

# **Dead Witches**

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## Chapter One

Inside an elegant, ten thousand square foot, California ranch house—with dusk leaking through its bay windows—Verna Dieadad argues with her husband, Luke, “You’re home early. So early. Checking on me? Ten years and I never know you to come home early from your precious meatpacking. You all done meatpacking, tonight?” She is dressed in a sheer blouse and Slim Fit Levis. Her feet are small and bare. On the middle toe of her left foot she wears a Princess-cut Black Diamond, fifty thousand dollar toe-ring; it matches the Black Diamonds on her slim, left wrist and on her ears and on her perfect, neck. She is tall and she is breathtaking. She plays with her long, black hair; drawing the silky strands through her Jolie lips.

“I came to get my boning knives, if you don’t mind?” Luke says and then walks from the rosewood game room to a huge, professional kitchen lined with black utilities setting on a black-and-white checkerboard, tile floor.

Verna follows; still twisting her long, straight hair. “You came trying to catch me with someone. You should have told me you were coming. I could have given you the arrival times of my many lovers. You wouldn’t have to waste your precious time, standing around.” If her husband ever guesses how many sex partners she has dragged through this big, lonely house, he will use her long, delicious hair to strangle her and then use that same hair to drag her out into the desert and bury her along with all her dreams; most of them unfulfilled.

“You been with someone?” The boning knives are wrapped in a leather apron and sitting on the stainless steel counter top. But Luke doesn’t pick them up. Instead he returns to the game room. He takes a pool stick from the plush green field of the pool table and then hits the cue ball. The cue ball slams into the three ball which slams into the corner pocket, like a gun shot.

“I’ve been with hundreds while you’re out slaving. You are out slaving, aren’t you? Like some superhuman creature.” She walks around the table so that she faces him the length of the slate top. Her hillbilly husband has become an unlikely millionaire workaholic. He is her slave. So she can have the most expensive stuff. Stuff that she deserves because she is stunning. As stunning as any woman on earth. As stunning as any woman in Hollywood. “You are out slaving, aren’t you?”

“Twenty-four seven. I work my ass off so you can have toe rings.” He hits the cue ball again and hammers the seven ball, toward the side pocket, it slams into the leather bound pocket, spins, and then ricochets, at a forty-five degree angle, directly at Verna’s angelic head.

She ducks. “You’re a saint. That’s what I told your brother on the down stroke.” She bends over and picks up the seven ball rolling back from bouncing off the wall. She heaves the ball at Luke. Die! You goddamned hick.

He catches the ball in his left hand. Just to the side of his left temple. “Down stroke? That supposed to mean you been doing John?”

“Maybe John; maybe Paul,” she says. She turns and smooths her hair while watching her reflection in a breakfront. Witchcraft has kept her young and beautiful. But witchcraft has not gotten rid of her hick husband. Maybe tonight.

"Maybe you're doing everybody else, but you're not doing John or Paul. They wouldn't do their brother's wife." His brother, John, and his wife had been lovers for almost twenty years. Maybe longer. He has fantasized about John coming to him, one day, and saying okay Champ, you've had this burden of living with Verna, all these years, millions on this house, millions on clothes and jewelry, and millions on cars and lakeside mini-villas and the tri-level in Big Bear, and I pay nothing and get most of the spoils; why don't you let me take over from here on out? I will pay all the bills and you get to visit Verna every Friday night for the rest to your life or until death do you part. But John never called him Champ and John could never afford Verna. Even if he is the crookedest Sheriff in the crookedest town. It is a fantasy that's only truth is that John and Verna are having a long and torrid affair.

"John's doing me every Friday night and Paul's doing me on Sundays. Because you're never come home on Friday nights. And you won't get off your dead ass on Sundays. I hate you! Go back to your slaughterhouse and slaughter some poor defenseless animals. I'm gonna get naked and do one of your employees or one of your friends, or one of your brothers," she spits the words at her husband.

Luke throws the cue stick on the table. He winds up like Sandy Koufax and then pitches a left-handed fast ball directly into the glass door, on the nine foot tall breakfront, standing next to Verna. He storms from the house.

Verna throws a gold impregnated, etched glass decanter of whisky against the wall. Big jagged shards of glass iceberg from a pool of Old No.7 and spread across the marble tiled hallway. She wants her husband dead. He is a big, dumb looking, tripe-smelling toad. She is stunning: A writer would describe her as breathtaking. She needs to be with someone stunning like the District Attorney, Jay Lattimer. Only he'd have to have a better paying job. She needs to be in Hollywood. On the arm of some megastar or on the arms of the manager and agent of some megastar. But first, she needs Luke dead so she can get all the money and all the stuff; ten million dollars worth. She had offered her cousin, Dexter Clark, fifty grand to make it look like Luke got drunk at Kelly's and drove off into a culvert. But after saying he would do it and getting a blow job as a handshake, he chickened-out. Course she has been giving him blow jobs since she was thirteen and already doing Meth. Only the witchcraft keeps the Meth from eating into her beauty. Betty Ann and she took over the Coven when both were fifteen and both their mothers were lynched. But, ten years ago, along came the most evil bitch in the desert; Naomi Cruthers just sorta took over. No, she really took over with both of her grubby hands. But if everything goes as scheduled, Naomi will be fodder for the wild dogs, tonight. And Betty Ann and she will be in control of the BabaYaga Coven of Glenrock, California. Back in control where they should have been for the past ten years. Tonight, it will all end for Luke and Naomi. Tonight is Verna's Night of a Thousand Wishes party. It has taken her exactly one year to complete the final draft of the, twenty-five thousand, word wish-list. Luke's death heads the wish-list; Naomi's death is second. If she just receives wish number one and wish number two on the list, she will worship, BabaYaga, the Skeleton Witch, forever. If she doesn't get at least the first wish from the Skeleton Witch, tonight, then she is going to turn to Christ.

Verna looks out the window at the silent desert. She had had the elaborate house built on this raised part of the desert because it looks down on the distant streets of Glenrock and because you can see an approaching intruder for miles and miles and miles.

She likes that. Especially if that intruder happens to be her drunken husband. Or her nosy mother-in-law.

She rolls back the fancy rug in the center of the game room floor and reveals a witches' foot—a five-pointed star—inlaid in the hardwood. She slides back a loose panel in the center of the witches' foot—Dexter Clark had done the woodwork on the hidden cranny and he had laid the expensive floor and of course, Verna. Verna had bartered for most of the house: Joe Gibbson did the plumbing inside and out for sex once a month for ten years and his brother, Randy, did the electrical inside and out for the same deal. The construction was a little more complicated but she managed to pocket fifty percent of the building budget—with Luke being none the wiser. He also has no clue about the amount of money she has poured into the Coven.

She takes out five black candles and a gold lighter, places the candles at the five points of the star, and then lights each candle, a ritual she has done a thousand time before, in a counter-clock-wise rotation while chanting, “BabaYaga appear. BabaYaga appear. Skeleton Witch appear.”

She has chanted for Luke's death on about a hundred or more occasions, chanted for Naomi's death, twice that number, but no luck on either's demise. But, tonight, she is having the Coven over for “A Night of a Thousand Wishes” party, and the year-long time it took, to make her list, will be more than worth it if the first two wishes are granted by BabaYaga and maybe the number three wish to live forever as a stunning beauty and maybe wish number four; to own the James Bond Aston Martin. Die Luke. Die Naomi. Die horrible deaths, tonight. “I can wait no longer, BabaYaga! I swear I will dismantle the Coven if I don't get some action from you, tonight.”

She strips naked and steps into the center of the witches' foot. Spinning, she repeats the chant, “BabaYaga appear! Appear to your faithful disciple Verna Dieadad. Appear! Find it in your black soul to devour my sainted husband, Luke Dieadad, tonight. And devour the bitch who stole the Coven from me and Betty Ann. I beseech you; don't make me wait any longer!”

She had offered half the estate to her long-time lover, Sheriff John, Luke's brother, for him to murder Luke, but after saying he would do it and getting anal intercourse as a handshake, he chickened-out. Course she had been giving him anal intercourse since she was twenty and arrested for doing Meth. The only one she has straight sex with—missionary style—started out as a Homo. Nicky Scartossi was having sex with Father Paul Dieadad, John's and Luke's brother, when he was fourteen. Now, Nicky is still young, gives good heterosexual sex and good gifts, and is her Meth dealer of choice.

Verna spins and admires her naked body in the distant, full-length mirror at the end of the hallway.

She will have to get another full-length mirror and put in the game room somewhere near the witches' foot. It is the first thing she will buy with the money from her husband's life insurance policy. The antique mirror, she covets, costs fifty-six thousand dollars. Funny, she forgot to put it on her rather lengthy wish-list.

Outside the ranch house, the sunset is silent: only the night sounds of the desert fade in and out. The ranch house is set against a fire-red mountain backdrop. The desert and the mountain are silent. The night wind stirs tumbleweed, but there is no sound. A resistant sun slides to its death behind the mountain. The house sits alone and lonely on top of a high, desert hill. There is darkness. And silence. A deep silence that is a

harbinger. A harbinger of a hideous death. Not engineered by BabaYaga, but executed by a killer whose only motive is revenge. Suddenly the silence is filled with piercing screams.

Inside the ranch house, beautiful, breathtaking Verna Dieadad is futilely attempting to fend off the rapid, frantic thrusts of a long-bladed knife. Blood, from her up thrust hands, sprays the scene. The knife becomes more frantic and punctures her throat with ten rapid thrusts. She tries to scream again but there is no sound. The killer knows Verna can hear the wet sound of the knife entering her flesh and then retreating. Blood now covers the entire length of the knife. The knife continues a rapid staccato down to the stomach and then the legs. The knife continues to make the wet sound. The floor and the walls are splattered with blood. Verna Dieadad has been slaughtered. Her blood fills the witches' foot circled with burning candles that are halfway consumed by the flickering flames. Blood soaks the hooded robe of the killer. "I am Vengeance saith the Lord!" the killer says and then drops a package of pictures and kicks them across the floor; three yards from the body, a dozen pictures are scattered around the area.

The photographs show Verna in compromising positions with locals. One of the photos lands next to Verna's list of a thousand wishes. Vengeance stoops and slowly works the pinky-ring from the dead woman's finger and then walks over and looks at the first wish on the list. Vengeance whistles and then hisses, "Till death do you part." The killer takes the bloody knife into the dimly lighted kitchen and scrubs and polishes the knife and then places it on the sideboard. The killer takes the hand piece of the kitchen phone, puts a brightly flowered towel, from the counter top, over the mouthpiece, dials the phone, and then speaks into the covered mouthpiece. "This is Vengeance. The Right Hand of the Lord, your God; tell Sheriff John, one of his lovers has been slaughtered at his brother's house."

Outside the ranch house, the killer runs from the house and into the desert. It is a moonless night but there is a shadow, of what looks like coattails flapping in the night wind. Dexter Clark sees the killer run from Verna's house. He has heard the screaming as he was finishing pissing on the cacti sheltering his beat up truck. He knows he has beaten Luke back, to the house, from Kelly's. So, it isn't Luke running from the house dressed in a witch's robe. Or something like a witch's robe. And it isn't Luke who caused Verna to scream those screams of excruciating pain. He hears the robed figure shout to the heavens, "Another witch down, hundreds to go." The voice is that of a female smoker or a very giddy male.

Dexter's first thought is to go and rescue Verna, but Dexter is a coward. Dexter knows that curiosity killed the cat; Dexter is no cat; he hears the siren in the distance and hops into his clunker and then drives, from the hilltop, with his lights off.

Bright headlights come up the driveway. A siren screams in the distance. Luke weaves his truck up the long, paved-stone driveway. He crashes into the bronze statue of Addie Zimmerman, leader of the National Council of Witches. Luke had been told it is the statue of the first lady to vote. He is happy he disemboweled the first lady to vote. Women should have never got the vote. Tonight is the night for disembowelments, Luke thinks. He is drunk on his ass, he knows that, but he isn't so drunk that he doesn't know, with certainty, he must kill his wife, tonight. The booze isn't making him kill her. The booze is just giving him the balls to do it, finally. He has told all the fellows at Kelly's that he was heading home to kill his whoring wife; heading home to slit her throat, to be

exact. But they all just laughed; except Dexter Clark who said that it wasn't funny and that Verna wasn't a whore; she was just real friendly—all the fellows laughed, even Dexter. He will use one of his trimming knives that he has left in the kitchen, earlier. He will probably pick the twelve inch beauty he has just added to his collection: an expensive assortment of the best cutlery money can buy.

Luke staggers from the truck and stumbles up the front steps. He falls to his knees, but gets up. The front doors are wide open. Luke looks through the double wide doors. He peeks in. He stumbles back down the stairs and falls again, but gets back up, and staggers around the side of the house. He nails his groin on the corner of the back porch swing. "Oh Christ!" Nobody ever uses that goddamned swing; it has been up there, on the porch, ten years, now, and nobody has ever used it. He enters the back of the house.

Luke comes into the dimly lit house by way of the kitchen. He grabs the knife off the counter top and creeps slowly, down the hallway, toward the living room. He screams; excruciating pain shoots up his leg. A two inch shard of thick glass has sliced through his boot. Blood fills his work boot. Why doesn't Verna come running? He thinks. She's probably in the master suite with John or Dexter. No, Dexter is at Kelly's but of course John is not. He leans against the hallway wall and pulls the bloody shard out of the bottom of his boot and then limps toward the game room. A siren turns off at the front of the house. Luke stops at the doorway to the game room. He freezes as he sees the slaughtered body of his wife.

Deputy Denny Hatch comes through the front door with his gun drawn. "Jesus, Luke! What in Christ's name have you done?"

## Chapter Two

"I didn't do nothing, nothing at all, Denny. I just got here. I was at Kelly's." Luke comes out of his shock and runs toward Verna. He still has the knife in his bloody hand. "Look! It's Verna! Oh God, she's dead!"

"Stop! Luke! Drop the knife!" Denny commands. "Or I shoot."

Luke looks down, like looking through the mile long tunnel; he sees the knife in his hand. He drops it like a hot potato; it bounces on the tile floor and rattles down the stairs. He drops to his knees and takes Verna's head in his hands. He pulls her bloody head to his chest and begins to weep and rock back and forth. I have seen the weeping and rocking bit, recently, on channel fifteen on Criminal Minds or was it Without a Trace. Probably Criminal Minds; that show has more bloody scenes then Without a Trace. On the show, the kid with the long hair was rocking back and forth with one of the five women his group was unable to save from a depraved serial killer. I hope I am doing the scene justice, but if Hatch wasn't present, I'd be dancing in the aisles. Running naked in the desert and boning the new waitress at Kelly's. Burning down the meat packing

company; fun things, like that. What a wonderful, wonderful day. I need a celebratory drink at Kelly's. And then some celebratory sex with the new waitress.

"Luke, stand up. I got to take you in for the murder of your wife, Verna Dieadad. You have the right . . ."

Luke jumps up. His hands are bloody. "You jackass! I know my rights. I know my wife's name. I didn't kill her. The killer is getting away." He darts, toward Denny, with his bloody hands outstretched. "You know me twenty years. You think I slaughtered my own wife. Look! There's no blood on the knife blade; only on the handle." He continues, toward Denny, in a stumbling, drunken lope.

"Luke, stop! Don't come any closer! There is blood on the knife. And blood tracked on the floor. Everywhere," Deputy Hatch says. He nods towards the hallway but keeps both hands on the revolver pointed at Luke. His hands are shaking. He has thought about killing Luke on many occasions. Because Verna was supposed to be his. He met her first and loved her first. He and Dexter Clark and a couple others were the first to hump her on the infamous Death Valley trips. She took on all five of us each and every trip. But she picked him to take her to the prom. Not Luke. Not any of the others. But Luke has the money. Lots of money. His family's money. So, Luke got Verna. Couple of years ago, after a wild session in the backseat of the cruiser, Verna solicited him to eliminate Luke, but like some silly Catholic boy, he said no when he should have said yes I will do it; for you, I will do anything; for you. Now, she is a bloody mess. And he catches Luke at the scene. It is a justified shooting. Pull the trigger, good Catholic boy.

"We got to go get the bastard who killed her." Luke continues toward the entrance and toward Denny.

"We got the bastard who killed her." Denny points his weapon at Luke's formidable chest and then fires three shots. One shot catches Luke in the shoulder. Two other shots shatter a giant fish tank.

"You shot me, you stupid bastard!" Luke says. "And you killed my fish. You stupid bastard!" He grabs his bleeding shoulder. My shoulder hurts like a bitch, and burns like a smoldering rod has been pushed through my bicep and twisted, but I feel like singing and dancing and clapping my hands, in the mountains. With snow. The hills are alive. I had planned on doing something really, really stupid after announcing, to the world, down at Kelly's, that I was going to kill my beautiful wife, tonight. That I was going to slit her throat and dump her in the desert then piss on her grave; or something like that. I would have been ultimately convicted of her murder, no question about it, and spend the rest of my life in prison, with some guy, named Bubba, buying me roses or chocolates or both. And getting a worse reaming than Verna has ever given me. Or I would face lethal injection of some cocktail concocted for death. A painless death, so they say. But some psycho, who hates Verna a hundred times more than I do, or did, has done the dastardly deed for me. I will still have a chance to piss on her grave; after everyone leaves the cemetery, of course. Maybe late at night after I consume a keg of cheap beer; the kind that turns your piss brown and all shitty looking.

Now, no one will believe I slaughtered my own wife in my own home with my own knife. I will be exonerated. Acquitted.

My wife is dead. She is actually dead. The witch is dead. Deader than a door nail or a door mouse or whatever. The witch is dead. The ugly old, ugly old, ugly old witch is dead. She wasn't really ugly, physically—a writer might call her breathtaking—but she

was ugly in her ways—maybe the ugliest person to ever exist, and she was getting old; compared to the new waitress at Kelly's. When my wounded arm is healed, and, of course, I am released from jail, I will be looking up that waitress; Susie or Trudy or Amy or something like that.

Maybe there is a God. Thank you God for taking me under your wing. Or is it wings? Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Now, if the God damn packing company would just burn down. Burn to the ground. But what if I butchered my wife before I went to Kelly's. Maybe I was stone drunk before I left for Kelly's. Maybe I really did slaughter my wife. I remember trying to nail her with a three or seven ball, but she ducked. She was alive when I left the house—wasn't she? Shit, yeah she was. I am free! Or, I will be free. John can probably get me freed within the week. A week of discomfort compared to a lifetime of Hell. Luke flashes a wide grin.

"Wipe that smirk off your face or I'll come back there and wipe it off for you," Deputy Hatch looks into the rearview mirror and speaks to Luke.

"With your aim, you'd miss my face and wipe my ass," Luke says. "You want to wipe the grin off my ass." Luke grins, at the Deputy, in the rearview mirror.

"You're lucky it was me who took the call and not your asshole brother, John, he would have blown your fool head off when he saw what a mess you made of his once beautiful girlfriend," Deputy Hatch says. He can stop the cruiser, right now, right this minute, drag Luke to the side of the road, and then plant a bullet in his fat, ugly head. It will look like he killed Luke, at the house. Self defense. He will wait at the house with Luke's body and Verna's body like he should have waited. Should have waited for Sheriff John. Hatch almost stops the cruiser but then he thinks, it will be much better to drag the Dieadads through the humiliation of a trial. He is glad he had received the mysterious Vengeance call. Regardless of what he said to Luke, he knows that John would have just let Luke go and then covered up Verna's homicide somehow. Just said she left town with a traveling salesman named Jack Frost; left for Albuquerque, New Mexico. John would have even had the license number of the guy's blue Mercedes. But all the evidence is on the front seat of the cruiser: the bloody boning knife wrapped in an expensive, kitchen-towel probably purchased from Bed Bath & Beyond. Hatch guesses kitchen stuff is part of the Beyond. And he has the nasty photos and the "Thousand Wish" list. It is a slam-dunk case. Open and shut. He will be the Star Witness. He will sit tall and handsome in his brand-new, for this occasion uniform, in the witness stand. He will be the next Sheriff of Glenrock. The Dieadads are finished in Glenrock. After all these years of controlling the law, the industry, and the Church, the Dieadads are finished in Glenrock. Maybe it is time for Hatch and his family to take over the town. Banish Sheriff John and Father Paul. Convict Luke. And buy-out, their widowed mother, Rosalie Dieadad.

Deputy Hatch gets on the phone to Deputy James Acker, "Call John and tell His Majesty I arrested his brother, Luke, for the stabbing death of Verna. Don't ask any questions. All you really need to know for now, is Verna's been stabbed to death by Luke. Get out to Luke's house and yellow tape it. Yellow tape the entire house. Back and front. Don't touch anything. Leave everything the way it is until we can get County Forensics out." The last bit of information will be to see if Acker will tell John that he told him there is a wish list and some dirty photos. "Don't tell John, but I have Verna's wish list and some real nasty photos of Verna with some fellows we know. Fellows who we see every day of our lives. Let's see if Luke tells the Sheriff about the list and the



photos.” He looks back at Luke who is snoring. “And Acker, this is an excellent time for you to decide whose side you’re on. The Dieadads are finished in this town. I can offer you job security when I become Sheriff of Glenrock. We may not have to wait till the next election.”

Deputy Acker speeds past a caravan lead by Naomi Cruthers toward Luke’s house. The Night of a Thousand Wishes party at Verna’s. His fat wife is invited; he forbid her to go. She has been slipping out late at night for the last five years. At first he thought she had a lover who liked fat, ugly women who color their hair pitch black. But he followed her, a couple of times, and she ended up at Coven meetings at several different locations: Betty Ann’s ratty mansion, Naomi Caruthers’ garbage dump, and beautiful Verna’s beautiful house. Verna was beautiful and his wife is ugly. Too bad, the is and the was cannot be exchanged. Glenrock is the notorious home of the ugliest women in the world. Mostly because of the persistent inbreeding. The Clarks and the Hatchs and the Taylors and the Ackers were all each other’s kissing cousins. All inbreds. And most of the women were Coven members. Or churchgoing Catholics. Or both. Witchcraft or Catholicism didn’t improve their looks. They were mostly fat and mostly ugly except for Verna, and that young reporter, Evie Ward, and the new waitress, Amy something, at Kelly’s. Acker holds a phone to his ear. “Sheriff, I been trying to get you,” Acker says into the phone. “Verna’s been murdered. I’m not shitting you. No, I didn’t see the body. Hatch arrested Luke for the murder. He wouldn’t give me any details. Just said, he arrested Luke, for the murder. But I know he took the call from someone calling himself Vengeance. I’m just at Luke’s, now. No I won’t go in till you get here. Naomi and her friends are headed this direction. No, they don’t know about the murder; they’re coming to a party. A big party. The Night of a Thousand Wishes party. Looks like your brother, Luke, got the first wish. Verna was stabbed to death. So Hatch says. I’ll hold everybody off until you get here.” Acker knows whose side his bread is buttered on; Sheriff John Dieadad always comes up on top. He will just as soon kill you as talk to you. And he always gets away with it. Hatch will be the next to die. Hatch is a ass hole. Hatch will not be missed. He will have to remember not to ride with Hatch for the next couple of weeks. Sheriff John is the best shot in the County; especially with moving targets. He might just call in sick for the next week, at least. Or better yet until Hatch’s funeral.

Acker yellow tapes the entrance and the many doors to the house and then decides to go in. Hatch wasn’t shitting him; Verna is dead. Really dead. If that body mass is Verna. She is swimming in a pool of blood in the center of an inlaid witches’ foot. The fingers, on her right hand, are barely attached and hang to one side. A major portion of her intestines lay piled, at her side, as if someone has reached in and yanked her intestines out of that beautiful body. He had seen Verna naked, at a party, years ago, since that day on, he has had vivid, erotic dreams about Verna. Acker charges from the house and throws up his fast-food supper, of a burger and fries, on the plush lawn. He is certain he will still have the dreams, but the dreams will be changed dramatically. He has assumed that the Loadstone Killer is killing witches because they’re fat and ugly. The Killer had his vote, up until now. But not if the Killer is going to slaughter the few beautiful woman the desert houses.

Acker is just finishing wiping his mouth, on his shirttail, when Naomi and her caravan circle and park in the front courtyard of the house. There are ten, mostly expensive, black vehicles with a couple of ratty, old clunkers taking up the rear.

Acker tucks in his shirt and then runs to Naomi's SUV. "No one can go in, there's been a terrible accident, I mean, Verna Dieadad has been murdered. Sheriff John will be here, soon, I hope. He says no one goes in. And he specifically named you, Naomi. He has authorized me to shoot, to maim, anyone who tries to enter the crime scene. Especially you witches." Acker unsnaps the leather strap across his gun and then loosens the gun by sliding it in and out of its holster. He strikes a pose with his legs spread wide and firm. His face is stern.

Naomi swings, open the door of the SUV, hard, and knocks Acker flat on his back. His gun flies loose to the pavestones. "I've got to go see for myself," she says.

"She's beyond help," Acker slips. "She's unrecognizable."

"Have you tried to help her?" Naomi looks down and asks Acker. "Is there a ambulance on the way?"

"She needs the County coroner not an ambulance. I haven't seen the body. I haven't been in the house. Sheriff John instructed me not to go in. And I do what Sheriff John tells me to do. But Hatch told me he caught Luke with the murder weapon; a big honking knife. He said Verna was pretty messed up; her intestines outside her body and stuff like that," Acker says. "You don't need to see stuff like that." He tries to get to his feet, Naomi kicks him in the face. The bottom of her robe flies open revealing her fat, naked, lower body. I'm going to puke again, Acker thinks. Puke all over Naomi's grubby feet.

Naomi signals two fat witches to get down and straddle Acker. Naomi kicks Acker's gun into the succulents and then runs to the house, Betty Ann follows. They both fall to their knees next to Verna's bloody body. They both thank BabaYaga.

"Go get my SUV. Bring it to the back of the house; and make it snappy," Naomi says to Betty Ann. While Betty Ann is gone, Naomi wraps Verna in the bloody rug and lifts, with ease, the blood-dripping package, over her shoulder and then carries it to the back of the house while tiptoeing through shards of glass. She dumps Verna's body, unceremoniously, on the back porch swing and sets it swinging like a slow moving pendulum; and then reenters the house. She hates Verna and is ecstatic with the brutality of the crime, but she assumes one of her own did the crime to fulfill one of Naomi's wishes. Number one on her "Thousand Wish" list. Probably Betty Ann did Verna—Betty Ann was late in joining the caravan. Verna thought they were bosom buddies, her and Betty Ann, but the only bosoms Betty Ann is buddying-up to, lately, are Naomi's double-D's. Betty Ann and her have been lovers for the last three years. Fact is, Sheriff John has been with both of them, at the same time, in the same bed, but mostly directing traffic; a little to the left, a little to the right, smile for the video.

Naomi grabs two decanters of whisky—one in each hand—she pulls off the tops, with her gold-capped teeth, and then empties both decanters on the witches' foot. The whiskey mixes with the blood and turns it to a reddish-brown soup. Chunks of flesh float in the mixture. The fat witch bends over and picks up Verna's lighter and thumbs the wheel. A long flame leaps from the lighter as Naomi throws it into the center of the witches' foot. The soup ignites sending flames high up to the cathedral ceiling. The breakfront, already damaged, ignites and tumbles, like a giant, flaming domino, onto the plush green surface of the pool table. The flames eat holes, in the table's surface, creating a temporary image, of BabaYaga laughing. Naomi grabs the eight ball, from the image's mouth, and then slips it into her robe pocket and runs to the back of the house. The eight ball will be a symbol of BabaYaga granting Naomi her number one wish. She will find a

prominent place to display this trophy in her trash filled house; maybe, on the mantle, next to her, “The One Hundred and Thirteenth Addie Zimmerman Witchcraft Award.”

Naomi’s SUV comes screeching around the corner of the house and straight down the front driveway; barely missing Acker and the witches still straddling the Deputy sprawled out on the pavestones. Naomi beeps the horn and signals, with her hand, for everyone to follow her. The caravan slithers after its leader. Flames come from the center of the house. Acker sits on the ground and watches the flames; he rethinks his current predicament. He’ll need to come with a damn good story when Sheriff John arrives. The truth is too embarrassing. Maybe if he got off a couple of shots? He gets up, on his feet, retrieves his weapon, and fires off two rounds in the direction that the caravan fled.

Sheriff John arrives just in time to watch Acker put out the last, of the fire, with a red fire-extinguisher marked “Property of the San Bernardino Sheriff’s Department.” Luke’s game room is gutted; the cathedral ceiling is partially burnt and open to the sky; the hallway is gutted; not a drop of blood appears anywhere. It is almost as though the fire has sought out the blood, and like a hungry dragon, slurped it up.

“Where’s the body?” John asks Acker. “Did the fire get it? Did you let it burn? Why did you move it?”

“I didn’t see no body. A gang of Naomi’s fat witches overpowered me. They took my weapon. Slammed me down on the pavement. And set a ton of witches on me. If there was a body, those bitches, they took it. I fired a couple shots at them. I might have wounded a couple of them.” Acker continues to spray the smoldering embers of the game room. He doesn’t make eye contact with John and his hand is trembling so much that some spray gets on John’s new boots.

“Watch where you’re spraying that shit, you idiot! Stay here until I get back. Don’t let anybody in,” John says. “Keep Hatch away from the scene. If Hatch ordered Forensics and the Coroner, cancel them both and order Arson out. There’s no sign of the homicide, here, yet.”

“Hatch said there were porno pictures of Verna and some Locals and a wish-list. He told me not to tell you,” Acker says. “Said you and your family was finished in Glenrock.”

John races to the idling cruiser and then hops in and heads out toward the desert behind Naomi Cruthers’ junkyard. He’s not quite sure Verna’s body having been taken is good or bad for Luke. Luke admits he saw Verna’s bloody body. He is certain she was dead. And Hatch is a witness. But no body is no body. Hatch is expendable. No star witness; will be a positive. In Luke’s phone call, Luke is sure the blood on the knife is his, only. But Verna will still be missing. Then if Hatch was missing. Too many missing people. He best get the body back for the DNA of the killer. Hopefully, it will be Nicky Scartossi’s DNA. Kill two birds with one stone. Help Luke with his problem and take over Nicky’s drug trade after Nicky heads for prison for the murder of beautiful Verna—the queen of Glenrock. Why the Hell did Naomi take the body? Verna was her only adversary in the Coven; they were mortal enemies. The only reason she would snatch Verna’s body, would be if she did the homicide or orchestrated it. Naomi is going to luck out. He is going to find Nicky’s DNA no matter who killed Verna. It is a simple plan. He controls the evidence. So whatever he wants the lab to find; it will find. It will not be

much of a chore to get Nicky's DNA and prints somehow someway. Then Nicky is gone and the drug trade is Sheriff John A. Dieadad's.

John parks behind the burned out carcass of one of his missing cruisers and then ducks as he works his way through the stripped bodies of over a hundred trucks and cars. The old Chevy is the Walker's—dead as they may be. And, almost, unrecognizable is a second cruiser. John knells beside a Lincoln Towncar. Matthew Owen's Towncar.

The Sheriff watches as Naomi eats, what looks like a heart, in front of eight witches and over twenty inductees—most appear to be out-of-towners. As the crowd splits, to create an isle for Naomi, in direct line with a briar that holds a cadaver, a cadaver that is missing its head and its heart, John recognizes its naked breasts and hips. Naomi takes a lit torch from the outstretched hand of Betty Ann. She wipes her bloody mouth on the corner of her robe as she walks toward the briar. The entire Coven chants to BabaYaga. Chanting, Naomi lights the fire. With her back to the Coven, Naomi flashes a big, wide grin. Verna will not be screwing John any longer; and Verna will not be screwing Naomi any longer; trying to take over the Coven. Actually, take back the Coven. BabaYaga has granted her first two wishes: get rid of Verna and be with Sheriff John; the love of her life. A mostly miserable life until John came into it.

A pack of Naomi's dogs—ignoring John—feast on the body of a rebellious inductee, but Betty Ann's Doberman, Bronco, sniffs the air and charges into the junkyard. The Sheriff draws his revolver, thinks better of it, and instead, races, to the top of Lincoln, with Bronco at his heels. He leaps across the open sunroof, whirls around and hits the flying Doberman with the butt of his revolver. The Doberman yaps as its flailing body drops inside the Lincoln. Trapped, the Doberman begins a continuous howl.

It will be suicide to confront the Coven and the pack of dogs, but he has to make an appearance, for the record. Because Luke is his brother, the D. A. will want to use his own investigators. So, an appearance is more than necessary. He will probably have to kill Naomi. The idiot witches don't carry weapons because they think they have supernatural powers and thus to carry a weapon will be like denying those powers. He is certain he can overcome their powers with a couple of bullets to the heads of two or three of the Coven leaders. He has read a few of Alexander Hope's books: the bad witches are always inept. He makes his way back to his cruiser. There is a blend, of Bronco's howling and the Coven's chanting, in the distance. John adds the siren to the cacophony. He slowly drives into the center of the Coven ritual.

The Coven members stop chanting.

"Sorry to interrupt your cook out, ladies, but I'm missing a dead body," John says as he leans out the cruiser's open window. His twitching, right hand grips his revolver on his lap. He puts the cruiser in reverse in preparation for any hasty exit.

"No Sheriffs allowed on this sacred ground," Naomi says as she approaches John.

"I think you've had at least two Deputy Sheriffs here on this sacred ground," John says.

"We make exceptions when it comes to Deputies," Naomi says.

"I want the body back," John says.

"Which Deputy?" Naomi asks.

"Verna's body. I want Verna's body back," John says.

“Verna left town with a handsome dude from Hollywood. Said she was firing her house up as a going away present to Luke. I got almost thirty witnesses. Whatever Acker told you is a bold face lie,” Naomi says.

“Probably. He said he saw no body,” John says as he surveys the crowd looking for familiar faces. Maybe a killer’s face.

“So why you here? You ain’t got enough to do without looking for a body that ain’t missing,” Naomi says.

The witches in earshot start laughing.

John whispers to Naomi, “we need to talk in private about Nicky Scartossi. I’ll make you a good deal. And just as a heads-up, even though a body is burned, to a crisp, forensics can identify it through dental records.”

### Chapter Three

Inside the rectory of a small desert church, Immaculate Conception Catholic Church of Glenrock, California, John brings three containers of vanilla ice cream to Paul's desk. John is in a Sheriff's uniform. Paul is in his priest's garb. His robe sweeps the floor as he rocks back and forth in the chair. John sits and stares at Paul. John thinks of all the times he has had to defend his feminine, homosexual brother, when they were young. But he never thought his brother, Paul, would turn out to be a pedophile; a very prolific pedophile. If his brother, Paul, were neither priest or a Dieadad, and he received the standard sentence for molestation, he would be doing over two hundred years in one of California's state run country clubs. Jailhouse legend is that pedophiles, especially priests, have it rough in prison. But the facts appeared to be; they are usually isolated with their own kind. So, they probably sit around telling each other, in vivid detail, about their conquests. His brother, Father Paul, is a pedophile-Pro and a Class A storyteller.

Paul stares at John. “We're not kids anymore. Ice cream won't solve this problem. You think I have no friends? I don't watch television? Maybe I own a radio? Maybe I use the Internet?”

John moves the ice cream, to one side, on the desk. He lights up a small, dark-brown cigar. He blows the smoke directly at Paul. Paul coughs into his hands and then fans the smoke away, stands up, and steps away from the smoke cloud.

“Ma knows?” John asks.

“Right after it hit local TV, her church friends called her. Couldn’t you have called her?” Paul says.

John moves from the desk to the window. He looks out at the early morning sun. He stubs out the cigar on the spic-and-span windowsill. “I was kind of busy arranging bail for Luke. Ma is going to have put up the packing company, to secure the Luke’s bail,

because Luke's house is community property. The spoils of a crime and all that jazz," John says.

"Did he kill Verna?" Paul asks.

"No. But it looks bad for him. Everything points to him. His favorite knife was used. And he announced, earlier at Kelly's, he was headed home to slit his wife's whoring throat," John tells his brother.

"Then, the hot head did kill her. Being a butcher by trade, he has all those knives lying around the house," Paul says. He moves, around the room, circling away from John's potent, cigar smoke. It will be a godsend if his brother, John, dies of lung cancer. Sooner if not later. Better yet, make it right now; right this minute. God, prove to me that you do exist; strike down John. Now! Nothing! Nothing at all! John is still standing. I have to be resigned to the fact that I have chosen to follow an impotent God. But I have decided to stay with the Church that has protected this lowly priest, so well. And given me such a big sexual playground. Sort of a kindergarten of my own, "Father Paul's Afterschool Playground."

"When Hatch got an anonymous call from someone calling himself Vengeance, he didn't call me, said it will look like a cover-up, he went out to the ranch and found Luke with a trimming knife in his hand. Supposedly Luke was standing over the bloody body of Verna. Hatch says her guts and blood where everywhere, including, all over Luke's work-boots and clothing."

"Hatch never liked Luke," Paul reminds his brother. God, I need some proof. It seems simple enough. Strike John down. Now!

"He shoots him then arrests him on the spot. Actually, Hatch and Luke are the only ones who saw the body and, remember, Luke was drunk on his ass," John says. "The only two witnesses to the supposed crime are both unreliable. Hatch has an axe to grind. Luke was so drunk he couldn't see straight. And now, the supposed body has disappeared."

"What do you mean? There is no body? Is Verna dead or not?" Paul asks. "Any other Sheriff would know if there has been a homicide or not."

"Naomi Cruthers says Verna ran away with a handsome dude from Hollywood. Says Verna set the house on fire as a going away present for Luke. But when I was at Cruthers', it looked like there was a body on the briar. Course, it's all gone now. Chances of any DNA is miniscule." John lights up another mini-cigar. "Even dental records are useless without a body or actually a skull with at least a portion of the jaw intact," John says.

"Jesus!" Father Paul says. "It's a mess. Why'd Hatch shoot Luke? Did Luke try to run? Try to escape? Try to stab him?"

"Hatch says, Luke tried to get past him claiming he wanted to chase after the killer," John says. "Luke says he thinks he was trying to chase after his wife's killer, but he was so wiped out that he doesn't even remember getting shot."

"It's a sure bet Luke was trying to escape," Paul says.

"If there was a killing, Luke was trying to chase after the killer. Why don't you ask how Luke is? He's been shot, you know? Luckily by the worst shooter I've ever seen. Your twelve-year-old boyfriend, Moonie Clark, is a better shot than Hatch. And he is cuter, too."

"I have no boyfriend. Certainly not Moonie Clark. Stop talking to me like that. The radio said Luke had a non-fatal shoulder wound. Luke is okay. But Verna may be dead!" Paul begins to weep.

"But Luke didn't do it."

"How do you know?" Paul says.

"He's my brother," John tells Paul.

"Don't give me that brother crap. If he murdered her, it was because of you," Paul says.

"You pious idiot. What's it got to do with me?" John says.

"Everybody knows. You and Verna. Maybe twenty years. Luke's been the only one with his head up his ass."

"How long have you known?" John asks, his brother Paul, matter-of-factly.

"Verna confessed to me in 78 or 79," Father Paul says.

"Does Ma know?" John asks.

"Ma guessed before I was told. She says she caught you sniffing around Verna when Verna was just a teenager."

"Does Luke know?" John gets up and paces. "I should ask, how long has Luke known?"

"Luke found out last night from Naomi Cruthers. Verna called me and confessed she instructed Naomi to convince Luke, that the two of you were having an affair, so it would all come to a head," Father Paul says.

"Those sluts. Why would Luke believe Verna or Naomi? Verna and Naomi are both consummate liars," John says.

"But they were both telling the truth, this time. Sometimes I think God is testing me. Two brothers . . . one too busy making money . . . one too busy making life hell for the people around him," Father Paul says.

John charges toward Paul. Paul stands ready to challenge him. John stops short of the desk. "Jesus! Don't pull that goddamned holier than thou bullshit on me," John says.

"Watch your mouth. This is the house of the Lord. The sacred house of the Lord," Father Paul says.

"Not the one you want to be in, right?" John asks his brother. "Not the one you pray for and covet. Not the church you think you should be running."

"I'm content here," Father Paul says. "I've made my peace with God about my position in the Church. God has His own timetable."

"Bullshit! Remember, I know why the Church sent you back here. Why you're not some high mucky-muck in a church in Frisco or L.A.."

"It is God's will," Father Paul says. "It is God's will. I can live with it. Besides, it's none of your business. It's all between God and Father Paul Dieadad, his humble servant."

"Save that crap for Ma or Luke or those little, fat, old ladies who drool during your sermons," John says.

"Leave!" Paul points toward the door. "We'll talk when you calm down. My sins have been forgiven."

"Future sins?" John asks. "You've got a 'Get Out of Jail Free' card for sins?"

"I meet temptations each and every day. I will never again succumb to them. But you never miss a day, do you? You are everything that the Bible teaches us not to be. Everything Evil." Paul makes a cross on his chest.

"Rumor is, you've scheduled some private lessons with Moonie Clark. Should I come by and chaperone?" John says.

"God is surly testing me; having made you flesh of my flesh," Father Paul says.

John rushes toward the door. He turns and looks back at Paul, "Maybe God is testing me." He slams the heavy door behind himself.

## Chapter Four

Paul moves slowly to the window. He has lied to his brother about resisting temptation. For the last two months, he has masturbated every night to the images of Moonie Clark. And now, he has arranged it so that Moonie Clark will have private lessons three times per week. He will end up touching Moonie Clark. If he gets caught diddling the young boy, the Church will protect him, but he will be transferred to some bow dunk town in Latvia or some other obscure Catholic community. It will be safer if he was a psychopath who killed his victims, but he can never do that; besides, none of his many inductees were actually victims. He watches his brother step into an idling Sheriff's cruiser. The red and blue lights flash across the priest's face. Tears run freely from his eyes. He moves from the window. He wipes his eyes and walks toward the desk. He takes a framed 8x10 photograph from the desk. The photograph is of the three brothers: Paul, Luke, and John. Verna, Luke's deceased wife, is with them. They are standing arm-in-arm in the desert. Verna is between Luke and John. Paul looks at the photograph. He touches Verna's image with his index finger. She has seduced all three brothers.

Verna had come to him during the tumult over Nicky Scartossi. He had been accused of having sex with an underaged boy—one Nicolas Alexander Scartossi. A.k.a. Nicky Scartossi. Naomi Cruthers had caught them in the oral act, in the spacious back seat of Paul's Church car, at Summit Hill, fifteen miles from Glenrock, and in one of Life's freaky events, coincidentally, on a plot of desert land owned, by Naomi's witch mentor, unbeknown to the loving couple. Verna had come to him and offered him a shoulder to cry on. But she badgered him to give the exact, vivid, details and they both got hot and one thing led too another. He had sex with his sister-in-law while thinking of fourteen-year-old Nicky. It wasn't his fault; Verna was the spawn of Satan. She was a test from God. The failed test was one of many. God needs to stop testing him and start helping him. He is getting sick and tired of the games. If it is wrong to desire young boys, why does God make them so beautiful? He was twelve years old when he first noticed how beautiful he was and how beautiful Robert Krieger was as they both sat, naked, under the



old railroad bridge. They met every morning, before school, and every afternoon, after school, and experimented sexually. Verna was the first and only woman he had ever had sexual intercourse with and to function, on that occasion, he had to think of Nicky. If it is wrong, in God's eyes, to make love to young boys, why is there such a strong, constant feeling? And why the vivid dreams of a young Jesus? And when he speaks to Jesus, in tongues, of course, why does Jesus look like Robert Krieger with a beard and mustache and a long, see-through, white robe?

Father Paul begins to sob. He moves to a small altar in the corner of his office, kneels, pulls the top of his robe off, and takes his shirt down to his waist. He uses a small, leather strap to beat his own bowed back. His stark-white back has blood-red scars that blossom like tangled roses up his back and over his thin shoulders. He is a secret student of Grigori Yefimovich Rasputin, The Black Monk, and a Khlisti who believed you must sin to be saved. Father Paul has sinned mightily. But all his sins have been forgiven by God. Like Rasputin he deserves to be given powers.

But God has somehow bypassed him or maybe he is in God's blind spot. Glenrock certainly is.

Paul had joined the Catholic Church when—the now Cardinal—Father Victor Ramello became his lover and mentor and teacher. They became Khlisti together and had a religion where they both could justify the molestation of under aged boys. More like lovemaking than molestation. Paul stayed in the lower ranks while Victor moved on. Paul has dreams of better things to come. Not just moving up in the hierarchal but knowing that his destination is to be the right hand of God and hints that some day he will be favored by God over and above Jesus Christ. Paul has long conversations with God about the possibility—in tongues, of course. The dreams are too vivid not to be true. Of course he also has dreams of vivid bouts of intercourse with twelve year old Moonie Clark. The dreams are vivid enough to soil his sheets, but not true, yet. Images of Moonie Clark flood his mind and drown his soul. God forgive me.

He straps his back, hard, until he draws blood, then he climaxes. New wounds radiate up his back and shoulders like a spider web of flesh. He will have to remember to cleanup the blood on the walls and mirror and change his underwear before Moonie Clark comes for a lesson in religion. He has just about enough time for a warm shower and maybe some daydreams about Moonie Clark running naked through the desert with Father Paul in pursuit. This time, the religious lesson will be about obeying your elders or, in any event, at least obeying your local priest. He really needs to go to a distant city and attend, Sex Addicts Anonymous meetings, "Hello, my name is Father Paul Dieadad."

Inside his speeding patrol car, John presses his foot to the floor and shoots, down the desert road, away from town. He pushes the pedal to the metal so the cruiser tops out its speedometer. The cruiser accelerates to one hundred and twenty miles per hour as John reaches in his pocket and takes out a small vile of cocaine, puts some powder on the back of his hand, presses his left thumb to his left nostril, puts his nose down to the back of his right hand, and sniffs with his right nostril. He looks up at the rear view mirror and wipes his nose. He loses control of the patrol car and it careens toward the berm at the edge of the road. He breaks hard and starts to get the cruiser under control but loses it again and shoots from the road and across the desert. Then he panics and over controls the steering wheel and fishtails into giant cacti. The car plows to a stop. John bangs his head against

the windshield. "Damn!" Blood details the ragged terrain, of John's broad forehead, on the cracked windshield. He sits back and looks over at the deployed passengers' airbag.

He reaches into his pocket and extracts two yellow pills, dry swallows both pills. He tries to restart the car but all he gets, for his effort, is smoke that pours from the engine. He pulls the small radiophone from its latch, hidden by the deployed passenger's airbag, and speaks into it, "Acker come in. Acker come in . . . Acker! Where in hell you been? Get off your dead ass and call a tow out here to Hidden Springs road. Yeah, damn near the same spot." It is getting to be a nasty habit to get so pissed off at his, holier than thou, brother, Paul, that he runs off the main road, into desert vegetation, at breakneck speeds. It is some kind of death wish. He wants to kill his brother but ends up close to killing himself. Paul isn't worth it. Let God, if there is such an entity; take care of that serial pedophile. Fifteen young boys, that's how many the Church has statements from. With unsubstantiated evidence that there is probably fifty more. If he wasn't a priest, his brother, Paul, would be lynched: hanging from one of these God damn cacti. Good riddance! If there is a God, He should step aside and let Paul get reamed by consequence and a muscle-bound, shaved head, heavily tattooed Bubba. His brother will have to be isolated from the general population, after each encounter, until he heals; then back to Hell. What made Paul the way he is? Their mother? Their father? Or was Paul just born this pedophile? Born this monster? If he molests one more child, I'm going to take him out, permanently.

John sits and stares out into the desert. A blank look covers his face. Tears run from his eyes. Blood trickles from his forehead. He pulls a picture of Verna from his wallet. He kisses the picture and then begins to sob.

Now, for sure Luke knows. It was bound to happen. He was going to tell Luke five years ago when Verna had agreed to leave town with him. Then she changed her mind. It is all about the money. She had an insatiable appetite for expensive things. Every day she needed another expensive thing. So the solution was to let her stay with Luke and John and her to continue their Friday night trysts at Luke's desert mansion. Now she is gone. He has lost his longtime lover and offended his favorite brother.

Sheriff John pulls his revolver and then puts the barrel in his mouth. The barrel still has the taste of the cleaning solution he had used after killing, Casper McNeal, the Yellow Truck informant. It was seven years in the coming, but Casper died in a purported car-jacking two weeks ago. Casper had changed John's life, in a big way, in a bad way. John was on the fast track in San Bernardino and then Casper McNeal told authorities that truckers were paying John for protection to drive across the high-desert. They named it, "The Dieadad Toll Road."

He had put the barrel of the same revolver in his mouth on that occasion, after killing Casper in his big, red, chrome-plated Peterbilt truck, but he burnt his tongue so badly that he couldn't eat solids or anything hot for a month. But this time he is going to do it. He will blow his fool head off. Bam! Blow his mutant brain all over the interior of the cruiser. End his and everybody else's misery. The only one who will miss him will be his Ma. Verna would have missed him, if Luke or whoever killed her had just let her be. With John dead, Verna would have just stayed with Luke and continued to be Queen of Glenrock, riding around in her big, gold Cadillac. He should have killed himself, years ago. But now is as good a time as ever. He puts the barrel of the gun back into his mouth.

## Chapter Five

A 1984, yellow, Jeep—in cherry condition—stops at the edge of the road, and then barrels across the berm and toward John's disabled cruiser. The Jeep stops inches from John's front fender and the cactus; Evie Ward steps out. She is young and beautiful. "John, my love, I've been trying to find your wondering ass all morning. Tell me about Luke and Verna." She sticks a small tape recorder in his face.

John places the trembling revolver in his lap. "How 'bout, 'John, you poor thing. Are you injured? Are you sad about Verna? Is that what you're crying about? Or are you crying about your current predicament? Or are you just crying because you are so under appreciated? John, my friend, I'll write a nice story about your valued service to the community."

"Yata Yata Yata. Now, what in Hell's name happened between Luke and Verna?" Evie says.

"Nothing but a separation. It appears Verna left town with a handsome dude from Hollywood." John says. "Almost thirty witnesses say she's been planning to leave Luke for over two years. It was two years ago that the witches held a convention in Hollywood. They say Verna met some handsome dude and has been seeing him on the sly ever since. And now she took off with the handsome dude, but not before trying to burn down the house. She maxed out their credit cards and drained the bank accounts."

"Your Deputy saw Verna's body," Evie says. "He described a very bloody scene."

"He's delusional," John says. "He's always been delusional. I only hired him because he's the Mayor's son. Now, I think he's gone too far. It looks like he's trying to frame Luke."

"Why, in the world, would he want to frame Luke?"

"He's held a grudge for a long, long time," John says. "He was supposed to marry Verna until Luke came along."

"Where are the pictures?" Evie asks.

"What pictures?"

"Hatcher says there were a dozen pictures of Verna doing the nasty to and with some of our local playboys," Evie says. She looks in at the revolver cupped in Sheriff John's lap.

"Hatch," the Sheriff says. He moves the revolver off his lap and onto the passenger's seat. He slides it under the airbag.

"What?" Evie asks. She is still focused on the disappearing revolver.

"Hatch. My Deputy's name is Hatch not Hatcher. A good reporter would get the name right; at the very least," John says. "Maybe a good reporter will get the facts of the story wrong once in a while, but a good reporter always gets the names right. It's Hatch, H. A. T. C. H., Hatch."

"Hatch, smatch. Who gives a ding? What about the local playboys?" Evie asks. "I need some names, so I can do some interviews. Where do the local playboys hang out?"

"I'm the only local playboy," John says. "Ask most of this town's single women and a few of the married ones."

"That's what I've heard. Were the pictures of you?"

“Beautiful lady, if you want a picture of me . . . just ask. I have a camera set up in my bedroom, twenty-four seven. If you browse the Internet, you can go to peekatjohn.com and follow along as I shower and play with myself.” John says. “You can even watch me clean my guns.”

“John, you’re such a bad liar, but my job is to get information. My editor says, ‘by any means,’ so, even if I have to take you out in the dunes and nail you, I need information—intercourse—verbal intercourse from you.”

“I’ve got a headache!” John says.

“That’s an old excuse. I am starting to think you’re an old excuse for a Sheriff. You’re trying to sell the notion that Verna left town with some guy or dude from Hollywood. But your own Deputy, Hatch, H. A. T. C. H., says he saw a body—too bloody to be identified, but he assumed it was Verna.” Evie leafs through the pages of her small note-pad. “That’s an exact quote, ‘Too bloody to identify.’”

“He also assumed the body was dead,” John says as he looks towards an approaching tow truck. “You want to print a story about assumptions, go talk to Hatch. If you want the truth, give me some decent time to investigate. That’s my job, to investigate not to make assumptions.”

A shinny red tow truck, from Clark’s Chevron, charges across the desert, toward them. Its oversized tires are churning up a dust storm. The tow truck’s driver plays chicken with some sizable rocks but swerves before the rocks make contact with the trucks brand-spanking-new tires.

“You best come up with some answers, tonight,” Evie says. She walks back to her Jeep.

“Is that a date?” John shouts.

“It certainly sounds like it. I hope you get rid of that untimely headache,” Evie says. “Bring some protection other than that revolver that was in your lap.”

Evie runs back to John and then kisses John on the tip of his nose. She walks away exaggerating the swing of her hips. Then turns to see if John is watching. And gets back in her cherry Jeep and leaves. She waves at the tow truck driver, Dexter Clark. She is going to interview Dexter Clark sometime today. He was Verna’s cousin and one of her longtime lovers. He should know what happened to Verna’s body. Whose body did Hatch think he saw? She knew it was Verna’s body. Too bloody to identify. Who stole the body? John, Naomi, or maybe Dexter Clark. Where was Dexter Clark when Verna was slaughtered. Was he a witness? If he was, she really needs to know. This job, suddenly, is becoming a lot more difficult than she has assumed. Too many assumptions. Her mother had told her not to assume anything. That was two days before the witches kidnapped her beautiful mother. The petite woman was dragged, from the shop, screaming. Mother’s erroneous assumption was that witches could be safely opposed; she was wrong, dead wrong, obviously.

Dexter drives the tow truck across the sand. He pulls up tight to the cruiser. Dust billows around the once-shiny truck. “Sheriff John? Didn’t I just pull you out of here a week or two ago? This getting to be some kind of habit? You keep doing this, and you’ll have one Hell of a time renewing your driver’s license.” Dexter laughs at his own joke. “You’ll have to hire me as a driver to take you on all your rounds to see all your lady friends, if you know what I mean?”

"I don't need no conversation. Just pull the goddamned cruiser out. And don't damage the damn bumper like last time," John says as he tries to stop the blood dripping from the cut on his forehead. "Make it snappy! I got places to go. Things to do."

"Kinda testy since Verna left town," Dexter says. "A lot of broken hearts and other parts, if you know what I mean, since the darlin' girl left for Hollywood. I always knew she'd head for Hollywood, some day. She is such a beauty. And so talented, if you know what I mean?"

"What makes you think she left for Hollywood?" John says. "Or are you just repeating the current rumors and local gossip. Or do you really know something? And don't be bullshitting me."

"My sister is in Naomi Cruthers' Coven, you know. She wouldn't lie to me. She says Verna left town with some handsome dude from Hollywood. My crazy cousin, Verna, lit up that beautiful house. Burnt my beautiful floor job—floor job for a blow job—if you know what I mean? Verna and me was real tight, if you know what I mean?" He winks at John. "I'm going to have to get reacquainted with my right hand now that Verna is gone; if you know what I mean? Do a hand dance for an audience of one or go and chase down one of my sisters." He laughs. "If you know what I mean?"

John slowly gets out of the cruiser. Blood trickles from his head wound. He has the revolver clutched in his hand as he walks to the side of the tow truck. He points the revolver at Dexter's left eye. "Dexter Clark, is this your good eye? If you know what I mean?"

"Sheriff John, don't screw around. You could stumble and your gun could go off, accidentally. Don't screw around with me or I'll report you to my cousin, the Mayor."

"I never screw around. Nothing is accidental. All is preordained. Get out of the truck and kneel, on the ground, in front of me, Dexter Clark."

"Come-on . . . Sheriff John," Dexter says. "Stop your fooling around. It's starting to scare the spit out of me. I'm about to pee my new drawers."

"Get out of the truck and kneel!" John points, with his revolver, to the ground. "Get out! Kneel!"

Dexter clambers out of the truck and kneels on the hot desert sand. "I didn't mean nothing about Verna." This crazy bastard of a Sheriff has the reputation of being trigger happy. He is certain Sheriff John had something to do with the mysterious disappearance of the banker, Matt Owens who turned down Verna on a simple home loan. He has to learn to keep his big mouth shut. Take this as a lesson in what not to say to a crazy guy with the gun. Or he will be known as the tow truck driver who died on some simple towing job, if you know what I mean?

"You say Verna's name, one more time; I'm going to blow your pea brain all over this fancy tow truck." John puts the barrel of the revolver against Dexter's throbbing temple. "Tell me how many times you screwed Verna."

"You said don't say her name."

John pushes the barrel of the revolver—hard—against Dexter's temple. Dexter flinches and the eyelid on his good eye begins to twitch rapidly. "Don't say her name ever again. Just say a number," John says.

"Over a hundred."

"Over a hundred times?" John asks.

"Yeah, way over a hundred times," Dexter says and shifts on his burning knees.

John pulls the slide back on the revolver and puts the revolver back against Dexter's temple. "You better be shitting me."

"I'm not. She's my cousin, kissing cousin, if you know what I mean? I was one of the first to really put it to her. Cover all the bases. Get to Home Plate. Five of us use to drive her, out to Death Valley, and take turns on the way there and on the way back. Four of the five still live in town and are still doing the one whose name I'm not supposed to say, as far as I know. I certainly am still doing her. And I think Hatch is to. And by all the great reviews, doing a bang up job, if you know what I mean?"

"When's the last time?" John asks.

"When Hatch and me and the boys took turns doing Verna?" Dexter asks. "Shit! I'm so sorry. It's just that I'm so use to calling her Verna when I talk about her. The five of us . . . ."

John jams the revolver's barrel against the center of Dexter's forehead. "No! you stupid shit! When's the last time you did her?"

"Last Friday night. When she finished with you. She was especially horny and wanted me to set up a threesome with my older sister."

"I told you not to shit me." He smacks Dexter, across the back of his head, with the butt of his gun.

"Ouch! I'm not shitting you! Sheriff John! I, I ah, always get action with her late on Friday night. I go to her house after you drop her off or you leave that beautiful house. We've been doing it for years on Friday night. You just wasn't enough for her. She did you because you control the town, and she was hoping Luke would find out about you two. But whenever she told Luke about you two, he wouldn't believe her. She said you knew she was doing it with me. I thought you OK'd it. Like you OK'd her doing it with Matt Owens. You know; the dead banker. Now I can't do her no more, while she's out of town, so, me and you should be okie-dokie, if you know what I mean?"

"We're okie-dokie, Dexter." John pulls the trigger. "If you know what I mean?" Blood splashes on the shiny, new, red tow truck, painting red-on-red flames on the front fender. Guys who drive red trucks have better not screw with Sheriff John.

Sheriff John lifts Dexter Clark's body up and over the side of the tow truck bed. Dexter has lost forty pounds since he started chasing Sissy Clark through the old ghost town, naked. He never liked Dexter Clark. Dexter's family was a bunch of inbreds. Everybody was related to everybody else. Nobody seemed to know if Sissy was Dexter's sister, his daughter, his first cousin. And Dexter was seen smooching it up with his very own mother! Jesus! John shakes his head and then climbs into the cab of the tow truck and backs it up against the cruiser. He climbs out of the tow truck and hitches up the back end of the cruiser and then drives the tow truck, out across the desert, toward the mountains, with the cruiser in tow and Dexter's dying body flopping around in the center of the truck bed and bouncing against the A-frame of the towing mechanism. The front end of the cruiser pitches from side to side. John turns around in the driver's seat, of the tow truck, but does not slow his speed. He slides open the truck's back window, takes the revolver from his lap, and plants three more bullets in Dexter's thrashing body. John drives toward distant desert-mounds and pulls around behind the tallest of three. He lowers the cruiser's back end and disconnects it from the tow truck, goes around to the trunk of the cruiser, opens it, and takes out a rusty, old shovel. He walks over to the base of the hill and begins to dig, and then strikes something.

“Shit!” John digs up a human leg bone. He covers up the bone and fills the hole back in, walks farther away from the hill, looks back, and measures the distance with his eyes and then digs a new grave. He has the feeling someone is watching. Maybe God.

High up, on a distant hill, an ugly witch watches John. She sits in a four-wheel drive, and watches through binoculars. The witch stuffs her mouth with salty chips and takes a quick swig of beer from its dented can and then wipes her mouth on the sleeve of her black dress. She lifts a mobile phone and speed dials. “Naomi, Love. I just saw our local Sheriff, Mr. John Dieadad, do something naughty. You were right about following him. No. Not over the phone. I’ll tell everyone at the midnight meeting, tonight. But, please tell your buddy Nicky Scartossi to reserve me some of what ever he’s giving the Sheriff. This was the fastest burial in history. Keystone cop like. Yeah out at our special place. You’re going to make me tell you, aren’t you? Right? Dexter Clark, Sissy’s boyfriend and Betty Ann’s brother. Course, every other male, in this nasty town, is Sissy’s boy friend and Betty Ann’s brother. Yeah, Sheriff John killed Dexter Clark. Shot him and shot him and shot him. Poor service, I would guess. We’re going to own this town with Sheriff John in our pocket or in prison. You can be Sheriff and I can be Mayor or I can be Sheriff and you can be Mayor. You can be on top or you can be on the bottom as we make, ‘a dead-Sheriff sandwich.’ Please, don’t tell anybody anything until tonight’s meeting. You and I will work out a funny routine. Or, let’s just adlib. See you, tonight, my little sugarplum.” She snaps her phone shut, stuffs a handful of chips in her mouth and continues to watch Sheriff John.

John sees the flash of light in the distance. Probably binoculars, he thinks. He hitches the cruiser back up to the tow truck. Somebody is watching. They will own his Royal Ass if he doesn’t get to them, fast. If it is some special law enforcement unit, he would have been sniped, by now. If it is a private citizen, they would have called who? Not his office. They can see that he’s a Sheriff or at least a Deputy. Will they think to call the D.A.? Maybe Evie Ward is still roaming the desert. Who would she call? If it is Evie, she will have to die. If it is a witch or witches watching, he can deal with them quid pro quo.

## Chapter Six

John decides to take Highway 139 back. There is a long flat spot in the road; he will be able to see any tracking vehicle. The tow truck, with the cruiser still attached, bumps across the desert and then slams over the shoulder onto Highway 139. Ten minutes later, John looks in his rearview mirror and sees, the flashy grill of Jean Rider’s Range Rover, a mile back. John takes Jean Rider, on a breakneck rollercoaster ride, across numerous, bumpy desert-roads, to the junkyard behind Naomi Cruthers’ fifty acre plot. He disconnects the cruiser and leaves the fancy new tow truck in the middle of an existing witches’ foot laid out with rocks buried in the desert sand.

John disconnects the cruiser and drives, the smoking vehicle, back to the station house. How will he explain Dexter Clark not towing him back to town? No one but Jean Rider saw the cruiser smoke; he will just say the cruiser started smoking just as he pulled into the alley behind the station house. Sheriff John parks the cruiser and then walks around the corner to Clark's Chevron. He enters the two stall garage; Dewey Clark sits, on a stool, behind the counter.

"Where is your car?" Dewey asks Sheriff John.

"Behind the station house. I need a tow, over to here. I think I need some repairs," John says.

"I sent Dexter out, to the desert, to tow you," Dewey says.

"Dexter pulled me off the cactus and onto the highway. I drove it home okay, but it started smoking in the alley. Dexter said he was heading out to Naomi Caruthers' for a tow."

Dewey runs his gnarled fingers through his thick, gray hair. "That God darn Dexter is freelancing, again. I'll send him over when he gets back. After I punch his lights out."

"Okey-dokey," John says.

They both laugh at the familiar phrase. John strolls back to the station house.

"Who, other than Hatch, knows about the body? Who else did you tell? Conny Walker?" John asks Luke. "Tell me you didn't tell Conny Walker."

"Conny's my attorney so I'm supposed to tell him everything, but he hasn't been here, yet," Luke says as he gesture with his hand indicating the sweeping beauty of his tiny cell. "Tell him when he comes, to bring some decorative items: beach scenes will be nice."

"Don't tell him shit. Just say you were too drunk to remember anything. Tell him, you don't even remember going to the house. There are over twenty witnesses who say Verna left town 'with a handsome dude from Hollywood.' And she tried to burn down the house," John says. "Hatch is framing you for a murder that never happened. He still hates you for taking Verna from him twenty years ago." John looks around. "Where is Hatch?"

"He got a call telling him someone dumped the Chevron tow truck behind Naomi's. I've never seen the son of a bitch move so fast; he took a fingerprint kit and left," Luke says as he stares through the ancient bars at Hatch's nearby desk. "Get me a Coke or something else to drink. I'm dying of thirst, here."

"Drink from the sink. I'll be back." John rushes out the station door.

"How we doing on my bail?" Luke shouts after his brother. He has too much time on his hands. He has started believing maybe Verna ran away with some guy from Hollywood. Believing that Hatch is trying to frame him, because of Hatch's failed engagement, to Verna, years ago. Believing that he never saw Verna's hacked-up dead body. Believing that he may have slaughtered Verna but was just too drunk to remember. Believing, that God may have abandoned him. And decides God will leave this a cliffhanger: he needs a nap. Luke flops face down on the paper thin mattress. The mattress smells sweet like maybe one of John's lady friends has been in this very cell. He wouldn't put it past John. His brother has probably had sexual intercourse on every surface of the jail house.

Hatch is in the tow truck dusting the steering wheel and column for prints. The prints he lifts from the steering wheel and steering column and door handles will be Sheriff



John's and Dexter Clark's. Clark will be found dead and Sheriff John will be indicted and convicted for the murder of the lowly tow truck driver. Everything is working out, perfectly, like a well-written script except for a couple of minor hitches.

John approaches Hatch, from behind, holding a twenty-two pistol he took off a junky a week earlier. Sheriff John looks around to make sure the two of them are alone. Like on an intimate date: a date with death. "Find anything?" John says.

Hatch tries to move from the seat, but his legs straddle the seat at weird angles and both legs are ensnared by the seatbelt; three twenty-two caliber bullets slice into the back of the Deputy's bald head; the tiny bullets race around inside his skull until his brain is dead but his body still lives. John strips Hatch naked, thinks about keeping Hatch's expensive, hand-made boots—they're my size—he thinks. He drags Hatch's limp body to the post in the center of the briar, ties him to it, selects some dry branches, from the inventory, sheltered by a tarp; he stacks the branches against Hatch's bare feet; and then fires up the branches. The flames eat the flesh off Hatch's thick legs but his naked body stays upright: the rope, tied with a half-dozen square knots, holds his upper body tight to the post. His upper body flesh melts before the rope burns causing the burned-out cadaver to slide down into a seated position. John laughs and coughs into his hand and then throws Hatch's clothes, one-by-one into the flames; he retains the equipment belt and holstered gun.

In the perceived safety of the carcass of the Lincoln, Jean Rider watches John's rampage. She is trapped, if Sheriff John spots her. You need some help, she thinks. John has murdered Dexter and his own Deputy and probably Verna. She will have to "just say no" to Nicky's drugs. She watches as John takes burning brush to the tow truck and tosses the fiery sticks into the cab; the plush upholstery ignites. He places the equipment belt over his shoulder. He then takes the twenty-two from its tucked position in his belt and rubs it down. He walks directly to the Lincoln. "Jean Rider, catch!" He tosses the small pistol into the Lincoln's shadowy interior. Jean Rider's knee-jerk reaction is to catch the pistol. She points the gun at John and pulls the trigger; the gun sends out a hollow click; it is empty. John strikes her across the face and takes the gun from her trembling hands. "Stop following me, or I'll come at you for the murder of my Deputy Denny Hatch. I've got the weapon of his death. With your prints on it." He shows her the tiny pistol and then pockets the murder weapon and walks back to the cruiser.

Jean Riders stays—shivering—inside the rusted-out Lincoln. She waits three hours for the Coven members to congregate. She isn't going to tell anyone how stupid she has been. Sheriff John probably has a collection of pistols, with prints on them, because witnesses were stupid enough to play catch with the Sheriff. She will have to torture and kill Sheriff John and get the collection for her own little scam. She will kill him with one of his own guns, High-noon, tomorrow. Then Naomi and her will really take over Glenrock and the drug trade. Nicky will be the next to die. Then it is money money money. She pees in the corner of the Lincoln and then waits for the Coven members to arrive.

## Chapter Seven

Inside the abandoned store next door to Evie's house, the killer lies, in the shadows, on a mat in the corner. The killer continuously pounds a fist on the hardwood floor. The killer, Vengeance, wears a long robe with a hood. Vengeance gets up and begins to pace and then walks over to the side window and pulls the shade aside. The window looks directly into the lighted side window of Evie's house. The killer waits a couple of beats, then picks up a flat bladed knife and walks to the back exit of the abandoned store.

There is more work to be done, Vengeance thinks. The Coven knows that Verna is dead—slaughtered—what they don't know is that Jean Rider is next.

Outside a small house, an hour before dawn, Jean Rider, still dressed in her ritual robe, hesitates as she steps out of the Range Rover. She has been the hit of the meeting. The Coven has to compete with late-night TV. Mix a little showbiz with witchcraft to keep the new recruits entertained. So, it was, "Showtime." First, when the members saw the burned-out skeleton, she had to explain how the Sheriff did the deed. How he shot ass-wipe, Denny, in the back of his fat head: Pow! Pow! Pow! Probably to keep Hatch from testifying against Luke or because she—Ms. Jean Rider—had called the Sheriff's Department and reported the tow truck being abandoned on their sacred ground—Sheriff John abandoned it; Deputy Hatch said he'd be right out. Don't touch anything, he said. That led to telling how Sheriff John got the tow truck in the first place. That led to telling about Dexter Clark kneeling in front of Sheriff John like he was going to give the murdering Sheriff a blow job like Dexter used to make Verna and her give all his friends—blow jobs. He got his in more ways than one. The entire Coven laughed. Then she told about Dexter getting shot in the head while he kneeled. Pow! At least he didn't have to give Sheriff John a blow job. The Coven laughed. Then she told of the way the Sheriff shot Dexter twice more while driving across the desert at a high speed almost too fast for her to follow him with the high-powered binoculars Naomi bought her for All Saints day. Pow! Pow! Again there was laughter. And last she told them about the hyper speed with which the Sheriff buried Dexter. There was more laughter and applause. She neglected to tell them about the small pistol she had caught and practically handed back to the Sheriff; or about his threat of arrest and conviction. She didn't want them to know how stupid she had been or how frightened. She also didn't tell them of her plan to kill Sheriff John and Nicky Scartossi sometime after dusk, today.

Jean Rider moves her fat body toward the small house. The door to the house is open. A howl from a desert animal startles her. She turns and surveys the silent desert. She looks around. She turns and cautiously enters the house.

She moves through the kitchen and then stops at the doorway to the living room. The furniture is pulled back to the walls. The carpet is pulled loose and rolled up. A large witches' foot is crudely etched into the hardwood floor. Lighted candles line the witches' foot's periphery. Jean Rider whirls around to leave, but the killer begins stabbing her face. She tries to fend off the intruder but the long knife is hammered into her flesh in a frenzy. She falls back into the center of the witches' foot. Vengeance goes back into the kitchen and cleans the knife and slips it back in its slot in a wood block that houses five other

knives and then goes back to the body and pulls a ring from the dead witch's index finger. The killer exits the house.

Vengeance is exhilarated. The plan was to cut up Jean Rider first, but then there was the invitation to Verna's party and we all know how that ended. Verna left town with a handsome dude from Hollywood. The handsome dude from Hollywood must have a thing for dead, bloody witches. Vengeance had hid in the shadows of the exact Lincoln Jean Rider had hid in and pissed in, earlier. Vengeance watched as Jean Rider became the star of show. Naomi Cruthers didn't look very happy. The Coven leader will be the last to die. The story about Sheriff John and Dexter Clark and Deputy Hatch is interesting but Vengeance is more interested in memorizing all the faces, of the wantabe witches, for future reference. Two down. Naomi appears to be recruiting new witches faster than Vengeance can eliminate them. There is a real need for a new strategy. A strategy where the butchering occurs while multiple witches are meeting. Possibly, three at a time. Then if Naomi recruits one witch and three witches are slaughtered, there will be a net two dead witches. I can make that work.

## Chapter Eight

Outside the Sheriff's station, in the early morning, John starts to get into the Sheriff's cruiser for a trip to San Bernardino. He must convince Jay Lattimer, the D.A., That Nicky Scartossi is somehow responsible for Verna's disappearance and Jean Rider's slaughter. Convince him Nicky is doing a copycat of the Loadstone Murderer; as a cover up.

Naomi walks up. She looks around. "There are seven Coven members, and some newbies, plus me, who know what you did to Dexter Clark and Deputy Hatch. We intend to . . ."

"Six Coven members," John corrects her. "As head witch, you should know the head count, of your Coven, at all times."

"What?" Naomi says.

"Six Coven members. You lost Jean Rider last night. I found the twenty-two that probably killed Hatch at her house. Rider was stabbed twenty-one times." He pops up seven fingers, three times, within inches of Naomi's face and then gets into his cruiser.

"You bastard! I know you killed Dexter and Deputy Hatch, and it will probably turn out you killed Verna and the Rider. Verna, because she wouldn't leave Luke for you. And Rider because she saw you murder both Dexter and Hatch," Naomi says.

"I didn't do Dexter Clark or Denny Hatch. Why would I? Your eye witness is dead, anyhow. She murdered both of them. And then told you and your Coven some tall tale. I'll just tell everyone you did it and buried old Dexter next to whoever's out in the other grave. Naomi, you need to take your act to some other miserable town. Nicky is killing your witches. Rider killed Dexter and Hatch. Not me. Verna was murdered by Nicky

because they had a big time falling out.” Rider was killed by Nicky because he had paid her a ton of money to take the Coven from you, and she failed.” John starts to drive off. Naomi grabs the door. “Why don’t you use your witch’s powers to stop me? Chant a little bit,” he tells the witch as he pulls away and drags her a few yards before she lets go.

“BabaYaga will devour you! She will come at you in the night and devour you,” she shouts after the cruiser and then glowers at the spectators. “Mind your own business, or I will mind it for you,” she says as she looks each one in the eyes. With one exception, they all look away.

John reaches out the window and flips Naomi the finger. Two blocks down, Evie stands in front of her house; she flags John down.

“John, I’m real pissed,” Evie says as she approaches the cruiser.

“You look so delicious when you’re pissed,” John says. He smiles and looks over every inch of the young reporter.

“You stood me up last night,” Evie says.

“I came over, but you weren’t answering the door,” John says.

“What time?” Evie asks.

“Pretty late,” John says.

“Okay, I forgive you, but when I first came back to this sraphole town, you promised that I would get the first crack at any news: bobcat sightings, road rage, witch murders. Now there’s been witch murders and zero, zilch, nada from you.”

“I promised nothing about witch murders. And we don’t have any bobcats out this direction. You’re supposed to be a real smart girl. Dig up your own news. My job description doesn’t include reporting the news. I’m the Sheriff. You’re supposed to be the news reporting girl.”

“I’m not a girl. I’m a lady. A real smart lady. I’ve already turned in four pages on Luke and Verna, and two pages on the witch murders,” Evie says. “I’ll probably be nominated for a Pulitzer for my coverage of the witch murders or for my story about Sissy Clark’s pussy being stranded up the Walker’s palm tree.”

“That’s not the first time for Sissy. And you mean witch murder . . . as in one. Verna is missing, not declared dead,” John says. “Multiple witnesses say she dumped Luke and ran away with a handsome dude from Hollywood.”

“John . . . John, how do you expect to get me in the sack if you don’t tell me the truth. You know Verna is dead. You know Jean Rider is dead. All you have to do is give me the inside scoop and I’ll perform like a circus acrobat,” she says. She puts her hands on her hips and twirls around.

“Who says I want to get you in the sack?” John asks Evie. “Maybe I’m too busy.”

“Town told me it was the only recreation in the area: watching you bag the ladies.”

“So, is that the deal? I give you the news . . . you give me . . . the blues?” John sings the high note on the word ‘blues’ and then grins at Evie.

“Oh, John, that’s so corny. Are you a poet for all your ladies?”

“So now you’re one of my ladies?” John says.

“Too much competition. Young women really like you old guys.”

“What old guys?” John asks.

“John, here’s the deal. You’re over the hill. Maybe two hills. I, on the other hand, am not even close to the first hill, but I’m easy.”

“That’s what I heard,” John says.

"If you want to bag me. Okie-dokie. You know what I mean?" Evie says.

"You been hanging out with Dexter Clark?"

"As I was saying: if you want to bag me, first you must tell me what's going on. I need to earn my keep at the newspaper or my ass will be on the street along with the rest of my beautiful, tender body."

"That will be one lucky street," Sheriff John says. "They can name that street, 'Sheriff John Dieadad Street.'" He

"Stop the flattery and fess up. What the Hell's happening? You help me out and I'll give you a little or a lot depending on the value of the information."

"I love women who talk dirty. You can ride with me to the D.A.'s, if you promise to talk dirty," John says. "Bring a trailer-load of notebooks."

Inside the Sheriff's cruiser, John drives across the desert with Evie by his side.

". . . So, Jean Rider, another witch, was stabbed to death last night. Why witches?" Evie says. "Maybe there's another connection. This is one damn small town. Maybe Verna and Rider are mixed up in something else, like drugs or prostitution or murder."

"As far as we know, Jean Rider is the only dead witch," John says.

"Come on, Sheriff, your Deputy saw Verna's bloody body in what he described as a witches' foot. There was a goddamn statue of Zimmerman in Verna's front yard. Verna was a witch. And Hatch saw a dead body. From your Deputy's description, Verna was interrupted while performing some kind of witchcraft while dancing around, naked."

"How would he know she was dancing around? Anyhow, Deputy Hatch has disappeared. He went on a call to the back of Naomi Cruther's place. Clark's Chevron's tow truck was abandoned there. Hatch took the call. His cruiser was found in the desert, but Deputy Hatch wasn't. You can hear it all, when I tell Lattimer. But now let's talk about this 'you can bag me' stuff."

"First I want to know about Dexter Clark. Town says he's been missing since yesterday. I saw him with you yesterday," Evie says and then turns and looks directly at John.

"Yeah, he's missing. He pulled me out of the cactus, then said he was headed to Naomi Cruthers'. Said he got a call from some guy, out at Naomi's, needed a tow for his brand-new Kia. You get what you pay for."

"A lot of people, around you, are missing, John," Evie says. "Why aren't you out checking on Dexter and Hatch?"

"You trying to tell me how to do my job? I've been working both cases, since early this morning, while you were getting your beauty sleep. If either or both of them are not back by the time we return from Lattimer's, I'll get back on the search out at Cruthers' and elsewhere. Deputy Acker is handling it till then. That's why I have Deputies; to do the legwork."

"Then you'll tell me what's happening?" Evie asks.

"Yeah, I'll tell you what's happening."

"Town says you're going with Naomi Cruthers," Evie says.

"I'd like to meet this Town fellow," Sheriff John says.

"Town also says you were bagging Verna, your own sister-in-law."

"Jesus, I must be a busy fellow. I won't deny I find most women delicious." He pats her upper thigh.

"I find some men delicious to. Like Jay Lattimer."

“Lattimer? Jay Lattimer is delicious?” John shakes his head.

“Yeah, Jay Lattimer is delicious.” Evie licks her fingers.

Sheriff John laughs and thinks of Verna saying much the same thing about Lattimer.

## Chapter Nine

Inside the District Attorney's office, District Attorney Jay Lattimer sits, with John and Evie, in the conference room. The furniture is old, but polished and clean. Lattimer is immaculate. Evie takes notes on the notepad despite a computer carrying case strapped to her shoulder. John leans forward in his chair and stares at Lattimer. “It's not some psychopath, who likes to chop up witches—from Loadstone—who, it goes without saying, hates witches. It's Nicky Scartossi trying to confuse us. He nailed this second witch, Jean Rider, to cover-up Verna being missing and probably dead.” He is convinced that the body burning at Naomi's place was Verna. What the symbolism of Naomi eating Verna's bloody heart is; he has no idea. Knowing Naomi, it has to be something real evil and nasty. But it is best that Lattimer believes the body is missing or that Verna actually left town with some handsome dude from Hollywood. “We should, at the very least, treat Verna like a Missing Persons.”

“John, it sounds, to me, like you have a problem with Nicky Scartossi. I know you and Scartossi were both pumping Verna. Everybody knows, even her husband, Luke,” Lattimer says. “Who you pump is your business, but don't think I haven't thought of you as a suspect and questioned if I should allow you to work the case. But I decided we're so short of help, in this County, that I have to overlook your relationship with Verna. But you're still one of the prime suspects in Verna's disappearance. I have found no evidence of your interaction with Jean Rider. But your relationship with your brother's wife was blatant and well documented.”

“Bullshit! Nobody knows nothing, or has documented anything about me and Verna, because there is nothing to know or document about Verna and me. We were just in-laws and friends.” John says and then gets up and paces. “Glenrock is a small town; everybody, in a small town, thinks that everybody, in a small town, is doing everybody in a small town. Rumor is you were pumping Verna about six months; what about that rumor?”

“You have nothing on Nicky Scartossi except he was with Verna. So, you are jealous,” Lattimer says. “Jealous of his youth, money, and power.”

“The day John Deiudad is jealous of Nicky Scartossi or any other young man . . . I blow my friggen brains all over the map.” He puts his finger to his head and makes a sound, “Bam!” He holsters his finger-gun. “Nicky Scartossi made Verna disappear because she left him. He killed Jean Rider because she was shorting him on the drug money. Shorting him by tens of thousands of dollars. Nicky couldn't put up with that. It

would have spread to his organization. So, Nicky slaughtered Rider as a Copycat of the Loadstone Murderer.”

“If you sidestep the personal stuff, you'll see this is something else. Somebody really hates witches. The Unsub wiped out every witch in Loadstone and now he or she is working Glenrock. Both Verna Deiudad and Jean Rider practiced witchcraft, vehemently,” Latimer says. “For Christ's sake! Your sister-in-law, Verna, has a statue, of Addie Zimmerman, in her front yard. That's way over the edge of being absorbed in witchcraft. I have information that Verna thought witchcraft kept her beautiful; I wonder how she rationalizes the number of ugly witches in Glenrock? Why their witchcraft didn't magically erase the ugly from their faces?”

“They were both wantabe witches,” John says and keeps pacing. “Both Verna and Rider. A college boy like you realizes there are no such things as witches, right? You do realize that it's all bullshit?”

“The witches' foot, left at both crime scenes, is used to call up Evil. I think the homicide was committed by someone who hates the witches' supposed ability to do so,” Lattimer says.

“Ninety-five percent of the town hates witches and their ‘supposed ability to do so.’ I'm starting to sound like some schmuck from the Ivy League.” John nods his head toward Lattimer.

Evie smiles at John. “I think that schmuck is kinda cute,” Evie says.

“I hope the two of you are not speaking of yours truly,” Lattimer says to John and then smiles at Evie.

“No, we're not speaking of yours truly. We're speaking of some other Ivy League schmuck, in the room, anyhow, Nicky did it. Not some witch hater from Loadstone or anyplace else.” John walks toward Lattimer. “Nicky's got you bamboozled. This thing. . . . It has nothing to do with witches. It has to do with lust and drugs and, of course, money.”

“Maybe it's a witch who used both of these ladies as sacrifices to the witch known as BabaYaga; the Russian witch worshiped by Naomi Caruthers and her Coven members,” Lattimer says.

“That's just what Nicky Scartossi wants you to think. Lab tests will show Scartossi did both killings; Verna Dieadad and Jean Rider,” John says. “Verna was personal, so Nicky made it personal, and did her himself. He probably put out a contract on Jean Rider. Paid, one of his henchmen, to do Rider.”

“As usual, John, you are dead wrong,” Lattimer says. “Caruthers is the principal connection between the two crimes: the death of Jean Rider and the disappearance of Verna Dieadad,” the D.A. says. “She probably used them both as sacrifices to BabaYaga. Took them out to that area behind her junkyard.”

“You're jerking yourself off. If they were sacrifices to BabaYaga, no bodies would remain . . . they would be gone . . . Disappeared. Devoured in a ritual fire,” John says.

“Verna's body did disappear. You should be, the one person, happy about that,” Lattimer says. “Maybe you should be number one, on the suspect list, when and if Verna is ever found.” The handsome D.A. smiles at John. “You had good reason to make Verna disappear, because she was going to tell Luke about the true manner of your relationship. And, if I dig around enough, I'll probably find irrefutable evidence that you murdered

Jean Rider because of a drug deal going down bad. And now, with Denny Hatch missing, it's like an arrow from God pointing to you as the Unsub."

John laughs. "You can shove that Unsub arrow up your ass. I have rock-solid alibis. You want them now or later? And now, what do we do about Luke; in light of Jean Riders murder happening while he was locked up?" John asks.

"He could've put out a contract as you say Nicky did. But, we have sworn affidavits from over twenty people; they all say the exact same thing, 'Verna lit up the house and then left town with a handsome dude from Hollywood.' Sounds rehearsed, but with no corpus delicti and your Deputy Hatch missing, I have nothing to hold Luke on. I will have his bail set aside. You can release him later this afternoon on his own recognizance. If we find his wife's body, then that is another story. But please let Nicky Scartossi be. We should both be concentrating all our resources on catching this psychopath from Loadstone. We both know you're a psychopath. Have you been to Loadstone, lately?"

"Nicky Scartossi is the psychopath. He probably had some kind of beef in Loadstone." John starts for the door.

Evie stands and shakes hands with the seated Lattimer. "Nice meeting you, Jay Lattimer," Evie says. "You are one handsome dude."

He stands with her hand still in his. "Ms. Ward, does your paper know what a distraction you are? Don't they have less attractive reporters they can send out with John?"

"I've been called many things, but . . . a distraction?" Evie says.

"There were many other things I wanted to discuss with John. But then I thought about your startling eyes, and your perfect chin, and beautiful lips, and I forgot about everything else," Lattimer says.

"Jay, my boy, I already did the corny shit with the young lady. She's easy. Just give her a story and she'll roll over and do tricks for you. All it'll cost you is a story and a decent meal somewhere; she'll provide the mattress." John says.

Evie takes her hand from Lattimer's. She smiles. "John is such a crude asshole . . . but he most often tells the truth. If you've got a story to tell, and money enough to buy me a burger at Kelly's, come meet me in my town." She starts to walk out the door with John.

"Ms. Ward," Lattimer says, "if you are working for the Chamber of Commerce . . . you are certainly doing a fine job. I will come to your town on Saturday. This coming Saturday. With enough money to get you as many as two burgers at Kelly's."

The Sheriff's cruiser moves casually up the desert highway. Evie sits leaning against John's right shoulder.

"I'm surprised that that young man didn't zing you more about the convenient disappearance of Hatch. Hatch being the only witness against, your brother, Luke, and all," Evie says. "He missed an opportunity to ask some interesting questions; like where were you when Hatch disappeared? And where were you when Verna disappeared? And where were you when Dexter Clark disappeared? And what about Hatch, H.A.T.C.H."

"You sound like you think I did something to my own Deputy," John says. "And my own in-law? And my own mechanic? Christ!"

"Like I said before; there's a whole lot of missing people around you: Dexter Clark, Deputy Hatch, your sister-in-law Verna. Jean Rider. The Yellow Truck informant. Verna's banking friend. Am I going to get home safe? Or are you going to pull over to



the side of the road and pump me and then kill me? Lattimer said you and Scartossi 'pumped' Verna? How exactly do you 'pump' a gal?" Evie says.

John looks at her and gives her a big grin.

## Chapter Ten

At dusk, the cruiser pulls, onto Main Street, a block from Evie's place. Evie is finishing the remains of a hot dog laced with tons of mustard. She has mustard on her lips and chin and a spot on her shirt.

"You got more on the outside than on the inside," John says.

"Small mouth," Evie says.

"That ain't what I heard," John says.

"John, you're such a bad boy. Pull around back of my place and come on in and rest your troubled mind."

"You gonna reward me, for all the information; or for hitching you up with Lattimer? You know. . . . Verna talked a lot about Lattimer. Maybe Lattimer was one of Verna's rejected lovers. Maybe Lattimer killed Verna. I wouldn't put it past him. He's too perfect. Regardless, are you inviting me in?"

"A deal is a deal," Evie says and then winks. "Some great information and Lattimer is just the icing on the cake. So what if Verna got some of that icing in her short life. Do you care?"

John nods his head. "I'm just a little suspicious of a guy who looks that pretty. Being handsome is okay; but he has perfect features, like a girl. He could have never been in a fight; and fight like a man." He shows off his powerful fist.

"I wasn't planning on fighting him," Evie says. "Maybe he's a lover not a fighter."

The cruiser pulls into the alley behind Evie's house. John and Evie get out of the cruiser on opposite sides of the car. They meet at the front of the cruiser and then clasp hands. John turns and notices the door ajar on the abandoned store next door. He releases Evie's strong hand and walks over. Evie follows.

"You gotta keep this place locked." John walks toward the store. "We've got a killer running loose and you have an open door to an abandoned store right next door. Isn't that your bedroom window? Don't you think there some fellows, in this town, who would like to take a peek in your bedroom window? And you're worried about me? Pumping you?" John says as he uses his foot to toe-open the door. John opens the door wide. He unsnaps his revolver. He walks through the door, pulls out his flashlight, and shines it into the shadows. He walks over to the sleeping-mat in the corner, kneels down, and checks the bedding, touches something under the mat, pulls out a flat-bladed knife, stands and draws his weapon, takes his handkerchief from his back pocket, bends over, and extracts the twenty-four inch knife by its wooden handle. He holds the knife and flashlight in one

hand and his revolver in the other as he cautiously searches the remainder of the small abandoned shop and then he steps back outside. "Glad you didn't come in," he says to Evie.

"Too many bad memories for me," Evie says. "My mother spent a lifetime collecting interesting things from all over the world and then she was taken away by witches. Goddamned witches," she whispers.

"You know there's a sleeping mat in there?" John says. "It's never been used."

"How do you know it's never been used?" Evie says.

"The mat still has its tags on it, and there is no body odor on the mat. Your tenant left a souvenir." John waves the knife at her.

"That knife? Maybe it was just left from some of my mother's stuff." Evie tries to take the knife from John.

John switches the knife to his other hand. "Your mother kept a knife this big?"

"It's a Batik. A butterfly knife. Used in the Far East," she tells John. "There are thousands of them in the world. Maybe, tens of thousands of them. If it's my mother's, then it belongs to me." She tries to take the knife, from John, a second time.

John holsters his gun. He walks over and puts the Batik in the trunk of the cruiser. When he turns, Evie is using a key to lock the door to the abandoned store. "Anybody else got a key?" John asks.

"I hope not." She walks over and takes John's hand and leads him, up the stairs, toward the back door of her tiny house.

They hear a sound down the alley; both turn quickly and see the clerk, Sissy Clark, at the back, of the occult store, dumping trash. She is looking directly at them. She places her hand on her young, skinny hip and continues to stare in their direction. She puts her other hand to her mouth and makes the international sign for giving a blow job.

Evie drops John's hand. "That's Sissy Clark; she's got a big mouth—unlike me. We best do this some other time. Probably, some other place. That blow job sign is rather presumptuous of her."

"Maybe it was just a suggestion. For later, tonight," John says. "I've got some business to attend to, tonight," Evie says in another voice. "I've been shirking the job I came here to do. Vengeance is mine saith the Lord."

John does a double-take. "Maybe Friday night, then," he says.

"Yeah, I can sub for Verna and all the other sluts." She walks rapidly to her back door, unlocks it, enters, and slams the door behind her.

Late that night, inside the occult store cluttered with cubby holes filled with candles and incense, pentagrams, robes, knives, herbs, and ancient books, a huge lady sweeps the storage room. She plants her big foot on the corner of a large rug that has a witches' foot sewn into its rough material. She sweeps the rug. "If that little bitch doesn't start sweeping this joint, and keeping the dust out, I'll fire her skinny ass no matter whose cousin she is. I never liked her idiot cousin anyhow. The only good reason for her to be in the Coven is: she will make a wonderful, delightful, and fitting sacrifice to BabaYaga the next time we . . . ." Anska Taylor hears a noise in the outer room. "I told you to get your skinny ass home so you can open early and do inventory. I want each and every bit of inventory itemized. Get your skinny ass moving home before I . . . ," Anska stops in mid-rant. She turns and looks in the direction of the noise. A gloved hand reaches out and takes a knife from the storage room wall. The huge lady turns. The knife starts beating a

staccato in time with her screams. Anska falls into the center of the witches' foot. The killer cleans the knife and hooks it back up on the wall. Vengeance takes candles from the bins and sets them on the outer edges of the witches' foot rug. The killer lights the candles, and then exits the storage room. But returns and stoops down over the huge lady's corpse and removes an emerald ring from the corpse's index finger.

Vengeance has been real stupid leaving the mat and the Batik in the abandoned store. There were no mistakes in Loadstone. Chop, chop, chop and all the witches were dead. A third of the population of the tiny town. But it was all just practice for Glenrock. But the Sheriff was leaving a higher body count than Vengeance. Of course, the Sheriff was the bigger psychopath of the two. Vengeance, only kills for revenge. Sheriff John kills for expedience. He never takes the diplomatic route. He is like a gunslinger from a century ago; except Sheriff John doesn't face-up, he usually puts a bullet to the back of his victim's head. Maybe Vengeance should take a page from the Sheriff's playbook. Why the need for all the blood and guts? Blood and guts are essential to the part Vengeance is playing. Without the blood and guts, Vengeance is just another psychopath. With the blood and guts, Vengeance is the right hand of God; the Old Testament God.

## Chapter Eleven

Inside Luke's ranch house, Luke takes off his long, butcher's coat and hangs it in the utility closet. John watches him from a comfortable chair. "I didn't stab Verna. But a couple of days ago she tried to stab me. She told me you two were going off together," Luke says. "Headed for L.A. where you're taking a high-paying job in a private security firm."

"It's not true, Luke," John says. "She was just saying that to push your buttons because she wanted a divorce. She wanted the money. And the house. And she was going to try to take the meatpacking company, too. She hired some famous attorney from Bakersfield. I didn't know there was anyone famous in Bakersfield, especially any attorneys. You would think a Bakersfield attorney wouldn't be a divorce attorney but rather an ambulance chaser for trucking accidents."

"She didn't mention a divorce; she just ranted about you two going to L.A. together and living happily ever after. I told her I didn't believe that fat witch Naomi about you two. And I didn't believe her. She said she did you and she did Nicky Scartossi," Luke says as he pours a drink without offering anything to his brother. "And she said she did most of the fellows who worked on this house. The Gibbson brothers and her cousin, Dexter Clark."

"I think it's bullshit about the Gibson brothers and Dexter, but she was doing Nicky . . . I'm sorry Luke. But she's been doing that Homo for a couple years, now. I'm sorry I didn't tell you, but I thought you knew. I'm pretty sure Nicky's the one that slaughtered

Verna and took her body,” John says. “Rumor is she was breaking up with him and he took it real hard. We have credible witnesses who heard him say she would only leave him in that infamous pine box.”

“I said she was old enough to be Nicky's mother and I said I believed she would do anybody and anything. I said her and her witch buddies do dogs and cats. And I said a lot of other nasty things because I was three sheets to the wind and I was very angry; you know how I get,” Luke says. “I said a bunch of worst things.”

“That's what I heard,” John says. “Verna told me you said something or another about horses or ponies and such,” John says. “You've been watching too much Internet. You know authorities can track those bestiality sites. You best get rid of your new computer.”

“I don't have time to go on the Internet. Anyhow, she grabbed the knife. Came at me. She missed. And stumble. Damn near stabbed herself. I left without telling her I knew you wouldn't do her because brothers don't hurt brothers by doing their brothers' wives. I know you didn't do Verna,” Luke says and pours himself another drink. He takes a second class and fills it then takes both glasses back to his chair.

“Now that you've told Deputy Hatch, what Verna said, the whole damn town thinks I was doing her. But you know I wasn't huh . . . Luke?” John's phone rings. He answers it and then walks away talking into the cell phone.

“Yeah, I know,” Luke says to John's back. And Luke did know; it has been John and Verna for years. He saw them kissing and dancing nude together, years ago, in this very same game room, before it was burnt out, when he came back from a trip to Los Angeles where he lectured on the highest and best use of a boning knife; and how to sharpen your best cutlery without permanently scarring the blade's integrity. He had tip-toed back out of the house and then drove out to Hidden Springs and slept in his truck. He could have stayed at the Super Six in town, but John would have been informed, instantly. Luke has thought about telling John he knew and maybe invoke the fair play doctrine, but John knew nothing about fair play. It was all take, take, take. Under the fair play doctrine, John should have come to him and said, “Brother of mine, you have had the duty of spending tons of cash on beautiful Verna. While I, Sheriff John, King of Glenrock, have had the spoils. Let us switch rolls. I will pay the four hundred thousand dollars per year needed to keep Verna in the bling bling—of course I'll have to sell more dope; sell more protection; and be on the take a little more—and you can sleep with her every Friday night till death do you part.” No matter how many times Luke played out this scene, in his head, it still never came to fruition. Instead his crazy brother, John, probably was the one who murdered her. I should kiss him, Luke thought. If that was Verna's sliced-up body sprawled on the game room floor. Hell, he was so stinking drunk. But he was certain there was a body. He was also certain that John had something to do with that bastard, Hatch, missing. He was also certain that he didn't want his brother, John, as an enemy. A deadly enemy. Maybe, his most deadly enemy in Glenrock.

“Well, we got problems. Why the Hell you bring your knives home from work? You dumb shit,” John says. “Most butchers leave the tools of their trade at work.”

“My knives got stolen before at the warehouse,” Luke says. “They're very expensive. My insurance company said they would not cover another theft of my knives; after the third time. And they raised the premiums to an amount that it was cheaper to buy new sets then to insure them.”

“The knives, when they are lying around, give an intruder . . . or Verna an excellent weapon to cut your stupid throat. And why did you have the murder weapon in your hand? Lattimer has decided to send the knife, to the lab, for tests. If it has anyone’s blood on it other than yours we’re in deep shit. He will go to trial with circumstantial evidence and Hatch’s report. The damn SteelHard knives have serial numbers etched on them. Ownership is easy to verify. Did you bring the boning knife with you or was it with the rest of your cutlery? How did all this happen?”

“It all started when I went down to Kelly’s and the fellows preceded to get me drunk as a skunk. I did a couple of nasty dances—very suggestive—with the new, beautifuler then shit, waitress, and then I announced to the bar that I was going home to cut my whoring wife’s lovely throat. And then have sex with her dead body. Everybody laughed but Dexter Clark; He said it wasn’t funny and said that Verna wasn’t a whore—she didn’t charge for it; a little bartering but no flat out cash. Everybody laughed including Dexter then he said she wasn’t a whore just very, very friendly. Everybody was still laughing when I left Kelly’s. Dexter must have called Hatch. When I got back to the house, the door was wide open. I circled to the back door by the kitchen. When I entered, the knife was right there on the counter. I grabbed it to use against any intruder. When I left for Kelly’s, earlier, the knives were, all together, wrapped in a leather apron and sitting on the big counter.”

“You’re a stupid shit,” John says then gets up and pours himself a drink. “If they were so valuable, why did you leave them lying around. Why didn’t you put them in the safe?”

“I forgot them earlier in the day, so, I came home to get them. We argued and I forgot them again. I left Kelly’s and decided to come and get the knives and work through the night. When I saw Verna, in the center of that star, in the game room . . . she was . . . oh God!” Luke begins to sob. “Slaughtered!” And you probably murdered her, you beautiful bastard. You probably saved my life. So I can live to drink again. Kelly’s here I come. Right back where I started from. And where I intend to get a little fresh gnocchi from that new, redheaded waitress.

“You were the last one to see her alive. And you told over forty-five patrons of Kelly’s that you were going cut her throat and shit down it. Why did you have to be so descriptive? Let’s hope Nicky Scartossi cut her throat and sliced her up and stole the body.”

“It was him. . . . I know in my heart,” Luke says. But he really doesn’t give a damn who killed Verna; as long as he doesn’t end up being found to be the guilty party. Like he said, he should kiss John right in the middle of Main Street. Authorities are looking at other suspects; Conny Walker will be able to create reasonable doubt in the jury’s minds. If it ever goes to trial. His money is still on his brother, John, killing Verna and Rider. But why Rider? Probably to make it look like the Loadstone Killer is in town. Just to confuse everybody. Johnny is an expert at confusing everybody. God bless his little heart. Little and stone cold.

“Nicky will be easy to convict. Let’s pray that it was Scartossi,” John says as he puts his cell phone away.

“It was Scartossi,” Luke says as he pours himself two more drinks.

"Nicky's the kind who would use a knife on his woman. The way you and Hatch described the body, she was cut by someone who needed to hurt her badly," John says. "Wouldn't you say?"

"I'd say so. But what the Hell was the star and candles about?" Luke says.

"That star is a witches' foot. And it may save your sorry ass. The D.A. thinks it was drawn by some psycho who hates witches. The killer from Loadstone," John says.

"It wasn't drawn, it was inlaid. Verna had that star on some of her books," Luke tells his brother.

"It's some kind of evil symbol that attracts a witch named BabaYaga. Jean Rider was mutilated. She was found in the center of a witches' foot." John gulps down his drink.

"Jesus! They can't blame that one on me; I was in jail. Some psycho witch-hater did do it!" Luke gives a sigh of relief. He hopes that the Witch Hater chops up five or six more witches. That will really confuse the issue. Somebody needs to start the rumor that the Catholic Church may have hired an assassin to kill off the witches at five, no, at ten thousand dollars a head. To keep the witch organizations from recruiting lonely old ladies and draining the Church's coffers.

"I'm sure Nicky Scartossi set it up so I would think it was Naomi Cruthers doing it to kill off any challenge to her leadership. But the D.A. thinks it's a psychopath. Most likely the psychopath from Loadstone. But he won't hesitate to come after you if he can't find anyone else. Next year is an election year, you know. Jay Lattimer has got to pin this on somebody, soon. If he can't find a psycho killer who hates witches, he'll come after you. We need to build a strong case against Nicky in case that happens." John says.

"I think maybe Verna might have been into some of that witch crap," Luke says. "To have it, that star symbol, inlaid in the game room floor, right under my nose, means she was up to something to do with the witchcraft thing."

John jumps up from the chair. "You stupid idiot! You've got the statue of their national leader in your front yard! You hit it, on your way in, the night of the murder. Of course she was into that witch shit. Maybe Verna drew the first witches' foot and was in the middle of some kind of ritual when Scartossi came in. Nicky got the brilliant idea to make the whole thing look like the work of a psychopath."

"The star was inlaid not drawn. Maybe Verna just said she was doing Nicky to piss me off. Maybe she wasn't doing anybody. Maybe she was just pushing my buttons. You know how Verna liked to push my buttons. Maybe she said all those nasty things because I came home late again," Luke says.

"Little brother, you can't be that stupid. Didn't you see the photographs? Hatch said Verna was posed doing everybody."

"Not everybody. Your picture wasn't . . ."

"Hatch said, only Nicky was missing from the batch. That's rather suspicious that she took pictures with everyone but Nicky," John says. "We know she was doing Nicky. She was blatant about it. Everybody in town, saw them together at one time or another at one place or another. That's why I thought you knew. I figured, one of your customers or employees would have told you Verna was strutting around like Nicky's whore."

"Why'd Verna have to be such a whore?" Luke asks his brother.

"She was a whore before the marriage. Did you think she would change? Maybe if you ever came home from the goddamned cold-storage company . . ."

"I had to work to get the money," Luke interrupts his brother. "A ton of money. Verna kept every retailer in Glenrock, and the surrounding area, afloat."

". . . maybe she'd still be riding around, in that expensive car, acting like the queen of this hick town," John says. He points toward town. "All you had to do was come home once in a while. Watch television or something."

"She needed expensive stuff. We talked about me not working so many hours and maybe her slacking off on the expensive stuff. We even talked about selling this house. And getting rid of the Big Bear properties. We never go up there."

"Of course she told you to keep working. For the stuff, and so you would be away from the house," John says. "Rumor is she had some of the locals come right here. Right here in your house. Doing it in your own bed. And it looks like she had pictures taken of it."

"She said I should keep working because she needed expensive things. She didn't know why she needed them, she just needed them. The more expensive, the better. If it was on sale, she wouldn't buy it. Do you know, I spent fifty grand on that damn toe-ring she wares? Fifty grand on a damn toe-ring!"

"Just say no. The worst that could happen is she would have left you for someone with more money or the ability to get more money. But she would still be alive," John says. "Queen of some other hick town. Or maybe the Queen of Hollywood or New York. She was a beautiful woman trapped in this ugly town. You should have let her go. You should have given her lots of money and let her go or spent a lot more time with her."

"Where would I get the time? I have to work my ass off. I can't get money by being some cop on the take. I can't get money like Paul: by walking around and telling everyone about some God who is going to save their poor, sorry, lazy, asses. A God that never seems to come through. I have to work twenty-four-seven. I wish Ma had never decided I was the one to run the goddamned company," Luke says. "I do all the work, and you and Paul get the same share as me when Ma passes. It's not fair. You guys are having all the fun. You with drugs and women and Paul with Moonie Clark." Luke laughs.

"I don't think that mission, the one with Moonie Clark, has been accomplished, yet. And who said Life is fair? You were Ma's logical choice," John says. "You are the best butcher in the family—Hell, the best butcher in the County. And you're a workaholic. You think Ma, smart as she is, would have a cop or a priest run the company?"

"Maybe I could be a priest except I like women . . . when I have the time. I could have been a cop like you," Luke says.

"So, you'd like to be like your older brother?" John says as he smiles. "Run the town? Catch some crooks. I always knew you kind of idolized me. You should have told me a long time ago. Maybe I could have got you on the force. You could've followed in my footsteps. Been exactly like me."

"I don't mean exactly like you. You're brave and you do a lot of good, but you're crooked as a friggen snake or a stick or what ever is real crooked. I can't get money by being on the take," Luke says. "By being crooked. Both you and Paul hustle people for the money. And you both use your positions to barter for sex; you offer protection, in the here and now, for sex. Paul offers protection, in the Everafter, for sex."

“Asshole, you're starting to piss me off. You're starting to sound like Mr. self righteous Paul. You want my help or not? I just as soon go and bag Evie, now she's back in town, then waste my time on an ungrateful asshole like you.”

“I need your help. But, stay off the women, until my ass is out of this sling. I'll buy you every goddamned whore in California, if I get out of this,” Luke says.

“That's a ton of whores. But I need your help. Not with the whores. You need to dig through Verna's stuff and see who she was seeing. Look for names. Was she getting her drugs exclusively from Nicky? Who did she do the drugs with? How often. Shit like that,” John tells his brother.

“She wasn't doing no drugs. I can spot druggies a mile away,” Luke says.

“Did you even know she was on methadone before you married her? Did you give a shit? What do you know about her day-to-day schedule? Did she keep a diary? Is she on any of the social networks? Facebook? Twitter? Any of them?” John points to an elaborate computerized office set off to the side of the burned-out game room.

“I . . . I don't know,” Luke whispers.

“You're about the last guy in this hick town to ask about Verna's life. All you know is that she was at home waiting to screw you if you were ready, willing, and able to get it up,” John says. “She died because of your neglect. One of the most beautiful creatures in the world, and you neglected her.”

Luke steps over the driftwood coffee table, and grabs John and then pins John against the wall with his forearm and raises his hand to nail, John's grinning face, with his fist, but John slams his knee into Luke's nuts. Luke groans and drops to his knees. John knees him in the chin and then puts his foot on Luke's exposed throat.

“I should let you go down for the murder, but Ma would die, so I'm gonna save your sorry ass. When this is over, you and me and Paul are going out in that desert and I'm going to whip the dog snot out of both of you,” John says.

## Chapter Twelve

Outside a small house in the center of town, Evie stands, on a brand new stepladder, painting, the house exterior, blood-red. She uses strong even strokes. She wears tight, pink shorts that ride up her perfect buttocks; and a halter top a size too small; a crowd of men has formed across the street at Clark's Hardware. A crowd of women has formed, at Clark's Beauty Shop & Supply, next-door; the women are watching the men. Jay Lattimer pulls up in a County car. A boarded-up store sits next to the house; it has a fresh coat of paint. In the window is a tattered sign that reads, “NO WITCHES ALLOWED.” Lattimer steps from the car and quietly walks up behind Evie. She is one well built lady, he thinks.

“You have drawn an audience,” Lattimer says.



“Oh Christ!” She jerks backwards and almost falls from the ladder. “Jesus! You all most made me piss myself,” Evie says.

“Watch it! I may be one of those kinky guys,” Lattimer says.

She comes down from the ladder. “I would bet my left one you are anything but kinky,” she says as she wipes her spackled hands on the rag hanging from the ladder.

“Oh, I have my days,” Lattimer says.

“You here to seduce me or see the town . . . the murder sights? Try to solve the case?”

“All the above . . . you said ‘seduce me’ first. Was that a Freudian slip?” The handsome D.A. asks.

“In order of preference,” Evie says and then curtsies.

“The devil is in the details.”

“Come on in, you little devil, while I clean up. Then I’ll show you the town and the murder sites while you attempt to seduce me.” She holds the front door open. She waves goodbye to the men at Clark’s Hardware.

All of the men, except one, wave back at Evie. They scatter, from the porch, most in the direction of Kelly’s. None in the direction of the local, Catholic, church.

“My audience, those men at Clark’s Hardware, only want what you want,” Evie says as she pats her delicious rump.

Lattimer waits for Evie to dress. He roams around her small living room. It is immaculate. Lattimer picks up a picture of Evie with an older woman standing in front of the store next door. Lattimer puts the picture back in place. A Tibetan ceremonial robe hangs from a clothes tree in the corner. He walks over and examines it. He checks the dried blood on its sleeve.

This is why he can never marry. He suspects everyone. Now, his brain is concocting Evie coming from some exotic land to kill witches in America. In the desert. She wares the Tibetan ceremonial robe as she stabs each and every witch in the town she is reporting from. He will have to check to see if she had been in Loadstone, recently. Under the robe she is wearing nothing. She receives some sexual release from the stabbing, like the Charles Manson followers. The stabbings will end now that he is in her life. He will be her soul mate and her Savior. Of course, he thought the same thing about Verna Dieadad when he first met her at a political rally a few years back. He loves beautiful women. And because of his looks, he has access to most of them. His fling with Verna lasted less than six months but cost him most of his 401(k). But, Evie Ward looks to be low maintenance. And she knows what she wants. He loves strong women. Women who know what they want and are not afraid to voice their opinions. Evie Ward is such a woman, but is she the killer? Was she the killer—past tense now that he is on the scene? But his curiosity makes him reach in his pocket for a mini Swiss Army knife. He needs scraping, of the blood, from the hem of the Tibetan ceremonial robe. He cups the knife, in his right hand, he looks around, and then begins to pull it from his pocket.

Evie walks in—buttoning her shirt. “It’s from Tibet. The blood is hundreds, maybe thousands of years old. A very famous movie star, who likes gerbils, gave it to me, when I was in Hollywood, last year.”

“Did you have to compete with the gerbils?” Lattimer says as he lets go of the hem, of the Tibetan ceremonial robe, and drops the mini knife back into his pocket.

“Not that night.” She can see the wheels turning in Jay Lattimer’s brain. He is in town as a District Attorney, first and a potential lover, second. He is picturing her in the ceremonial robe hacking up Verna Deiudad and Jean Rider. And at the same time picturing her in the same robe being pumped in some cheap motel on the outskirts of Glenrock. “Want to drop the robe off at the lab for a few initial tests?” she whispers next to Lattimer’s ear.

“I’ll bet my left one, you wouldn’t harm a fly,” Lattimer says.

“Would it be a big bet?”

“Gigantic,” he says.

She hopes Jay Lattimer can function with just a right nut, because he has just lost what he called a gigantic bet and will probably live to regret it. Or possibly die to regret it.

On the street, John and Paul both wave at Evie and Lattimer as they get into a County car. John and Paul are, across the street, leaning against John’s patrol car. John is smoking a small, brown cigar; Paul continuously fans away the smoke.

“Well, my dear brother, looks like, your friend, Jay Lattimer, may curtail at least one of your temptations. The Lord works in mysterious and magnificent ways,” Paul chides his brother.

“Nothing mysterious about it. The Lord created Evie as a slut. So she’s acting like a slut. So, what’s mysterious?” John says. “And as far as magnificent goes; Evie is one of God’s most magnificent creatures. Only rivaled by Verna.”

“John, you poor boy. You actually feel some hurt. I can see it in your eyes. I’m stunned. Bad boy John has feelings. Not very noble feelings . . . but feelings none the less. I don’t know whether the feelings are for Verna or Evie or both. I think I sense tears coming to my eyes . . .” Paul pretends to wipe his eyes on his robe.

“You’ll have tears in your eyes when I kick you in the family jewels.” He makes a little halfhearted kick toward Paul’s crotch.

“There may be hope for you yet.” Paul walks away. He turns back. “There may be hope for me too. Maybe you should have kicked my family jewels . . . ten years ago.”

“Anytime,” John says. John gets in his Sheriff’s car.

Paul continues to walk toward the church. It was another test from God. He has to keep the information sacred. He had helped Evie and her Nanny escape to Guatemala when Evie was nine and her mother was kidnapped and surely murdered by Jean Rider and the BabaYaga Coven. It was God’s will. And though he has been tempted to tell his brother, the Sheriff, he has been faithful to the Church’s code to let things be worked out by God. But, he is certain, now that Jean Rider has been brutally slaughtered, that Evie Ward is the Witch Killer. It is nothing more than a case of revenge. It isn’t some psychopath witch-killer, from Loadstone, killing witches in Glenrock; it is the town’s petite reporter, Evie Ward, getting revenge on the witches who murdered her mother so many years ago. God will give him the sign if he should report Evie to save his brother, Luke. There has been no sign, yet. He spoke to God after Luke’s arrest and there was no mention of Luke in their conversations. They talked, mostly, about Moonie Clark and his drowning-pool eyes; and a little bit about his skin; the perfect pale shade of it. But, Father Paul is headed, for the church, specifically, to kneel down and talk to God about Evie Ward.

Inside Lattimer’s car, Lattimer and Evie sit and talk in front of Luke’s house.

“... was she a witch radical?” Lattimer asks. “Or just a part-time witch—a country club witch?”

“If you mean, was she serious. She had a statue, right over there,” she points towards the magnificent house, “of the head of the National Witches’ Council. I think there are only five or six other statues of Addie Zimmerman in the Country. Luke plowed this one down in his drunken rush to get into the house to execute his announced plan to slit his wife’s throat and shit down it,” Evie says.

“Did you confirm that Luke really said that about the down the throat thing? You think that Luke murdered her? Or do you think someone killed her because she was a witch?” Lattimer asks Evie.

“She was killed because she was a bitch. Your theory about a psychopath, who kills witches, is crap. There have been witches in this town since I was a child many, many years ago,” Evie says.

“Yes, John told me,” Lattimer says. “This town has a long history of women who believe in witchcraft.”

“Hey Romeo . . . you're supposed to interrupt me and say ‘couldn't have been that many years ago.’ You just lost a shit load of points.”

“How many points do I need?” Lattimer says.

“Any who. Your theory of a psychopath is crap. John's probably on the money with the Nicky Scartossi thing. I think your head's up your ass on the psycho thing”

“Please do not hesitate to say what you think.”

“I won't. Do you want to go through the yellow tape?” Evie asks.

Lattimer nods his head and then follows Evie through the yellow tape strung across the double door entrance. They move rapidly to the burned-out game room.

“If there was a murder,” Lattimer says. “All of the evidence has been neatly erased by the fire. Or it's as Naomi Caruthers stated. Verna tried to burn down the house before she ran off to Hollywood with some lucky fellow.”

“Sounds like you would have liked to be that lucky fellow? Evie says. “Are you one of her many lovers?”

“No. I just happened to see her at some of the political events. She was a big time money raiser for the party. She was, stunning, but no more so than you.”

“I thank you, kind sir. Do you want to see the other crime scene?” Evie points back toward town.

“Lead on.”

They drive to the Jean Rider’s small house. They park outside and talk.

“This one was about the worst of a lot. She was like the enforcer. Every one in town was afraid of her,” Evie says.

“Apparently not everyone. If she was the enforcer, what was Verna?” Lattimer asks Evie.

“Verna was the banker. The Coven couldn’t have existed or survived if it wasn't for Verna's money. Actually, it was Luke's money.”

“That makes it even more logical that it is a psychopath, who hates witches, trying to wipeout the Coven. When you destroy an organization, you start by eliminating the cash flow then you eliminate the soldiers . . . the enforcers,” Lattimer says. “It's too much of a coincidence that the town, just North of us, has had its entire witch population slaughtered by some psychopath.”

"Sounds great and looks great on paper, but, in reality, Verna was Nicky's lover and this one was one of his biggest drug distributors. Verna jilted him. Jean Rider stole from him," Evie told Lattimer.

"You certainly have a lot of information. But your information appears to be tainted by your relationship with John."

Evie squirmed in the passenger's seat. "I have no relationship with John or anyone else. Since I came back to town I've become a born again virgin. I'm hornier than a college kid on a Saturday night."

"Okay, enough shop talk. Let us concentrate on your problem with you being horny. If I am a college kid, and this is Saturday night and I want to pump a local beauty who happens to be a born again virgin, where do I go to accomplish the deflowering?"

"Do you want to go through the yellow tape?" Evie says.

"No. Forensics has already been here; they will give me a thorough report. Unless you mean your entrance is yellow taped?"

"No yellow tape. I'm ready for my deflowering. But, I for one don't think I've ever been pumped. But I'm willing to try anything once," Evie says. "I'm a ruthless investigator and very open-minded. So, like I said, I'll try anything, once."

"Anything?" Lattimer says.

"No small chickens. But if you mean make love, with an emphasis on the love part, I suggest that you drive out to Hidden Springs. Throw a blanket on one of those high mounds of sand and blow softly in the young lady's ear."

"Points the way," Lattimer says.

"That's what I've been doing from the start. I suppose I'll have to do all the work too. Get on top and all that," Evie says as she places her hand on Lattimer's thigh.

"I will do my share of the work. But you are more than welcome to contribute." Lattimer smiles. "I have an old football injury that stops me from doing a couple of positions, but other than that I should meet your requirements."

"As long as they're not positions one hundred and twenty and twenty-nine of the kamasutra; go West, young man. Go West." She points toward the mountains.

Outside Jean Rider's small house, Lattimer's car moves out toward the mountains. John's cruiser pulls from the shadows three hundred yards away. He should have gotten rid of Jay Lattimer when Lattimer was screwing around with Verna, but Verna had guaranteed that there was no monkey business between the two of them. Well, he has his dear rifle and scope in the trunk. When Lattimer was dating Verna, he had a chance to use the dear rifle. The two love birds were, on Big Bear Lake, in a small, romantic boat; he was on the shore, among the trees, watching. He raised his rifle up to her shoulder and looked through the scope; the crosshairs centered on Lattimer's gut. A painful gut-shot was ready to fly when two young lovers decided to picnic close by.

## Chapter Thirteen

Outside the occult shop, Sissy Clark, the clerk, unlocks the front door of the shop. She steps through the doorway and closes the door. Screams come from inside the shop. The clerk comes stumbling back out the door, screaming. She runs towards Sheriff John's office. Bounds up the stairs and then slams through the door.

"Jesus, Sissy, calm down." Deputy Acher says without leaving his seat behind the desk. He lays aside a book on the occult. "It's mighty early for you to be up and around. You're looking mighty good. I've been thinking about you lately."

"They've slaughtered another witch," Sissy says. "Hacked her to death. There's blood everywhere. More blood than I've ever seen in my life."

"Where?"

"Over at our shop. Where's Sheriff John? He should see this. All the blood and all the candles around the body."

"Sheriff John's out screwing off, as usual. You want something handled, since Deputy Denny Hatch's mysterious disappearance, you've come to the right place and right guy," Acker says. Jesus, sissy's knockers have gotten mighty big for such a tiny girl. They look like they're going to tilt her too far forward and bang her head against the floor. They certainly are something to behold.

"Naomi Cruthers says you hate witches," Sissy says as she brushes back her long, black hair and smooths the bodice of her long dress.

"I do. But there aren't any real witches in this town."

"Naomi's a real witch. She can do things," Sissy says and does a little twirl in the center of the floor. The material, from her long dress, whirls above her knees. She catches the bottom of the hem and holds this pose just long enough for Deputy Acker to see her slender legs.

"You're silly. Naomi Cruthers can't do jack."

"She can so. She can conjure BabaYaga."

"The Russian witch from the Birch Forrest? Who eats people and uses their bones for her picket fence? I'm just now reading about the infamous witch. Naomi can't conjure jack!" Acker says.

"She can so."

"You ever see her conjure BabaYaga?" Deputy Acker asks Sissy.

"Yeah." She whirls again, in the center of the floor; this time the dress whirls above her slender hips; she is wearing black, bikini panties with a white, miniature witches' foot on the front.

"So, you've seen BabaYaga, the skeleton witch?"

"Sorta," Sissy says and smooths the bodice of her black dress, but lingers on her sizable breasts.

"What the Hell do you mean, 'sorta'?" Acker says. He should go tend the dead witch at the shop, but this is getting interesting. He should lock the station door. And use some mouthwash.

"Naomi makes one of the other witches become BabaYaga. Someday I'll learn," Sissy says. "I'll become BabaYaga and eat people."

"Someday you should learn to eat me, Sissy Clark," Acker says.

"BabaYaga can do that now." Sissy smiles a broad smile.

"You did something to your tits since I last looked at you close," Acker says.

"Witchcraft grewed them bigger. You want to see them puppies?" The skinny teenager asks Acker.

"We better go see whose dead at the shop. Is she cut up badly?"

"How's it you knowd she's been cut up? Did I tell you? I hope its Jean Rider but it's probably Anska Taylor," Sissy says.

"Jean Rider was slaughtered on Wednesday night," Acker says.

"No, Naomi said she went to Hollywood with some handsome dude," Sissy says.

"That was Verna," Acker corrects Sissy while looking directly at the plump breasts on her tiny frame.

"No, Verna was burnt or I think you called it cremated in a special ceremony. I wasn't there but my cousin, Betty Ann, was."

"You need to keep your mouth shut about stuff like that; keep your mouth shut except for when you do blow jobs, Sissy Clark. Let's take a quick peek at them puppies before we head for the shop." Acker undoes his belt. And then walks over and flips the lock on the station door.

Sissy Clark unbuttons the top of her long dress; her bra is embroidered with a tiny witches' foot on each double-D cup.

Lattimer and Evie are at Hidden Springs. They put a plaid blanket on the top of one of the highest hills. The desert stretches out, before them, to the horizon. They sit and look out at the distant mountains which peak out to their left. He puts his arm around her shoulder. "An exciting day. An exciting view. An exciting lady. An exciting case." He turns and looks at her. "Please tell me you don't plan on being with John. He is a real bad guy. He was dismissed from the SBPD because he was taking money from the unions to look the other way," Lattimer says.

"He was framed by Yellow Truck," Evie says. "I'm going to do an exposé about Yellow Truck; right the wrong done to Sheriff John."

"Anthony Scartossi's union beat the scabs bloody at Yellow Truck. John just turned his head. John should be in prison, but they just dismissed him without pension. Then reinstated him six months later. Tell me he's too old, or something, for you to be bagged by him."

"He's not too old. But he'll never bag me as long as you bag me and pump and pump and pump. Twice a week. After diner and wine. Movies at least twice a month . . .," Evie tells Jay Lattimer.

"Whoa, I was just planning on pumping you not marrying you."

"We shall see." She pulls his head toward her. She kisses his lips. But Evie knows she didn't come all the way from Guatemala just to get married. She doubts she will ever marry. She had ended up in Guatemala when she was nine years old. Brought there in the loving arms of her nanny, Deloris Ramirez; who still resides with the Guatemalan Freedom Fighters. Deloris and her precious cargo had escaped from Glenrock, with the aid of Father Paul Dieadad, after witnessing the abduction of Evie's mother by the BabaYaga Coven. Her tiny, defenseless mother was dragged half dead from the shop while Evie and Deloris hid in the stock room. Evie vowed never to be defenseless, again. She was raised in the rebel camps and taught to use her fist, her feet, and any handy

weapons needed to kill a human being. The witches she killed, as Vengeance, in towns like Loadstone were just practice for Glenrock. Though she has decided to keep killing witches when she is finished in Glenrock. Her cover is perfect for the hick towns she is so attracted to. She is a freelance reporter reporting on the phenomena of small-town witch murders. No one notices that there are no witch murders until a few days before Evie shows up. No, she is not in Glenrock to get married; she is in Glenrock to slaughter witches; every last one of them. Currently, she plans on speeding up the slaughter: at least one slaughter per night until there is no witch standing. She plans on staying close and intimate to the two men who can stop her in her tracks: Sheriff John Deiudad and D.A. Jay Lattimer. She will become both men's lover. And if necessary, if she is found out and trapped, she will slit their throats while they sleep after a full night of intercourse with the Loadstone Killer, a.k.a. Evie Vengeance Ward. Now, she will tend to the needs of pretty boy, Lattimer, while the handsome lad tends to her's.

Nine hundred yards away, John watches the lovers through a high-powered scope mounted on a deer rifle. His trigger finger caresses the hair trigger. The trigger molds perfectly to his finger; like an extension to his hand and thereby an extension to his brain: his sociopaths' murderous brain.

Should it be shoot to kill? Or just shoot to scare? Or shoot to make them both piss themselves? Kill? Scare? Or piss themselves? Who shall he shoot. He has to draw some blood or a good bullet will be wasted. His father taught him to never waste ammunition or a good glass of Jack Daniels. His father also taught him to be a marksman, so, he has decided to catch both Evie Ward and Jay Lattimer with one warning shoot. Course, if he misses, for the first time in his adult life, and the bullet slices through both of their pounding hearts; that will not be a bad deal either. He will wait for a perfect shoot. But sometime before Lattimer is in the down stroke—as his beloved Verna would say. Evie murdered Verna and Rider and has been a busy little girl, last night, killing the fat witch clerk, Anska Taylor, at the Witchery Shope. Acker has just phoned him that Sissy Clark had discovered Taylor's body early this morning. John has decided he will let Evie Ward keep killing witches until he can see what Lattimer is going to do about Luke. If Luke gets charged in Verna's murder, then, as Sheriff of Glenrock, he will be duty bound to rat Evie out to Lattimer and let the chips fall where they may. Evie is a slut. Why is he always attracted to sluts? Maybe it's a long-standing affair his mother had had with Conny Walker's father, Glenn, the founder of Glenrock. To bad it's not the two of them up on that hill: the two of them in his crosshairs. Course, Glenn Walker is already dead; courtesy of Naomi Caruthers.

Lattimer kisses Evie while he slowly unbuttons her plaid shirt. He doesn't want to look until her breasts are free. Like ninety-nine percent of all males, he is an avid breast fan. He had fixated on Evie's breasts the first day they met. Now, he is about to free them and to see them. If somehow he can spend time: make this moment last; make it last above all other moments recorded in his brain. Or intertwine it with moments he had with Verna. He finishes unbuttoning the flimsy shirt and discovers the young reporter is bra-less. There is a God. Now, did The Almighty make them average or two pieces of fine art? The matrix in his brain flashes his ideal concept of a perfect set of breasts. Of course, they are Verna's.

He pulls her shirt open and then peeks.

They need to be framed, by a professional framer, and hung, in the Louvre, next to the Mona Lisa, and named, "Evie's Breasts on the Mound." Or hung at Clark's Hardware, in Glenrock, as a community service.

He is about to search for the mound of gold at the end of the rainbow, but he is conflicted in three ways: he wants to get there fast, yet he wants to get there very slowly, and he is worried that he might be quickly falling in love with the psychopath who is killing the witches in the local desert towns. He has tried to get information on Ms. Evie Ward but she had disappeared with her mother and nanny over fourteen years ago and just appeared back in Glenrock a few months before the killings started. The mortgages on the shop and the tiny house have been paid, all these years, by a bank in Guatemala. The trail ends there at the numbered account. Where will this trail in the desert end?

He inches her shorts down; she is without panties. This beauty came prepared to have intercourse, he thinks. And he starts kissing her with abandonment.

Suddenly a bullet whizzes across the top of Lattimer's left ear. The bullet rips the top of his ear and slices the edge of Evie's upper thigh. Blood covers the side of Lattimer's face and Evie's upper thighs. Evie screams. She jumps up, tugging on her tight shorts and dumping Lattimer onto the desert sand. "Oh, shit!" she says. "One of us is bleeding to death."

"Oh! Double scrap!" he says and holds his bleeding ear. "I think it's me!"

"Rather you than me! Stay down! Someone's trying to kill us." She drops to her buttocks and then slides down the far side of the sandy hill. A skeleton's bony hand creases her calf. She screams and jerks away leaving cut marks on her lower leg. But before Lattimer can slide down to her rescue, she kicks sand over the hand. They have picked a burial ground; appropriate when she realizes how badly she wants Jay Lattimer's bone buried inside her. She giggles.

But maybe they weren't shooting at District Attorney, Jay Lattimer, maybe they were shooting at Freelance Reporter, Evie Ward, for some witch story she has written. Or maybe Naomi Cruthers and her Coven has figured out that there had been a witness, those many years ago. And that witness came to Glenrock to wipeout the Coven and any one else who smells of witchcraft. Or maybe Sheriff John is a little more interested in her than he appears to be.

"You okay?" Lattimer says. "Your thigh looks manageable. How to get those marks on your beautiful calf?" He points at her lower leg.

Evie shrugs. "I don't know, but it looks like they were trying to kill you and I just kinda got in the way. How bad is your wound?"

He pulls a handkerchief, from his back pocket, and places it over his ear. "Lots of blood but I think it's just a knick. I hope it's just a knick."

"Lucky you were down low. They couldn't get a good shot. I assume we'll finish, later," Evie says.

"Of course. But now we have to figure how to get the Hell out of here. And figure out who in the Hell wants me dead."

"Looks like Nicky Scartossi sent someone after us. You got a gun?" Evie asks.

"No, I never carry one," Lattimer says.

"Where's the Sheriff when you need him?" Evie mumbles.

"He has been following us all morning."

"Oh! Again!" Evie says.



"You thinking what I am thinking?"

"Naw, couldn't be," Evie says.

"You do not sound very convincing, beautiful lady," Lattimer says.

"John wouldn't kill you for this." Evie uses her teeth to start a tear across the bottom of her plaid shirt.

"Well, he did not kill me. Maybe it was just a warning. Maybe he hit exactly where he aimed," Lattimer says as he points his free hand at his bleeding ear.

"If it was John, he would have shot you a lot lower," Evie says as she binds her wounded thigh.

"If you remember correctly, I was still zipped up," Lattimer says and points to his fly.

"Would it have been much of a target?"

"He could not have missed," Lattimer says.

"In that case, bigger is not better," Evie says.

Lattimer starts crawling back up the sandy mound.

"Where the Hell you going?" Evie asks Lattimer's tight butt.

"Back up there to find that slug. It must have slammed into the dirt."

"Are you nuts?" Evie asks the handsome, young D.A.

"If it came from John's gun, I will bury him," Lattimer says.

"If he doesn't bury you first. Get back down here!" Evie says.

Lattimer crests the hill, on his elbows. He looks over. A bullet whizzes past the same bloody ear. He rolls down next to Evie. "Whoever it is, isn't trying to kill me, only warn me, twice. The third time probably won't be a warning shoot. You'll be burying me right here in the desert."

"Well, let's heed the warning and get the Hell outa here. Or we might both be getting buried in the desert. You know the rule about leaving no witnesses?" She gets up and charges toward Lattimer's County car. No shots are fired. If it is Sheriff John, who's the desert sniper, Lattimer is about to die, Evie thinks. He'll never make the ten yard run. Ten yards with nothing to crawl behind.

Lattimer races after her. He holds the handkerchief to his bleeding ear. Two rapid shots ring out.

## Chapter Fourteen

Inside Sheriff John's office, Paul stands up and begins pacing. John sits behind a cluttered desk. John's long, yellow rain-slicker is hanging, behind his desk, on a coat tree. The room, ancient as it is, smells damp and claustrophobic. There is an old bloodstain in the center of the floor and a plaque, embedded in the floor, next to it, explaining that the bloodstain was that of Sheriff Forrest Hill; killed, at that very spot, by Billy the Kid.

Paul walks to each table and desk in the room. He takes the overloaded ashtrays and empties them in the trash basket. "It's against the law. God's and Man's. I won't frame an innocent man. Why don't you do some good, old-fashion detective work? Like you're paid to do. You're not paid to bang every woman in town. You're paid to prevent crime. And if unable to do that, to hire someone who knows how to prevent crime." He takes the ashtrays to the sink inside a cell across from Sheriff John's office. "When's the last time you prevented a crime? I will not frame Nicky."

"Nicky Scartossi did it!" John shouts across the empty station. "Your ex-lover boy did it. You know it, in your heart, he did it."

"When his father was in prison, Nicky came to me for guidance." Paul walks back toward John. He is drying the ashtrays on the bottom of his robe. "We spent many hours on the concept of taking another's life especially a woman's life. Nicky, wouldn't murder a woman. His mother was murdered when he was only six years old."

"You gave the Homo great guidance. Nicky really turned out to be a fine, upstanding citizen," John says. He leafs through an open desk-drawer, and finds a picture of Nicky when he was fourteen with a group of ten other choir boys. He plops the picture on the desk.

"He came to me for guidance and comfort," Father Paul says and ignores the 8X10. "Nicky, is essentially a good guy. At least he doesn't pretend he is something that he is not."

"He's not trying to be a drug dealer; he is a drug dealer. A good guy drug dealer? That's an anomaly. So, you'd rather help a drug dealer than your own brother?" John says. "Homo's of a feather flock together." He sails the 8X10 across the room. It hits Father Paul in his privates and then drops to the floor. "Here, take this for your masturbatory collection."

"God will never forgive me if I betray one man for the benefit of another." Paul bends down and picks up the picture of Nicky Scartossi. Blood drops from his wrist onto the picture; he covers it quickly. The blood from this morning's whipping is running from my shoulder down to my wrist. I must excuse myself. Nothing can be more humiliating than having my brother, John, know that I whipped myself this morning. Whipped myself until I bled. Whipped myself until I climaxed thinking of Moonie Clark.

"I thought God forgave all things? It appears he's forgiven you a ton of shit. Do this and I'll bet your God will forgive you again and again and again," John says. "The way it's set up for priests is you're pretty much forgiven all things probably even murder."

"John, you're the last person I want to get into a theological discussion with. I can't do this thing to Nicky." He looks at the 8X10; rolls it; and then puts it in his robe picket.

"I need your help. If Luke goes to trial, he'll be convicted on circumstantial evidence. You want him to do life . . . maybe get the death penalty?" He makes the motion of sticking a hypodermic needle in his upper arm.

"If it's God's will." Father Paul blurts out to his brother.

"For one time in your life forget about that God crap and help your family."

"Nicky is family," Father Paul says.

"Not my family. Help my family," John says.

"You were thinking about your family, when you laid your whoring hands on Verna?" Paul says.

John throws an empty ashtray, at his brother, like a ninja's cartwheel, it smashes the glass on the open, office door. And then imbeds itself, in the knotty-pine wall, behind the door.

"Where have your whoring hands been!" John shouts.

"Your brother's wife! Do you ever think? Stick with Naomi Cruthers and her kind," Paul spits the words at John, but circles the office a cautious distance from his brother.

"Naomi's more your kind. She likes doing children," John tells his brother.

"Why Verna?" Paul asks his brother.

"I had my needs. She had hers. Our needs were a little more natural than yours." John gets up and walks to the window. He turns his back on his brother.

"You should have let Verna alone. She did the drugs because of her guilt over you," Father Paul says.

"She did the drugs because of Dexter Clark and Denny Hatch," John says. He keeps his back towards his brother. Betty Ann and Naomi are standing across the street staring at the Sheriff's station. Naomi is on her cell phone.

"Verna's probably dead because you used her. Then Nicky used her. Then . . . everybody used her. Why couldn't you leave her alone, for Christ's sake?" Father Paul shouts.

"I don't live for Christ's sake. I live for my own sake. Verna and I kept each other sane in this God forsaken town." Betty Ann and Naomi walk away. Naomi turns back and flashes John the middle finger. John smiles and turns and faces his brother.

"If you don't like this town," Paul says, "pack up now. It would be better for all of us. Better for Ma, Luke, me and the town."

"And I take your dirty little secret with me?" John asks his brother. "Maybe I should leave town but give up my secrets before I leave."

"It would have been better, if you had just packed your bags and left years ago, before father died. He lived to see your deceitful ways."

"He lived to see your preferred ways. If I had left town, like you, I would have come back. It's a very forgiving town," John says.

"Should this town forgive you for fornicating with your brother's wife?" Father Paul says.

"I was forgiven for that, years ago. I tried to save Verna from the Meth. And save her from the witches."

"Ah, my brother, John . . . the saint. That will be the day," Paul says.

"Screw you! There are no saints in our family. Luke, me and Ma look the other way about your problem. Your Homo and pedophile problem. We look the other way because we're family. Nicky Scartossi is not family."

"I love Nicky as much as I love Luke," Paul says.

"Oh, you love him like a brother?"

"Yes," Father Paul tells his brother.

"Don't bring any of that brotherly love to me or I'll break it off."

"God will never forgive you," Father Paul says.

"Screw God. I need your help. Luke needs your help."

"Lattimer thinks it was a psychopath not Luke. You're the only one who needs Nicky to be the scapegoat," Paul says. "If Nicky did it? Why did he murder Jean Rider?"

“To throw us off. And Rider was stealing from him. Nicky is not a scapegoat. Nicky's guilty; Lattimer will find out the Coven burned Verna's body and he will take Luke to trial on the testimony of one of the over twenty witnesses to that burning. Verna didn't run away with some handsome dude from Hollywood. Nicky murdered her; I just need a little help proving it. Come on, Paul, you're the only one who can pull this off . . .”

“If I do this terrible thing, for you, will you protect me if I should get into some trouble because of any accusations from Moonie Clark?” Father Paul says.

“Yeah, you got a deal. You sick bastard.” John says as he reaches, across the desk, and shakes his brother's hand. Blood pools in John's palm. “Stigmata?” Sheriff John says and then smiles at his brother.

## Chapter Fifteen

Outside an Italian mini-villa, surrounded by two hundred abandoned pink, Italian mini-villas dubbed “Glenrock Achers,” a failed subdivision project that is rumored to have gotten Matthew Owen, of the Bank of the West, murdered and cost Nicky and Verna and the Union millions of dollars; two burly guards stand on the front lawn. Bulges, in their expensive coats, suggest holstered weapons. Guards, with German Shepherd dogs, walk the periphery. Men, with automatic weapons, pace the upper balcony of the villa.

Paul approaches the two guards, standing together, on the lawn. “Tommy, Gerry, I have not seen you two, in Church, in a while,” Father Paul says. “Your father's have told me they will bring you back to the flock. Hopefully, starting this Sunday. Your mother's vowed that you two will be back attending Mass, religiously.”

“Been real busy, Father. Nicky's a man on the go. Ruler of Glenrock. He has lots of appointments; lots of requests for his help. He can grant you, and yours, all wishes. You got a wish you want granted? You want to see Nicky, Father Paul?” Gerry Gibson says. “You don't need prayers when you can get what you want from Nicky.”

“I want to see him for just a minute,” Paul says. “But only God can grant you all wishes. The world has always used prayer to record their wishes. I assume most of their prayers are addressed to God or Christ or Mother Mary but not to Nicky Scartossi.”

“Not in Glenrock,” Gerry says. “In Glenrock, you come see Nicky if you really want something. I'll check to see if Nicky has time to see you—unannounced.”

Tommy nods his head and stays guard at the front door. Gerry goes inside. He salutes Father Paul.

Paul takes out his bible and opens it to the center and then lets the Bible flop open to the page God wants him to read. God has guided him in this manner since he was twelve years old and his father threw a Bible in his lap and said he should think seriously about

becoming a priest because his homosexuality would be accepted in the priesthood but it wouldn't be tolerated in the Dieadad home or on the streets of Glenrock. Paul paces and looks at the Bible without really reading it. He notices it has opened to his name sake. It must be an omen. A message from God. Paul, his name sake, became one of the most powerful leaders of Christianity after being one its most outspoken nemesis. Now, this Paul is due some power. But, he is weak, in God's eyes; doing his evil brother's bidding. God's voice tells him not to obey his brother's evil command; not even to save Luke. But it appears that John's commands and threats hold sway over God's commands and threats. But, today John will lose and God will win. Paul closes the bible and turns to Tommy. "Tommy, I just realized I'm running late for another meeting. Please tell Nicky I'll see him another time. Another place."

Gerry looks out the entrance and motions to Paul "Father Paul, Nicky says, 'Come on down!'" Gerry says in his game show announcer's voice. He holds the door open for Father Paul.

Paul starts toward the entrance.

Evie Ward comes bounding out. "Hi, Father Paul. Nicky need you to give him his last rites? Forgive all his sins?"

"Evie? Welcome back. I haven't seen you in Church," Father Paul says.

"I gave up on God—fourteen years ago. He couldn't protect my beautiful mother. I'm sure he can't protect little, nasty, old me," Evie says to Father Paul.

"It was tragic . . . the thing with your mother. She was beautiful and charming. God must have had other plans for your dearly departed mother." Father Paul says.

"You are a total asshole. What a stupid thing to say. Read my column, Saturday, it contains my in depth interview with Moonie Clark." She runs down the walkway to her cherry Jeep.

"That's one feisty little broad, huh Father Paul?" Gerry says.

"Her slut's mouth has no respect for God's messenger. I condemn her to Hell," Father Paul shouts after Evie Ward. And after he has been so diligent about keeping her secret all these years. Well, that will be the end of that. He will have to speak to the editor and stop the publishing of Evie Ward's column if it contains anything that even hints of pedophilia especially on the heels of the accusations against thirty-seven Philadelphia priests; some who happen to be his Internet buddies.

"Damn! I didn't know you had the power to do that!" Gerry says. "I thought only God and Nicky had the power to do that."

Paul makes the sign of the Cross and then goes into Nicky's fancy house. They move slowly down a hall where Hooligans push past carrying armloads off plastic bags. Through half closed doors, Paul sees naked women packaging Meth. The women are naked in order to prevent the concealment, of drugs, from their supervisors. At the end of the hall, Paul and Gerry pass by a huge guard, Arturo Tate, and enter an elaborate room lined with gun cases. In the center, at an oversized desk, Nicky Scartossi sits. He is a young, expensively dressed, weasel.

"Father Paul, sit down. Want a soda, water, booze, a blow job? You've come because me and the boys have been remiss about church. I swear, Father Paul, we was busier than squirrels packing our nuts. But we all plan to see you . . . come Sunday."

"It's not about church, my son," Paul says and makes the sign of the cross.

"I'm not your son . . . why you here. Why you not out chasing some choir boy," Nicky says. "I hear you're swooning over Moonie Clark. You know he's no virgin. His soccer coach nailed him last summer. They was almost married, but I hear Moonie Clark's mother called off the wedding." Nicky and Gerry both laugh.

"Nicky! I am not a pedophile. Your accusations were never proven. No accusation, of pedophilia, has ever been proven against me." Father Paul says and makes the sign of the cross again. Nicky is mouthing off in front of his men. But he will live to regret it. John is going to get help from one pissed off priest. Help to put Nicky where he can give lots of blow jobs. God, please forgive me, but I am a holy man. I don't deserve the taunting. I've only been intimate with boys who have seduced me. Besides, everyone seems to know my desire for a relationship with Moonie Clark, so his mother must know and still she is going to allow him to be alone with me for ten wonderful hours a week. She must approve of what is inevitable. Maybe, Moonie Clark, has confided, his desires, to his mother.

"You're not only a pedophile; you're a serial pedophile. You look like a nervous serial pedophile." Nicky says and makes the sign of the cross and then throws it at Father Paul. "You been following what's happening in Philadelphia? They're not only going after the serial pedophile priests; they're going against the higher-ups that transfer the serial pedophile priests from place to place. They're after them for child endangerment. You're superiors must be getting a giant jolt up their collective anuses. They're probably amassing, your legal fund, as we speak."

Paul sits at the front of the desk. "Enough of this nonsense, I wanted to talk to you about Verna."

Nicky looks down at his folded hands. He sits silent for a moment then looks up with teary eyes. "She was the only thing good about this jacked-up town. The only reason I had for getting up in the morning. She was the Queen of Glenrock. If I wasn't such a punk . . . had a nine-to-five job, I would have got her off Meth. . . cleaned her up and gave her a good life. Got her out of this God damn town."

"She was married, Nicky," Paul tells Nicky. "Happily married by most accounts."

"He was married. She wasn't. He bought her stuff, stuff, and more stuff. Tried to buy her love. But she loved me. He found out. Then he cut her up and Naomi cooked her," Nicky says.

"Luke loved her . . . in his own way," Paul says; but is thinking, Nicky is so young looking. He still looks like a teenager. Maybe even a preteen. I know I shouldn't be asking, but please, God, let me have Nicky and Moonie Clark, in tandem, so to speak. That is the least you can do for me.

"His way was bullshit. Why you here? If you came to do your asshole brother, John's, work, the answer is no. No, I didn't kill Verna. Luke killed Verna. Hatch saw it and John took out Hatch," Nicky says.

"I know you didn't kill her. I also know Luke didn't either," Father Paul says. "But I need your help find out who did."

"I loved her as much as anyone could love Verna. She didn't deserve to die like that. She didn't deserve to be married to that turd Luke or to get laid by your cop brother."

"Nicky, I . . ."

"Your whole family is psycho. We both know what, a sociopath punk, you are!"

"We have all sinned, my son. I have sinned . . . you have sinned. Next Sunday, you and I will pray for our souls," Paul says.

"You and me got no souls," Nicky says.

"When you were a boy, not too many years ago, you came to me whenever you needed comfort or help. Now I need your help. Whoever cut Verna up, wanted to hurt her badly. Make her feel excruciating pain before she died."

Nicky starts to sob. "When I catch the bastard . . ."

"What man would do such a thing? What man from our town would do such a horrible thing?" Paul asks Nicky.

"Maybe it wasn't a man. Maybe it was Naomi Cruthers because Verna was going to try and take over the Coven," Nicky says. Or maybe it was Evie Ward because of what the witches did to Evie's mother.

"Naomi and her friends are eccentric. They think they have power. But they're not violent. And certainly not murders," Paul says.

"Father Paul! Get your head out of your ass. Open your eyes. I'm the only guy in town who has balls enough to screw with Naomi. She's one mean, murderous bitch. She's got half your parishioners doing witchcraft or drugs or both," Nicky says. "She's on the verge of renting your church for her midnight meetings."

"She's recruited a bunch of lonely widows. I will bring them all back to Jesus," Paul says. "God will punish them if they stray, from the church, much longer."

"Naomi told the whole town why you're back. And you defend her?" Nicky says. "She's got the whole town thinking I'm a Homo, looking for young boys, because of what you did to me and you still defend her?"

"I'm not defending her. I'm saying she has no power. Eventually my parishioners will see Naomi as a sham. Not some evil being," Paul says. "The Lord has given me no powers, yet. He certainly wouldn't give powers to some fat witch. Naomi is a sham."

"That sham . . . has made husbands disappear. And the Walkers who owned the house Naomi now lives in. And what happened to Edna, Evie's mother, after she posted that, 'witches not welcome' or 'no witches allowed' sign, in her store window," Nicky says.

"Now? Naomi? Killed? Evie's mother?" Paul laughs. "What, did you toddle down to Edna's, after getting your diapers changed, to witness the murder?"

"I told Evie that Rider did her mother, but all Evie wanted was the names, of the witches, to publish in her silly paper. I didn't give her the names. That group, of ladies, is all paying customers."

"Jean Rider didn't murder anybody, neither did Luke. Some violent woman-hater murdered Verna. I need your help to locate him." Paul gets up. "Try to help me, Nicky. Get me a name, come to Church . . . Sunday." He starts toward the door then turns. "Nicky, may I use your bathroom . . . before I head out?"

Nicky nods and points, to a bathroom, off to the side of his office. "Should I join you, Father Paul?"

"Nicky!" Paul closes the bathroom door, and then goes directly to the sink. That little asshole is putting me on public display. Now, he's going to really, really regret it. He has picked the wrong priest to screw with. Paul reaches over and flushes the toilet. He takes a tissue from a box on the back of the toilet. He uses the tissue to cup a small drinking glass and place it in his pocket. He takes another tissue and pulls some strands of hair from

Nicky's hairbrush. He places the tissue in his pocket. He flushes the toilet again and begins to exit the bathroom. He stops and he returns the glass to the sink. He takes the hair tissue from his pocket, pulls the Bible from his other pocket and places the hairs, less the tissue, in the Bible. He mumbles a quote from the page the hairs fall onto. He places the Bible back in his pocket. He takes a tissue and removes a pair of tweezers from the sink top and stuffs the tweezers, down the front of his pants, into his underwear. The smart-alecky, little punk wants to show off in front of his men and talk about blow jobs in front of a priest; he'll be talking about blow jobs in front of his cell mates. As pretty as Nicky is, Hell, he'll have lots of Bubas standing in line. And they won't be gentle and loving like Father Paul. He starts to exit the bathroom. He looks down at a small magazine rack. He sees a magazine. In the center pages, fanned out into its spine, are photographs, of Verna and three men in sexual positions. Paul sighs, rubs his forehead, and exits the bathroom.

Paul walks, nervously, past Nicky's desk. "God bless you, Nicky. See you Sunday." Paul turns and heads toward the entrance.

"Father Paul!" Paul stops dead in his tracks. "I don't remember you ever mumbling to yourself while you take a piss? Is this something new? Old age maybe and, Father Paul . . . no one gets outta here without a search," Nicky says.

"Why a search, Nicky. You know me. You know me well," Father Paul whispers.

"Yeah, too well, but, you know I'm missing cameras, tape recorders, some of my drugs. One guy took a glass with my fingerprints on it . . . can you imagine? Doesn't matter, there are no prints of mine on file . . . anywhere. Gerry, search Father Paul . . . gently. But not too gently or he'll want your phone number or e-mail address."

"Nicky?" Paul says.

"What you got in that pocket? That your Bible or you just happy to see me?" Nicky points.

Paul pats his pocket. "Just my bible."

"Hand it to me." Nicky reaches out his hand.

Paul walks over to the desk and hands the Bible to Nicky. Gerry follows and pats the good Father down while Nicky leafs through the Bible. Gerry finishes his search. Nicky tosses the Bible back to Paul. Paul drops the Bible. It lands slightly under the desk. Paul kneels down. Under the desk, he sees another small stack of pictures; the top picture is that of Verna in a compromising position with two locals. One looks a lot like Paul's parishioner, Randy Gibbson, the electrician. Paul straightens up and looks at Nicky.

"By by, Father Paul. See you Sunday," Nicky says. "Say hello to Moonie Clark. Give the little booger a kiss for me."

Paul starts back down the hallway to the entrance. A door flies open and two burly guys come slamming backward through a side door. They go back out and they wrestle, a reluctant Naomi Cruthers, into the house. They push Naomi into a room then start tying her, to a chair, with excruciating knots.

Paul stands in the doorway. "What in God's name are you doing? Let her go! She's a lady. Didn't your mothers teach you how to treat a lady?"

"You tell them, Dieadad!" Naomi says. "You tell them that they better kill me because if they don't I will find them and tear their hearts out then stuff their still beating hearts up their puckering assholes. Then have my Coven dogs root for their hearts."



"Naomi, stop that nonsense. I'll go tell Nicky how they're treating you. He will stop them." Paul goes back to Nicky's office. Paul stands in the doorway of Nicky's office. "Nicky, I thought you said you would not screw with Naomi Cruthers?"

"I said I am the only guy in town with big enough balls to screw with Naomi Cruthers," Nicky says. "What do you care?"

"Please come with me. Your men are beating the Hell out of Naomi," Paul says as he turns and rushes back up the hall.

When Paul and Nicky approach the room, one of the guys, who was using the rope on Naomi, Bobby Taylor, comes stumbling backwards through the door. Claw marks lace his face from bottom to top and from side to side. Inside the room, Naomi is straddling Moonie Clark's uncle, Duke Rider. Naomi is strangling him. Duke's face is purple. He is attempting, in vain, to pry Naomi's powerful hands from his throat. Naomi is shrieking like a falcon in heat.

Nicky pulls out his forty-five and places it against the back of Naomi's head. "Naomi, darling, let him be. Get up or I will blow your mutated brain all over Duke, here!"

Naomi gets up. Duke struggles to his feet. He walks over and punches Naomi, with a right-cross and then a left-jab, straight in the face. Her nose splits. She smiles and spits blood in his face. He starts toward her again.

"That's enough . . . you two. Calm down," Nicky says. "Naomi, I assume you didn't give Duke my money. You know I want my money!"

"Let her go, Nicky!" Paul shouts. "She's a woman for Christ's sake."

"Stay out of this, Father Paul. This bitch owes me a pile of cash," Nicky says as he nails Naomi with the butt of his forty-five. "Where's my money?"

She falls to the side, but pops back up. Her forehead is bleeding. "I gave your money to lover boy John. . . he said he'd deliver it, to you, later tonight. Less his cut, of course," Naomi shouts. "He said, these were your new instructions." She wipes her bloody nose on her skirt.

"Nicky, let me call John. He'll bring the money," Paul says. He digs in his robe for his cell phone.

"No, John's not that stupid. He wouldn't hold out my money. She's lying. She's a lying bitch." Nicky moves toward Naomi and places the barrel of the gun between her fat legs. "Here's the deal, beautiful, you call your fat friends and tell them to bring me my money or every hour, I wait, I decide if I will chop off one of your fingers or shoot you in your coin-operated pussy."

"I won't stand here and let you harm her," Paul tells Nicky. "I'm calling John to come in stop you."

"Gerry! Take the Good Father away from here," Nicky commands Gerry. "Confiscate his cell phone. We'll give it back on Sunday."

Gerry leads Paul back down the hallway toward the entrance. Nicky backs Naomi over to a desk. He keeps the barrel of the forty-five buried in her underwear. Her dress folds deep into her crotch as she sits. He places the phone's handset against her ear.

Naomi dials the phone. "Sonja, bring the money to Nicky or he's going to chop off my fingers or shoot me in my little money maker. No, I don't think he's bluffing."

Nicky signals to Arturo Tate, the big guard at the door. Arturo rushes forward and slams his flat-bladed knife down on Naomi's thumb. The thumb separates from her hand. Naomi screams and drops the handset. Blood spurts across the desk.

Nicky picks up the receiver. "Sonja, dear, I'm not bluffing."

## Chapter Sixteen

At the entrance to a small church, Paul and John stand on the front stairs. John holds Father Paul's wrist. "Did you get the stuff?" The Sheriff asks his brother.

"I got it, but I've changed my mind," Paul says. "I'm not doing this evil thing for you. I have spoken with God; He has forbade me to do this evil thing; even though I no longer care for Nicky Scartossi."

"No! No! You are not flaking out on me, this time!" John warns his brother. "I'll break your God damn arm right here on the church steps."

"Nicky Scartossi's innocent. He's guilty of manufacturing and distributing drugs. He's been doing that since you became head of the department. He is guilty of that . . . the drug thing," Paul says. "He's guilty of slandering a priest. He's not guilty of murdering anyone."

"I can't do anything about the slander; that's a civil thing. I can bust him for the drugs, first, and then the murders. Two of my informants place him at Luke's the night of the murder. Nicky did it. I'm not going to mess with you. Give me the stuff or I tell the whole town the truth about my holier-than-thou brother," John says. "I tell them how many other Nicky Scartossis the Church has discovered you've been intimate with; it'll make Philadelphia look incidental. Your congregation will lynch you."

"I have sinned. I have been forgiven. If you expose me, God will never forgive you. My punishment should only come from God. He has absolved me."

"Your God's been too lenient. Does your God know about Moonie Clark?"

"There is nothing to know about Moonie Clark. If he tries to seduce me, I will rebuff him. You would hurt me to help Luke. Where is your brotherly love for me?" Paul says.

"Everybody loves you, Paul. You don't need my love. Give me the stuff or I stand up in the town meeting and show the Church report on Father Paul Deiudad. The lab box is being shipped this afternoon. I need the stuff now!" John gives a little twist to Paul's wrist.

Paul pulls away and then looks around; he reaches in his robe pocket and extracts two small tissues. He hands them to John. "This means, you have still agreed to protect me against any Moonie Clark accusations." Paul turns and walks away. Everybody in town seems to know about Moonie Clark. Am I that obvious? Or is God testing me, again? If anything happens between me and Moonie Clark and Moonie Clark threatens to

expose me, I will threaten him back with jail time provided by my brother, Sheriff John. And John will back me up. Not a bad deal: punish Nicky for his big mouth, and get Moonie Clark with no consequences. That is of course, if Moonie Clark wants me. I think he does.

Inside the Sheriff's station, John talks to Deputy Acker, "Where's our new Deputy?"

"Out at Naomi Cruthers', she's roasting a dog or something," Acker says. "He's related to most of the folks out at Naomi."

"You, go back him up," John says. "Soon as he put on that uniform, he put himself in harms way with the folks out at Naomi's."

"Damn! Sheriff! That's a long damn ride. The new kid don't need no back-up for that fat puke. Her and her fat friends are just eating dogs. No big deal."

"Pretend they're your dogs," Sheriff John tells Acker.

"Denzel Clark can handle it. He don't need no back-up. He was in Black Ops, for Christ's sake."

"Jackson disappeared on a call to Naomi's. And he was a ex-Marine," John says.

"J. J. just kept going . . . that's all. He got tired of this goddamned, boring town. And all the god-ugly women. He just kept going. Headed for L.A. and some pretty pussy. If I had any sense, I'd follow him."

"Well then, J.J. stole the cruiser to head to L.A.. . . Go back-up the kid. I can't afford to lose another cruiser," the Sheriff says.

Deputy Acker exits in a huff. John moves around the desks and down a dark hallway. He takes the keys, hanging from his belt, selects one and unlocks the small evidence room. He reaches in and turns on the light. Two twelve-foot tall shelves are not much more than John's shoulder width apart. At the back, of the tiny room, is a rolling cart with a small box on it. John rips the tape from the closed box. He extracts a fingerprint panel and a vial. He takes the panel and vial and stuffs them into his pocket. He takes a new vial from the shelf, reaches in his other pocket and takes out the tissue from Nicky's bathroom. He empties the contents of the tissue into the vial. He sticks a label on it. Scribbles a notation on the label and puts the vial in the open evidence-box. He takes the tweezers from his pocket and places them by a fingerprint dusting kit. After dusting the tweezers and lifting the prints, he puts the fingerprint tape on a fingerprint panel and inserts the panel in the open box. He closes and re-tapes the box. He puts the tweezers back in his pocket. He turns the light off as he leaves the evidence room. He walks directly into Jay Lattimer.

"I want those lab samples before they get lost or something unusual happens to them while in your custody," Lattimer says. "Give them to me, now!"

John turns the light on in the evidence room. "Nice bandage. Evie bite your ear? As you found out, she likes to bite during sexual intercourse. I've got several bandages, on the intimate parts of my body, all due to Evie. Five people reported seeing you and Evie headed toward Hidden Springs. There is nothing to do in Hidden Springs except bang the broads or bury bodies or do both; which were you doing?"

"You have spies? Or are you the spy? You have a high-powered rifle?" The D.A. asks the Sheriff.

"Yes, I do. And I'm a crack shot. Do a little target practicing each and every day. If you're asking, did I try to kill you and Evie while you screwed around, on that hill, in the desert? The answer is maybe . . . maybe not. We got a perfectly good motel on the

outskirts of town, you know. Or Evie has a nice . . . soft . . . bed right here in the center of town,” the Sheriff says.

“Screw you. I’m told your zipper’s on automatic. But you never pumped Evie,” Lattimer says. “You’d like me and everybody else, in town, to thank you did. But you didn’t. And that breaks your black heart. You shot at me to warn me to stay away from her. You wasted the shot. I’m sending one of my men to search for the slug that cut my ear. If I find out it is from your weapon, you will never make it to trial.”

“Lattimer, you got pecker tracks on your pants.” John points to the front of Lattimer’s pants. Lattimer just stands there looking down at the spot on the front of his khakis. John grabs Lattimer by his crouch and lifts up. “Listen college boy, don’t ever threaten me with your bullshit. I’ll kill you right here and now, and get away with it. Don’t send anybody for the slug. I have it right here.” John reaches in his pants pocket, and then shows his open palm to Lattimer. The spent slug sits in a small scattering of desert sand. He hands the slug to Lattimer. Then retrieves the lab box and hands it to Lattimer. “Now, if you’re finished spending your seed and making idle threats, maybe you can use this evidence to prove Nicky killed Verna and the others. And use the slug to prove he shot at you. Or maybe he shot at Evie and you got in the way . . . as usual.”

“Any evidence you hand me is tainted. The lab boys will come back with whatever bullshit you want them to come with. My men will find the killer. While I spend my time finding a way to put you out of business,” Lattimer warns Sheriff John. Lattimer throws the lab box and the slug at John, and then darts from the Sheriff’s office.

Lattimer speeds along the deserted highway. John will have to go. He is too dangerous to stay around. He has assaulted the District Attorney. He should be brought up on charges; but that will bring Evie into the mix. The Sheriff will have to be eliminated through other channels. It will be the first time I kill a man, but it will be justified. I will have to get him alone somewhere. Somewhere, out in the desert. He will be suspicious of any meeting with me that involves an isolated location. But, what if he thinks the meeting is with Forensics; something to do with a body in the desert. I will have to move quickly; before Sheriff John gets it, into his sociopathic brain, that I have to be dealt with. I will kill him with justified malice . . . Suddenly, John’s cruiser comes out of nowhere and smashes into Lattimer’s back bumper.

## Chapter Seventeen

Lattimer tries to get away, but Sheriff John’s cruiser stays glued to his bumper. John steers with one hand and raises the high-powered rifle to his left shoulder. He braces it tight against his shoulder and lets the barrel rest on the side mirror. He starts firing directly into the back-left tire of Lattimer’s car. The tire shreds away from the rim and smacks against the side of John’s cruiser. Lattimer attempts to control the sliding car.

Lattimer's car twists sideways, skids, slides twenty yards along the blacktop, and tumbles, out of the cruiser's path, and into the desert. It tumbles and twists and does one-eighties three times and smashes flat on its roof top. John screeches the cruiser to a halt. He gets out of the cruiser and looks up and down the deserted highway. He unsnaps the strap across his revolver and walks across the desert to Lattimer's crushed car. The sand crunches beneath his boots like a scene from True Grit. "I come to kill you, Jay Lattimer." John laughs at his imitation of Jeff Bridges.

Lattimer is hanging, upside down in the crushed car, strapped to his twisted seat by a jammed seatbelt. Gasoline runs from the ruptured fuel tank. The gasoline rains down over the sides of the car and across Lattimer's handsome face.

Tears fill his startling blue eyes. He shakes his head in an attempt to see through the gasoline covering his face. "You crazy, murderous bastard. Get me out of here!" He spits the gasoline from his lips. "This is the final straw. You are about to do hard time."

"This is your entire fault, Lattimer," John says. "You should have slowed down when you saw the speed limit sign. I was going to write you a speeding ticket, but, I'm making this the final straw." This is the final straw. All that remains to be done is to put a match to that straw. "I would love to stand here and chat for a while, but times a waster. Some witness could come up over that hill at any moment, now." John stands and stares at Jay Lattimer. He re-snaps the strap across his revolver. He reaches into his shirt pocket and takes out a small cigar.

"Don't do this, John! I'll stay clear of Evie, I swear to God; this will just be between you and I," Lattimer begs. "Evie will know you did this. She'll come after you and slice you, into tiny pieces, like she did in a Loadstone and Glenrock."

John lights the cigar with a gold lighter.

"You'll burn in Hell!" Lattimer screams. "You'll never get by with this! You crazy, stupid, bastard! Everyone will know you did it. I phoned it in. When you were on my bumper, I phoned it in."

"Why didn't you just say that, earlier. I might have believed you, earlier." John flicks the lit cigar on the top of the overturned car. Lattimer starts screaming. The entire car ignites. John walks away. Lattimer continues to scream. A white Mustang slows up then speeds away. The teenagers, in the Mustang, will have to be apprehended and dealt with. John thinks. If he hadn't stood around and chatted with the D.A., he could have eliminated the need to deal with the occupants of that Mustang.

John cruises through town. He is on his mobile phone talking to Evie. "I just got the call, this minute. I'll pick you up in front of your paper. Bring your camera."

Evie sits, in the front seat of John's cruiser, as it speeds along High Desert Road. "Some kids called it in. Sounds like a fatal accident of some idiot who was speeding on High Desert Road. We have about three fatal accidents a year because of idiots who won't slow down," John says. "I'll have to track down those teenagers, as witnesses, but it sounds pretty much, cut and dried, to be a fatal accident. We're going to have to start doing what some other States do: put up little, white crosses where fatals happen. Only ours will have, 'IDIOT' painted across them."

"Thanks for calling me. You're a pretty good guy no matter what Jay Lattimer says." Evie leans over and plants a kiss on John's rough cheek.

"What'd the young man have to say?" John asks.

"Just that you were one of the bad guys," Evie mumbles.

"That's too bad he felt that way. I thought of him like the son I never had; that I know of. He was a brilliant prosecutor," John turns and smiles at Evie.

"You're talking about him in the past tense," Evie says.

"Well, I won't be thinking of him as a friend anymore."

"That's too bad. I like you and Lattimer's gonna be around a lot. I think I finally found my soul mate," Evie says.

"I thought I was your soul mate." He smiles at Evie.

She slaps him on the lower thigh. "John, my love, you know you have no soul."

At the crash site on High Desert Road, John drives the cruiser up next to the smoldering car, but thinks better of it and then parks a safe distance from the wreck. Four teenagers stand watching the overturned County car smolder; their white Mustang is parked up on the hill. John gets out of the cruiser and walks up to the teenagers.

"We couldn't do nothing. When we got here, it was one big fireball," one of the teenagers tells the Sheriff.

"Anyone else see the accident," John asks.

"Three ugly fat ladies were getting into a black SUV when we came back, over the hill, to see the accident close-up," the teen says.

John puts away his note pad without asking for more information.

The teen continues as John walks away, "We all saw you on the first go around, but it would have been suicide for you to try and drag anyone from that burning car."

John turns and says. "You boys, best skedaddle or you'll be asked to hang around and be witnesses." John then walks over to the burned-out car. Evie comes running. John fishes out the charred license plate showing a County tag.

Evie comes up beside John. She has her note pad out. "Those boys are leaving. Did you get their names and contact numbers? Can you run the plates?"

"I'll run the plates, but I know, it's a County car. The only County car out this way, that I know of, is District Attorney Jay Lattimer's," the Sheriff says matter-of-factly. "Was he with you?"

Evie drops to her knees. "Oh, no! It can't be! Please God! Not again!"

"Evie, I know this is cold, but I think you need to know, this could be the best thing to happen to you," John says. "Lattimer confided, in me, that he was investigating you for the witch murders. He said you probably did it to avenge the murder of your mother. The last time he was by himself, in your front room, he took scrapings of dried blood from a Tibetan Ceremonial robe. He was going to take them to the lab, today. They most likely burned in this fire. But, it would be my advice to get rid of that robe."

Inside Luke's ranch house, Luke paces. John and Paul sit in comfortable chairs. All are sipping wine. They are in the living room; off to the side of the game room; the game room is still a burned-out crater; but it has been tidied up and the roof repaired. A brand-spanking new pool table, with the plastic wrap still intact, sits in the center of a newly installed floor.

"How long we got to wait for the goddamned lab tests?" Luke asks John. "What could take so long in this day and age? On TV, they make the tests in a couple of hours."

"This is not TV. A couple of weeks is standard," John answers.

"What's the point? My prints are on everything. I live here. And that DNA crap. My DNA is in every crease in Verna's body," Luke says.

"We're looking for Jean Rider's killer's DNA and prints. And Anska Taylor's killer's DNA and prints. If your prints show up at Jean Rider's or Anska Taylor's place, and your DNA shows up on either body, then they go after you for all three murders. We're also looking at the Anska Taylor murder as a copycat killing. But if no prints or DNA show up in the Rider or Taylor cases, they can do nothing with you on Verna's case, because they have no body." John says.

"They know your prints will be here. Unusual prints. They're looking for unusual prints. Yours or Verna's or mine or John's . . . Ma's. Those are not unusual," Paul says.

"So, now you're a print expert?" John says to Paul. "Is that a God given talent—to know everything about everything?"

"It doesn't take an expert to know what they're looking for. You know what they're looking for. Prints that they assume were left at the scene," Paul says to John.

"Shut up!" John says to Paul.

"I know who did it," Paul says, "I can't tell you. Either of you, because it is my priestly duty to keep the faith. I can tell you it's a female not a male. Not Luke or Nicky."

"You think it's Evie Ward killing witches because the witches killed her mother. But I can alibi Evie, the night Verna was killed, I was with Evie. She hitched a ride with me to the scene. And I'm sure, if I ask her, she can come up with an alibi for the nights of the Rider and Taylor murders."

"You're a liar!" Paul shouts. "You just want everything to lead to Nicky so you can take over his drug business."

"Stop! This is my life we're fighting for. I need your help, not your usual banter. What do you think Lattimer's death will do to the case?"

"John couldn't convince Jay Lattimer it was Nicky. Maybe he can sell his bullshit to the new D.A.," Paul says.

"Screw you, Paul," John says.

"Come on, John, Ma says to trust Paul. Trust his judgment. She thinks you cut too many corners," Luke says. "She thinks Paul . . ."

"Damn!" John jumps up—spills his wine—and heads for the door. "Then let Paul handle it!" He exits.

"Why in Hell's name can't you two act like brothers just one time?" Luke says.

"John does cut corners. But he loves you. He would do anything for you. Ma values my opinion because I'm a priest not because I'm her son. Any Catholic mother would value her priest son over her cop son. Especially if the cop son has a history."

"The priest son has history too. Just try to act like brothers . . . through this thing . . . okay?" Luke asks Paul.

"Okay. Why don't you and I take some time now and pray? Let's ask the Lord for some guidance. Let's pray for the real killer to be caught. Pray for mother and everyone to survive this."

They kneel beside each other.

Paul takes Luke's hand and begins the prayer. "God, forgive me for I have sinned. Give Luke the courage to live through this tragic hour. Give John the intelligence and desire to solve this case. And please God give this town the benevolence to forgive this possessed soul... this murderer. This vessel of Satan. God, appear, to us, in our hour of need." And God, forgive me for what I plan to do with Moonie Clark. Because the temptation is too great and the opportunity is too great and the hunger eats at me every

minute of the day. God, please let me have Moonie Clark. He has such soulful eyes and such lovely skin. God, grant me this one last boy; I will raise him in the man boy tradition of the Holy Church. God, appear, to me, in my hour of need. If you let me have Moonie Clark, I will cherish you for the rest of my life. Please God!

In the middle of the desert, encircled by hundreds of burned-out, junk cars Naomi Cruthers, her left hand wrapped in a bloody bandage, slashes out with a long knife at Deputy Acker. He is strapped—his shirt ripped and pulled down to his waist—to a pole in the center of a briar.

He is screaming and begging to God. “Please God! Help me! Please God! Help me in my hour of need!”

“Scream all you want. Your God is asleep or drunk or stupid or all of the above. Tonight you will be a feast for BabaYaga.” She turns to the six witches parading around the briar. “Take the other one. Strip him. Prepare him.” She points at Deputy Clark lying on the ground, hog-tied. “You two . . . Sissy and Betty Ann, unless you want to stay for the slaughter of Deputy Acker and your cousin Deputy Denzel Clark, go get rid of the cars.” She begins to chant, “BabaYaga . . . Mother of all That is Evil. Come join your humble servant . . . your humble disciple. We have brought you a feast. You must bring us . . . power! BabaYaga, appear to us in this hour of need.”

Sissy and Betty Ann turn as Sonja screams. Her fat body begins to twitch violently. Tremors start at her toes and vibrate up to her broad forehead. She falls to the ground and starts crawling like a monster hog toward Deputy Acker. Acker screams. Naomi and the Coven continue to chant. Sonja stands and, hunched over, charges toward Acker. He cannot stop screaming. Sonja slams her open jaws into Acker's neck and rips out his jugular with her filed-sharp teeth. She turns to the Coven members and continues to eat the flesh hanging from her fat mouth.

She finishes, wipes the blood from her mouth and addresses Naomi in a deep, sluttish voice, “Is this the main course?”

Naomi looks toward Deputy Clark. Naomi says, “No.”

Deputy Clark screams, “Sissy! Betty Ann! Save me! Help me!” He screams. “This is a Hell of a way to treat your kin.”

## Chapter Eighteen

Sonja's tattered station wagon bumps across the moonlit desert toward an old trailer house with a tattered awning. She leaves her car and enters the trailer house and slams the trailer door behind her. A vicious watchdog begins barking, and then charges toward the desert shadows. The dog is silenced. The fat witch opens the trailer door and looks out into the desert. She sees nothing. “Buster! Baby. Come on back and say hello to your



Ma Ma. I have brought you something delicious to eat. Come on Baby.” She waits a beat and then closes the door.

Evie creeps out from the shadows of a rotted-wood storage shack, she walks to a plot of ground at the front of the rusty trailer house, draws a witches’ foot in the desert sand and plants candles at each point, then lights the candles. Evie knocks at the trailer door. Sonja comes to the door with a double-barreled shotgun cradled comfortably in her big hands. A knife slices down through the darkness and into her throat again and again. Sonja tumbles down the trailer steps onto the desert sand. One barrel of the shotgun explodes under her body weight and blows her chin off. Evie grabs the fat witch, by her swollen ankles, and slowly drags her to the center of the witches’ foot. She has unintentionally created a smile on Sonja’s chinless face. She laughs and kicks sand, at the bloody opening, until the sand stuffs the opening; a desert scorpion pokes its head from the bloody mound; Evie laughs and then bends over and takes a ring from the fat witch’s middle finger. Evie decides to stab Sonja several more times. But, several more times turns into a hundred more time; as rage takes over and she turns Sonja’s body into what looks like undercooked meatloaf—the food not the entertainer. She leaves the knife—the bloody knife—sticking from Sonja’s unrecognizable belly. Evie has no worries about the weapon becoming any kind of evidence against her; the knife is from Sonja’s roach infested kitchen. Evie has been waiting in the kitchen for two hours but decides the trailer is too close quarters for her and the big woman. She decides to move the slaughter to Sonja’s front yard after making friends with Buster and slowly feeding him sleeping pills wrapped in beef patties. It appears old Buster had one more burst of protection before he zonked out in the desert. She has decided to work on a plan to kill multiple witches, each night, for the remainder of the week. The one witch a night was too slow and too dangerous. The more time she spent in the robe in the darkness, the better chance Sheriff John has of catching her. She has the feeling that John has her at the top of his list, of suspects, after what Jay Lattimer told him. What she needs is a weapon with an extended clip—like in the Tucson Massacre. But she can’t purchase it in town, at Clark’s Hardware, or Sheriff John will find out immediately. She will need to take a ride to Bakersfield, tomorrow. She doesn’t know the gun or ammunition laws in California, but she is certain with her charm and body and considerable money, she will get the weapon and extended clip along with the ammunition. The reports out of Arizona, said you can kill thirty people with an extended clip. If she ever finds thirty witches congregated somewhere. And if she can get them to stand still long enough to be slaughtered. That will be a problem: to kill them all. Too grandiose. But, there were only five or six hardcore witches still located in Glenrock; she could get all of them in one fell swoop if she had the right weapon with an extended clip.

## Chapter Nineteen

Outside Naomi Cruthers' house on the edge of the desert, the yard is cluttered with junk. Weeds entangle everything. A dozen stacks of used tires, five feet tall, sit, at the front of the yard, with a sign that reads, "KILLER TIRES \$20 A TIRE". The house needs paint and repairs. The smell of rotting meat fills the air. Chickens and a giant pig, named, "Porkchops," roam the yard. John stands talking to Naomi. Her fat body is barely covered by a revealing negligee with, what looks like, coffee stains dripped across the front. Her left hand is still wrapped in a bloody bandage.

"Scartossi told me he butchered your hand," John says. "But paid Doc to sew your thumb back on. Pretty gracious of Nicky, wouldn't you say? Cut it off and then hook it back on. Pretty gracious of Nicky. I heard he was going to shoot your little money maker but instead he just whacked off your thumb. You going to let the little Homo get away with it? He not only damage to your hand, he damaged your reputation."

"Be tough to give good hand jobs, for a while. You know I'm a lefty," Naomi says. "I'll have adjust and start practicing with my right hand. Get up to speed. Become the best hand job in the West."

"You never did give good hand jobs, Naomi," John says. "In the West, or anywhere else. The little Homo probably gives better hand jobs than you."

"Since you was fourteen, you was always willing to pay the going rate." Naomi slides her fingers together as if she is touching money. "You, and your brothers and all your friends. I started at a dollar and a half price. And as I raised it—I mean the price of course—you still came along and paid it."

"I'm afraid; your going price of three of my Deputies has become way too high." John unsnaps the strap holding his gun in his fancy holster. He looks around.

"That move mean you're going to shoot me? John, John, you'll be needing some extra TLC now with Verna's gone off with a handsome dude from Hollywood. I won't charge you nothing. You can help me with my rehabilitation," Naomi says. "I won't charge you nothing until you tell me that I'm the best in the West. We make a chart and you grade me every Tuesday night. The chart will read: Okay. Good. Better. Best. And you will check one. When you check off Best, I will start charging you a nominal fee. Like four dollars and ninety-five cents."

"My Deputies all made their last calls to this address. Disappeared without a trace, Naomi. Explain to me how it is possible that three out of three are missing. You're batting a thousand," Sheriff John says. "I'm going to get a search warrant, and if I find the smallest piece of a Deputy uniform or one of my cruisers, I'm going to get you for the murders of all three. And Verna and Hatch and maybe even Dexter Clark."

"Johnny, the D.A. laughed you out of court last time you came at me with trumped up charges. This time they'll laugh you out of town. I'll convince them to tar and feather you. I'll bring the tar and spread it over you like I used to spread the whipped cream all over your naked body. I just happen to have some whipped cream in the Frig. It's the brand you like." She makes a scooping movement with her hand. "Want to come in for a dollop?"

“Naomi, you need to take your shitty act to some other town. We're all tired of it. Take your act and go or I promise you . . . you and your fat friends will disappear . . . one by one . . . without a trace. In pieces so tiny even your BabaYaga won't be able to resurrect you,” John says. He turns to leave.

“Johnny, if you jack around with me or mine, I'll make sure you die the most excruciating death. I'll invite Luke and Nicky and Father Paul . . . they can watch you confess to all the nasty things you did to their beloved Verna. The very last thing was the nastiest.” She walks toward the house. She turns. “Johnny, if I even thought for a second it was you cutting up my Coven members; I would have you drawn and quartered. You're not the psychopath . . . are you Johnny . . . oh . . . by the by, Johnny, would you like to come in and do me. I know it's not Tuesday. But maybe you should change your routine. Have a little Friday snack . . . you'll need some action now that your brother's wife is gone and your Fridays are open. Boring routine. Me on Tuesday. Verna on Friday. Me on Tuesday. Verna on Friday. Me on Tues . . .”

John rushes forward and grabs the fat woman under her chin and bangs her head hard, several times, against the exterior of the house. “You stupid bitch.”

“You must mean stupid witch,” Naomi says.

“You're no witch. You're just a fat, fake bitch.” He lets go and she slides, to a seated position, in the weeds, against the house. “Pack your shit! Get out of Glenrock before midnight Tuesday.”

She stares at him with hatred. He exits. Naomi chants, “Me on Tuesday. Verna on Friday. Me on Tuesday. Verna on Friday.”

Inside an old mansion in the center of town, Evie moves down the stairs and blends with the shadows. She wears her brand-new robe; purchased from Addie Zimmerman's website. She hasn't had time to get a gun with an extended clip, but she is positive she has the ability to take on more than one witch at a time, but she is not certain how many witches; they're all big, strong, and vicious. Her years of combat training have taught her to be able to kill multiple defendants but she didn't know how many was her limit. Her highest count in battle had been six well-equipped men; the exact number of witches she spotted going into the used-brick mansion. She should wait until she gets back from Bakersfield with the gun. But this is a challenge; she will whirl and spin and cut the throats of the first three and then she will stab the last three with forward thrusts and then she will finish by mutilating the bodies. She disappears into the shadows and listens to the muted conversations, coming from the direction of the cellar, and then edges along the wall. Apparently, the meeting has just started. Suddenly, a two hundred pound hound charges at the robed figure. Evie runs back up the stairs with the hound in pursuit. After three close calls, the hound catches her thigh, in its giant jaw, just as Evie makes it through the entrance door and slams the door on the hound's thick neck. The hound howls. Three witches charge from the cellar. They pursue the limping reporter into the desert. Across sand dunes. Through cacti patches. The three, fat witches peter out and then hobble back to the mansion. Evie stops running and collapses behind a small dune. She's bleeding profusely and probably has contracted rabies. It will be back to one slaughter at a time for little, old Vengeance baby, Evie thinks. Until you get a gun you psycho bitch. A gun will be more efficient, but more traceable. The paper trail on a gun will be like an arrow from God pointing right back at her—where has she heard that, arrow from God reference, before? If it is to be more than one witch at the time for the

psycho bitch, it will have to be with her considerable skills and a very big knife or two. She would have to work fast: Sheriff John was sniffing around and just might have sniffed her trail. She will probably have to end up slitting his throat. Before or after doing the nasty?

Back down in the mansion cellar, the three witches stumble back down the creaky cellar-stairs. Their fat bodies are sweating and they are all gasping for air—totally winded. The cellar is occupied by two other witches and Naomi Cruthers. They are all in robes. The three witches, slouched in the oversize coaches, sit, with the robes open, exposing their naked, fat bodies.

“Who the Hell was that?” Naomi shouts. “Somebody dares to break in, here? It’s certainly not a Local; unless it’s a Loco Local.” She laughs at her own joke. The Coven follows her lead.

“Yes, somebody dares. I don’t know who,” Betty Ann says, “but he’s hurt and bleeding. And he’s faster than shit. He out-ran us even with his bad leg. But, he’ll be easy to spot. He’ll be limping around town. Mr. King Dog tore him a new asshole.” Betty Ann flops down on the nearest overstuffed couch and casually puts her arm over the shoulder of a hyperventilating witch.

“How do you know it was a he?” Naomi says.

“I’m assuming,” Betty Ann snarls. “I don’t think any woman in this town would have the balls to break into a Coven meeting.”

“Don’t assume. Figure out who hates us enough to stab us over and over. A psycho. Who hates us with a vengeance?” Naomi says. “Most of the townies hate us; but they all lack the passion or, as you say, the balls to break in. To kill us; to say nothing of the balls to chop us up. Who hates us with a vengeance? We are all such lovable creatures.”

The Coven laughs.

“John Deiudad, Luke Deiudad, maybe Paul Deiudad. That Evie girl that lives next to the old store. The one writing stories about us. Maybe some of the Coven members that we excommunicated. And that brute of a man, Conny Walker—the Walker’s avenging son,” Betty Ann rattles off. She opens her robe and then sprawls against the adjoining witch.

“John hates us because he thinks we killed his Verna. But he also might try to get rid of us so he will be a hero to the town. Luke hates us because he thinks we made his innocent wife into a nasty slut-witch. How wrong can you get? She was a bad girl from the get-go,” Naomi says. “And Paul hates us, of course, because we worship his Savior’s nemesis. Conny Walker suspects we made his parents disappear, but why that Evie girl?” Naomi asks. “You think she’s killing us just to write stories about us being murdered?”

“That’s not what I mean. Years ago, before you were in the Coven, we used her mother as a sacrifice. Remember the little, skinny woman who ran the general store. She had that sign ‘NO WITCHES ALLOWED’ or something like that. Jean Rider got the little bitch . . . her name was Edna . . . I remember because one of the rings, that Rider took from her, had an E set deep inside the stone. Rider was wearing, that very ring, the night she got it. Got it like thirty times. Stab, stab, stab.” She makes a repeated stabbing movement with her hand. “Anyway, I was given the honor of becoming BabaYaga and chewing out Edna Ward’s throat,” Betty Ann says. “The ‘NO WITCHES ALLOWED’ sign is back up.”

“Okay . . . you could be right. But I think it's John, individually, or all three of the Deiudad brothers. If we are going to control Glenrock, we will have to get rid of the Dieadads. We should have done it a long time ago. Let's get them all. Before they get us. We go after the weakest first. Go get that Evie girl. Try to bring her here alive for little torture. I'll take care of Conny Walker with my shotgun. He's too big a man to screw around with. We will feed all the bodies to BabaYaga. Go get the reporter, then we'll round-up the Dieadads.” Naomi motions, with her good hand, above her head. “Betty Ann, your sister still make that delicious, homemade ice cream?”

“The deadly kind or the friendly kind?” Betty Ann asks Naomi.

“The deadly kind, of course. This is no time for partying; this is time for killing!”

The coven cheers. The witches charge up the stairs; each witch attempting to be the first to leave the mansion cellar. But the ancient stairs cannot hold the weight. The thirteen stairs collapse dropping all of the fat witches to the cement floor.

“Oh shit! Look what you fat-asses have done,” Naomi says. “Betty Ann call Chucky Taylor. Tell him to bring the strongest ladder he's got. And tell him he can have any one of us for a little fun. What ever he wants to do. But tell him to come quick. When we get out of here, you five go get the reporter. Bring the little psycho to my place, and the desert.”

The battered and bruised witches move staircase debris from the many overstuffed couches. They flop down and tend to their wounds while waiting for Chucky Taylor.

Chucky Taylor appears at the doorway. He sticks his curly head out and looks down at the witches. “Don't tell me. You all tried to use staircase at the same time. Okay, I brought my strongest ladder, but only one of you ladies at a time. The maximum weight, on the warning label, is three hundred pounds. First, let's make a deal. I want Verna for a little fun.”

“You live under a rock?” Naomi says. “Verna left town, with some handsome dude from Hollywood, days ago.”

“Okay then. I want Sissy Clark and her oversized boobs,” Chucky says.

“She's not here.” Naomi points around the room. “Betty Ann has nice boobs. You can have her. Betty Ann has bigger boobs than Sissy Clark. ”

“Yeah but she's bigger all over,” Chucky says. “I like big boobs, on a slim and trim body.”

“Then why in Hell do you live in Glenrock?” Naomi says.

The Coven laughs

“I'll take a rain check,” Chucky says. “Let's get you ladies out of here. This is an expensive ladder, so, one at a time.”

Outside Evie's house, the five fat witches wait. They try to hide their huge bodies behind some sparse shrubbery and all watch as the light goes on in the downstairs bathroom. They move en masse toward the window and scramble to look into the bathroom window to watch Evie carefully placing bandages on her damaged lower leg. She examines the wound on her upper thigh and then redresses it. The witches give each other looks of affirmation and then move around to the front of the house and watch Betty Ann kick in the front door.

The three biggest witches come through the front door, first, just as Evie comes from the bathroom into the front room. Evie screams; she grabs the poker from the fireplace and slashes out hard at the lead witch. The poker hammers down on the lead witch's

forearm. It takes a meaty chunk out of the screaming witch. Blood splashes across Evie's naked body.

"You bitch! Your mother died a slow death. Yours will be much slower; much more painful," the wounded witch shouts as she wraps her forearm in the tablecloth snatched from the dining room table. A glass vase, filled with roses, crashes to the floor.

The other four witches charge at Evie. She drives the point of the poker into the thigh of one of the attacker. The attacker screams and spins backward against the fireplace; she cracks her head on the mantle; blood paints the front of the used-brick fireplace; the attacker collapses and her three hundred pound body twitches in a death dance; the poker sticks straight out of her thigh. The naked reporter charges, back up the stairs, toward the second level of the house, then turns and kicks out, with the bottom of her foot, at the first pursuing witch's thick neck sending the witch tumbling onto the other witches on the crowded staircase and thereby breaking the tumbling witch's neck when her neck strikes the banister. Evie charges back down the stairs and strikes the nose of a witch sitting disheveled at the bottom of the stairs. Evie's palm breaks the witch's nose driving the bone up into her brain and killing her instantly. But Evie is garroted, with an electrical cord, and subdued by Betty Ann.

Betty Ann tightens the garrote. "You little bitch! You're lucky Naomi wants you alive. I just as soon strangle your bony ass, right now." She motions to the remaining witch. "Get some more cord, and tie her wrist, tight!"

Outside Evie's house, a half block down, John sits in his patrol car. He sings along to an old Clint Black song on the radio. He watches the witches kick in the door to Evie's house. Later, he watches as Betty Ann and a witch, John doesn't recognize, drag Evie, bloody and naked, out of the house and into a waiting car. Evie's hands are bound, with an electrical cord, behind her back. John hesitates then drops the patrol car into reverse; the patrol car slowly creeps back into the shadows. He watches the witches drive in the direction of Naomi Caruthers' house. John waits and eventually exits the cruiser and walks to Evie's front door. He peeks in; three witches are dead. This leaves very little doubt that our little Evie is Vengeance, the Loadstone Witch Murderer. John speeds after Evie's captors, and then sits in his patrol car and watches the witches force Evie from their car. She has small cut marks over most of her body. Should I let her die or not? That is the question. I still haven't bagged her. But she is trouble. Maybe more trouble than I can handle, right now. But she is exciting and beautiful and funny and she talks dirty. He reaches in his shirt pocket and takes out a gold coin his father gave him the night of his father's death; he balances it on his thumb and then he flips it. It spins and clatters on the dash and then shows up, heads.

In Naomi Caruthers' cellar, the three remaining Coven members stand around Evie's lacerated body. Her hands are tied above her head and hooked to an eyebolt in the cellar's rafter; her bare feet stretch in search of the cold cellar-floor.

"Evie, do you think you've been very fair. We take one skinny, little mother from you. And you take seven witches from us. That's not fair. Even a psychopath, like you, knows that ain't fair. Are those King Dog's teeth marks in your beautiful leg?" Naomi says. "Betty Ann, here, thinks you're the reason for dead witches and that you broke in her old mansion, earlier, to slaughter that rest of us. She thinks the scratch marks are from poor, old King Dog when he chased you out of the mansion. I think she's very pissed at

you for writing the story about her inbred family. You certainly got a way with words. But I think Betty Ann is right about the scratches.”

“I got these scratch marks from a skeleton hand in the desert,” Evie says. She twists her hands, slightly, to see if they will loosen. She wouldn't be in this predicament if she had kept her eyes on Betty Ann, in the first place. Betty Ann was the most agile of the bunch. And acts like she has had some martial arts training. When she gets loose she will take out Betty Ann, first.

“When you were with that handsome, Jay Lattimer, fellow? The one John Deiudad drove off the road and lit up? Murdered? By fire? What a way to die.” Naomi says. “He was such a beautiful looking man; John couldn't take the competition, so, he did what John does; he just ran out and murdered the young man.”

“John didn't murder Lattimer and I didn't murder any witches. I killed three females, who broke into my house, but I didn't know they were witches, anyway, that was self-defense. I should have been able to kill them all, but I underestimated Betty Ann's skills. Betty Ann is a formidable foe, but she should be my comrade. Fact is, Verna had me convinced to join this BabaYaga Coven. She has been nagging me about it since I got back to Glenrock. I've read a lot of Verna's books on BabaYaga. She's got a formidable library,” Evie says. “So, I read Verna's books and I decided to join your ranks. I'd like to have some of her powers”

“You've read a lot, about BabaYaga, you say. Then let's play a game of BabaYaga trivia. I ask you a question. If you answer correctly, you get to live a little longer. If you answer incorrectly, you get a one inch divot cut from your delicious body,” Naomi says. She moves closer to Evie and caresses, the young reporter's right breast, with her grubby fingers.

“BabaYaga . . . Mother of All that is Evil,” Evie blurts out. “BabaYaga, appear to me in this; my hour of need.”

“Who is her mistress?” Naomi asks.

“Mistress Beelzebub,” Evie says.

“What country is she from? What geography? What is she called in her country?” Betty Ann asks.

“Russia. From the Birch Forest. She's called the Skeleton Witch,” Evie answers, rapidly.

“She learned all that to infiltrate us and slaughter us,” Betty Ann says. “I say we kill her. Sacrifice her to BabaYaga.”

“Yeah. You're right. Kill her!” Naomi commands.

As Betty Ann starts toward Evie, a hand reaches out and takes a hooded robe hanging on a peg near the cellar entrance. Two hands take a ritual sword hanging close by. Betty Ann is within inches of Evie when the wounded witch steps forward.

“This is my night to taste flesh. Betty Ann, step aside.” She pushes Betty Ann away from Evie's naked body and gets positioned to sink her teeth into Evie's naked flesh.

The ritual sword severs her head from her body. A hooded figure turns and twists and cuts the two remaining witches. Screams fill the cellar. Naomi and Betty Ann escape the cellar and its blood-laced walls; they are both wounded. The hooded figure cuts Evie loose and leads her, naked, from the cellar. They race three hundred yards to the waiting patrol car. John removes the hooded robe and puts it over Evie.

"Of course, you know, I'm not the one who killed those others witches. I followed you here," Sheriff John says.

"You took your damn time; they pricked me all over my body," Evie says.

"I'm sure you been pricked before. Just not so many times at once. I was going to arrest them. But the sword was there and the robe was there so I decided to end it all right here," Sheriff John says as he tightens the robe around Evie's naked body.

"But you didn't end it. Naomi and that fat bitch Betty Ann escaped," Evie whispers in John's ear.

"Naomi and her fat friend will run like startled mice. They'll be out of town before dawn," John says as he pulls her closer to him.

"Where will you be at dawn?" Evie whispers in John's ear.

"That's up to you." He pulls her in tight to him.

"Right now . . . I'm so horny I could cream my jeans."

"Beautiful lady . . . you may not have noticed, but you're sans any jeans," John says.

Evie opens the hooded robe and looks down at her naked, blood covered body. "When you're right, you're right. Do I need to take a shower, or do we do it right here and now?"

"You can shower later." He turns her face toward him and kisses her.

## Chapter Twenty

Inside the Sheriff's station, John talks to Luke and two of Luke's raw boned truckers. Luke stands, off to the side, with a pistol in his hand. He spins it and twirls it and plays with it. Both of Luke's truckers have rifles; big, goofy smiles light up their faces. Paul stands, in the doorway, shaking his head, fingering his beads, and mumbling to some unseen God.

"I need your backup. Nicky Scartossi murdered Verna and the others. His prints are on everything; at every crime scene." Sheriff John says. "I just got verification an hour ago. It appears Nicky didn't put out a contract on any of the victims, like I assumed. It appears he did all the wet work himself. The stressor that made him go psycho was Verna's dumping him. His ego couldn't take it. He went on a binge. Got sloppy. Left prints and his DNA, everywhere. I don't want to soft sell the danger, here. I'm asking you guys to put yourselves in harms way."

"Nicky says there is no record of his prints . . . anywhere!" Paul says. "It would be interesting to find out how the lab got comparison prints. If there is no record, the lab would need comparison prints. I sure as Hell know that Nicky didn't give them, voluntarily."

"Shut the frig up!" John says. "Or I will shove those beads up your pompous ass. Hell, you'd just smile and enjoy it."



"He was always sniffing around her!" Luke says. "But I thought he was a Homo. I should have busted the little Homo's chops. Or blown a hole in his hundred dollar haircut. I hope he resists. Bamn! Bamn! Bamn!" He thrusts, his gun forward, like he is shooting and invisible Nicky.

"John! Luke can't go. He'll kill Nicky! Remember, Nicky's to have a fair trial. Witnesses and all. Right?" Paul says. "Not a kangaroo court put on by vigilantes; but a legitimate court of his peers."

"His peers are all drug dealers and witches, but Luke, your brother's right . . . as usual. If you go, it could all get jacked up. You shoot the guy; it looks premeditated. You go to prison in a hot minute. This whole thing is about keeping you out of prison," John says. "You should go down to Kelly's where there's a ton of witnesses."

"Screw you! I'm going!" Luke shouts. "He killed Verna! He killed my wife. He killed those others too. He should be strung up in front of his gang. They all should be strung up. Cleanup the town in one fell swoop."

"Now, you sound like me talking." John walks over and takes Luke by the arm. He leads him over to a chair by the bars of a holding cell.

"Don't you try to lock me up!" Luke says as he jerks away from John. He points the pistol directly at his brother, John's, chest. "Don't think I won't shoot. Really cleanup the town."

John grabs the barrel of Luke's gun and twists it from his brother's shaking hand. "You wouldn't do that. For future reference; don't threaten a guy, just shoot him. Now, sit here!" John commands. "We need to talk."

Luke sits. John pulls a chair over toward him. John turns the chair around and straddles it facing Luke. He leans forward to speak to Luke. His right hand quickly unhooks the handcuffs from his belt and, in one quick move, cuffs Luke's wrist to the cell bars and then slaps Luke, hard, across the face. "Don't ever point a gun at me again. Ever!"

One of the truckers whistles. "Did you see that move?"

"You son of a bitch," Luke whispers to John. "You better kill the bastard. Or I will."

"Paul, go grab anyone off the street; make any excuse; bring them here to witness that Luke is cuffed to the cell bars," John says. "Make sure it's not the town drunk, Tommy Morand."

Outside Nicky Scartossi's house, John pulls up in his cruiser. The two truckers are in the back. They all come out of the car and walk past the guards: Tommy and Gerry.

"They're with me," John says as he points his thumb, over his shoulder, at the truckers.

Tommy and Gerry look at each other, put their automatics in the backs of the truckers, take the trucker's rifles, and follow them into the house. John and the group parade straight back, past two guards, to Nicky's office.

"John? . . . Since when you need help picking up your cut," Nicky says as he looks up from his cluttered desk. He pulls a stack of hundred dollar bills from his top drawer and then smacks them down on the front of the desk.

"I'm not here for my cut. I'm here to arrest you for the murder of Verna Deiudad and three others. I'm certain you had Lattimer hit but I can't prove that one," John says. "And Dexter Clark is questionable. But I got you dead to rights on the others."

"What are you talking about? I wouldn't kill Verna . . . She was the best blow-job in town." He laughs.

Tommy and Gerry laugh. The truckers laugh. John steps forward and slaps Nicky across the face. The truckers turn and wrestle with Tommy and Gerry. One trucker is shot through the stomach. John uses Nicky as a shield, draws his revolver and shoots Tommy. The second trucker picks up the rifle dropped by Tommy and uses it to blast Gerry. He also manages to blast one of the two guards running towards him, down the hall, but, the second guard, Duke Rider, uses his automatic weapon to rip the trucker to pieces. John plants one bullet, neatly in Duke's forehead. The Sheriff pushes Nicky from the house. They both stumbled down the stairs but recover.

Sheriff John shouts at the group of armed hooligans gathered on the front lawn, "Not one of you shit-heads make a move or Scartossi dies."

"My father will nail your booze soaked ass for this!" Scartossi says.

Sheriff John keeps the gun pointed at the back of Nicky Scartossi's head as he moves his prisoner around to the driver side of the cruiser keeping the cruiser between him and the heavily armed hooligans. He shoves Nicky into the driver seat and then pushes him through into the passenger seat and slams the heavy butt of his revolver down on the back of Nicky's head.

"Jesus!" Nicky screams. "What do you do that for?"

"I don't want to fight you and them," John says. "If you try any heroic shit, you get a bullet to the brain. You understand?"

"John, you stupid bastard, you're a dead man," Nicky says as he reaches back and then touches the lump on his head. "You'll never get out of the compound. You stupid, hick bastard."

Nicky's hooligans block the Sheriff's path. The Sheriff throws the cruiser in reverse and barrels, backwards, through the garage door, of the neighboring house. Wood debris blankets the cruiser. John jerks Nicky from the front seat and then puts a gun against his head. He backs Nicky up to the trunk of the cruiser and gets his dear rifle and then pushes Nicky into the house and up the stairs to the second floor.

"Here's what I'm going to do, Nicky. I'm going to kill all your men. Then I'm going to shoot that butane tank. Fry your gang's dead bodies and blow up all your dope. Unless your boys put down their weapons and walk out into the desert."

"I can get more boys and cook more dope," Nicky says. "Go screw yourself!"

Sheriff John shoots the butane tank. The small, orange-yellow mushroom cloud looks like some test being done in the Nevada desert. Thugs run, from the ruptured drug-house, with their clothes in flames. It reminds John of the prize-winning photo of a naked girl, running down a Vietnamese road, trying to escape the horrors of mustard gas.

Outside the Sheriff's office, acting D.A., Radit Starich, Evie, and John lean against John's patrol car while they talk.

". . . okay, you were right, the lab found most of the prints were Nicky's. The DNA was Nicky's. But . . .," Starich says.

Union boss Anthony Scartossi walks, with two bodyguards, from the station. "You idiots have got the wrong guy. The kid was with me that night. You idiots will be finished in this state." A bodyguard opens the door on an Escalade. Anthony enters the car by stepping on the stair that has automatically appeared.

"I must assume he was talking to you two. You're both in deep shit. Radit, how much has he contributed to 'Starich for Governor?' and John, my boy, the rumor is that his son contributes highly to your well-being," Evie says. "It appears you blew up all the dope. How you gonna get money, now? How are either of you going to get money now?"

"Sut up, Evie!" They both say.

"Okay, Starich, you going to take it to trial?" John says.

"Yeah, the DNA should do it. Yeah, I'll take to trial," Starich says.

Evie whips out her note pad and starts writing as she moves fast toward the nearest phone booth. "See you latter . . . fellows." She drop kicks her cell phone into the City Park. "Useless piece of crap. I must be in the three percent that it doesn't cover."

That's one fine looking woman," Starich says. "Body and face to die for."

"You could be summing up your future; she's got a real jealous lover," John says.

Starich turns quickly and heads toward his County car. He knew Sheriff John's reputation and his relationship with Evie. Was she worth getting killed over? He knew John killed his predecessor, Jay Lattimer; he was on his cell phone with Lattimer when it all went down.

## Chapter Twenty One

Three thugs walk up to Luke as he closes the cold storage plant, "Anthony want his usual cuts of meat?" Luke asks. "Did he say if he wanted them tenderized?"

"He said, he wants you, tenderized," one of the thugs says. He grabs Luke by the throat and slams him against a freezer.

Two thugs hold Luke while a third thug pounds him in the stomach.

"Dieadad, were going to hurt you real bad if you don't tell us how you got Nicky's DNA and his prints," the lead thug tells Luke.

"I don't know what the Hell you talking about," Luke says.

The thug knees him in the groin. "Call your brother and tell him what I'm doing to you."

Luke is handed a phone. He dials the Sheriff's office. "John, Anthony Scartossi's boys are beating the shit out of me." The third thug slams a fist into Luke's stomach. "Oh! Shit! They just nailed me again . . . no, it's not a fair fight. There're three of them. They want to know, some shit, about Nicky's DNA and prints. We're at the warehouse."

The third thug grabs the phone. "Sheriff, Mister Scartossi wants to talk to you. We got your brother. Come out here and meet with us or your brother is gonna be like mincemeat."

"You understand you are all dead men," John spits in the phone. "I'll track you down and plant a bullet between your eyes. The three of you are dead man unless you let my brother go, right now!"

“Sheriff, don't be silly, you finally screwed with the wrong guy and the wrong guy's son,” the third thug says and snaps his cell phone shut.

Inside John's speeding cruiser, John drives with one hand while his loads a shotgun, on the front seat, next to him. He careens around a corner. Three revolver slide off the seat and onto the floor. He screeches up in front of the cold storage plant. John bangs his knee getting out of the cruiser. He limps around to the passenger's side and retrieves the revolvers from the floor of the cruiser. He puts a revolver in each pocket and tucks one in his belt. He takes the shotgun and approaches the entrance. The door is open. He moves cautiously toward the light at the center of the plant. Luke is tied to a center post. Blood drips from his nose. Duct tape conceals his mouth. His eyes shift to the left. John drops the shotgun and then drives the revolver from his waistband; he turns and fires. One of the thugs drops to the floor. Blood seeps from a perfect bullet hole just above his heart. Luke's eyes are frantic. John turns quickly and plants a bullet in the eye of an onrushing thug. But John doesn't see the one behind him. The butt end of the thug's gun smashes into the back of John's skull. John stumbles forward and slams his head, into the post, just below Luke's feet. He is out cold. The thug charges after John; he slaps John's face in order to revive him. John comes to just as Luke uses his legs to pull the thug toward him and away from John. John reaches up on the counter and retrieves a meat-hook; he swings it up and into the side of the flailing thug. Sheriff John grips the meat-hook, with both hands, and pulls in an attempt to jerk the thug away from Luke, but Luke keeps his legs around the thug and the meat-hook pulls the thug's bloody intestines out onto the cement floor.

“Luke, let him go, he's finished,” John shouts at his brother and then reaches over and pulls the tape from the Luke's mouth.

“Oh shit! That hurt!” Luke screams.

John pulls the small knife from his boot and then begins to cut the rope from Luke's bound wrists. Suddenly, a black van smashes through the front glass of the warehouse. The van darts towards John and clips him on the hip. Anthony Scartossi's bodyguard, Bam-Bam, jumps from the van and then grabs John's limp body and, as if John is a limp rag doll, throws him into the back of the van and then drives, from the warehouse, leaving Luke tied to the center post.

Bam-Bam stops the van in the parking lot and retrieves a trash basket; he sets it in the entrance of the plant and lights it. He kicks it into the building. The building bursts into flames. He speaks into his cell phone, “Boss, I have John. All the others are dead. Yeah, Luke is dead, too.” He looks at the raging fire and then clicks his cell phone shut.

Luke struggles to get the ropes off as the flames lick closer and closer. He twists and turns but he can't get loose. Watch what you pray for, you asshole, the plant is going to burn down, but you're going to be in it, you idiot. Robe shrouded Evie dashes past him and slashes the ropes on the fly. Luke charges out through the back of the plant. Who the Hell was that? It was a witch! Which witch? He owed her his life. The plant fire's smoke staircased to God. Watch what you ask for, Luke my boy. How is he going to save John? Does he even want to save John? He really isn't worth saving. A mad dog killer, that's what John is. Maybe he killed Verna; for sure he killed Hatch. Maybe he killed Dexter Clark; for sure he killed the banker—Matthew Owen. Verna's banker. Probably her lover. One of many. John included. But he needs John; at least until he is exonerated.

Now, it looks like John has planted the evidence against Nicky. The dead thug was right: John is screwing with the wrong guy and the wrong guy's son.

Outside Paul's church, Anthony Scartossi's huge guard pushes Paul down the church steps. The priest roles down the steps and gets twisted up in his garb.

"I'm a Priest!" Father Paul says. "People are watching. Someone will go and get John and he'll come and arrest you for the assault of a priest. Sheriff John's my biological brother, you know? And you can see I'm a priest."

"I'm an atheist. I am allowed to assault priests and conmen and pedophiles. Fact, Anthony Scartossi gave me permission." He shoves Paul hard. Paul trips down the steps and falls to his knees in the street. The huge guard slams his big foot into Paul's ribs. Paul scrambles on his knees and tries to get up. The huge guard slams his foot into the pit of Paul's stomach.

"God will punish you," Father Paul says as he attempts to crawl away.

"I already discussed my feelings about God and priests and conmen and pedophiles. What I want to hear from you is that you got Nicky's prints from his place. And I want you to tell me every detail of how you did it."

"I swear it wasn't me." Father Paul makes the sign of the cross as he kneels in front of the huge bodyguard.

"Well maybe. We'll see. You're about to watch your brother get beat to death. Unless you would like to tell me the truth . . . now."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Paul says and makes the sign of the cross, again.

The huge guard kicks Paul one last time and then drags him to the waiting car. "That last one's for trying to turn Nicky into a fag."

Inside a vacant house in Nicky's subdivision, Anthony Scartossi, the union boss, sits behind a makeshift desk. John and Paul sit tied to chairs in front of the desk. Two brutes stand behind the chairs. Both Paul and John are bleeding from their noses, eyes, and ears.

"One of you must have got the prints and hair. Nicky didn't kill the slut . . . you pricks know how I know . . . think you stupid jack-offs . . . I'm his father . . . it was Father's Day. He was with me." He motions to the guard behind John. "Now here's what we are going to do. Bam-Bam here is going to beat the shit out of John here until you tell the truth" He points at Paul. "If that doesn't work, then Arnold here is going to beat the shit out of Father Paul until you tell the truth." He points at John. "Now, Bam-Bam, break his nose, his jaw, and then his eardrums, in that order. Go!"

Bam-Bam drags the chair, with John tied to it, to the wall. He tilts the chair against the wall and smashes his fist into John's face. John's nose tweaks to one side and blood gushes straight out from his broken nose and then washes front of his uniform. The second blow dislocates John's jaw. Bam-Bam positions his guerrilla hands on each side of Sheriff John's head and begins to squeeze.

"Stop! . . . I . . . I did it. I took a glass from Nicky's sink and hair from his brush," Paul says.

"You didn't get no glass past Gerry. Ain't it a sin for you to tell a blatant fib, Father Paul?" Anthony says.

"I started to take a glass, but instead I took tweezers and stuffed them in the front of my underwear where I knew Gerry wouldn't search," Paul tells Anthony.

“Thank you, Father. I knew your relationship with God would make you be truthful. . . eventually.” He motions to Bam-Bam. “Bring our guest back . . . John! John, my friend. Can you hear me? We'll have Doc fix your nose and jaw after you do me a big favor. Do you understand?”

John slowly nods. His head is hanging to one side. Bam-Bam has taken the handkerchief from his suit pocket and is gently trying to stop the blood flow.

“John, this is what you are going to do for me. You will help Nicky escape, tonight. It's about time I send the troublesome kid out of the country. He's trouble, all right. A whole shitload of trouble. But he's my boy. My only son. And I love him. So, you're going to help him escape. Tonight! Or the Good Father, your loving brother, will be dead . . . tomorrow. It'll be a slow painful death and probably involve sodomy with a foreign object.” He laughs. “I may even hire Moonie Clark to wield a broomstick. He could pick one up from Naomi Caruthers on his way over here. I hear that witches have a shitload of broomsticks.”

## Chapter Twenty Two

Inside John's cruiser, he grabs his bloody, broken nose in his right hand while he steers with his left. He tries to snap it back in place. “Oh holy shit!”

He wipes his bloody hand on his pants leg and reaches in his pocket. He pulls out some pills and dry swallows them. He reaches up to his nose and grips it and snaps it back in place. “Shit! Shit! Shit!”

He wipes his bloody hand on his pants leg, again. He reaches in his pocket and pulls out two more pills. He dry swallows them and reaches up and pounds his palm against his jaw. His jaw snaps into place. “Bam-Bam is a dead man. A walking goddamned dead man. I'll use a shotgun to blow his brains all over, his boss, Anthony Scartossi. Then I'll use a shotgun to blow Anthony's brains all over, his son, Nicky Scartossi.” My God damn hip is killing me. Probably cracked. Funny, I can't remember seeing that van coming. Bam-Bam will live to regret not finishing the job. He should have rolled that van over my big, fat head. The plan is simple; I take Nicky out, into the desert, and bury him. No, my hip won't take the shoveling. I take Nicky out to Naomi Caruthers' place, kill him, and let Naomi worry about disposal of the body. Then I go and get some help to kill Anthony and his people. Who can I get to back me up; Luke's dead.

Inside Sheriff John's jail, he unlocks the holding-cell door. Blood seeps from his nose; the blood has drenched the entire front of his uniform. He is having trouble speaking because of his jaw; he is limping because of the excruciating pain in his hip. “Come on, Nicky. I'm going to help you escape. Your old man has convinced me to make sure there's no trial.”

"Looks like the old man really convinced you. He's such a wonderful, loving father. Who did the work? Bam-Bam or Arnold? My old man wouldn't dirty his hands on you." He points at John's torn face; inches from almost touching it.

John slaps Nicky's hand away and leads him from the Sheriff's station. He keeps booting Nicky in his skinny ass to make him move faster. Nicky stumbles, but gets back up; John boots him again.

Inside John's cruiser, Nicky rides in back, "When this is over, I'm going to have Bam-Bam and Arnold really jack you up," Nicky says. "They're gonna beat you till you're almost dead, then revive you, then beat you once more. Then continue, until you are really dead."

John slams on the speeding cruiser's powerful brakes. Nicky's face smashes, into the wire window gate, leaving a waffle effect on the young man's face.

"You bastard!" Nicky says. "When you look back, you'll remember this moment as the moment you sealed your fate."

"If you say one more word, I'll blow your pea brain all over the . . ." He hesitates as pain shoots through his jaw. He reaches in his pocket and takes out two more pills. He dry swallows. Then he pulls the car up in front of Naomi Cruthers' house. They both step from the car.

"What the Hell we doing here?" Nicky asks. "You better not be planning on feeding me to the God damn witches; you psycho bastard."

John walks to the door ahead of Nicky. "Your father made some kind of a deal for Naomi to hide you. Get you out of the country. Then give him a blow job. Your mother must not be servicing him."

"Keep my mother out of this! I don't need to leave the country. I don't need to escape. You just need to confess to the D.A. that you manufactured the evidence so you could take over my drug business," Nicky says. "At the same time, you can confess to Verna's killing; you murdering psychopath!"

John jams the palm of his hand into the center of Nicky's back. Nicky slams, face first, into Naomi's hardwood door. Blood, from Nicky's nose, paints a blurry image of a butterfly on the black surface of the door. Nicky slides down the door. John steps over Nicky and then knocks on the door. There is no answer. He steps back and kicks the door in. He grabs Nicky by his shirt, yanks him up, and then ushers Nicky into the house. Nicky stops dead. The front room and hallways are cluttered with debris. Old newspapers and magazines are stacked to the ceiling in the part of the house Nicky can see. John knocks some pizza boxes from a chair. Three giant rats scurry, from the chair, revealing a bloody deputy's-hat as their nest.

"Sit!" John says. He handcuffs Nicky to the chair; he kicks his way, through the debris, to search the remainder of the house. He returns. "Don't say a word."

Nicky obeys, but looks around at the clutter. John walks around behind Nicky. He uses one hand to draw his service revolver and the other hand to push Nicky's resisting head straight down. He puts a bullet through the back of Nicky's head. John unlocks and removes the handcuffs from Nicky's scrawny wrists and then knocks the chair forward, on to the trash cover floor; he reaches up and topples a stack of yellowing newspaper's onto Nicky's blood drenched body. John spits a bloody tooth onto the top paper featuring a story about the murder of the beloved banker, Matthew Owen. Matt Owen was my

seventeenth kill. John thinks. Nicky Scartossi is my twenty-first kill. I'll be up to thirty kills by the end of the year.

Inside the Sheriff's station, John stands facing Luke. "They left you to die; I thought you were dead, so they think you are dead. They're going to kill Paul if we don't get back there. They let me go to help Nicky escape jail."

"Did you help him escape?" Luke says.

"Yeah, he's gone. I helped him escape everything."

"Then Anthony will let Paul go," Luke says.

"Maybe . . . maybe not. Why didn't you come and try to save us?"

Luke hesitates, "I was trying to dig up some fellows for backup; difficult to do what with Carl and Otis getting killed at Nicky's. Under your watchful eyes, I might add."

"We could have been dead by the time you got help," John says. "That's the difference between you and me; I would've come by my lonesome, if I couldn't get help. I would've come with guns a blazing."

"Yeah, but you're one crazy bastard," Luke says. "You give no value to life; yours or anyone else's."

"I'd rather have a crazy bastard watching my back than a chicken-shit stewing at home," John says as he loads his revolver.

"I knew you'd find a way. You always do," Luke says. "It's just that it usually ends up with a lot more dead people. I guess you have plans to raise the body count."

"Yeah. You must admit, Luke, I get the job done."

Inside Anthony's makeshift office, Paul is still tied to the chair. "God will never forgive you if you sodomize and murder a priest."

"You sodomized Nicky!" Anthony shouts. "Besides, I don't believe in God. I don't believe in Santa Clause. I don't believe in Christ. I don't believe in the Easter Bunny. I believe in Evil."

"Christ is more powerful than evil," Father Paul says.

"Nietzsche says 'it's all crap born of the religious urge. Nurtured by bubble headed women to keep men in line for over two thousand years. He says all those 'thou shalt nots' are bullshit! Father, you know, the only reality is Evil. . . . The man who slit my mother's throat had the streak . . . inborn. In his genes. I slit his throat. . . He was my father. The epitome of Evil. So am I. So are you—selling your religious crap. Taking money for bullshit just so you can have access to young boys. Your work is crap."

"I do good work. I do the work of the Lord," Father Paul says.

"You do your work in this little, shitheel town, because the Church won't let you do your work in . . . little boys." Anthony laughs.

"Christ has forgiven me," Father Paul says.

Anthony laughs, "Fantastic! What's fair is fair. All those guys I offed. I should be forgiven. I should be forgiven all those incidental eliminations just as you should be forgiven all those incidental little boys."

"You tortured and battered your innocent victims . . . I only . . . ." Father Paul stumbles over his words.

"You only ruined their lives. I should reach in that pedophile mouth and rip out your deceiving tongue."

"You will never be forgiven," Father Paul says.

"Do you speak for God?" Anthony asks.



"Yes, I speak for God and I know there is only one place for you: may you burn in Hell!"

"I'll be comfortable burning in Hell . . . will you?"

Paul drops his head. There is knocking at the door. Arnold answers. John puts a bullet straight between Arnold's eyes. He moves fast and puts the revolver in the center of Bam-Bam's forehead. "Back up, slowly." He backs Bam-Bam up slowly. Luke follows. Anthony Scartossi is standing behind the desk. He has a gun drawn. He points it at Paul then turns it toward John and Bam-Bam and Luke. He looks confused when he sees Luke.

"Luke, no matter what happens in the next two minutes. Blow Tony's brains out," John says. "Don't make it a clean shot, either. Make sure the prick dies slowly. Remember, Tony left you to cook, with the rest of the meat, in the warehouse. He left you to face long, painful death. Do the same for him. Make it a gut shot."

"You dumb shit, do you know who you're screwing with!" Anthony says. "My union members will track you down and beat you to death, if something happens to me. You will really know what a long, painful death is."

"Everyone needs to be calm. Just calm down. John, did you help Nicky?" Paul asks his brother. "Did you help him escape. You are back here awfully fast. John, this is no time for one of your infamous tricks."

"He's gone. Yeah, Nicky's gone," John says.

"Tony? Everything should be okay. Right?" Paul asks Anthony.

"How do I know this prick's telling the truth?" Anthony says. "When you ever know him to tell the truth. And now, he's gone and killed Bam-Bam, in cold blood. I wouldn't put it past him that he killed my son, Nicky. Probably killed him. In his cell!"

"John, where is Nicky? Can his father speak to him by phone?" Paul asks his brother. "Did you give him a cell phone? Or is he near a land-line?"

John pushes Bam-Bam backwards; moving him, like a shield, closer to Anthony Scartossi. "Yeah. I dropped him at Naomi Cruthers'."

"Why there?" Anthony says. "What's that witch got to do with anything?"

"Nicky's got something going with the fat witch," John says as he pushes Bam-Bam closer to Anthony Scartossi. "They've had a love-hate relationship for years; like when he had her thumb cut off by Arturo Tate and then had it put back on by Doc. Nicky didn't have to do that, but he did because of that love-hate thing."

"Goddamn it! I knew he was into that witchcraft shit. Shit!" Anthony Scartossi sits down in the chair behind the desk. "That's just one more reason for getting him out of the country. Get him away from all the dope and all the witches."

"Luke! Take his gun!" John says. "Now!"

Luke steps forward. He holds his gun at Scartossi's eye level and reaches down and removes the revolver from Scartossi's relaxed hand.

"You got Cruthers's number. I'll call Nicky," Anthony says.

"How about this number? One, two, three . . . you're dead. Luke, blow his brains out!" Sheriff John commands. "Did I stutter? Blow his brains out!"

Scartossi tries to get up. Luke pushes him down—back into the chair. Bam-Bam tries to twist away from John. John's first shot splatters Bam-Bam's brains all over Scartossi. John's second shot whizzes past Scartossi's head. Scartossi ducks. "Shit!" Anthony uses the back of his hand to try to scrape the flesh and blood from the front of his thousand

dollar suit. John steps forward. He puts the hot barrel of his service revolver in one of Scartossi's nostrils. "It's hot! Goddamn it! It's hot!" Anthony Scartossi attempts to push the gun away.

"That's enough John. You've killed enough, for today. God will not forgive you if you continue," Paul says. "God commands you to stop. I command you to stop!"

"Luke, untie your brother . . . and get him out of here!" John says.

Luke unties Paul.

"Get that out of my nose or I'll put out a contract that you'll never outrun." John shoves the barrel further up Scartossi's nose. John twists the revolver. "You goddamned psycho!" Anthony screams.

"I won't leave until Tony is free to go," Paul says. "Let him go!"

"After I have a little talk with him. Luke, drag asshole out of here," John says. "Cuff him to the steering wheel." John unclips the handcuffs from his belt and then tosses them to his brother, Luke.

Luke struggles with Paul, but finally gets him to the entrance. Luke and Paul exit.

"Tony, I have one question. You want to see it coming, or you want it, in the back of the head, like Nicky got it in the back of the head," John asks Anthony.

"You stupid psycho shit. You have no damn idea how much trouble you're in. You've killed my son and my two best men and. . ."

The bullet and the flash blow off the front of Anthony Scartossi's face. John searches Anthony's bloody suit and finds a wallet in Anthony's breast pocket; he removes the cash and credit cards and stuffs them into his pocket. He tosses the wallet on the makeshift desk. He takes Anthony's rings and expensive watch. He searches Bam-Bam and Arnold and fleeces them of their possessions including their weapons. He dumps Anthony's bling bling briefcase, fills it with the bounty, and then walks out swinging the confiscated briefcase, casually.

Inside the rectory, Paul sits, dejected, behind his desk. John sits, in front of desk, with a giant grin on his face. Three half-empty containers of ice cream sit in different locations on Paul's desk. Luke paces, in a circle, around the rectory. Each brother holds a glass of wine.

"Let's drink to a difficult case closed. Then finish this delicious ice cream," John says. He raises his glass, high. "To a case closed and to fine investigative work of Sheriff John A. Dieadad."

They toast then put the glasses down and pick up individual containers of ice cream. They all eat rapidly.

"Where'd you get this ice cream? It tastes homemade," Luke asks John. "It's as good as any I've tasted in a long time. As good as any that Betty Ann's sister ever made."

"It was in the refer at the station," John says. "Maybe Evie dropped it by. Anyway, to a closed case." He raises his container of ice cream. "Let's all eat and be merry; Paul, you can be Mary; Luke and I will just be plain, old Luke and John." He raises his container of ice cream, again. "To a case closed. To the Dieadads."

"The case is not closed. It's still unsolved. Nicky was with his father. Luke didn't do it. Who did it? When I was at Nicky's, he said to look at Naomi Cruthers as the one. What do you think, John?" Paul says.

"I thought you said you knew who was doing the killing. Maybe Caruthers is the killer, but she's no problem. She's got only a half a witch left. Betty Ann. The others have

disappeared mysteriously. So will Naomi and her last friend,” John says. “But I still say Nicky did it. Nicky did it. His father lied. Or Lattimer was right, some psychopath who hates witches did it.”

“Yeah, I think Naomi’s innocent,” Paul says.

“If you think that Naomi is innocent, that she's not a witch. That witches can't exist . . . but by some logic angels do . . . why do you make Luke carry around that silly vile of holy water?” John asks his brother, Paul. “He even goes by the church, once a week, to have it recharged.”

“Luke carries it around because he thought Verna was trying to become a witch. He was going to convince her that a sprinkle of holy water would stop her in her tracks,” Paul says and then devours another giant spoonful of ice cream.

“Did it work?” John asks.

“She told Luke she stopped attending the Coven meetings. Right Luke?”

“Looks like she might have been bullshitting. I'm not sure. I didn't really know what she was doing,” Luke says. I'm just glad she's dead and the case is closed. I can sell the house; probably to the Clarks. I can sell what's left of the meatpacking company, property and customer service—bluesky; probably to the Clarks. Split, the company’s net on the sale, with John, Paul, and Ma. Collect Verna’s life insurance. Collect fire insurance on the warehouse; split that cash. Collect fire insurance on the house. I'm probably forgetting something but it still a load of cash to leave this homicidal town.

“So, you lied to me about knowing Verna was into witchcraft. What else did you lie to me about? Did you lie about slaughtering Verna? This whole god damn thing is your fault. You booze-soaked idiot. Maybe if you went home once in a while, Verna would still be alive,” John says. “My beautiful sister-in-law would still be alive.”

“Screw you! I know it's true . . . you've been screwing her all these years,” Luke says. “I'm glad she's dead; if for no other reason then to deprive you of your Friday night hump.”

John charges and Luke but trips, over his own feet, and goes sprawling on the ancient, scared floor.

“John, is it possible that Verna was murdered by Naomi, because Naomi was jealous of your relationship with Verna and the rest is just cover up,” Paul asks his brother.

John stumbles up from the floor and moves toward the entrance. “Shit! You just said Naomi was innocent. I've never been with Naomi or Verna. I still get my action in L.A. Once a month. You can think what you want. I'm going to clean this town of Naomi and her last remaining friend and do something about drug production and then take a break in L.A. . . . You two should come along we could have a great old ti . . . .” John collapses to the floor.

Luke moves toward him, bends down, on snaps John's holster, and then extracts John's revolver. He points the gun at John's head. “I’m going to do the world a great service; I'm going to blow his brains out.”

“No Luke, it's an automatic death penalty, in this State, if you assassinate a police officer,” Paul says.

“Who cares? I'm going to blow his brains out.” Luke points the gun at his brother, John. The gun weaves, back and forth, in an attempt to locate target. Luke pulls the trigger, but slowly crumples to the floor. The bullet slams, into the wooden floor, inches from Sheriff John's head.

“No! Did you kill him? Is he dead? Paul swoons. “The whole damn town knows about me, don't they . . . don't they . . . .?” His head falls to the desk top. “God, just one more, just Moonie Clark,” he mumbles. “I'll never ask for anything else again. I . . . .”

## Chapter Twenty Three

A full moon reflects, like a giant spotlight, off the desert sand. Evie Ward treks through the sand. Her robe protects her from the chilly night air. She loads her weapon as she walks. The extended clip engages easily as she smacks it home. The extended clip is overkill, but better safe than sorry. She is going to kill Naomi and Betty Ann; the only two witches left; they have somehow drugged the Dieadad brothers and dragged them out into the desert. She is undecided about the Dieadads' fate. They will probably be nothing more than collateral damage. Luke appears to be the only Dieadad worth saving, but the reality is, he will be a witness; and we all know the creed of the killer: leave no witnesses standing. In the middle of the desert, the brothers are tied in a circle around a four-foot diameter, six foot tall post. The post is topped with a witches foot made of intertwined branches. Dry timber is stacked at each brother's bare feet. Naomi Cruthers and Betty Ann are chanting to BabaYaga, “BabaYaga, Mother of All that is Evil, hear our plea. Come to greet your disciples. Come and feast on Unworthies and a disgraced Priest. Appear BabaYaga. Sniff the air for blood.” Naomi Caruthers has an unhealed wound across her face. She is missing her left eyeball. Betty Ann is missing her right arm, at the elbow; she is also missing her right leg, at the knee; she is using a homemade crutch to hobble around the briar. She trips and tumbles to the ground.

Naomi walks over and helps Betty Ann up and then retrieves Betty Ann's crutch. “BabaYaga will get your arm and leg back and my eye back,” Naomi says. “But, for now, we must feed the skeleton witch.”

Naomi and Betty Ann move toward Paul. Betty Ann stands next to Paul and directly in front of John. She braces herself on the crutch and places her hand on Paul's forehead and pushes his head back, against the pole, exposing his throat. Saliva runs from her open mouth. Her sharpened teeth draw blood from her twitching lips. The ugly witch's lips are colored, outside the lines, with blood-red lip paint.

“Well, Father Paul,” Naomi says. “Now would be as good a time as any to confess, to both your brothers, that, on one rainy night, many years ago, you sinned. You . . . fornicated with Verna Dieadad. Your own brother's wife. The family that lays together stays together. You Dieadads are such bad news. If Evie Ward wrote a column called, ‘BAD NEWS!’ You Dieadads would be in it, every day” She laughs. “There you are humping her own sister-in-law, and your not even part of the Clark family, yet.” She laughs. “We all thought you only liked little boys like Nicky Scartossi and Moonie Clark and those young boys up North. Before you die, you should know that your cop brother cut up Verna because she was going to tell Luke about their affair. Sheriff John promised

Verna he would kill his brother, Luke, but instead he broke his promise and he killed Verna.

“And it could have only been John who slaughtered all my witch sisters. . . . and Dexter Clark and Deputy Hatch and D.A. Jay Lattimer. So do you want to pray for your screwed-up family? Pray to you're sleeping God. You best wake Him first. If you pray to BabaYaga, you and your family might have a chance. And by the by, you know, we can't let your mother live; she spawned you and your brothers. Death to the Dieadads!”

Paul doesn't say a word.

“No prayer, huh, well . . . see you in Hell,” Naomi says.

Naomi plunges a long-bladed knife toward Paul's exposed throat. Suddenly, John rams his head against Betty Ann. She tilts on her crutch. The knife plunges directly into the Betty Ann's throat. Blood paints the timbers and Naomi. Naomi turns and bites into John's throat and rips out his jugular. Luke struggles with his ropes. He frees one hand. He reaches in his pocket and pulls out the vile of holy water. He jams it into Naomi's throbbing temple. Her screams fill the desert air. But she extracts the vile, drinks its contents, and moves toward Luke. Luke fends her off with his free arm. Paul tries to free himself but is unable. He settles back and he prays. Luke finally is able to grab Naomi's long hair. He twirls the thick hair, into a knot, around his hand. He jerks her into the post. Her head smashes into the hard wood; wooden splinters pepper her forehead. She pulls back. Luke jerks again and her head smashes again; this time harder; her facial wound opens; blood spreads across her forehead. Luke jerks the witch into the post. He does it again. Then again. Then again. Blood drenches the front of Naomi's face and robe. She falls, to the ground, twitching like she has an advanced case of Parkinsons.

Luke unties the rope restraining him. Then frees Paul. They both untie John and slowly lower his bloody body to the ground. Paul is sobbing.

Luke walks away. He stoops and picks up John's holster and gun; he slides the gun into the holster, and then holds the holster in his hands. He turns. “So you did Verna too! What, you do women, boys? What else you do!”

Paul walks slowly toward Luke. He tries to hug Luke. Luke twists away. Luke's back is now to Naomi who is stirring. Naomi grabs the long-bladed knife and lunges at Luke's back. Paul, in one swift move, pulls the revolver from John's holster that is being held by Luke. The bullet tears out Naomi's throat. She flops down next to John.

Paul is still holding the revolver. He looks at Luke. “Luke, forgive me. Ask mother to forgive me. I love you both.” Paul puts the hot barrel of the revolver in his mouth and without hesitation pulls the trigger.

The explosion fills the night air.

Luke lunges, toward Paul, too late. Luke, who can't stop screaming and crying, slowly and tenderly moves the body of Paul over close to John. He sits between them and puts their bloody heads on his chest. He rocks back and forth. He stares off into the desert. He rocks back and forth. Back and forth.

Evie Ward sits, in the burned-out frame of a Chevy Nova, watching the mayhem. She probably could have saved the Dieadads but can think of no good reason. John was a bloodthirsty murderer. Paul was a serial pedophile. She doesn't know which one was worse. But who is she to judge anyone but witches. Her prey are all dead, in this town. So she will be packing up and heading out to another witch infested desert town. The next town will not be this complicated; because, it will not be personal. It will be just for fun.

Her kill numbers will be higher, now, with her new weapon and extended clip. She moves the gun from her lap to her robe pocket. And she won't have Sheriff John A. Dieadad as competition. He was her lover, protector, and nemesis. He was great in the sack. He saved her life. But, he was on her trail. See you in Hell; Sheriff John.

## Chapter Twenty Four

In Evie's cozy bedroom, Starich and Evie are sitting in a four-poster bed. They are naked under the sheets. The sheets are pulled up under their arms as they discuss the recent events.

"So, it turns out John was killing the witches including Verna," Starich says. "He killed Verna so she wouldn't tell Luke of their affair, and he killed the other witches to cover up and to rid the town of the witches," Starich says. "He tried to make it look like the psychopath from Loadstone."

"John only killed the witches who were trying to kill me. Three at my house and one at Betty Ann's old mansion. Mark my words, someone else killed Verna and the other witches. I was with John the night Verna was murdered. I don't know where he was the nights of the other murders. I suggest that you escort any witches, who visit this twisted, little town, to the city line. This is not a healthy place for witches." Evie pulls Starich's head toward her. "It's been fun being with you. I'm going to take a break. I'm going back to Guatemala to see my daughter and her Nanny. But, I'll be back!" She says in her best Arnold Schwarzenegger voice.

Starich reaches up and takes her hand. Then looks down at four emerald rings. "Interesting rings. where did you get them?"

"They were my mother's. They disappeared when she was slaughtered by witches. The rings showed up . . . recently." She pulls him close to her. She stares blankly over his shoulder . . . Her look is that of a psychopathic witch-killer with plans of clearing desert towns of witches on a monthly basis. Or maybe on a weekly basis. Or, what the Hell, maybe on a daily basis. She must not forget to send her dues to Addie Zimmerman.

The end