

*SHADOW
PLAY*

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ST. MARTIN'S PRESS  NEW YORK

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www.stmartins.com

Designed by Omar Chapa

The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

ISBN 978-1-250-02010-9 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-250-02009-3 (e-book)

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First Edition: September 2015

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CHAPTER

1

SONDERVILLE, CALIFORNIA

Walsh watched the detectives and forensic team milling around the open grave, their flashlight beams lighting the darkness. Stay in the back of the crowd, he told himself. The rest of these locals were only curiosity seekers, and the cops were used to dealing with them. If he blended in and didn't call attention to himself, no one would notice or remember him.

Damn kid. The girl had been buried for years and might never have been recovered if those Boy Scouts hadn't chosen this area to set up camp. It must have been the recent rains that had washed away the top layers of dirt and revealed those old bones.

Or maybe not.

He remembered how strange that little girl had been, how he'd hated her before that final blow. And he'd heard there were weird stories about this wood where he'd buried her . . .

He felt a chill as he remembered those stories.

Forget it. They were just stories. He had come here to make sure that the report was true that the girl had been unearthed

after all these years. He had carefully monitored the town and vineyards since the night she had been buried. Now that he was certain, he'd fade away for a while. He was good at fading away. He'd done it eight years ago, and no one had connected him to anything that had happened in this valley.

And no one must connect him to that child the forensic team was so carefully taking out of her grave.

She had to remain unknown and lost, as she had been all these years. It was too dangerous to him for her to be anything but the heap of bones she'd become after he'd thrown her into that grave. He would have to keep monitoring the situation to be sure that threat didn't become a reality.

It would be okay. Years had passed, life moved fast, no one would care about this child who had been lost so long . . .

LAKE COTTAGE
ATLANTA, GEORGIA

"You have a FedEx package," Joe Quinn said as Eve came into the cottage. "It's on your worktable. It came from somewhere in California."

She nodded. "Yeah, Sonderville. Sheriff Nalchek called me last night and asked me to bump his reconstruction to the top of my list." She made a face. "I almost told him to forget it. I'm swamped right now, and I don't need any more pressure."

"You're always swamped." Joe smiled teasingly. "You thrive on it. And it's natural that you're in demand. Everyone wants the world-famous forensic sculptor, Eve Duncan, to solve their problems."

"Bullshit." She went to the kitchen counter and picked up

the coffee carafe. “There’s usually no urgency about putting a face on a skull that’s been buried for years anyway. It has to be done, but there’s no reason that I can’t do it in an orderly fashion. Every one of those children is important.”

“So why did you give in to Sheriff Nalchek?”

“I don’t know.” She poured her coffee and came back to Joe. “He wore me down. He sounded young and eager and full of the horror that only comes the first time that you realize that there are vicious people out there who can do monstrous things to innocent children. I got the impression that he was an idealist who wanted to change the world.” She sat down beside Joe and nestled close, her head against his shoulder. He was warm and strong, and she loved the feel of him. She loved *him*. Lord, it was good to be home. That trip to the airport today had been achingly difficult. She had watched her adopted daughter, Jane, fly away back to London, and she had no idea when she would see her again. “He kept telling me that this little girl was different, that he was sure that he’d be able to find out who she was and who had killed her if I’d just give him a face to work with. Who knows? Maybe he’s right. In cold cases like this, the chances are always better if the officer in charge is enthusiastic and dedicated.”

“Like you.” Joe’s lips brushed her forehead. “Maybe he thinks he’s found a soul mate.”

“Oh, I’m dedicated. Enthusiastic?” She wearily shook her head. “Not now. I’m too tired. There have been too many children in my life who have been killed and thrown away. I’m not as enthusiastic as that young officer is. I’m only determined . . . and sad.”

“Sad?” Joe straightened and looked down at her. “Yes, I’m definitely feeling the sad part. But it’s not only about that skull

in the box over there, is it?” His hand gently cupped her cheek. “Jane? I could have taken her to the airport. I thought you wanted to do it.”

“I did want to do it. It may be the last time we see her for a while. She’s off to new adventures and finding a life of her own.” She tried to steady her voice. “Just what we wanted for her. Look what happened when she came back from London to try to help me. She got shot and almost died. Now she’s well and going on with her life.” In her line of work, sometimes the evil came close to home. Most recently Jane had been one of the targets. Those weeks with her daughter, while she had been recuperating, had been strained and yet poignantly sweet. Jane had come to them when she was ten years old, and she had been more best friend than daughter to Eve. But that hadn’t changed the love that had bound them all these years. Now that Jane was out on her own and becoming a successful artist, it was terribly hard to adjust to the fact that most of the time she was thousands of miles away. “It’s exactly what she should be doing. What’s here for her? Hell, I’m a workaholic and always involved with a reconstruction. You’re a police detective who they tap to work cases that don’t give you normal hours either. It was just . . . difficult . . . to see her get on that plane.”

“And you didn’t let her see one bit of that pain,” Joe said quietly. “You smiled and sent her on her way.”

“That’s what every parent does. It always comes down to letting them go.”

“And more difficult for you than for others. First, you had to let go of Bonnie when she was killed. Now Jane is moving out of our lives.”

“Not out, just away.” She made a face. “And evidently I

couldn't let go of Bonnie because I insisted on keeping her with me, alive or dead. I was so stubborn that whoever is in charge of the hereafter let me have my little girl's spirit to visit me now and then." Though she had initially resisted that blessing. She had thought she was hallucinating, thought that grief had made her mind fly to any solace possible. She had only wanted to be with her Bonnie and was spiraling down to meet her when she had been stopped by the realization that the visits from Bonnie were no hallucination. She drew a deep breath and gave Joe a quick kiss. "Which makes me luckier than a lot of people. I refuse to feel sorry for myself. I have you. I sometimes have Bonnie. I'll have Jane when she moves in and out of our lives." She nodded at the FedEx box across the room. "And I have a chance to help the parents of that little girl find resolution." She got to her feet and took a sip before she put the cup down on the coffee table. "So slap me if you see me go broody on you." She headed for the kitchen. "How about lasagna for supper? There's something about the smell of baking garlic bread that lifts the spirits and makes everything seem all right."

"Besides outrageously tempting the taste buds. Sounds good. Need help?"

"Nah, you know my culinary expertise is nonexistent. I'll do frozen."

"Eve."

She glanced over her shoulder.

He was frowning, and his gaze was narrowed. "It's just Jane leaving? You've been pretty quiet the last couple weeks. Nothing else is wrong?"

And Joe noticed everything. She was tempted to deny it and put him off, but she couldn't do it. They had been together

for years, and their relationship was based not only on love but honesty. “Nothing that can’t be fixed.” She shrugged. “I guess I’m just going through some kind of emotional adjustment. I wanted everything to stay the same. I wanted to keep Jane close to me. Mine. Though I always knew she didn’t really belong to me. She was too independent and was ten going on thirty when we adopted her. And Bonnie was mine, but then she was taken.” She smiled. “And that spirit, Bonnie, who comes to visit me now and then is very much her own self now. Beloved, but only flashes of being mine.” Her smile faded. “But I’ll take it. I just want to keep her with me, too. I don’t want anything to change.”

“Why should that change?”

“It shouldn’t change. That’s what I told Bonnie. Nothing has to change.”

His brows rose. “Ah, your Bonnie. She said something to disturb you? When?”

“A couple weeks ago. She scared me. She said she didn’t know how long she’d be able to keep coming to me. She said everything was going to change.”

“How? Why?”

“She didn’t know. She just wanted to warn me.”

“Very frustrating.” He chuckled. “If your daughter has to pay you visits, I’d just as soon she not upset you like this.”

“That’s what I told her.”

He got to his feet and took her in his arms. “And so you should. Send her to me, and I’ll reinforce it.” He kissed her. “Though I doubt if that’s going to happen. She only appeared to me a couple times just to make sure I knew that you weren’t hallucinating.” He looked directly into her eyes. “I know you need Bonnie. She’s the anchor that keeps you here with me.

You were spiraling downward and almost died before you had your ghost visits from Bonnie. She brought you back, and I thank God for her.” He paused. “But if for some reason she stopped coming, I want you to know that we’ll make it all right. I have so much love for you, Eve. I’m full of it, you’re my center. You always have been and always will be. If your Bonnie drifts away from you, I’ll just pour more of that love toward you. I’ll find a way to stop you from hurting. I promise you.”

He meant every word. The knight was about to mount his stallion and launch himself into battle, she realized. God, she was lucky.

She gazed up into his face, the strong square contour, the well-shaped lips, the tea-colored eyes that held both warmth and intelligence. So familiar, yet so new, every time she looked at him. “Hey, I’m just having a few twinges, nothing major. It just seemed when Jane got on that plane that the changes were starting. A sort of harbinger of things to come.” She pushed him away and turned back to the freezer. “But change can be good, too, can’t it? After all, Bonnie wasn’t definite about anything. Forget it.” She took out the lasagna. “Jane told me she’d call me as soon as she got off the plane in London. I think I’ll start working on the new reconstruction after dinner, so that I’ll be awake when she calls . . .”

But Eve’s cell phone rang before she even finished loading the dishwasher after dinner.

“Sheriff Nalchek,” she told Joe with a sigh. “You finish here. I may be more than a few minutes.”

“Dedication and enthusiasm,” Joe repeated with a grin. “At least he waited until after dinner.”

“Not necessarily. California is three hours earlier.” She punched the access button. “Eve Duncan.”

“John Nalchek.” His deep voice was brusque. “Sorry to bother you, Ms. Duncan. I just wanted to make sure that you’d received the skull for reconstruction today.”

“Yes, FedEx is usually pretty reliable.”

“What do you think of her?”

“I haven’t opened the box yet, Sheriff Nalchek.”

“Oh.” A disappointed silence. “But you’ll do it tonight?”

“Possibly.” No promises, or he might be calling her in the middle of the night. “Or tomorrow.”

Another silence. “Okay. I don’t want to rush you.”

The hell he didn’t. “There’s no rushing a reconstruction, Sheriff. There are several stages, measuring and processes that have to be done before the actual sculpting. It will take as long as it takes.”

“What stages?”

She tried to be patient. “The first stage is repairing, then I go to the measurement stage, which is vitally important. I cut eraser sticks as markers to the proper measurements and glue them onto their specific points on the face. There are twenty points in a skull for which there are known tissue depths. Facial-tissue depth has been found to be fairly consistent in people the same age, sex, race, and weight.”

“What happens next?”

“I take strips of plasticine and apply them between the markers, then build up all the tissue-depth points.”

“It sounds kind of iffy, like connect the dots.”

“If you wish to simplify it. I guarantee it’s not simple, Nalchek. And that’s only the beginning.”

“Sorry, I wouldn’t have sent her to you if I hadn’t believed you could do the job. But you are going to put her before the others on your list?”

“I told you I would.” She remembered what she had told Joe. Dedication and enthusiasm might work miracles for that poor child. “I know that you probably had a shock when you found that skeleton. It’s never pleasant. But you have to remember that we can do something about it if we work together. We can find her parents, we can find the person who killed her.”

“I wasn’t shocked, ma’am. I was in Afghanistan, and I worked as an EMT several months before I went to work with law enforcement. There’s nothing much I haven’t seen.” He paused. “And I told you yesterday that I know I can help her if you give me a face. I *know* it.”

His voice was so passionate that Eve asked, “Really? And how do you know it?”

“Sometimes you just know. Sometimes you—” He stopped. “Or maybe I just want it so bad. I looked down at that little girl’s skeleton all covered in dirt and mud, and I felt like she was calling to me. It was so damn strong, it rocked me. She was so . . . small and fragile. I wanted to pick her up and take her somewhere safe, where no one would ever hurt her again. Crazy, huh?”

“Not so crazy.” All her impatience had disappeared with his words. When her own daughter had disappeared, she would have wanted someone like Nalchek to be hunting for her. It was a cold world, and men who cared were rare and to be valued. “What can you tell me about her?”

“Nothing much. We think she’s nine or a little younger. She died of a blow to the head. She’s Caucasian, and she’s been

buried for a good eight years or more. I've checked the missing persons reports at the time, and there's nothing that matches up to the location or the time frame."

"She might have been transported from almost anywhere in the state or beyond."

"I know that. You asked me what I knew. I didn't think you wanted guesses, ma'am."

"No, I don't." Nine years old. Buried eight years. If she'd lived, she'd have gone to high-school proms by now. She might have had a boyfriend or had a crush on some rock star or movie actor. She'd missed so much during those eight years. "Thank you. It may help to know something about her."

"I thought it might. I read a couple articles about you before I sent you the skull. You were quoted as saying that you liked to do anything that brought you closer to the victim. You said for some reason it seemed to make the sculpting process easier. The reporter made a lot of that remark."

"He was looking for a hook for his story. I made the mistake of giving it to him."

"It was a good hook. It was what made me send the skull to you. I liked the idea of someone's caring enough to want to get close to a victim."

"I feel sympathy for any victim, but the closeness of which I spoke only occurs during the actual sculpting process. That's really the only part of reconstruction that has the potential for creativity."

"And bonding?"

"You're putting words in my mouth."

"Maybe. I'm trying to make sure I did the right thing, sending her to you. I feel responsible."

"Should I send that skull back to you?"

“No, ma’am. I didn’t mean to offend you. I’d appreciate it if you’d get right on it, please.”

“No offense taken. You just seem very possessive about this skull.”

“That’s what I thought about when I researched you, Ms. Duncan. Two of a kind?”

“No.” Though those words were eerily close to what Joe had said, she thought. “Perhaps I do feel a responsibility and closeness to my work while I’m doing a reconstruction, but I’d never feel possessive. I only want to set them free.”

Nalchek chuckled. “I haven’t gotten there yet. I feel like that little girl still belongs to me just like the minute we pulled her out of that grave. Maybe after you get me a face, I’ll be able to let her go. Good night, Ms. Duncan. You’ll let me know how it goes?”

“I imagine that you’ll make sure I do,” she said dryly. “Good night, Sheriff.” She hung up.

Nalchek wasn’t entirely what she had thought. She would still bet that he was young, but he wasn’t inexperienced and had a toughness that made his insistence about her doing the reconstruction all the more puzzling.

A nine-year-old girl, buried over eight years.

I felt like she was calling to me.

“Eve.” Joe was standing behind her in the doorway. He was carrying two cups of coffee. “Done?”

She nodded and took the cup he handed her. “For the time being.” She moved toward the porch swing and curled up next to him as he sat down. She sighed with contentment as she gazed out at the lake. The fragrance of the pines, the moonlight on the lake, Joe beside her at this place they both loved. “Nalchek is very polite, very concerned. And he’s going to be a thorn in my side until I finish her.”

“Then don’t take his calls.”

“That’s one solution.”

A breeze was lifting her hair, and it made everything in this moment all the more wonderful. This perfect place, this perfect man for her.

That little girl had not lived long enough to have a perfect anything. That took time and searching and the wisdom to know it when you found it.

“Then do it.” Joe put his arm around her. “Why not?”

“I’ll think about it.”

But she knew she wouldn’t do it.

I felt like she was calling to me.

“So did your bone lady come through for you, Nalchek?”

Nalchek looked up as Deputy Ron Carstairs came into the office. He was a friend as well as coworker, and Ron had been riding him since the night they’d found the little girl. He was a good guy, and they’d worked together for five years, but he didn’t understand why Nalchek hadn’t just dropped this investigation and pushed it into the hands of the medical examiner. “She’s not a bone lady. You’re thinking of that TV show. She’s a forensic sculptor and probably the best in the world.”

“And she’s rushing to give that kid a face just because you asked her to do it?” Ron dropped down in the visitor’s chair. “Hell, then she couldn’t be that good. We’re small potatoes out here in the boonies.”

“She’s that good,” Nalchek said. He tossed the Eve Duncan dossier to Carstairs. “Take a look for yourself.” He pointed to the photo of Eve Duncan. Red-brown shoulder-length hair, hazel eyes, features that were more interesting than beautiful.

“She was illegitimate and born in the slums of Atlanta and had a baby of her own by the time she was sixteen. She named the little girl Bonnie, and the kid turned her life around. The kid became her whole life. She went back to school and then on to college. Then when the little girl was seven, she was kidnapped and killed. It was a terrible blow, and Duncan went into shock. But then she rallied and started to rebuild her life. Duncan went back to college to study forensic sculpting. Since then, she’s become the most sought-after artist in forensic sculpting. She works for police, FBI, and private parties.” He pointed to the dossier underneath Eve Duncan’s. “That’s Joe Quinn, ex-SEAL, ex-FBI, currently a detective with ATLPD. They’ve been living together for years.”

Ron only glanced at the dossier. “I’ll look at them later. Nice looking woman. Not my type. Too intense.”

“She’s my type. I want her intense.” He grinned as he leaned back in his chair. “Though I’ll probably stay away from Joe Quinn. His reputation is a little too lethal for me.”

“You said he was a cop.”

“There are cops, then there are cops. You know that as well as I do. He’s supposed to be totally bonkers about Eve Duncan and very protective.”

“Well, you shouldn’t have to deal with either one of them now that you’ve turned the skull over to Duncan.”

Nalchek’s smile faded as he looked back down at the dossier. “Yeah, you could say that.”

“Hey.” Ron was shaking his head. “Drop it. Let it go, Nalchek.”

“I have let it go. It’s out of my hands.”

“But not out of your mind. There’s a lot of talk around

town about how weird you've been behaving since we found that kid's skeleton. We all felt bad about what happened to that little girl, but you overreacted."

"How can you overreact to the murder of a kid?"

"She's been dead over eight years. What are the chances we'll ever find her murderer?"

"Damn good if we try hard enough." He got to his feet. "And I'm trying hard, real hard. I'll find the son of a bitch. I've got Eve Duncan, and soon I'll have a face." He moved toward the door. "And right now, I'm going back to that grave site and take another look to see if I can find anything more."

"You've been out there five times. Don't you think it's a little excessive?"

"No."

I felt like she was calling to me.

He had said that to Eve Duncan, and he was still hearing that call even though the bones were long gone from that crime scene.

"You can never tell what you'll find if you look hard enough. Want to come along?"

"Waste of time." Ron grimaced. "Oh, what the hell." He got to his feet, grabbed the Duncan and Quinn dossiers, and followed him toward the door. "Why not?"

"Are you still going to wait up for that call from Jane?" Joe asked as he paused before going back to their bedroom. "Want company?"

Eve chuckled. "I've got company." She moved across the room to her worktable, where the FedEx box remained unopened. "No, you go on to bed. You've got to work tomorrow morning. I won't be too long. I'll just take care of the setup and

preliminary measuring, then come to bed after I get Jane's call."

"Sounds like a plan." He still didn't move. "Sure you're okay?"

"Absolutely." She started to unfasten the box. "Stop hovering. You're acting like a grandma with her first grandkid."

"I beg your pardon." Joe's voice was suddenly deep, silky smooth, and infinitely sensual. "Grandma? Me? I think we're going to have to address that insult when you come to bed."

She glanced up at him and suddenly lost her breath. Thigh muscles that were compact and yet sleek and full of leashed power. Tight stomach and buttocks. In this moment, he was totally male, completely sexual, and she could feel her own body respond. Even after all these years together, their sexual chemistry was just as explosive as when they had come together when he had been the FBI agent sent to investigate Bonnie's death. "I'll look forward to it," she said softly.

He grinned. "That was my intention. Anticipation is the name of the game." The next moment, he'd disappeared down the hall.

She stared after him for a moment before she ruefully shook her head. She was tempted to go after him, but he could just wait until she got the call from Jane. Anticipation worked both ways.

She looked back down at the box and completed opening it. Then she carefully removed the plastic ties that held the skull in place and the protective plastic wrap around the skull itself. "Let's see you," she murmured as she took the skull in her hands. She always talked to these lost children when she first started the reconstructions. It seemed to aid her in making a connection and helped her over the first painful shock of seeing their

remains. She never got used to that moment. She held the skull under the light. "Small. You were small for nine. I wonder if they were wrong about you . . ." Small, delicate features . . . fragile. She looked so fragile and vulnerable. Nothing appeared to be broken or devoured by animals.

If you discounted the crushed side of her right temple where her killer had struck the fatal blow.

She'd have to repair that immediately, so that she could concentrate on the actual reconstruction. Her fingers gently touched the crushed bones. "Bastard." She felt a sudden surge of rage that was as intense as it was unusual. She always felt sad, but it was difficult to focus rage on a faceless predator. She was having no trouble focusing now. This child's killer might only have been a shadow-figure, but it was malignant and evil and Eve felt as if she could reach out and touch him. "But I don't think it could have hurt you for more than a few seconds. That's a mercy. Though I'm sure he didn't mean it to be." She tossed the box in the trash and spent a few minutes setting up the skull on her worktable. "There you are. Now I'll clean you up and start the measuring. I have to do a lot of measuring before I can start bringing you back the way you were. Were you a pretty little girl? Not that it matters. I've always liked interesting more than pretty anyway. I've had two children of my own in my life. My Bonnie was both pretty and interesting, and Jane is very beautiful. But they both know that it's what's inside that counts." She was done with the cleaning and tossed the cloth aside. "What's inside you? Maybe we'll be able to see after I finish. Right now, it's difficult, but I've gone down this road before. Okay, that's all. I just had to establish a sense of what we have to do together to find a way to get you back home. From now on, I just work and maybe you help a little."

She leaned back in her chair and gazed thoughtfully at the delicate skull. “One last thing. I always name my reconstructions. No offense. You can have your own name back once that sheriff finds out who you are. But I have to call you something besides ‘Hey, you’ when I talk to you or about you. It’s just the way I work.” She tilted her head. “What name . . . Linda? Penny? Samantha is a good name. It’s got substance. Do you like it? Maybe too heavy. How about Carrie? Short and sweet. I kind of like that for—

Jenny. I . . . think . . . my name is Jenny.

Eve went still. Out of the blue, out of the darkness, those words had come to her. Weird. Imagination? Or had she been concentrating so hard on this little girl that the name had just popped into her head, and she’d mentally couched it in terms that the child might use. It didn’t matter. The name was there, and she might as well use it. “Jenny. I like it. And it seems to suit you. Much better than Samantha.” She opened the drawer of the desk and drew out her measuring tools. “And now that we’ve got that out of the way, it’s time to get to work. Let’s see if we can get the basic stuff done before I have to leave you and get to bed . . .”

Ringing.

Her cell phone was ringing, Eve realized vaguely with annoyance. She wished she’d turned it off before she’d started working as she usually did. She had just begun the mid-therum section of—

Shit! Jane! Three and a half hours had passed, and she hadn’t even realized it.

She grabbed her phone from her pocket and punched the access. “Jane! Hello. Has your flight landed?”

“Yes, I’m in a taxi on the way to my apartment. It took you long enough to answer. I was beginning to worry.”

“I was working. I just received a new reconstruction, and I was doing the preliminary measuring.”

“I should have known. You cut down your schedule while I was there recuperating, and you probably had to make up for lost time.” She paused. “I was a bother. I’m really sorry, Eve.”

“I’m not.” She got up from her worktable and moved across the room to the couch. “I loved every minute of having you with us. I wish you’d stayed twice as long. No, I wish you’d never go away.” She added quickly, “But I know that’s not practical. You have a career. So do I. We’ll work it out.” She changed the subject. “Good flight?”

“Smooth as glass. So is your new reconstruction a little boy or girl?”

“A little girl. Nine. Found in the vineyard country in California.”

“And what did you name her?”

“Jenny.” She looked back at the skull on her worktable. “I called her Jenny.”

“Pretty name. I’ve always liked it.”

“So have I. I guess. It just sort of fits her.”

Jane chuckled. “How can you tell? It’s a skull, for heaven’s sake.”

“I can tell.” She added, “She definitely wasn’t a Samantha.”

“Samantha? Where did that come from?”

“You’d have had to have been here.”

“And I’d just as soon not.” Jane paused. “I don’t know how you do it. So sad . . . Never being sure what you’re doing is going to help those children’s identities to be discovered.”

“I’ve had a good percentage over the years.”

“I know, and I admire you more than I can say. I call myself an artist, but it’s you who are the true artist, Eve. You create life from death.”

“Only the semblance. But sometimes that semblance can cause the bad guys to be caught and revenge exacted.” Her lips tightened as she looked at the reconstruction. “This little girl is so fragile-appearing. It makes you wonder how anyone could bear to hurt her. Yet that bastard crushed her head and—” She broke off. “For some reason, I couldn’t do the measuring until I’d done a temporary cosmetic fix on that wound. I was going to wait but it . . . bothered me.”

“Because you have a gentle heart. Why else would you have taken a street kid like me into your home?”

“Because that street kid was remarkable, and I knew that she’d light up our lives.” She added, “And you’re a very good artist, Jane. You have great vision. And it’s not of skulls or death.” She chuckled. “Far more socially acceptable. You must be close to your apartment. I’ll let you go. Thanks for calling.”

“My pleasure,” Jane said. “Truly. Good luck with your Jenny. I hope you find a way to bring her home to those who loved her.”

“I think I will.” She added dryly, “She seems to have a young sheriff in California rooting for her. He says she wants to be found.”

“A psychic?”

“No, he just has a feeling. Good night, Jane.”

“It’s morning here. Have a good day.” She hung up.

Night here. Morning where Jane was living. It only pointed out how far apart they were.

Don’t think about it. They were together in their hearts.

Time to go to bed. She wanted to get up with Joe and have a cup of coffee with him before he left to go to the precinct.

She washed her hands and dried them on the towel she kept at her worktable. She turned off the work light. “We made a decent start, Jenny. It will go faster later.”

No answer naturally.

The fragile bones of the skull shone in the glow of the overhead light. Eve moved toward the hall leading to their bedroom, then impulsively stopped and looked back at the reconstruction.

She looked . . . lonely.

Imagination.

It was a skull, for Pete’s sake. Eve had worked on hundreds of reconstructions, and she had never had that feeling with one before. Was she transferring her own sadness about Jane’s departure to the death of this little girl? It was possible, but she wasn’t going to look for psychological excuses for the strange feeling she’d had since she’d seen Jenny’s skull.

Jenny.

I . . . think . . . my name is Jenny.

The phrasing was very odd.

Forget it.

She turned and started down the hall.

“Good night, Jenny,” she said gently.

No answer from the darkness.

Of course there wasn’t.

No answers.

No loneliness.

Not for the dead whose life had been snatched away.

That was for the people left behind.

She was suddenly filled with anger and rebellion and a desire to hold close to everything that life meant.

She opened the bedroom door. “Joe?”

“Present and accounted for.” He held out his arms. “Come here.”

“I have every intention.” She was shedding her clothes as she crossed the room. “And you’d better account yourself well.” She slipped into bed and wrapped her arms around him. “I need you.” She kissed him and buried her fingers in his hair. “I really need you tonight, Joe.”

“You’ve got me.” He kissed her again and then moved over her. “Forever . . .”

“Good night . . . Eve.”

The words were soft, hesitant, drifting to her in the darkness.

She was sleeping so hard after their hours of erotic lovemaking that she was barely conscious of the words. She was still half-asleep yet she knew she had to answer. “Good night . . .”

Joe kissed the tip of her nose. “I thought we’d said our good nights, sleepy head.”

“Not you . . .”

“No? Who then?”

“No one really.” She cuddled closer as sleep overcame her. “Only Jenny . . .”

“I don’t like this,” Ron said bluntly, as Nalchek parked the squad car at the edge of the forest. “I don’t want to go blundering through those woods. You’re being too damn— You’re acting weird as hell, and they’re going to tote you off to the funny farm. You’re not going to find anything out there in the forest that forensics didn’t find.”

“Then why did you come along?” Nalchek grinned as he got out of the vehicle. “It’s because you know I’m sharp, and I

sometimes notice stuff that others don't. You wanted to be with me, so that I wouldn't be able to say I told you so later."

"I came along because for some reason I want to keep you from making an ass of yourself," Ron said sourly. "Imagine that."

"I'll try," Nalchek said. "But we've been together a long time, and you haven't seen me make an ass of myself yet." He grimaced. "Of course, there's always a first time. But I don't believe it's going to be here." He hesitated. "Look, you said you don't want to go with me to that crime scene. Why don't you stay here and keep an eye out for reporters and other folks who might think I'm as nuts as you do?"

"I don't think you're nuts," Ron growled as he got out. "I just think you've got this . . . thing about that poor kid, and you're not thinking straight."

"So stay here." He moved toward the trees. He smiled back at Ron. "It's okay. Keep yourself busy looking over those dossiers you brought with you. I'll be right back. Ten minutes. No more." He disappeared into the woods.

Ron got out of the car and moved to stand in front of the patrol car. Then he moved to the edge of the forest and gazed uncertainly down the trail. Maybe he should have gone with him, he thought. Not that he could have helped. Not that there was any more evidence to gather. But Nalchek was his buddy, and cops supported cops.

Hell, too late now. He'd wait and try to smooth over any feathers he might have ruffled when Nalchek got back. Maybe they'd go down to that bar down the highway and have a couple beers and he'd try to talk sense into—

Pain.

So intense that he didn't know where it came from.

Back.

Chest.

He looked down and saw the knife blade protrude from his chest.

He couldn't breathe. He could feel the blood pour out of his mouth.

He fell to his knees and pitched forward.

Darkness.