

DEATHBED



BY
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Deathbed

Fan fiction novella by Madame Manga, written 2000 - 2001

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Based on characters from WWF/WWE television shows circa 2000, notably the Undertaker, Triple H, the McMahon family, Paul Bearer, Kane, Steve Austin, Chyna, Mick Foley, Eddie Guerrero. They are not meant to be seen as their real selves nor as their TV characters, but as actors playing roles. The characters of 'Irene' and 'Roy' are original.

This is a work of fiction. Although it uses the names of several real people and some of the circumstances of their lives and careers, the story is entirely from the author's imagination and has no basis in fact. Nothing in this story should be taken as representing actual events, attitudes, quotations, relationships or actions of any person living or dead.

Adults only. Plenty of violence, both fisticuffs and firearms, coupled with recurring death wishes and talk of suicide. This story dates from my most explicit period of erotic fanfic writing, so there are multiple graphic descriptions of various sex acts between male and female, some of them bordering on violent or all the way over the line. The question of rape and not-rape is central to the plot and to the psychology of the narrator.

Lyric: All Right Now, written by Andy Fraser and Paul Rodgers, 1970.

The plot of this story is very loosely based on that of the opera *Der Fliegende Holländer* (The Flying Dutchman) by Richard Wagner, 1843. When I say 'loosely based on', I mean with a lot of elements reversed one-eighty; the opera's heroine is an innocent virgin fangirl obsessed with the hero from constantly gazing at his picture and brooding on his cursed existence. I kiddeth thee not.

Frontispiece: Photo illustration by Madame Manga, 2009, using five or six things cribbed from Google Images. Yes, that's a 1950 Harley-Davidson. In Texas.

All comments, feedback, crit, diatribes and encomiums should be addressed to the author at:

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ONE

“Oh, hell,” I said, and kicked my shredded tire. The compartment for the spare was empty. I had forgotten that Roy had had a flat the previous week, and this was his BMW — I’d taken it instead of my car for no particular reason that I could remember. Earlier that morning, three hundred miles east of here, I hadn’t been thinking very clearly about such things, of course. I’d never thought to check whether he’d replaced the spare.

I sat down in the driver’s seat of the BMW and closed my eyes both in exasperation and against the glare of the afternoon sun. A hundred and fifty miles to go to Papa’s house, and it might as well have been the dark side of the moon without a working car.

But it was a miracle that the blown tire hadn’t sent the car completely out of control; I had been driving too fast for my ability since I was in such a hurry, and the abrupt left-hand curve had taken me by surprise. Someone else had been taken by surprise as well, since he had spilled some of his load of used lumber, complete with big bent nails sticking straight up like police roadblock spikes.

The thought of police did nothing to ease my mind — if they were after me by now, I had no way to run. My right front tire had instantly exploded and sent me veering off onto the right shoulder. The ditch beside the road could have flipped the car on its roof if I’d gone in; it was sheer chance that I had stopped in time.

Panicked, I had stomped on the brakes so hard that they had locked in a terrifying screech. There had been a rough jolt and a flash of light and an impression of tearing apart, but when I’d come to my senses I had been sitting on the shoulder, my skid marks still smoking.

I looked at the four white wooden crosses set against the bank of the ditch to mark where a fatal accident had taken place. Someone had been watching over me, because by all rights, I should have been dead.

Dead. The realization sent a thrill through my body, centering between my legs, hot and fluid like blood or sex; such thoughts always affected me that way.

Perhaps it would have been best if I *had* died... a quick shock and all my troubles would have been over, out of my hands, forgotten. Death could have meant peace; I liked the idea of traveling an unknown road with death my only companion. Though where I might have ended up after taking the easy way out might have made the most troublesome life look like paradise.

"Speaking of hell..." I muttered to myself. I'd once been a devout Catholic, but I told myself I didn't believe in such things any more.

Well, as long as I wasn't dead, I realized I had better call Papa to tell him I'd be late. Leaning into the car and reaching for my purse, I felt for my cell phone. My fingers first encountered the stock of the .32, since the revolver crowded the other contents aside as if to make itself manifest with a mind of its own. I pulled the gun out and put it on the passenger seat, removed a Snickers bar to get it out of the way as well, then found my phone and turned it on, pulling up the antenna.

It beeped for a moment as it attempted to find a signal and failed. This was a country road that ran between hills, far from any town, and of course there wasn't a cell tower in transmission range.

I jammed the phone back in my purse and swore. Papa wasn't expecting me for another three hours or so. I hadn't seen another vehicle on this road in thirty minutes at least, and since I'd taken this detour for the express purpose of avoiding the well-traveled freeways that crossed the state line, no one knew where I was.

Even if Papa backtracked to find me, he wouldn't realize I had wandered fifty miles north of my usual route, since I hadn't told him my exact plans when I had called him that morning. I had been frantic to get on the road and had told him nothing but the bare facts. I was well and truly stuck unless someone stopped to help.

Where was the next house or ranch? I'd never driven this way before, so I had no idea, but probably the nearest people were miles away. I'd last passed a driveway and mailbox three quarters of an hour before doing seventy, and there were no fences or cows in sight.

Nothing but rolling brown hills slashed with an occasional ravine, the black strip of road winding along a dry creekbed before ascending one of the lower hills some distance to the west, my direction of travel. It might have been the Sahara Desert for all the signs of life or settlement I could see.

Getting a map out of the glove compartment, I studied the route. No towns were marked along the road for twenty miles to the east and fifty miles to the west.

I had two choices. I could stay with the car and hope someone came along before dark, or I could start hiking in the hot sun under the cloudless sky with no water and not much idea of my destination. I decided to stay with the car.

More than five hours later I was beginning to regret that decision. Not a single car had come along the road in all that time. The sun had declined to a point almost directly level with my eyes as I stood on the shady side of the baking-hot black BMW; it would set in less than thirty minutes. I would not only be stuck; I would be stuck after dark with no food or water on a lonely road without even the option of hiking out.

I might have been a little scatterbrained that day, but I wasn't stupid enough to walk a road I didn't know in the dark of the moon without a flashlight. I could stumble straight into one of the ravines and never be heard from again. But I was hungry, having eaten the candy bar from my purse three hours before, and I was

very thirsty, not having had a drink since I had left home. Was I going to have to stay here all night? It certainly looked like it.

A few Canada geese flew overhead, honking. I checked my watch for the fourteenth or fifteenth time: 7:30 P.M. and only a little bit of daylight left. The sun kept declining and touched the crest of the western hill, just where the road came over the ridge, my spirits sinking with it.

At that moment, at long last, I heard an engine. A faint sound approaching from the west, though still a long way off on the other side of the hill.

“Thank you, God!” I said to the sky.

It was probably a ranch pickup with a dog or two in the back and a guy with a cowboy hat driving — he could give me a ride to the nearest phone and maybe even something to drink. I was so thirsty my mouth had gone nearly dry.

The sound of the engine suddenly increased in volume and something topped the ridge, centered in the disk of the dying sun.

Squinting against the light, I tried to make out what the vehicle was, but as it started down the slope towards me, it fell into the shadows on the eastern side of the hill. All I could see was a moving blotch wheeling with the sunspots in my vision, the engine growing louder and louder. Deep, throaty hammer of pistons; I blinked into the twilight at the blotch. It wasn’t growing larger at a quick enough rate — too small for a truck. A compact car, or... a motorcycle.

Yes, it was definitely a bike, since now I could see the blotch had only one headlight, and my ears could make out the distinctive throb of a Harley. I hadn’t had entirely good experiences with guys who rode Harleys, so the sound sent a wave of prickles over my skin.

I got into the still-hot car and glanced at the revolver on the passenger seat. It was unlikely that a man who rode on remote routes at dusk was a predator — how many unaccompanied women was he likely to encounter? Probably just a farm kid on his way home for dinner; I wouldn’t want to frighten him when he pulled up.

The sun slipped behind the hill and twilight spread over the valley just ahead of the approaching bike. I had a strange idea that the rider brought the shadows with him. I closed the car door and put the gun under the floor mat where it would be accessible just in case. Straightening up to look out the windshield at the rider, I turned on my headlights to show him that there was someone in the car.

He was about a quarter of a mile away now, rapidly approaching, and he had grown larger with proximity at a rate faster than that of his bike. It was a big bike, but he was a bigger man. No helmet; just a black bandanna tied over his forehead.

I flashed the brights a couple of times as a distress signal and the rider slowed, his head cocking at an angle as if he were sizing me up. I could see he had long hair under the bandanna and wore a black leather coat and jeans.

As he braked to a stop on the gravel shoulder ten yards in front of the car, spotlighted in my headlights, I bit my lip with the beginnings of apprehension.

He wasn't merely a big man; he was huge. Shoulders like an eight-lane highway, enormous hands in black fingerless gloves, muscular legs that went on for miles. As he sat upright in the saddle of the big pearl-white Harley, his feet planted flat on the ground, his knees bent at enough of an angle that his thighs pushed up the folded flaps of the coat. How tall was he?

He cut his engine and left the keys in the ignition, then flipped down the kickstand and dismounted with a deliberate swing of one of those endless legs.

I realized my heart was beating like a sledgehammer; I swallowed hard with a dry throat and nudged the revolver with my foot. A trickle of sweat ran down my cheek because the car was hotter than hell inside after sitting in the sun all afternoon, and I wiped it away.

If I was going to get the gun out again I had better do it now, because the rider tucked his sunglasses into his coat and walked towards my car, his boots crunching on the gravel. He stood well over six feet — no, he stood well over six and a half feet. Close to seven feet tall, and the long leather coat lent him the air of a caped highwayman, the flaps swinging with his lengthy strides.

I wondered if I should open the door at all — I tried to remember articles I had read on what women should do if they had car trouble. What kind of man was he: honorable or otherwise? Could I even tell from his outward appearance?

His face was large-featured and fair-skinned, marked with a reddish goatee and mustache a little darker than his collarbone-length hair, the edges of which glowed flame-colored against the sunset sky. Something about that face frightened me aside from its owner's size, though its expression wasn't overtly cruel or degenerate. It was set and grim and... indifferent.

Indifferent to what? I couldn't quantify that face, and I had little time to think it over. The rider had reached my car.

He tapped my hood with the fingers of one hand and glanced at the engine badging and the ruined tire, then came around to the driver's window and put a hand on the roof. He had to bend a long way down to look through the window at me, nearly squatting on his haunches, and I met his eyes.

Narrow and penetrating under light brows, they looked strangely acid green, but that was probably a trick of the fading light, I thought. Their gaze held mine through the glass for a long moment, then moved over the interior of the car and my body, the rider finally meeting my eyes again as I examined him.

He might have been in his late thirties, about eight or nine years older than I. An open denim shirt showed the upper contours of his pectorals and he wore a gold chain around his neck. His face was either too heavy-boned and Irish slope-nosed for beauty, or its virile irregularities fell together into a strangely compelling mix — I couldn't decide on that aspect of it either. It wasn't a clean-cut face, or a simple face. The mind and personality and experiences behind it had been shaping and battering it for a lifetime.

The rider raised his brows slightly as if to inquire whether I was planning to roll the window down any time soon, and I flushed and rolled it down.

The outside air was growing chilly and somewhat damp, moving the evening's scent past my face; I caught road dust and engine smell and something even warmer from the rider's body: sharp saltiness with a musky undertone. It was like worn leather or dried meat, something neither alive nor dead: in arrested decay.

All the muscles of my thighs and pelvis tensed for a moment. I'd always noticed that if you liked a man's smell, the rest might not matter much. He could be a pipsqueak or a gun control advocate and still he could do just fine in bed if you liked his smell. And the rider wasn't a pipsqueak by a long, long shot.

"Evenin'," he said.

"Uh... hello," I replied.

"You've been sitting here a long time, girl."

My eyebrows went up — how did he know? "Your engine's cold," he said by way of explanation. Looking at me very carefully, he took a deep breath through his nose; I had the impression he was evaluating my scent the same way I had his.

"Oh. I got a flat about two this afternoon. See that lumber there, with the nails? I almost ran off the road and I'm not sure how I — " The rider silently asked a question again and I said, "There's no spare and I don't know this road, so I thought it was better to stay in the car. I might have tried to walk out if I'd realized how little traffic there is along here. You're the first person I've seen since I... "

Again my muscles tensed, the flutter in my stomach probably visible through my jeans, because admitting how alone I was seemed dangerous. I wished I had put the gun in my pocket, though a dinky .32 might not have made much impression on a near-seven-foot monster like the rider unless I hit dead center.

I knew how to use a gun, of course, but I wasn't a hand-to-hand fighter, and even if I had been, my potential opponent's size advantage alone would have defeated me before I ever got started. A gun was an equalizer, the only one available to a small woman like me.

"Blew a tire on the curve and *almost* ran off the road." His voice was low and measured with a strong taste of Texas in it. I saw his brows crease and his tongue ruminatively push out his cheek, and he looked up and down the road and at the skid marks and the car and me as if he were visualizing what had happened. Glancing at the four white crosses, he seemed to come to a conclusion and nodded slightly to himself.

"Yes, that's what I said. So I guess that I've — "

"Been waiting just for me?" he said, straightening up without even the ghost of a smile. "Come on, get out."

"W-what?"

"Get out of the car, girl." He rapped on the roof with a note of mild impatience. "Fancy set of wheels, but it's not going anywhere right now. I'll take you where you need to be." Pointing his chin at his bike, he looked down at me. I didn't move. How could I put myself into the hands of a man like him, a formidable stranger whose trustworthiness was entirely unknown?

He smiled slightly, the first time he had done so. The expression improved his looks considerably — all the angles of his face realigned, and my heart jumped. “Now, this is assuming you don’t want to sit here until someone else happens to come this way, tomorrow or the next day. I could be wrong.”

When I didn’t immediately reply he shrugged slightly and turned, heading back to his bike.

I made a quick decision and scooped up the .32 from under the mat, inserting it into my purse out of his line of sight, then unlocked the door and rolled the window up again before getting out. I turned off the headlights and put on my jacket.

The rider had already started his Harley and rode it slowly up to the side of the BMW as if he’d known all along that I would agree. I locked the door and looked around.

The rider’s eyes were directed at my rear end, but again I had the impression of indifference. “Least you’re dressed all right for a bike. Get on.”

I slung my purse over my shoulder and pulled it around to my back to avoid banging the gun against him and betraying its presence, then stood up against the bike and put a tentative hand on the saddle. The rider looked around at me. “You ever ridden before?”

I blushed a little; I knew I didn’t look much like a biker babe, though I wore (designer) jeans and an (expensive) leather jacket. “Uh, yes. A while ago. With a helmet.”

“Sorry; don’t have one.” He cocked a brow at me. “You could just say a prayer and trust that I’m the one to keep you safe.”

I didn’t feel the least bit safe with him, not in any respect, but I didn’t have a lot of choice, so I put a foot up on a piece of chrome and struggled to mount the high back of the saddle. I stood only five foot four in three-inch heels and obviously this bike hadn’t been chopped low, not with a rider nearly seven feet tall.

He turned and picked me up. I gasped, both in awe at his strength and in disturbance at his touch. Those hands were so large they completely spanned my admittedly small waist. When he had lifted me into place he flipped out the passenger foot pegs.

“Hang on,” he said, pivoted the bike and took off in the direction from which he had come.

I grabbed him around the waist and hung on as he told me. Into the reddening sunset he rode, his hair whipping in the wind far over my head and the leather coat bellied like a spinnaker.

“Where were you aiming to go, girl?” He raised his voice to be heard above the roar of the bike.

“My Papa’s house. I was supposed to be there by four, so I’m hours late. He’s probably tracking me with bloodhounds by now.”

He grunted, which I felt more than heard, as I was pressed against his back and embracing his body with both arms. “Yeah? Where?”

"He lives more than a hundred and fifty miles southwest of here, so I'm not asking you to give me a ride there. All I need is to get to a phone." This sounded ungrateful. "Um, thank you."

The rider grunted again. "No, you don't need to get to a phone; you need to get to someplace to spend the night. No one's sending a tow all the way out here until morning, girl."

At the age of thirty, I thought I had outgrown being called 'girl', no matter how small I was. "My name's Irene." It wasn't, but I felt the need to introduce myself although he hadn't asked me to. I wanted to know his name in any case, though I wasn't willing to tell him mine for a number of reasons. "What's yours?"

"You can call me Deadman," he said after a moment's consideration. He pronounced it like two words run together, not like a surname. I laughed a little; a name like that must be a biker handle. He seemed to feel the laugh the way I had felt his grunt. "No, it ain't my given name. But that isn't yours either."

"Huh? How'd you know?" I felt my hands tense around him.

"I knew."

"Oh." This was not a guy who let anyone put anything over on him, obviously, not even minor details of fact. "Well, 'Irene' is going to have to do."

"Suit yourself."

We rode in silence for a while, the sun's glow disappearing entirely over the rim of the world, though we chased it at high speed. The night was entirely dark but for the beam of the Harley's headlight on the road ahead and a dim glow from the stars that outlined the crest of the hills.

I had dreaded spending the night alone in the dark; alone in the dark with an enormous biker named Deadman wasn't less frightening, though so far he had at least been charitable.

"Um..." I ventured.

"Yeah?"

"Where are we going?"

"Place I know."

"A motel? Someplace with a restaurant?"

"No," he briefly replied.

"I... I'm really thirsty. And I haven't had anything to eat today, except a candy bar."

He grunted as if surprised. "Hungry?"

"Yes. I was sitting there a long time!" Why would it seem strange that I was hungry and thirsty?

For a moment Deadman twisted to look over his shoulder, though it was so dark I doubted he could see my face. He turned back again to keep his eyes on the road.

"I'll be damned." His body shifted in my arms as if he were testing their grip. "Say, girl. When you blew your tire... you remember getting, uh, hurt?"

"Huh? No." Hadn't he seen I wasn't injured? Did he think I'd hit my head? "I stopped before I hit the ditch. I'm fine. Aside from being thirsty."

"I'll be damned," he said again.

"What's the matter?" He shook his head slowly without saying a word. "If we're going a long way, I'd appreciate it if you could stop somewhere and let me get something to —"

"Right saddlebag," he said with a shrug. I looked down at it hanging behind my thigh. "Don't go spilling everything out."

"I won't." I leaned over, holding him with my left arm, and unbuckled the flap. Inside I felt a few cans of beer, warm, and something that felt like a package of beef jerky. I reached a little farther and my fingers encountered something cooler, something that shifted and clanked: a length of heavy chain.

I didn't care to probe further into the belongings of a man who carried around a length of chain, so I retreated and pulled out a can of beer. I didn't much like beer, especially not when it was warm, but I was so thirsty it didn't matter. I would have drunk out of an oily mud puddle in the road right then.

I put the can down on the saddle in front of me, between my legs where it wouldn't fall and buckled the saddlebag again, trying to figure out how to open the beer. Only one hand was free, and I didn't want to let go of the rider to pop the top of the can — the bike was going at least eighty miles an hour and I didn't feel secure.

Before I could say a word, Deadman reached back and took the can from between my legs. His knuckles brushed the inside of my left thigh; my sharp intake of breath might have been audible to him, and my breasts pressing into his back with the sudden expansion of my chest certainly was noticeable. Steering with his elbows for a moment, the rider opened the can and handed it back to me.

"Th-thanks." I gulped the warm, bitter beer and felt the thirst ease a little. At least it was wet. "How much farther is it?"

"Not too far." We topped a rise and I saw lights down in the hollow; a small cluster of buildings by the road. We had come about twenty-five miles from where my car had broken down, so I was glad I hadn't tried to walk it. My boots had three-inch heels and I wasn't much of a hiker in any case.

One of the buildings was a gas station, one was a bar, one was a garage. Several houses sat back from the road with lighted windows here and there; a few scraggly trees grew at the side of the gas station, silhouetted against the lights.

It took a few minutes to reach the bottom, and my spirits rose higher on the way. Civilization it wasn't, but it was lights and other people and food and drink. I needed food — one beer on an empty stomach may not sound like much, but when you barely weigh a hundred and five soaking wet it can go to your head fast. I felt a little dizzy.

The rider pulled into the bar's parking lot; both the gas station and the garage were dark. When we rolled into the lighted area, he stopped the bike, turned and took my chin in one hand, tilting my face to the glare. My eyes went wide and I trembled; he looked at me again very carefully, brows down low with a speculative frown moving over his face.

"What?" I said faintly, head spinning.

The rider had a rueful grin. "Damnation. You didn't run off the road after all."

TWO

“Huh?”

“I thought you just hadn’t realized it yet.”

“Realized what?”

“You smell of death, girl. Strong. Like no soul who ever rode on this bike. But you aren’t dead. Not when you’re wanting to eat and drink, and not when you’ve still got sweat on your skin.” He drew a finger across my forehead. “Alive. I’ll be damned.” He laughed softly and spoke almost to himself. “Not that I ain’t already most of the way there...”

I pulled my chin out of his grasp, flabbergasted. He was insane! Or something else? Drunk? I didn’t smell alcohol on him, so maybe it was drugs.

But his eyes glowed clear and his voice sounded firm, a dark sort of humor curling the corners of his mouth. “What the hell, I got you, so we’ll make the best of it. Fifteen minutes,” he said, turning off the ignition and dismounting. “Don’t go wandering off. Ain’t safe.”

“What? Isn’t this where we’re stopping?” I hadn’t seen this settlement on the map; a battered handpainted sign by the road said ‘Camino del Muerte’. I didn’t like the look of the place, but it might be preferable to going any further with Deadman.

“Nope. Another ways to go — place called Hanging Crick. This here’s just a pit stop.”

He was heading towards the bar, coat swinging. I followed, having to jog to keep up with his mile-long strides. The parking lot was half full of old Camaros and pickups and motorcycles, and when Deadman opened the door the noise of the bar spilled out into the night. The peeling paint on the concrete-block wall read ‘Last Chance Saloon.’

The noise quieted a little when the patrons turned to see who the newcomer was, and went dead still for a few heartbeats when he walked in.

I came in behind him. The door slammed and I stood alone as Deadman headed to the bar. He sat down and tapped the counter with one index finger. The bartender, after staring at both of us for a minute, especially at me, slung a towel over her shoulder and drew him a beer.

The conversations slowly resumed, the patrons stealing looks at the huge black-coated figure at the bar. Probably most of the inhabitants for miles around were here

— it was Thursday night, eight o'clock, and I could see that this joint was the only entertainment to be had for a long, long way. About fourteen or fifteen people sat at tables, lounged at the bar, or danced slowly to the jukebox.

When I didn't move from the doorway, the bartender looked at me again as she switched on the television that hung from the ceiling.

"Coming in, sister?" She was tall and well-built, her ample hair dyed jet black, and her voice had a tone both sarcastic and humorous.

"Smackdown's on, man," said someone. "Channel six. Dish working?"

"Yes, I'm coming in," I said, attempting a smile while a dozen pairs of eyes riveted on me. I went to the bar and sat one stool away from Deadman, putting my purse on the bar and folding my hands over it.

A stocky man with a mane of curly brown hair meandered up to me, his bushy beard slightly wet with beer suds.

"Hey there, ma'am," he slurred at me, leaning on the bar. "You wanna dance?"

"No, thank you," I said. "Could I have a cola, please?"

"A *what?*" said the bartender, sounding just as surprised as Deadman had. She shot a glance at him; he said nothing. "Taker?"

"Give it to her," he said impatiently.

"OK; whatever you say." Shaking her head, the bartender put a can of Coke on the bar with a glass of ice.

"Aww, why not dance with me? I'm a nice guy," coaxed the drunk. He did sound like a friendly man under the cloud of alcohol, and I turned to look at him. Two upper front teeth were missing from his broad, guileless grin. "This ain't such a nasty joint as it might look to a city lady like yourself. I know how to treat a lady real nice."

"How do you know I want to be treated 'nice'? Or that I fall under any definition of a lady, for that matter?" The words fell into another dead silence and the man looked comically hurt. "Look, I don't want to dance. Sorry."

"Cactus," said the bartender, leaning over and speaking in a stage whisper, "Didn't you see? She came in with 'Taker.'"

"Oh my God." He looked much less drunk all of a sudden, backing off and going pale. "Sorry. No offense."

"Uh... no offense." He didn't seem to be afraid that the rider would be angry with him — Deadman, or 'Taker' as the bartender called him, ignored the whole exchange, tilting his head back and draining his beer. Cactus seemed to be afraid of *me*.

I couldn't make out why, since the gun was hidden in my purse and I was tiny and slim and one of the least intimidating-looking people I knew. That was why no one that morning had expected resistance; that was why I was still alive.

Considering the result, perhaps he did have reason to be afraid. Could people tell what I had done just from looking at me, or... did this have something to do with the odd conversation I'd had with Deadman?

I poured my Coke and drank it as fast as I could and ordered another, eating peanuts in between gulps while the rider drank his second beer. He'd thought I was dead until I'd asked for something to eat? How on earth could he think that a dead person could move and speak and see? Did he believe in the supernatural?

Certainly the people in this bar behaved as if they thought he had something to do with ghosts. Perhaps by association, they thought I did too. They thought they knew something about me that I didn't know myself.

I stole a look at the rider. Did he think he knew something about me? Did he have any idea what kind of woman I was? A sudden thought chilled me — did he want to take me to this place he had mentioned in order to have his way with me? He hadn't shown much sign of sexual interest in me, though, something I thought I would easily recognize; I had probably shown more in him, to my regret.

"Excuse me," I said to the bartender. "Do you have a phone I could use?" She stared at me and pointed to a pay phone in the passageway to the toilet. I got up, dug for change and placed a call to Papa.

No one answered except the machine, and I left a message telling him I was all right and to expect me later tomorrow. I gave him the names of Camino del Muerte and Hanging Crick, then hung up. Papa was probably out inquiring after my welfare or even driving my usual route back towards my house, so there was no help for it; I hoped he would think to check the machine.

The bartender came around the end of the bar to kick the jukebox, which had stuck on 'Highway to Hell', and as she returned I put out a hand to get her attention. To my surprise, she flinched at my touch.

"Jesus! What do you want?"

"Sorry. Did I startle you?"

She folded her arms, her expression closing down. "Look, I know you got a right to be here. He's got a right too. But pardon me if I'm not real eager to associate with you!" I opened my eyes wide; I must have looked stricken, because the bartender's scowl relaxed slightly. "It's nothing personal, lady. But this is the first time he ever brought one of his — " She cast a look at Deadman and broke off the phrase. "Did you want to ask me something?"

"Yes, if it's not too much trouble."

"Sorry. Go ahead."

"I had a flat tire twenty or thirty miles east of here. I'm going to need a tow in the morning. How can I leave a message with the garage?"

"A... message?"

"Yes, a message. Could I leave a note with you or something? That you could give them when the place opens up?"

"Uh... I guess so." She took a bar napkin and wrote down my license plate number and the approximate spot I had left the car.

"There's something else I'd like to find out." I indicated Deadman with my eyes. "Do you know... *him*? He gave me a lift, and he says he wants to take me to a place he knows — is it safe to go with him?"

Her face slackened into incredulity. "Is it *safe*? Don't you know where you're going?"

"Why would I know that? I'm not from around here."

"I can see that, but... geez." For a moment she examined me from top to toe. "Look, if you don't know yet, I don't think I can explain it. I'm not going to touch that one." I could see her shrinking away from me; she was intensely uncomfortable in proximity to me, though she didn't like to show it. What on earth was her problem — *everyone's* problem? What was the mystery?

"I don't understand," I said with some pique.

She rolled her eyes. "OK, let me put it like this; I don't think you have any choice but to go with him. If he picked you up..."

"Yes, I'd been waiting by the car for hours. He was the only person to come along."

"Yeah, he would be." She let out a breath. "OK, to answer your question. If he wants to take you somewhere, then that's probably the place you should go. As for *safety*, I'm not sure what you mean."

"I mean... is he likely to..." I dropped my voice to a whisper. "You know. Do something to me."

"Oh... like, molest you?" The bartender pulled a strange grimace, part rueful, part repelled. "Uh... I've never heard of anything like that happening, no. That's not what he does."

"What he does? What does he do? Patrol the road or something?"

"Yeah, something. 'Scuse me, OK?" She backed off and went behind the bar again.

A man banged open the door and stalked into the bar with a snarl, a shaven-headed and bearded bruiser in a black leather vest and jeans with no shirt. He took the beer the bartender handed him and sat down on the other side of Deadman, glaring at both of us.

"What the hell are you doin' here, 'Taker?'" he bellowed. "Fucking bad luck stormcrow! Fucking Grim Reaper! Who's going on the ride this time around?" I saw Deadman's head move slightly, but his narrowed eyes expressed most of his opinion of the hothead. "You are fucking pathetic, you know that? You make me fucking sick!"

"You under the delusion I give a shit about your damn opinions?" replied Deadman.

"I know who's taking the ride!" The belligerent man bared his teeth at me as I sat down again. "I saw you haul this fancy city tart in on yer bike! I warned ya about mixing with decent people, and now you go bringing THEM in here! Where do you get the fucking balls? Fucking pathetic! I wanna heave!"

"Where's this go, *mamacita*?" asked a trim, mustachioed Mexican man, coming in from the back room with a crate of bottled beer. "I can't fit it in the —" He caught sight of me and whistled, rotating his hips with a waggle of his mobile eyebrows. "Ay

caramba, chiquita! The nights are cold out here... you need some Latino heat to warm you up?"

"No," I said wearily, wondering when I could leave the bar. "Thanks for the offer, but no thanks."

"Shut up, Eddie," said the bartender with a swat to his wiggling backside. "Put it under the counter for now. And keep it in your pants!" Eddie noticed the rider and seemed to make the connection between him and me. Putting down the crate of beer, he quickly crossed himself and disappeared into the back room again.

"You goddamn carrion-eating vulture," continued the belligerent man as if he had not been interrupted, pointing with his middle finger. "Where'd you find this fucking stuck-up cunt? Huntin' road kill again? You make me *puke!*"

"Yeah, huntin' road kill," said Deadman, his jaw working as if he were chewing bones. "Just found me a squashed rattlesnake." He finished his second beer, slammed the mug down on the bar and stood up, cracking his knuckles. "Got his head beat in somehow." The hothead glared at him with an ugly snarl.

"Yeah, looks like boot prints on ol' Rattlesnake's face," said the rider, pretending to consider the question. "But it might be road burns from somebody draggin' him behind a bike." He smiled, far less pleasantly than the first time I had seen him do so.

"You sick, pathetic fucker!" yelled Rattlesnake, stabbing both middle fingers in the air. "Everybody wants me to kick his ass, gimme a Hell Y —"

"Outside, boys," said the bartender, flexing one well-conditioned arm and tossing her black mane. "You bust up the place and I will knock your fool heads together, and I mean you too, 'Taker!"

I was entirely ready to leave by now, so I paid my tab, walked out and watched Rattlesnake slam the door open again and go through. The rider followed, but before he could step outside, Rattlesnake swung the door and tried to bounce it off his skull.

WHUNK! I gasped, but the rider only blocked the door with one forearm, narrowed his eyes again and headed for his bike.

He reached into the saddlebag and took out the length of chain, wrapping it twice around his right hand and once around his forearm. "Here's the tow chain," he said. "So let's get you hitched up!"

Rattlesnake leaped for him and got inside his guard, connecting with a punch to the head, but Deadman moved back with the impact and swung the loose end of the chain. SNAK! It scored an ugly hit across Rattlesnake's face, lacerating his nose and forehead.

"Auggh!" he yelled, hand to his wound. "I'm gonna open up a can of whoop ass on ya!"

"I don't see yer can opener," replied Deadman, grinning nastily. He swung the chain again and missed as Rattlesnake ducked under the vicious lash.

A stream of people began to spill out of the bar, deploying in a semicircle to watch the action.

Rattlesnake did a shoulder ram and a trip attempt without effect; the rider landed a punch with his chain-wrapped fist and opened another cut on Rattlesnake's jaw.

Taking advantage of the man's brief disorientation, the rider grabbed him by the throat and hurled him to the ground, whipped the chain in a circle around his head to gain velocity and struck.

Rattlesnake scrambled and got between two cars; the end of the chain hit the hard ground and gouged a gash, sending up a puff of dust.

"Hey, this is better than Smackdown, man," chuckled one man to another. The rider was stalking Rattlesnake between the cars, swinging the chain.

KRASSH! One near shot hit and broke the side window of a Ford pickup. "Fuck! He busted my truck!"

"Think I'll stick to TV," said his neighbor.

Rattlesnake dove into the bed of the pickup. The rider put a boot up on the running board to follow, but Rattlesnake jumped to the top of the cab and hurtled down on him, knocking him prone. He sat on the rider's back, grabbed at the chain and pulled a section of it taut between his fists.

The rider still had one end wrapped around his hand and would not let go.

Rattlesnake used the section of chain to pin him by the back of the neck, scraped the chain between the rider's face and the dirt to make a loop around his throat and yanked hard to wrap it as tightly as he could.

I could see the links biting into flesh, Deadman's face straining as his back arched in the effort to throw Rattlesnake off. Higher and higher he rose as he gasped with the chain nearly strangling him. Horrified at the no-holds-barred violence of the fight, I stood with hands clamped over my mouth, barely able to watch.

"Who's road kill now?" Rattlesnake was yelling. "Who's road kill, asshole?"

The rider put forth a tremendous effort, lashing his entire body, and flipped over with Rattlesnake on the bottom. In an instant he was up, one hand to his throat and the other whipping the chain around in an arc.

SNAK! Rattlesnake yelled again, the skin opening up along his right shoulder, and then the chain hit him in the throat and wrapped twice around his neck. Deadman caught the flying end, yanked it hard, and Rattlesnake fell to his knees. The rider kicked him in the chest and stomped hard on his face; he went limp, moaning in pain.

"Let's see how far we can ride 'fore your damn head pops off," growled the rider, dragging Rattlesnake's inert body toward his bike with the two ends of the chain held in one hand. "Anybody got a padlock handy?"

He didn't sound like he was joking. I began to tremble.

"Jesus, 'Taker!" someone gasped. "You can't kill him!"

The rider's head whipped around as he looked for the speaker, his face transforming into something almost demonic. His sharp teeth gnashed, his eyes burned green, dark-ringed, and his long, fiery hair bristled around his head. "Can't kill him? Who AM I?"

The crowd was silent. The woman bartender stepped forward after a moment, her hands out in a let's-be-reasonable gesture. "Taker. We know who you are." Everyone covertly glanced at me. "You don't have to prove it or anything. I don't think he's going to try interfering with you again, OK? He got his lesson."

I was shaking with horror by now; the rider was a maniac! There was no way that I would ever get back on that bike! With one more look at him, I turned and ran.

"What the hell's she doing?" said someone as I passed. "Where's she think she's gonna run to?" The chain slithered to the ground behind me as if suddenly let go and someone followed me, someone with long strides that thumped on the dusty earth.

I ran through the parking lot and out to the road with Deadman in pursuit, tripping over the ruts and praying for someone to help me. All the patrons from the bar stayed where they were, but the footsteps still followed.

"God!" I cried. "God, help me!" A hand came down on my shoulder as I tried to run across the highway. "No!" The rider stopped me and turned me around to face him.

"Careful," he said, his face showing some marks of concern. "It ain't safe to run off." The demon rage was gone, but it was the same face. "I'm taking care of you, Irene. C'mon, get on the bike and let's go."

"Help me!" I screamed, struggling in his grasp. "He's a murderer! For the love of God, don't leave me with him!"

The people looked at each other, shrugging, then as if of one mind headed for the door of the bar. Even the woman bartender didn't move to give me aid. Rattlesnake lay where he had fallen, the chain still loosely wrapped around his neck.

"No! Come back! Help me..." Voice failing, I kicked and fought, my slight strength useless though magnified by despair.

"I didn't kill him, OK?" said the rider patiently, half carrying me back into the parking lot. He bent and retrieved the chain as Rattlesnake moaned. "He'll heal up; it ain't his time yet. You calm down, hey?"

"Please, just let me go!" He ignored me, lifting me on the bike. "You bastard, let me go!" I tried to bite his arm.

"Hey! None of that!" Pulling off the glove on his right hand, Deadman put his palm against my forehead.

His teeth gritted, his fingers curled, and I felt vitality drain out of me as his eyes rolled back into his head and went blank white for a moment. All my limbs relaxed and I swayed into his arms as if I'd been drugged. I could still think and see and hear, but I could barely move. I was helpless and at his mercy.

"Taker," said a hoarse voice from the ground. "What are you doin' with her?"

“What’s it look like?” Deadman replied. He kickstarted the bike, one arm around me. I was sobbing silently, limp, and he settled me in front of him and locked my legs under his to keep me secure.

“She ain’t yours,” Rattlesnake gasped. “We all thought she was yours! She don’t even know who you ARE, goddammit!”

“Not yet, I guess.” The rider motored slowly past Rattlesnake, who still lay on the ground. “They all figure it out in time.”

“The *dead* know you for who you are! Goddammit, SHE’S not dead!”

“Yeah, I know.” Deadman smiled and lowered his chin to the top of my head. “But I’m taking her with me anyway. She smells right.”

“You son of a bitch... leave that woman here! The dead are yours, not the living! You can’t take her, you fucking fiend from the pit!”

“Save your breath,” the rider replied. “I been called names by experts.”

“I ain’t letting you take me when the time comes. No way, no how. I don’t trust you.” Rattlesnake looked at me, his face bloody and swollen with a distinct boot print on the forehead.

He called out to me as the rider negotiated the ruts out to the road, the sound of his voice fading rapidly under the roar of the bike. “Don’t trust him! Don’t trust no one you meet! That’s the ‘Taker, girl!’”

He took a deep breath and yelled faintly as the rider gunned the engine and took us out of earshot. “You’re ridin’ to hell with the Undertaker... !”

THREE

I had no idea how long we had ridden the road. Hours, perhaps, or only a few moments that dragged out to eternity. Most of the time, I had kept my eyes tightly closed, cradled in the rider's lap like a child, neither of us speaking a word.

Slowly I revived from the spell he had put me under, but I was swept up in events and felt unable to influence my fate. All around us, the dark night pressed in like a conscious entity; the roar of the bike seemed to cut through a palpable blackness, opening a passage that closed again behind it.

I shut my eyes after a brief look into the featureless void, still unable to raise my head from its resting place against Deadman's open shirt. The rider lightly touched my face, his fingers brushing my ear and scalp, as if he were ascertaining whether I was awake.

I rolled my head away from his caress, for a caress it was. Under my cheek the hair on his chest made a crisp sound. He touched me again, and I made a stronger move to avoid him, lurching slightly to the side.

Immediately the rider's arms clasped me and set me upright. His coat fell around me, and the scent of his body welled up in a surrounding blur.

Where were we? I could not even see the stars now, and the headlight shone on a road with no markings, no signs. The surface was black and oddly glassy as if wet, though the air was hot and dry. Strange sounds whispered on all sides like inhuman voices, parting on each side to let us pass.

Once or twice I thought I felt phantom claws touching my arm or thigh or hair, grasps that slipped away with the inexorable forward movement of the bike. I could feel no road vibration, and the bike never turned right or left. The broad straight road to hell?

Rattlesnake, for all his belligerence and insulting manner, had been the only person to stand up to Deadman or try to save me, and the only one to give me much idea of what was happening. The rider's name, or title, was the Undertaker. What was an undertaker? Someone who had charge of the dead. Someone who took the dead into his care: prepared them, transported them to their final destination.

That almost made sense, strangely, considering what the bartender had said — that I had no choice but to go with Deadman, that the place he wanted to take me to was the place I should go. If I had been dead, that was, it would have made sense. I wasn't dead and the rider knew it. So what did he want with me? I could not know the answer.

Oddly, I was grateful for the rider's strength and determination, his body half wrapped around mine and protecting me. I knew somehow that this road was one I had to travel — no matter which way I had gone, I would have had to take this road, and a guide was a necessity. Even a guide whose mysterious nature and frightening ferocity filled me with horror, because I felt the presence of things far more horrible than he, to which I would inevitably have fallen prey if not for him.

Suddenly the glassy texture of the road changed. Again it looked like asphalt in the headlight's glare, though the sky still had no stars. I saw trees and bushes and a state highway department sign reading "Hanging Crick".

We passed a mailbox and turned up a dirt driveway. Another handmade sign at the bottom of the drive said 'No Trespassing — This Means You — Violators Will Be Shot.' The rider passed the sign and roared up the driveway for about a hundred yards, then curved around a large clump of bushes and slowed in a yard.

At the end of the drive stood a large white farmhouse with a circling veranda, the sort of house common to the part of the country through which I had been driving. Set back some distance from the house was a big garage that had once been a stable, a battered Firebird and a John Deere tractor parked in front of it. Dimly behind that loomed a decrepit barn.

A few bright floodlights on house and garage lit up the yard and driveway. The house had two stories and a shingled roof with a few decorative curved boards along the sloped eaves, and was visibly in need of a paint job. On the veranda sat a moldering sofa, a few cheap folding patio chairs and a two-seat swing. Four or five large, mangy dogs lay around the dusty yard.

As the bike entered the yard, the dogs sprang up as one and raced to chase it, barking and howling like wolves. Deadman parked by the steps that led to the kitchen door at the side of the house and took the keys out of the ignition. The dogs ran to the back yard, still barking, and circled around again. Lifting me off the bike, Deadman dismounted as I began to walk to the front of the house.

The dogs ringed me, snarling, and I froze. The rider spoke sharply and their attention turned to him. Passing me, they approached him with hackles raised, growling in their throats. He spoke again and kicked one of them.

To my surprise, the dogs didn't spring; they cringed at his feet, whining. The rider raised a hand and they leaped back. He grinned at them, the sort of grin that's meant mostly to show the teeth, and the dogs whined again. Two or three of them slunk under the veranda.

Someone banged the front door open and came out — a young man with dark hair, and right behind him a fiftyish, greying man. They were obviously father and son. With a distinct resemblance to each other, both had beady eyes and sloping chins, and both were short and scrawny in comparison with Deadman, though they might have been less insignificant on their own.

"Hey! You there! This is private property — that sign's there for a reason!" bawled the father, pointing at me. He had a double-barreled shotgun in the crook of his arm. "We don't hold with trespassing in these parts! Shane, hustle your ass and get her out've here!"

"Get your ass off this property, bitch!" echoed Shane.

Deadman came around the corner of the house and grinned at the pair, who stopped dead at the bottom of the steps to the yard.

"Fuck," said Shane. "It's him!" His weak chin wobbled.

"Taker?" gasped the father, his mouth hanging open in a round O.

The rider cocked his head and looked at them. "Thought I warned you fellows to clear out of the house while I was here. You need reminding again, Vince?"

"It's my house," said Vince, drawing himself up to his full five feet ten. "Damn, it IS MY house! What gives you the goddamn right to walk in like you own the place?"

"Yeah!" shrilled a trashily dressed young woman who had just emerged onto the veranda. "We're sick of you coming here and making trouble! Get off my family's land, 'Taker'!"

"Guess we got to go over all that again," said Deadman with a rueful shake of the head, but he was smiling. He shrugged off his coat and threw it over the Harley's saddle, then walked past me and toward the steps. His sleeveless shirt exposed his huge arms, covered from shoulders to wrists with intricate tattoos. I saw a wise, demonic face, a castle wreathed with a dragon, an eyed skull, a fallen soul shrieking in the abyss; all written on his skin like a history.

"I got me a twelve-gauge here!" yelled Vince, significantly patting the shotgun. "I don't care who you are, 'Taker! I'm the lawful owner of this property, you're trespassing, and I'm gonna give you a damn double buck load in the face if you don't get back on that bike this damn minute!"

Vince lifted the shotgun, but before he could level it a giant fist shot out and took him straight on his receding chin. He flew eight or ten feet backwards, collapsing against the steps, and the shotgun went in the opposite direction.

Deadman picked it up, bent the barrels with a stomp of his boot, flexed his fingers and looked at Shane.

The young woman screamed, hands to her cheeks. "Daddy!" She scrambled to his side, bending so far over her breasts nearly fell out of her brief, backless halter top. "Aaahh! You hit my Daddy!"

"Son of a bitch!" yelled Shane. He leaped up on the veranda and grabbed a folding chair, swinging it at the rider's head. Deadman blocked the blow with one hand and seized the son by the throat with the other, lifting him straight up and clear of the veranda over the high railing.

For a moment he dangled nine feet in the air, gurgling and choking, and then Deadman slammed him to the ground with a resounding thump and a puff of dust. Shane lay flat and didn't move; wisely, I thought.

The daughter turned on me, nails held like claws and her over-mascaraed eyes flashing. I backed up with my purse held defensively in front of me. She grabbed the front of my jacket and swung at my face with the nails of the other hand. Deadman caught her wrist in midair.

"Don't you go exercising your crap on my woman, you little bitch," he said. "Get in there and cook something to eat."

"Your *woman*? My ass! You ugly bastard — " She broke off, because Deadman had twisted her arm up behind her and pushed her toward the house. "Ow! Owwh! You sadist! My husband's gonna kick your ass!"

Deadman, dragging the daughter, went up the steps past the inert Vince and jumped up to the narrow railing of the veranda, walking along it and propelling her by the upraised and twisted arm, his sense of balance extraordinary for such a large man.

"Ow!" the daughter wailed, stumbling along the veranda to the kitchen door. The rider jumped down from the railing and gave her arm a good wrench; she clutched her shoulder and scuttled into the kitchen, yelling.

The father and son lay where they had fallen, moaning, and Deadman kicked Shane's legs aside from his path and came to me. What had he meant by 'my woman'? Even the daughter had been incredulous, and I was no less so. One of the dogs sniffed around Vince's feet.

"OK, you whipped the shit out've 'em," said someone else. The rider had been about to speak to me, but stopped and rolled his eyes.

A man came around the corner of the house, a big man with blond hair pulled back in a ponytail. He wasn't as tall as Deadman, but he had large shoulders and a protruberant nose and jaw, and his voice was loud and pugnacious. "You ain't gonna do the same to me, asshole! Stand right there and get your ugly face kicked in!"

"I'd advise you to move to one side," Deadman said to me. To the newcomer he said, "You certain about that, Aitch? Are you that damn good?"

"Damn straight I am," the blond man said, and sprang at him.

"Get him, Aitch!" the daughter yelled from the kitchen door. Deadman and Aitch collided like a couple of bighorn rams; the impact knocked me back a step and I retreated further. They traded punches, right hands slamming into skulls, but neither seemed to feel much from the other's blows. Aitch backed off a few paces and took a running start, leaping into the air and planting a knee on Deadman's chest.

The rider staggered, but didn't fall; Aitch landed on his feet and whipped an arm around Deadman's neck, flinging himself backwards. They both landed hard on their shoulder blades, the ground shaking under my feet. The rider rolled up and met Aitch's kick, countering with one of his own, and they bounced back from each other, panting.

They ran to meet with a thunderous shock again, each connecting with blows to the midsection, and again traded punches in a flurry. Deadman got Aitch by the throat and squeezed. The muscles rippled under his pale tattooed skin as he heaved. The blond man's toes left the ground and he grabbed the rider's wrist with both hands.

"Aitch!" screamed the daughter. The blond man rose in the air at the end of the rider's arm, described a high arc and slammed to the ground. Deadman kicked him

hard in the chest and bent to grab his head. Aitch writhed from his grip and seized his legs, knocking Deadman's feet out from under him.

The rider went down like a cut tree. Aitch leaped up and backed off, running up and falling hard elbow-first, aiming the blow at Deadman's sternum. The rider let out a pained grunt; Aitch grappled with him on the ground, then rose to his feet and clamped the rider's head between his knees. Grabbing his arms, Aitch pulled them up behind his back and jumped, landing on his bent knees and viciously propelling the rider's face into the ground.

Deadman jerked and lay still, his hair spread in the dust. Aitch got up and kicked him several times, the rider's body reacting sluggishly. He looked half unconscious, his forehead bloody. I couldn't stay here to be beaten by these psychopaths myself! My heart beating fast, I began to edge down the driveway.

"Get her!" screamed the daughter, pointing at me with avid cruelty in her face. "She's running, Aitch! Get the bitch!" The blond man looked around and headed for me, his big nose wrinkled up in a snarl. I fumbled for my gun.

But before I could get the revolver out, Deadman rose, shaking his head and flinging back his hair with a snap of his neck, and hit Aitch from behind with a flying tackle.

The two big bodies nearly knocked me down. I backpedaled to avoid them and ran along the edge of the yard, heading for the veranda. Behind me the fight had resumed full force. The combatants rolled up to the steps and struggled on the ground, Deadman bouncing Aitch's head off the lowest step.

I grabbed the railing and climbed it, propelled by adrenaline alone, and seized a folding chair. Deadman had just risen to his feet, wobbling a little; he spotted me and beckoned. I tossed him the chair; he caught it out of the air and brought it down with a crash over Aitch's head as he tried to get up.

When he collapsed, Deadman grabbed his hair and shoved his head between his knees just as Aitch had done to him. I expected the same maneuver, but Deadman seized the blond man's legs and lifted them straight up, grabbing him around the waist.

Even with the burden of a man who must have weighed two hundred and fifty pounds, the rider sprang two feet into the air before coming down on his knees like a earthquake, Aitch's head and neck taking the full weight of both men. He collapsed like a rubber doll, sprawling prone in the yard and bleeding from nose and mouth.

"You bastard, 'Taker!" screeched the daughter, running to the fallen man. "Aitch, honey! Speak to me!"

Deadman took a couple of steps backwards and leaned up against the veranda, putting his elbows on it for support. He was breathing hard, his face and clothes smeared with dust and blood. I could see that he had won; Aitch was entirely out of it and would be for some time. Vince began to stir, as did Shane, but their faces showed only cringing fear as they looked at Deadman. They were as whipped as the dogs.

"Get your asses back in the damn garage," said the rider, straightening up. "Don't let me catch you sneakin' round the house. Stephanie can do the cooking and cleaning, but keep your damn family out of my vicinity."

He hawked and spat on the ground next to Vince's shoes. Father and son looked at each other and departed up the driveway, dragging the limp Aitch between them. Stephanie trailed behind them in the tracks of her husband's feet, crying and cursing.

When they had gone, Deadman closed his eyes, looking weary. For a moment he looked far older; I had thought I must be only eight or nine years younger than he, but at that instant he might have had half a century on me, or more. He rolled his head around on his shoulders and opened his eyes.

"Thanks for the assist," he said. The shadow passed, and he was smiling.

"Um... I didn't want to be alone with those people," I said.

His teeth showed in a grin. "But back at the bar you weren't real sure you wanted to be alone with me either."

"No." For some reason, helping him in the fight had given me less fear of him. He wasn't invulnerable, though his strength and ability seemed almost superhuman. I began to shake off the almost-mystical fear that had overcome me at the Last Chance when I had seen his face transform in anger.

Of course, no matter what sort of bizarre reputation he had in this area, he was only a man, I told myself. Not a demon. A biker who liked to drink and fight and roam the roads. Not the sort of person I usually associated with; the sort of person I felt superior to in an almost unconscious way, the way I had felt superior to Cactus and Eddie. Though I had grown up in surroundings not unlike this area, I had long ago left them behind. My Papa was the only reminder I had of my origins. "I always reserve the right to change my mind."

Deadman laughed. "Come on inside. You earned it." He turned and headed up the steps, opening the front door and beckoning me. I hung back for a moment.

"Why did you call me 'my woman' when she attacked me?"

"What, did that spook ya?" He seemed particularly amused by my expression of offended dignity. "That little slut don't like any competition."

"You mean she's your — "

"Hell, no!" It was his turn to look offended. "Stephanie McMahon? She tried it on me a couple times, but I told her she could keep it. I ain't interested in waking up some day with my balls cut off." The rider went into the house and I followed.

The front room was shabby, though amply furnished with some marks of former expense; the flowered carpet was faded almost to a uniform color where it wasn't stained. Nearly every piece of furniture was covered with bedspreads and crocheted afghans to hide the holes in the upholstery. Next to the door stood an old-fashioned hall tree with a mirror and hooks; I saw a ring with keys for the Firebird and the John Deere.

A single working bulb remained in the dining room chandelier and several kerosene lamps sat on tables, providing most of the illumination. The kitchen, at the side of the house through the front room and dining room, was brighter than the dim living areas.

Although all the appliances and cupboards looked at least fifty years old, the place was reasonably clean and tidy. A galvanized sink stood next to the door that led out on the veranda and Deadman stripped off his bandanna and turned on the water.

"I'm afraid I can't stay the night here," I said, looking around the kitchen. "It's out of the question; I have to get going. My Papa will be coming."

"Hm. You call him from the Last Chance?"

"Yes, I did. Is there anything to eat around here?" I opened the near-antique refrigerator.

"I dunno. Check around. Pop wasn't home, huh?" replied Deadman from the sink, washing his bloody face with his bandanna.

"No. I left a message and told him where I was." Nothing was in the refrigerator except beer, mayonnaise, and a few packs of batteries, so I closed it. "I hope he'll come to pick me up soon, because I really have to go."

"Reckon he's calling the cops to look for you?"

"N-no. He won't do that." Belatedly it occurred to me that I had left a clear trail for anyone who cared to look for me: my car, my note at the bar, and more than a dozen witnesses. In the mean time, I was hungry and tired and feeling tightly strung, a headache hovering just above my eyebrows.

I hung my jacket on a chair, took the clip from my hair and shook it out of its coil. Against the back of my neck, it was sweaty and matted, but I had just washed it that morning and the silky mass rippled down over my shoulders.

It was a lot of trouble sometimes keeping my hair so long, but since it wasn't a spectacular color and neither curly nor straight, I figured it needed some mark of distinction, so I grew it. I hadn't cut it in years, so it was crotch-length and tapered at the ends, veiling my back and buttocks when loose.

My hair was definitely my best feature, and why I was displaying it for Deadman I didn't know.

I rubbed my scalp and turned to find the rider standing right behind me, his gaze intent. I jumped — I hadn't heard him approach. With his bandanna off, his coppery hair fell around his high pale forehead; my eyes roamed over his face. Until that moment I hadn't noticed that his lips were full and seductively curved.

Although he wasn't delicate-featured or pretty in any way, he seemed unsettlingly attractive in his over-sized fashion, his distinctive, warm coloring slightly softening the effect of angular bones and marked features. A curl of desire began to pull at my insides. I wouldn't act on it; I wouldn't give him any clue that it existed, but there it was. I hoped it wasn't going to cause trouble.

He picked up a lock of my hair. "You're a pretty lady," he said in a matter-of-fact way, examining the lock and scanning my body up and down.

"Uh... thank you." That gaze made me a lot more than uncomfortable. I could feel the electricity in the air and I knew he felt it too, because he was its source. The whole surface of my skin seemed to grow warm while Deadman's eyes lingered on my little waist and the curve of my breasts under my shirt.

"Damn pretty," he said. "Real pretty eyes. Didn't notice the color till I saw you in a good light." I knew my dark brown eyes had an auburn tint like my hair; in some lights they looked positively red. Dried-blood brown, someone had once called them, a description I hated.

"I like a red-head woman," said Deadman, looking up and grinning from under his pale brows. "I never saw one before with eyes to match."

"My eyes are brown," I said, turning my face away.

"They're red, Irene." I looked back at him. His green eyes seemed to have a fire in them again, something like acid that would burn through any confinement or barrier in time. My heart froze. "You know they're red. Don't you?"

"No, they're not," I said, trying to stare him down, which might have been the bravest thing I had ever done.

He veiled his alarming gaze for a moment and moved a step back; I had the feeling it was a tactical retreat. "You got a man, Irene? Married?" He had probably spotted the pale indented band around the third finger of my left hand where a gold ring had been until very recently.

"N-no... not right now." I'd carried out the equivalent of a final decree of divorce earlier that day, but I wasn't about to tell him that. "I used to be."

His expression said that he had some idea of what I meant by that, but how he could have known I had no idea. Other than Papa, I hadn't told a soul. "Kids?" he asked.

"I... I had a baby four years ago." He asked a silent question in his way. "She... died."

"They all die some day," he said with an detached shrug. "Every child that's born in this world is condemned to die."

This was a stranger remark than any I had ever heard from someone I had told about Irene's death. Yes, I had given him the name of my little dead daughter as my own name. She had been dead almost a year now, and I knew my memory of her was fading. Not the memory of her death, but of her. I would never forget what I had felt when she had died.

That was what he was indifferent to — life and death. Death could be sooner rather than later, but we all ended up as ashes and earth no matter what, and for some reason he saw the endings obscure the beginnings. The precise way that I did. "I know," I said.

Deadman's brows raised a little, a faint smile starting on his face. The fire kindled in his eyes again. "Do you, now?"

"Why do all these people call you 'Taker'?" I asked to change the subject.

“Cause that’s what they know me by,” he replied. I saw him grimace with a hint of anger, as if he had almost grasped something he wanted very badly but had seen it just elude him.

“Then why did you say your name was Deadman?”

“That’s a nickname — *Irene*.” He emphasized the name with a sarcastic inflection. “Considering who I am.”

“All right, who are you? That seemed to be a big deal back at that bar.”

“Yeah. Some people don’t cotton to me — well, most people don’t.”

“Aside from the obvious, why not?”

“The obvious?” He narrowed his eyes at me.

“Oh, I don’t know.” I folded my arms. “Beating people with chains. Threatening to drag someone to death. Kidnapping women.”

“Kidnap? No way, girl. You belong to me.”

“What? Either you’re deluded, or — ”

“Nope. You’re the one who hasn’t figured it out, Irene. Could take a while, but I got time.”

“Well, I *don’t* have time for this nonsense!” I shouted. “I need to get to my Papa’s house, and I’m going to do it no matter what *you* say!”

His rolling laugh filled the room. “I like your confidence, girl!”

“I want to leave,” I said firmly. “I’m going to walk if I have to, but I am not staying in this place.” I picked up my purse and settled it over one shoulder. “Thanks for your help, what there was of it, but I’m going.”

He waited until I had touched the knob of the kitchen door. “Wouldn’t try that if I were you, Irene.”

“Then stop me, you disgusting hoodlum.” I flung the door open and stepped out on the veranda. Stephanie scampered backwards; she had apparently been listening. The rider only laughed harder.

I walked to the steps and down them and across the yard, intending to head down to the road, but when I neared the drive the dogs raced to intercept me, barking.

I knew those dogs meant business, so I didn’t try to run, stopping where I was as they circled me. Growling, they crouched on their haunches and blocked the way out. I reached into my purse and closed my fingers around the stock of my revolver.

“Come back in the house, Irene.” Deadman’s amused voice came from the veranda behind me. “Walk slow and they won’t bother you.”

“I... hate... you,” I got out, still holding the revolver inside the purse. “You... son of a bitch.”

“Just come back in and sit down, OK? She’s cooking up some dinner.” I had six shots and there were five dogs facing me. Not enough, if I had to take on the rider and perhaps the family as well. I wasn’t a bad shot, but I wasn’t so certain of my

ability that I would show all my cards when the odds were so against me. I let go of the gun and withdrew my hand from my purse.

"Good girl," said Deadman as I passed him on the way back to the kitchen. I wanted to belt him. But I went inside and sat down hard at the small table, purse clutched on my lap.

Stephanie stood at the stove with a hot pan of what smelled like old bacon fat, a few uneven slices of potato floating in it. An opened can of Spam sat on the counter. She didn't look particularly angry or put out, as if altercations like the one that had left her husband a bloody wreck happened every day.

When the food was ready, she put two plates on the table and scraped the contents of the pan into them, then dumped the pan in the sink and walked out without a word. I looked at the greasy mess in front of me and felt my stomach turn over.

"You used to high-toned grub?" said the rider with a smile, shoveling burnt Spam and potatoes into his mouth with a fork and one thumb. "I read a newspaper once said city folks eat their fish raw and pay stiff money for it. You eat your fish raw?"

"I don't like fish."

"Kind of fond of it myself," he said, still smiling. "But if I ever catch any trout out of the crick, I sure don't let that slut do the cooking. You going to eat that?"

I put a forkful in my mouth, chewed and barely managed to swallow. "No." I put the fork down.

"Suit yourself." He emptied my plate into his own and began to eat the rest. I got up to look out the kitchen window. "Might as well make the best of it, Irene."

"Make the *best* of it?"

"Oh, I ain't been walking in your shoes today, is that it? Nobody knows the trouble you've seen? Tell me about it, then."

I remained silent, back to him as I looked out into the lit driveway.

"Come on, girl. I want to know. Tell me about you." I gave him an angry, impatient look. "OK, let's run it down, then. What do I know about you? You might be about thirty, I figure, though you're so little you could pass for younger. You had a husband and a kid once, but you don't have 'em any more. Dumped the wedding ring a real short while ago. You were in an all-fired hurry to get somewhere today and you still are. Papa's gonna make it all better, you think, and what the hell it is that he needs to make better looks like something nasty, because when I mention the police, you jump. You got a look about you... like death."

His eyes were burning into mine, and he got up and began to walk towards me. "You were drivin' too damn fast and you damn near killed yourself. Was that what you were aiming to do? I smelled death on you. Confused me for a few minutes, because it wasn't *your* death I was smelling."

The rider had approached close enough to make me sidestep to avoid being backed against the cupboards. "So you smell of death, but you aren't dead. That would mean... maybe you meant to die. Maybe someone died right next to you. Maybe... you killed someone just a little while ago."

"That's ridiculous!"

"Could be." He smirked. "How would a little thing like you have the means, or the guts, to kill someone? Must be my imagination." I clutched the purse with the gun more tightly. "So how'd you get rid of that husband of yours? You didn't like him much, I guess."

"I... no. He had a lot of money."

"Married him for his dough, hey? You screwed around some, right?"

"What?"

Deadman smiled none too pleasantly. "You fucked around with other guys. While you were married and had a little kid."

My face burned. "Yes."

"What kind of guys? Suits with cell phones? I saw that damn krautwagon you were drivin'."

"That was my husband's BMW. He wore a suit and had a cell phone."

"So the other guys were like that too? Or not?"

"Not like that, no."

"Guys like... me?" He smiled sarcastically. "You're such a high-class lady and all. I know your kind. Married to a guy who earns a living pushing paper around? Lot'sa you get a yen for a man who really knows he's a man."

"That must be so nice for you," I said icily. I was furious at his insinuations, but since he seemed to have my number, it wasn't justified anger. I didn't have much defense against a recital of my sins other than resentment, and I didn't have much defense against Deadman's now-obvious interest in me other than coldness.

Showing him the gun wouldn't accomplish a thing. If I brought it out, I had to be prepared to use it immediately.

"So come sit a while." He wagged a thumb at the front room. "Have a drink. Tell me some more about you."

"No, thank you. I don't want a drink, and I'm not interested in talking."

"That's not my favorite thing to do with a woman either," the rider said. His smile set off alarm bells. What if he simply decided to take me, if that was his intention? Was there a thing I could do about it if he did?

Although the thought of being forced terrified me, it also gave me such a strange thrill that I lowered my gaze in an attempt to avoid letting him see it in my eyes.

For a long moment Deadman was silent, my own breathing the only sound I could hear. "You still hungry?" he asked at last.

"... Yes."

Reaching over my head, he took a bottle of rye whiskey and a glass from a cupboard behind me. "Think there's a loaf of bread in the pantry." Taking a swig from the half-full bottle, he brushed past me to enter the front room and recline on the sagging bedspread-covered sofa.

The springs let out an overstrained sigh, and so did I. So he didn't mean to try anything after all, thank God... and perhaps I could leave soon.

I turned back into the kitchen and searched all the cupboards, finding the bread and eventually assembling a couple of sandwiches with a can of tuna and the mayonnaise. I located some instant coffee and put a kettle on the stove to heat water. In the front room I heard a clink of glass and a belch.

When I had eaten and finished my coffee, I checked the yard and drove again. The dogs lay here and there, but nothing disturbed the night other than the slow screech of crickets. I saw no movement in the garage; the battered Firebird and the tractor were still parked in front of it.

If Papa had received my message, which was a big if, he couldn't reach this place in less than three hours, assuming he could get directions or even find it in the dark. I might not see him until morning, and it was nearly certain that the police would beat him to it. I'd eaten and drunk; I felt better, and I'd stayed long enough. I had to go.

If I couldn't walk out, perhaps I could take the car keys from the hall tree and borrow the Firebird — the family probably wouldn't stop me. I heard a snore from the sofa as I peered into the front room to check, which heartened me. I could see the bottle lying nearly empty on the floor, so it was obvious Deadman had drunk quite a bit.

Perhaps he had passed out for the night. I was familiar with the habits of a hard drinker — my grandfather had frequently spent his evenings in such a manner throughout my childhood. Gran'pa had been a sleepy drunk, not a dangerous one, except when he decided to do a little target shooting.

Taking off my boots and leaving them by the kitchen door, I walked quietly past the sofa, aiming for the car keys.

The rider suddenly sat up, and I jumped. "All set?" he said, not sounding particularly drunk.

"Uh... all set for what?"

"Bed, naturally." He got up, yawned and stretched to his full height. "Reckon I am too."

"Oh." I began to double back to the kitchen. "Well, I'll just —" The rider followed.

"Not there, girl," he said, clamping me to his side with a long arm and turning around. "Upstairs."

"Why?" I jogged alongside him as he walked; I had little choice in the matter.

"Bedrooms are up there, that's why. Less you prefer the sofa or something."

"Prefer the sofa?" We were almost to the stairs by now. "For sleeping?"

"Sleeping? I'm intending to tire you out, sure," he replied. "I don't imagine there's going to be a lot of actual sleeping tonight." My stomach gave a great wrench of excitement and fear. Stopping at the base of the steps, Deadman turned me to face

him, cupped one hand under my chin, tilted my face and leaned down. I gasped, my lips opening, and his mouth crushed down on mine.

"Ohh!" Wriggling, I tried to escape, but he was so much stronger than I that all I managed to do was rub my breasts against his ribs. His kiss pressed harder, his lips warming and parting mine while I let out little sobs of terror. The sharp stubble on his cheeks pricked my face, but his mouth felt smooth and sensuous and wet, coaxing me to respond.

Dread and desire roiled deep in my belly. I did want him, or my body wanted him — he could surely tell that, but at the same time I quivered all over with fear. I had the strange thought that sex with this man would be a kind of passage from one state of being to another — the orgasm a little death, a barricade hurdled with a strong arm to help me over.

The rider backed me up against the wall next to the stairs and slid his tongue into my mouth. Hot and salty and dizzying, his lips and tongue took mine and wrested all physical control from me; I responded involuntarily, sagging in his embrace. Deadman pulled me up with a hand under my bottom and pushed my hips up into his groin, spreading his legs. His erection bulged his fly and pulsed against my soft flesh.

Did he think I was willing to be seduced, or did he mean to rape me? Was it possible for the act to be rape when I wanted him the way I did? My mind went dark with confused, tumultuous emotions as Deadman kissed me and ground his crotch against my stomach.

"I've been needing you so bad, baby," he muttered when he came up for air. "Moment I got that scent of you, bang, I was so hard I couldn't barely walk straight..." One hand seized my left breast and squeezed it; the other ran down over my stomach and thighs and forced its way between my legs.

I jumped and shook, jerking from side to side as Deadman squeezed my sex through my jeans. He pressed his face into the junction of my neck and shoulder, buried his nose in my loose hair and fastened his lips to my throat. "Oh yeah — I'm gonna take you 'til the damn sun comes up!"

I gasped in panic — I had to leave the house! If he took me upstairs, he wouldn't let me go for hours, and by then it would be too late — the police would catch up with me. In another sense it was already too late, because I'd kissed him back. It wasn't just my body he wanted, though he had complimented my looks; he wanted *me*.

I'd let him know my darkest desires without meaning to give myself away, let him look for a moment into the cryptic, guarded recesses of my soul and find something kindred there. Both of us recognized our affinity, though I was fighting it. He would never stop of his own accord, and I had only one sure-fire way to stop him myself — if I chose to use it. "NO!" I half-screamed. "Stop — please — I don't want —!"

"Oh, you want it, baby," growled Deadman. I felt him smile against my throat, his teeth brushing my skin. "You've been checking me out since I pulled up to your car. Don't lie to me."

"I have to leave! Please let me go!"

"Don't go trying to run away from me, Irene. You ain't going nowhere but upstairs. Damn, you taste good..." He licked the pit of my throat. I tried to push away the hand on my breast, but the rider grabbed my wrist and pinned my arm to the wall behind me, pulling off the glove on his other hand with his teeth.

Was he going to knock me out again in that strange way? I hadn't recovered from the lethargic spell for some time — the situation was growing desperate, because if he rendered me helpless I would never escape. I had the feeling that once he had taken me, I would never again have the power to part from him.

"No... please don't hurt me!" I gasped, back arching as my arm twisted nearly to the point of pain. "I'll do what you want — don't hurt me!"

"Not unless you like it that way, baby..." Deadman released my wrist and kissed me again. I could hardly breathe with his long tongue crammed into my mouth, his cheekbone pressing my nose. Before he backed off my vision began to dim from lack of air. "I'm not out to bruise your pretty face." He licked my chin, gave me an almost gentle kiss under the eye, then groped my bottom and drove his fingers along the crotch seam of my jeans. "All I want... is your sweet little ass!"

"Ohh..." I sagged and wriggled again, turning in his arms until his back was against the wall instead of mine. Telling him I would cooperate had had the desired effect — he loosened his grip and let me move more freely. Disentangling my purse strap, I finally got my hand on the flap. While the rider distracted himself with massaging my breasts and devouring my lips as if he were starving, I opened the purse and put my hand inside.

The revolver's stock immediately bumped against my fingers and I drew the gun out and pressed it against his side. He started in surprise and began to break the kiss; before he could react any further I closed my eyes and pulled the trigger.

The rider yelled, rearing back from me and clutching his wound. The bullet had passed clean through his body a few inches below the ribs and hit the wall behind him in a red spray. Blood spurted and bubbled between his fingers as he doubled over and fell to his knees. I had inflicted a stomach wound, hellishly painful; the spilled digestive acids burning his guts as he slowly bled to death.

"You... BITCH!" he wheezed. "Where the hell... did you get that piece?"

"I had it all along," I said, holding the revolver's muzzle steady a few inches from his forehead. "I know all about men like you!"

A stream of blood began to run from the corner of the rider's mouth. "Do... ya?" His eyes rolled up to keep me in focus, but they were glazing over in agony. I decided to be merciful. Or merciless: they amounted to the same thing.

"Yes, I do. And I know all about guns, too." I thumbed the hammer, pulled the trigger again and saw a star-shaped hole appear in the middle of his forehead. His eyes rolled back all the way, showing only the whites, and he tilted slowly back on his haunches and slumped against the wall.

A broad smear of blood, hair and gray matter followed his head down the wallpaper. When he collapsed at my feet, I saw the huge exit wound in the back of his skull, the pale ruins of brains pulsing in the ragged, bone-edged cavity.

The rider was dead, though his eyes still gleamed open and white in the light of the kerosene lamps. So big, so forceful, but even he could do nothing to fight a little slug of lead. His long red hair had fallen partly over his face and his big tattooed arms lay slack on the floor.

I felt a dreadful pang of regret; if it hadn't been essential that I leave, I knew I would have submitted to his lust. He had been the sort of man to treat me the way I wanted to be treated. "I'm sorry," I said. "But I couldn't let you keep me here."

I put the gun back in my purse and went to the hall tree to pick up the car keys, considering my escape route. The people in the garage would have heard the shots — I had four bullets left, and there were the dogs —

Someone grabbed me from behind, one hand around my wrist and one around my waist. "Aaahhh!" I shrieked. He tore the purse off my shoulder and flung it into a far corner.

It was the rider, impossibly alive, his face working with demonic fury. Although his shirt had a huge bloom of blood on the front and his face was streaked red, I could see no wounds. Paralyzed with horror, I nearly fainted. His grip was the only reason I didn't fall.

"I wasn't gonna hurt you, Irene," he said through gritted teeth. "But I think I changed my mind." His open palm connected with my jaw. "You thought you were gonna kill me, huh? Little *bitch!*"

"I — I SHOT you!" I screamed, my face stinging from the slap. He could have taken my head off if he had closed his fist. "You were — "

"Dead?" He grinned banefully into my face. "Sorry. You can't kill me that way, because you can't kill what's already dead." The whole surface of my skin prickled, every hair standing on end. "That's who I am. The Dead Man. Fifty years dead."

"Wh-what? Dead? You're crazy!"

"It's black sorcery, Irene. A mockery of life." The rider's hands tightened on my arms. "I feel desire and hunger and pain, but there's no escape and no rest in this world or the next. Undead until I'm finally condemned!"

"Why?" I asked faintly. "Who... ?"

"I challenged the Devil and forfeited my soul — I'm his creature until I meet the conditions of my contract, and I know what the Devil's promises are worth. Fifty years I've existed in this torment — it's my curse from Hell!"

"Oh... my... God..." I closed my eyes. What was happening to me? Incredible, impossible, but I had put two bullets through him and the effects had vanished in moments. I had to believe him; there was no other explanation. The rider was a demon — undead and unkillable!

I was positive he was going to do away with me for shooting him, and a wave of heat went over me like a baptism of warm blood. He was going to kill me, and I welcomed my fate. If the accident that had seemed meant to end my life hadn't done the job, death at the rider's hands would be just as quick.

His fingers brushed my throat. I waited for them to close their grip around my windpipe, perhaps break my neck with one squeeze. With his hideous strength, I knew he could kill me as easily as a gesture. A minute ticked by, and still I waited while the rider did nothing but hold me, hand poised at my throat.

"Getting shot hurts like a sonofabitch!" he growled. "I swear, I can still feel it — I may be dead, but I got all my nerve endings. Makes me mad!"

"I'm sorry," I whispered through my clenched teeth, my eyes still shut. "Just kill me!"

I felt him laugh softly, and his lips covered mine in a harsh kiss. "I got better things to do first."

He bent and threw an arm around my thighs, then stood and hoisted me against his chest. Up the stairs he went, three at a time, and at the top he kicked a bedroom door open. "You're going to taste even sweeter now, you feisty little bitch! Get those clothes off!" He dumped me on a quilt-spread double bed and took off his shirt, exposing another large tattoo on his stomach.

"I... I..." I scrambled backwards on the bed. "No — please don't do this to me! I don't want to — "

"Too late now." Deadman threw the bloody shirt on the floor. "You owe me — and you said yes anyway." He jumped on the bed and grabbed me, dragging my body under his. He did mean to rape me, then — which I realized was exactly what I had wanted him to do all along. And then he would kill me...

"No — please!" I tossed my head back and forth as Deadman tried to kiss me. My legs were pinned under his heavy knees and my hands twined with his hands, my arms flung straight out to each side. His lips fastened on the sensitive spot behind my ear. "Don't force me!" I begged, arousal flaring white-hot in my belly.

"I won't have to if ya calm down, girl," he said in my ear. I thrashed harder and he held me down more firmly. "Whoa there! I'm not going to hurt you!"

"What?"

"I said, I got better things to do! All I'm gonna do is make you mine. Sweet little red-head Irene, with her eyes to match." His mouth came down on mine again for a long moment. "Kisses me one minute and puts a goddamn bullet through my head the next. My kind of woman!"

"You're crazy!"

"You think yer too damn high-class for me?" Deadman grinned at me and settled between my legs. "I'm just some damn dirty biker who picked you up on the road?" He laughed in a way that frightened me even more. "You know I'm a lot more than that, Irene. Let's see if you still think you're too good for me after I'm in you."

He inserted a hand between us and began to unzip my jeans. "I'm interested to know, so you'll have to tell me. How high-class are you gonna feel when yer flat on your back gettin' fucked? It's an equalizer in more ways than one. A little short of the ultimate equalizer, but it'll do." With a heave, he pulled my jeans down and past my hips.

“No!”

He dragged my jeans all the way off and tickled my pantied crotch with his fingertips. “I can smell you. You’re wet for me, ain’t ya?” Deadman sat up and pulled my legs around his waist. One of his thumbs inserted under the elastic of my underwear and moved through the hair and down. “Yeah, all slick and soft... mmm.” He worked the thumb up and down in my sex, stroking my clit. “Feels damn good.”

“Ohh... oh...” I moaned, writhing with the sensations. “N-no...”

“Pretty lady.” With the other hand he smoothed the skin of my hips and thighs. “Can’t really tell you’ve had a kid — you’re not stretched much. Just a few marks... I bet you’re still real tight around a man’s cock, huh?” He roughly sank a finger into me and rapidly worked it in and out, keeping the thumb on my clit.

I began to moan more loudly, my hips shuddering in little circles as the excruciating pleasure shot up and down my legs and into my chest. Deadman pulled the crotch of my panties aside, hissing on an intake of breath when he exposed my sex, and kept stroking me.

Pushing back from me and half lying down, he brought his face closer to my groin, nostrils flaring. He added another finger to the one already in my vagina and breathed on my clit from an inch away, then licked it and sucked it between his lips.

My moans reached a crescendo of sensuality while Deadman pressed his face between my thighs and engulfed my sex with his mouth. Fingers thrusting and stretching me, he teased my tender flesh with intense wet lips, pulling on my clit and working his head around and around.

Softer than his stubble, his beard and mustache brushed my inner thighs and my buttocks. His tongue darted back and forth, flickering; I felt something roaring inside me, centering in my thighs and groin, and I screamed.

“Ahhh... ahhh... OHHH!” I climaxed, my legs thrashing.

Deadman reared up again, licking his lips. His eyes had gone fiery and hooded, his mouth open with panting breaths. “Damn, you are one hot lady. You need that cock now, baby!” He unbuckled his belt and kicked his jeans off.

When he was naked, his erect penis rose up before my eyes, nearly reaching his navel; it looked bigger around than my wrist. Sinuous with muscle and velveted with light hair, his whole body was pale with the exception of his sex, which was dusky purple nested in red-gold curls. I couldn’t close my eyes, couldn’t stop staring at him. Deadman noticed my gaze and looked amused. “I reckon you’ve seen a cock or two before, Irene. You’re no tremblin’ virgin.”

“No...” But my lover Tony’s penis was half the size of his, and nothing larger than Tony’s had ever gone into me. Only my daughter had come out, four years before, and my body had already forgotten her birth. Only her death remained with me. I kept looking at Deadman’s penis; I didn’t think it would hurt me in and of itself, but the mere thought of such an instrument in me made me shake.

Deadman opened my shirt and pushed my bra up to my collarbone to expose my breasts, pulled me around until my head rested on the pillows under the patchwork quilt that covered the bed, and began to work my panties off.

"No," I repeated automatically, my will to struggle almost entirely gone. Even if I broke away from him I wouldn't take two steps before he would have me pinned again. I reveled in the knowledge that he would forcibly take me in a few moments — there was nothing I could do.

"That's right, there's nothin' you can do," said Deadman, stripping off my panties, sniffing them voluptuously and dropping them on the bed. He smiled at my startlement. "I know what yer thinkin', girl. It reads plain in those pretty eyes of yours."

After arranging my legs he lunged forward and lay on me, the firm head of his penis digging into my stomach. The weight of his huge body felt so erotic that I began to breathe hard again. "You don't want to do anything about it anyhow. You want me to take you. Don't ya?"

I shook my head, and kept shaking it as he raised his hips and used one hand to spread a little spit over the head of his cock before settling it at my entrance. When he closed his teeth and curled his lips in a sensual snarl, driving into me with a few hard thrusts, I was still shaking my head in denial of the only thing I knew was true right now. I knew I was a liar.

Deadman let out a long grunt as he entered me, panting in my face with his teeth locked, his eyes closing for a moment. "Damn... good..."

I felt my body let him in and ease around him, closing its soft grip on his cock. His size was too much for my small frame, but too much was what I wanted. He sighed in pleasure, his long hair falling forward over his shoulders as he began to move.

Despite myself, I arched my whole body in a slow rolling bridge to feel him penetrate me to my deepest recesses, the thickness of his cock stretching my entrance until my clit throbbed. Deadman lowered his head to my breasts and licked them, teasing the nipples with the tip of his tongue and bathing my skin in cool moisture. His damp hair trailed after his mouth. Continuing the tongue bath up my neck and across my shoulders, he thrust and withdrew, thrust and withdrew.

Returning to my breasts, he covered them again with wide strokes of his tongue, seeming to savor the taste of my skin. I moaned, wondering at his gentleness. I had nearly forgotten why I had shot him and why I had to escape the house — his heavy body on mine and in me crowded out all other thoughts and sensations.

I began to give myself over to the pleasure that rippled out from my sex and my breasts, urged along by Deadman's touch. I couldn't pretend for one moment longer that I didn't want it. He raised his head and slowed his strokes, barely moving. Forcing my eyes open, I watched him consciously restrain himself with some effort. He smiled, looking at my breasts.

"Whose blood is it, girl?"

"What?"

"You must have washed the blood away, but I can still taste it. All over you, Irene. It's in the pores of your skin." He licked the underside of my right breast. "You taste of someone's blood. And you smell of it..." Opening his mouth wide, he engulfed the

nipple and areola, tugging and sucking. His hips rotated and he thrust deep and held his cock inside me.

“You’re crazy!”

He lifted his head and looked me straight in the eyes. “I know blood when I taste it. I could smell it the moment you got close to me. I thought it was yours, but I know it’s not. Whose blood is it?”

His cock grew even harder, taking me slowly, so big it reminded me of childbirth. Every thrust, every slow excavation of my aching depths left me limp and panting like the aftermath to labor pains. Acid green, his gaze bored into my eyes; his upper lip curled to show his teeth. “Tell me whose blood is on your skin, Irene.”

I began to hyperventilate, my breasts and stomach heaving into his chest. I had a strange feeling that he already knew the answers to the questions he asked, but was testing me to see if I would tell the truth. “It’s... it’s... my husband’s. And my lover’s.”

Deadman nodded slowly, his body still possessing mine, and began to thrust faster.

I moaned with the extremity of the pleasure, rolling my head around on the quilt. “I shot them. This morning. They were going to kill me together. They didn’t know I had the gun, but my Papa taught me to shoot and gave me that revolver when I left home and I’ve kept it ever since. I emptied the revolver into both of them and I reloaded to make sure they were dead. There was blood everywhere. I had to take off all my clothes because of the blood.”

Deadman lowered his head and began to trail his tongue along the line of my jaw, sliding his cock in and out of my body with a deliberate, accelerating rhythm.

“It splashed on my face and throat and chest,” I whispered, “and it was on my thighs and my shoes. I stripped naked... and I took two showers to wash it off. I had to burn everything I was wearing. It was all... soaked in... blood...”

“I can taste it,” he said, lapping the side of my neck. “You taste so good, baby...” He was fucking me hard now, pounding my body into the mattress with his hands imprisoning mine above my head, and I cried out. “Yeah, baby, scream for me!” Deadman growled into my throat. “I’m gonna take you ‘til you know who I am!”

“W-what?” I gasped.

“Who am I, Irene? Who’s fucking the life out of you?”

I felt an orgasm approaching and moaned incoherently. “D-Deadman... Taker...”

“I’m the Dead Man, and you’re mine now. Aren’t you?”

I screamed, my hips slamming up and down as I came. He rode me to the conclusion, his teeth set in a grim smile.

“You’re a woman of blood,” he said. “Shot three men today, and you meant to kill them all! Those two aren’t the only ones who’ve died at your hand, are they?”

“No...”

"Like I said... my kind of woman." Deadman kissed me with such passion I moaned, and began to move inside me again. "You turn me on so damn much..." I felt his penis swell inside me, the beginnings of his orgasm pulsing at the base. "Been so long, Irene. I haven't had a woman for so long, and I found you waitin' for me by the road."

His face began to twitch, his mouth snarling with lips drawn back from his teeth. Ferocious, baneful, the most compelling masculine face I had ever seen. Beautiful, as his green eyes closed and he thrust hard and fast into my accepting body. The violent roar of his climax reminded me of his savagery in battle.

When he collapsed full length on me, covering my entire body with his hot, sweaty limbs, I sank into the mattress beneath him and imagined that we would lie this way for eternity. Always joined, always buried, alive in death.

The heaviness of dead earth on both of us, but the heat of our lust melting us together in an eternal embrace. Fading into exhausted sleep, I barely felt him leave me, dreaming of his body crushing mine like the weight of mortal sin.

FOUR

I woke to the sound of a Harley some distance off and approaching. For a moment or two I didn't know where I was. A dark room filled with an unfamiliar smell; a bed with musty sheets in which I lay naked. The side of my face felt sore and my hip joints ached.

The burn in my groin brought it all back to me in the next moment, and I sat upright, pulling the quilt around me. The kerosene lamp had been turned down or had gone out. The dogs began to bark in a howling chorus.

Outside, the Harley pulled up and stopped and a voice began over the dogs. It continued in a low and complaining tone as the barks gradually subsided, though I couldn't make out the words. It didn't seem to be a conversation, since no one answered in the silences, and though it was somehow familiar, it didn't sound like the rider's voice.

Where was he? He'd covered me and gone, though he'd said he would take me all night. If that had been his bike, he'd apparently left and come back. It was still night; the blackness was defined only by the slightly lighter rectangle of the window and a faint beam of light coming up the stairs through the half-open bedroom door.

Between my legs seeped the sticky moisture of sex, now cooled, but still redolent of what had happened in this bed. I could smell my own sweat and the scent of a man: sharp muskiness and the crushed-herb tang of semen. Now I realized why his aura of suspended decay had such an effect on me. I recalled Deadman's powerful naked body, his hands, the look in his eyes as he took me, and my insides went hot and soft.

I'd confessed a crime to him — he'd forced me into my most vulnerable state and made me admit what I'd done, and for some reason I felt relieved. As I had been raised Catholic, confessions of sin and guilt resonated deeply with me, but only in the throes of sexual passion could I ever open my confidence to anyone.

I recalled the previous confession I had made while in bed with a man, and its result, and the relief began to flee. What if Deadman had gone to fetch the police and returned to betray me? What if they were just behind him?

Searching by touch, I found my clothes and put them on. The voice had fallen quiet. I crept down the stairs past the bloodstains on the wall and floor and through the front room, navigating by the light from the kitchen.

Someone was moving around in there, clanging utensils. My purse and gun were still where they had fallen, so I picked them up, closed the purse and peered into the

kitchen. Stephanie was chopping potatoes again, her back to me. Her long, inexpertly crimped ash-brown hair hung over her shoulders.

“Excuse me — ” I began, and she jumped, her knife slipping.

“Ow! Shit, you scared me!” she said angrily, waving a cut and bleeding forefinger. “What are you sneaking around for?” She put the finger in her mouth and took it out; I couldn’t see the cut any more.

“I wasn’t sneaking around. I was wondering if — ”

“Whatever,” she snarled, turning back to her task. “Taker just got back and he’ll be hungry, so I have to get the food ready.”

“Got back from where?”

“How the hell should I know? He had to go on one of his rides and fetch someone. He’s right out there with the passenger.” Stephanie bobbed her head at the door that led to the veranda. “He doesn’t tell me where he goes. Just orders me around!”

“A passenger? Not... the police?”

She laughed in a high shrill tone. “Cops? Him? You’ve got to be kidding! He HATES cops! There isn’t a police station in fifty miles, anyway. Only state troopers come all the way out here, and you wouldn’t catch them *dead* near *this* house. Ha!” It apparently hadn’t occurred to her to ask why I was concerned about the police. “No, he’ll eat and then he’ll leave with the passenger, but he won’t be gone long, damn him. I wish he’d ride off on that noisy, stinking bike and never come back!”

“What is he to you?” I moved into the kitchen and took my jacket from the chair where I had left it; the house had grown chilly. “Does this house belong to your family?” Shouldering into the jacket, I crossed the room to peer out the window. Nothing was visible but a portion of the driveway beyond the rise of the veranda. The Firebird was gone.

“Of course it does,” she snapped, dumping several handfuls of potatoes into a skillet along with a chunk of dubious fat from a tin can. “It belongs to Daddy! Taker just comes here and commandeers the place whenever he likes and sleeps in our beds and eats our food and sends us on errands and makes us wait on him. We all hate his guts.”

Turning for a moment, she glared at me. “And we feel exactly the same about you, understand? I don’t know why he decided to keep you here — I don’t know what you’re doing here at all, whoever you are! You’re not even *dead*!”

“Um... is he really what he says he is? Uh... undead?”

“Du-uuh! Of course he is!” She stood with arms akimbo as the potatoes sizzled, looking me up and down with chilly blue eyes. Since she had on far too much makeup, her glare lost a large part of its malicious effect. “I guess he must think you’re cute or something — you don’t look like anything special to me — but he’s never kept anyone here before.” If her expression had been more pleasant, I thought, she might have looked much prettier than she did. Her eyebrows went up. “Oh! Did he do it to you?”

“What?” I knew I was blushing bright red.

"Oooh! Now I get it — he said you were his woman! 'Taker brought you here to screw you! He screwed you in mine and Aitch's bed up there!" Stephanie's nose wrinkled, but her eyes gained an avid, prurient inquisitiveness. "That is SO gross! I didn't think he *ever* got laid! What's he like in the sack — I bet his dick's just monster, right? Did he do it to you up the — ?"

"None of your business!" I was appalled; my few women friends had never asked me such questions, knowing that my somewhat askew sexuality wasn't a matter for light conversation, but she seemed to lack any feminine insight into my nature.

"Oh, la-di-da!" she replied sarcastically, rolling her eyes at what she apparently considered my over-delicacy, then asked a question that took the breath out of my lungs. "So you're in love with him? You're going to stay with him?"

"WHAT?" In love with the rider? A man I'd met only a few hours before? A huge, uncouth biker? A man who'd virtually kidnapped me and forced himself on me — though with my tacit consent? A man whose very humanity was in question? But I was the sort of woman whose desires ran in dark directions, as he seemed to have known from the beginning, and although I'd never loved any of the men I had slept with, he wasn't like any man I had ever met.

I hadn't sorted out how I felt about him, and I had no idea how he felt about me, other than the obvious fact that he lusted after me. Or he had lusted after me — he'd left me alone after finishing, so perhaps he'd taken all he wanted. "That's... that's the craziest thing I've heard all day, which is saying something! I'm leaving here as soon as I can."

To my utter surprise, she looked crestfallen. "You're not the woman of his dreams, I guess. Too bad — we might have gotten rid of him." The Firebird pulled up and parked outside, and Shane got out: her brother. "But that wouldn't have happened in a *thousand* years, let alone fifty, no matter what the contract says! He's so big and nasty and smells like a — "

The scent of scorching approached my nostrils. "Your potatoes are burning," I said. Her eyes opened wide and she turned to stir them. "What contract are you talking about?" I recalled that he had said the Devil's promises were worth nothing. "You mean... his contract with Hell? Is that really — ?"

"It's not like he doesn't deserve his job, no matter how much he hates it," she hissed, scraping stuck potatoes off the bottom of the pan and adding another chunk of fat. "I hope he steps out of bounds and gets taken away himself! He's never going to find a woman who will be faithful to him anyway — he might as well give up and break the terms and get it over with."

Snorting, she broke a few eggs into the pan and clapped on a lid. "Then we'll have our own damn house to ourselves! Just family, the way it used to be." Shane opened the kitchen door and came in with a sack of groceries. "You stupid prick!" Stephanie screamed at him. "'Taker's gonna kick your ass for coming in the house!"

"No, he isn't, you dumb slut!" he shouted back. "He told me to put the stuff in the kitchen!" They stuck their tongues out at each other and she threw some potato peelings at him. "Bite me, you bitch!" He flipped her off and left, though not before making a face at me.

I rolled my eyes and tried to piece together what she was telling me. “Taker needs to find a faithful woman to be redeemed from service to Hell? That’s the Devil’s stipulation?” It sounded fairytale, medieval. What did a dead man walking sound like?

“Uh-huh. A woman who’s always loved *him* and never will love anyone else. Fat chance, right? Who would fall in love with a bastard like that? Who in her right mind would even want to fuck him?” Her face sharpened into prurience again. “Did he, like, make you do it? Did he tie you up or something? That’s really gross.”

I ignored all but one question. “Love... ?” Who *would* have always loved him and been faithful? I wasn’t a faithful woman; quite the opposite, in fact. I had slept with several dozen men for varying reasons, and I had betrayed every one of them. Other than my father and my daughter, I didn’t believe I had ever loved anyone. My mother had died from complications of pregnancy just before I had been born. In a sense I had killed her.

I had been taken from her dead body by Caesarian section, so I had never known her, either to love or to despise. Perhaps that was why I didn’t have much to say to other women. Certainly I hadn’t loved my husband. It hadn’t cost me much emotion to shoot him, and less to shoot my lover, who had been his best friend. Both relationships had been matters of convenience alone. “Love defined how? Sex? Devotion? Sacrifice?”

“How should I know? The whole thing’s gross and weird and so is he. He doesn’t have any more time anyway, which is such a pisser! Another forty hours, and the limit of the contract is up and he’s permanently bound to Hell. We’re stuck with him forever!” She banged a bottle of hot sauce on the table and scrubbed a plate with a grubby towel. “I’ll have to cook his damn food until hell freezes over!”

“Forever? How are *you* going to last that long?”

She smirked at me. “We’re the same as he is. Undead. Isn’t that a crock?” She grinned at my wide eyes. “Me and Daddy and my husband Aitch and my stupid brother. We all died in a car accident years ago. Boo!” I jumped and she laughed. “Ha, ha! Scared you! You’re in the house of the living dead! Bwaah!”

I realized she was telling the truth, but her juvenile glee made fear ridiculous. She wasn’t truly dangerous, the way the rider was; she was only a spiteful girl who didn’t like having another woman around, no matter how she had tried to attach me to the rider. Was she concerned for the virtue of her big blond husband?

I wondered if he had recovered from his injuries as quickly as Deadman had. Her face fell when she saw that I retained my equilibrium — she’d apparently hoped I’d run out screaming. But the sight of the rider’s fury after I had shot him had inured me now to almost any kind of lesser fright, supernatural or otherwise. Nothing could be worse than his unholy wrath.

“Your family is cursed, the way he is?” I thought of another cursed family I knew.

“No,” she said as if it were obvious. “We’re good people! Decent people! Taker saw us standing along the road next to the car and he stopped and looked at us, and told us he wouldn’t take us with him because that wasn’t where we were supposed to go.

So we asked him to help us get the car out of the ditch and he did, and we just came home and we've stayed here ever since."

"For years? No one else came to get you?"

"Like who? What, God or something? We don't believe in shit like that."

My jaw dropped slightly. "Oh."

"So here we are. He takes advantage of us because he can. Everyone around here knows who he is and won't let him in their houses, so he uses our place for a crash pad when he's around. The rest of the time we mind our own business. We're not looking for an impossible redeemer the way he is. We're just fine the way we are." For a moment her face changed; a hint of human sorrow crept into it. "I can't ever have children. Dead people don't have children..."

I couldn't get my mind off the idea of Deadman's redemption. It did sound impossible. A woman had to have always loved him and have been faithful? How long did she have to remain true to him — eternity? Where would he find a woman like that? She had to be someone he already knew, I supposed, and if he hadn't found her in fifty years he wouldn't ever find her.

Maybe the whole stipulation was a fraud. Surely a contract imposed by the Devil had myriad loopholes in Hell's favor, though perhaps the condition had to be possible of fulfillment in order for the contract to be valid. What were the legalities of damnation, and who was the final judge? I could hardly believe that I was taking this seriously, but obviously there was more substance to my childhood theology than I had realized.

Mind spinning a bit from all the peculiar revelations I had heard, I opened the kitchen door and went outside. There next to the veranda stood the big pale Harley, leaning slightly over on its kickstand like a tired horse. Surrounded by his spread-out black leather coat, the rider knelt with his back to me and tinkering with something on the engine. He had braided his hair and tied a bandanna over his head.

I walked to the railing meaning to speak to him, but a short distance to the left of him stood another person — a man. He was tall, somewhat overweight, and dark-haired, his white dress shirt splotched with blood. All around him sat and lay the dogs as if guarding him. Obviously it was the passenger Deadman had gone to fetch.

The man turned, and I looked into my husband's eyes.

"Hello, Roy," I said, feeling only a little faint. Nothing of this kind was going to surprise me ever again, I knew. Deadman didn't look up.

"Bitch," my husband replied dazedly. "I'm dead. You shot me dead."

"Yes, I did. Did he bring you here?"

"I was wandering around the house. I didn't know what to do. Where to go. Tony kept saying the rosary and he left with some broad. She had a shining face, but I couldn't go with her. Didn't want to go with her... angels are too fucking New Age-y." He looked around and up at the house. "This dump is where you ran off to?"

"Yes."

"This enormous guy came up behind me. In my own damn house. He told me to come out and get on his bike, and I told him to fuck off. He touched me and I couldn't move. He dragged me out and put me on the bike. We came a long way, I think. Or just a short way — I don't know. A strange road. Like glass."

"I saw the strange road. It must be his route between places."

"You're not dead, you murdering bitch," said Roy. "Why not? You ought to be dead, not me."

"I don't know, actually. I almost was killed. I almost ran your BMW off the road."

"You stole my fucking car, you bitch. First you shoot me dead, then you steal my ninety-thousand-dollar custom Beemer. You better not have wrecked my car. I'm still paying on it."

I sighed. "You're dead, Roy. You don't owe any more on your car."

"I should have killed you. No, I shouldn't have married you. You're damn sexy in a slightly twisted way, but you're a deeply conflicted, passive-aggressive, necrophilic bitch. You murder your own family and friends, and you spend too much of my dough. My psychiatrist says you're symbolically emasculating me by spending my money."

"Which would mean that you equate your money with your prick? Par for the course, Roy."

"Where did you get that gun? Did you buy it with my money?"

"Papa gave it to me before I ever met you. Papa has a modicum of foresight."

"Oh, fuck your Papa! Fuck you! You killed me! It hurt." He sniffled.

"So I hear."

"Your eggs are ready, 'Taker!" Stephanie yelled in the kitchen. "Don't blame me if they're overdone! Daddy hasn't adjusted the damn propane tank yet and the stove's still running hot!"

Deadman got up and brushed off his hands, looking at me for the first time. When our eyes locked, I felt a great wave of emotion pass through me. Heat, desire, memory only a few hours old. I had never before felt the way I had felt in bed with him, and all of it washed over me in an instant and left me shivering.

I saw his pale face flush at the sight of me; he ran his tongue along the line of his lips as if his mouth had suddenly gone dry, but he said nothing and came up the steps toward me, gaze riveted to my face. It felt as if we were the only two people in the universe, but I couldn't help wondering if he actually meant to kiss me in front of my dead husband.

When the rider stood before me, he paused for a moment. I knew my eyes were speaking plainly to him again, and his focus dropped to my lips, but he stepped to one side.

As he passed me wordless on the way to the kitchen door, Roy spoke again. "I loved you, you pretty bitch. I really loved you. Tony told me what you'd done. I went

through hell. I didn't want to kill you. I love you." Deadman stopped where he was, just abreast of me, and slightly turned his head as he listened.

"Why didn't you and Tony just call the police if you thought I should be punished, you idiot? None of this would have happened."

"Call the police? You crazy? That's not the way we do things in the family. You know that. We take care of our own. I love you. You're mine. My wife. It's my right to kill you."

"I'm not your wife any more. I'm alive and you're dead. No one can be married to a dead man."

"I love you, baby," he blubbered. "You vowed to be faithful to me and then you cheated on me with everyone under the sun, but I love — "

"I don't love you, and I never did." I met Deadman's eyes, which were intent on me. "I married you because I wanted to have children and you had money. You never told me how your family had made that money. Death. You sold death disguised as pleasure, poison to bring on oblivion. Heroin, crack, methamphetamine. You sold poison to people who only wanted to relieve their pain, and you killed them.

"All of you were criminals and racketeers and drug-addled perverts. You never told me that your grandfather raped your mother until her husband stabbed him to death, that all of her children including you were her own father's offspring, and that your damned family was so inbred from generations of incest that it was a miracle you didn't walk on all fours. I wanted children because I wanted to give life for once instead of taking it. You never told me that your sisters died as babies because they were too deformed to live. All of you were cursed, including my daughter. You were dealers in death and you profited from death. You might have made a bad choice in marriage, but so did I. Maybe I knew what you were even though you hadn't told me. Maybe I thought I deserved you."

"That doesn't give you the right. You don't have the right to take matters into your own hands."

"I loved Irene. I loved her even though I knew she wouldn't live the moment she was born, and I didn't want to see her in any more pain. It wasn't her fault she was born to such a family and that your curse passed on to her through me. I let the doctors torture her for three years, and then I gave her the only gift that would relieve her pain. I know it was a sin, and I've suffered for it ever since. Why do you think I finally confessed to Tony? It was eating me up inside, because I felt my child's last breaths through my own hands. I blurred it out while he was fucking me in your bed because I lost my mind with grief on her birthday. I gave Irene life and I gave her death. What did it matter if her death was a little sooner rather than later? What difference did it make?"

I felt the tears I had never shed for anyone but her. "Why, God? Why didn't you release her from her torment? Why did it have to be me?"

Deadman was looking at me with narrow eyes. "*Irene...*" he repeated low.

"I spared her pain. It was murder and against the law and a mortal sin before God, but it was mercy too. I took care of my own, Roy, which is exactly what you tried to

do. Don't you talk to me about rights. I loved her the way I never loved you. I hated you and I'm glad you're dead."

"Your fucking eggs are co-old!" yelled Stephanie from the kitchen again, banging dishes in the sink. "Don't blame me!"

Roy burst out sobbing and hung his head. Deadman raised his brows and went into the kitchen. I turned and followed him, unwilling to look at my husband any longer. The dogs ringed around Roy and kept him where he was.

Deadman sat at the table, poured hot sauce all over his eggs and potatoes and wolfed the food down. I got a glass of water and drank it in an attempt to wash the strangling tightness out of my throat. "You married that guy?" he asked with his mouth full. "What a dipshit."

"Yes."

He swallowed what he was chewing and looked at me. "You killed your daughter?"

"I killed my daughter." I sat down and covered my face. "A year ago tomorrow. I told Tony, he told Ron, and they decided to kill me for betraying the honor of the family. I wish they had killed me."

"Her name was Irene?"

"Yes. Do you take the dead where they are supposed to go?"

"Some of the dead. Not someone like her." He shook his head slowly. "Not the innocent."

"Where are you going to take Roy?"

"He's written his ticket himself... *Irene*. I only provide transportation."

"Is that your contract with the Devil?"

The terrible shadow of age passed over his face. "I knock at the doors of projects and the doors of palaces. I'm called to find the ones who've earned the trip. I drag them out if they won't come willingly and I make them ride with me. I have the authority and the strength to force them to go. I chase down the wanderers who think they can avoid the journey, but I don't always come back with a passenger. Sometimes... they have already departed with another companion by the time I get there. Sometimes they don't make it to the destination. There are other forces battling for them all the way, and I don't always win the fights. Until I get to the gate at the end of the road with my burden, it's not over, and perhaps not even then. I don't pass judgment. I only carry it out. Death is impartial."

"You take the damned to Hell."

"Behold a pale horse," he said softly. "And his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him."

"I've committed murder, but you're a servant of the Devil. I killed my child to release her from her pain, and that torments me and always will. You are a dark angel of death, and you hand over human souls to eternal, unreleasable pain. What must you feel?"

The rider got up and stalked out of the kitchen, leaving his meal half eaten. I followed him out to the veranda and stood there while he shooed the dogs away and led Roy to the white Harley. Roy seemed docile but sluggish, and looked up at me for a moment. I looked away.

They mounted, Roy holding the rider around the waist, and the bike started up and made a wide turn in the drive. I saw Deadman's face for a moment as they passed in the floodlights from the house, and it might have been the face of a skull. They roared down the drive and vanished into the darkness.

He had gone on his awful errand, and I was alone in the house of the dead. I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep, although it must have been the wee hours of the morning by then. I sat in the porch swing and rocked slowly back and forth, looking out into the yard, the floodlights too bright to let me see the night sky.

Stephanie finished washing up in the kitchen and flounced off to the garage, opening a door to let light stream out behind her into the driveway. I heard a loud crackle of television and the shrill beginnings of an argument, then the door shut and closed off the sound. In the quiet I heard clanging and curses at the back of the house. Getting up, I walked along the veranda and looked around the corner to see who was there and what they were doing.

Illuminated only by one kerosene lamp stood Aitch and his father-in-law Vince, the owner of the property. They were addressing a rusty white propane tank supported by a small shed built against the foundation. Aitch had a large pipe wrench locked on a valve and struggled to turn it while Vince held up the lamp and offered vulgar advice.

Aitch's generous muscles bulged and his features creased, but the valve wouldn't budge. I couldn't see a trace of the injuries Deadman had inflicted on him. Aitch let out a grunt, heaving with a great effort, and a vein popped out on his sweating forehead. WHANGG! The wrench slipped, hitting the tank with a loud clang and leaving a dent.

"Shit!" Aitch spat, wringing a stung hand.

"Will ya be a little more fucking careful?" yelled Vince. "Gonna cost two hundred bucks if we got to buy a new one, and I'm not the one who's gonna ask 'Taker for the dough!"

Aitch picked up the wrench and brandished it. "Fine. You do it, asshole."

"Now just hold on a second there! This kind of thing is your damn job!"

"Hell, and here I thought I earned my keep porking my wife," retorted Aitch with a sardonic grin. "In case you hadn't noticed, I ain't your hired hand any more."

"Don't you speak of my daughter that way! I'm still the owner of this fucking property, and it's not like yer gonna inherit any time soon, you lazy piece of shit!"

"Shut the fuck up!" The two traded curses back and forth for a few moments and Aitch shoved Vince, forcing him to sit down hard. This provoked another storm of profanity and threats, and finally Aitch flung down the wrench and stalked off to the

garage, followed by his father-in-law with his fist shaking in the air. A door slammed again and everything fell quiet.

I didn't want to return to the house, so I descended the steps to the yard. A dog raised its head from the dust and examined me. I skirted the drive and headed to the back of the property away from the house. Passing the garage, I saw a window hung with a bedsheet, a lamp shining through it next to the bluish glow of a television. The voices inside were muffled.

The barn loomed up in the darkness before me. I liked barns, especially weathered barns with half-ruined roofs like this one, so I approached it and circled around to the half-open main doors. It didn't smell like a working barn; they had no animals other than the dogs, apparently.

Inside hung Stygian darkness, punctuated by lighter stripes where boards were missing from the walls. Next to the doors, I felt the wall, found a battery lantern hanging on a hook and turned it on. Rats skittered away from the bright white light.

The beam lit up a series of wooden stalls hung with moldering harness and rope. Nailed to one wall were rough storage cupboards and a workbench. A tractor so old it had not a fleck of paint left crouched in the main open area like a rusty tomb guardian, and all around it rats had dug nests in the piles of disintegrated straw and stacked hay bales.

There still lingered a faint scent of manure and musky animal bodies, and a soft, mournful feeling of nostalgia moved through me. Papa had a barn like this one, though in somewhat better repair, and he still kept cows and chickens, so the place smelled strong like a real barnyard.

I hadn't been to my childhood home in ten years. I'd always liked to sit in the barn and watch him milk the heifers, and when I was old enough, he'd let me bring the hatchet while he caught the cockerels for Sunday dinner. He'd praised my dispatch in chopping off their heads. "Not like a girl," he'd say approvingly. "No silliness."

I turned the lantern and saw a set of whittled hooks on one wall, just like the ones Papa had made for his rifles and shotguns. One old Winchester lever-action lay across them, but they were otherwise empty. Deadman had ruined a shotgun in the fight when Vince had threatened him with it.

Had he forgotten the man wasn't killable? Was there a weapon in the world that would do the trick? Deadman existed in torment; he'd said so. If he couldn't find a woman to release him, how would that existence ever end? I walked up to the Winchester and ran a finger along the stock, careful not to put fingerprints on the barrel that might rust it. It was shiny and the stock had been recently oiled.

"I take care of it," said someone behind me in a quiet, amused tone. For a moment I thought it was the rider and turned with a jump in my heartbeat.

But although the voice was low and masculine, it wasn't Deadman's. Aitch stood in the open door with a smile on his heavy-browed, handsome face, arms folded and his blond hair loose around his shoulders. "There's still some good huntin' around here."

“Oh.” I dropped my gaze for a moment; his smile was just a trace too warm, but I looked up again immediately, not wanting to seem timid or anxious. He might have been dead, but he didn’t look like a man who let any sort of advantage or opportunity pass him by. Notwithstanding his large nose he was attractive when he smiled, with a well-developed body and a deep chest, an incisive discernment flickering in his hazel eyes. But his lips were thin and brutal. I knew I’d have to be very careful around him.

“You like guns, ma’am?” he asked innocently.

“Um... my Papa taught me to shoot.” It was a question why Aitch was now so much friendlier than his wife, but I had some idea what the answer was.

“No kiddin’? My wife won’t even touch a gun. I have to keep ‘em out in the barn here.”

“I’m not afraid of guns.”

“No, I don’t guess you are,” he replied. “You’re probably not afraid of much, not if you can ride with ‘Taker and stay so calm and collected.”

Oh, I had a very good idea what the answer was; he was cocking a hip at me, perhaps unconsciously, and trying to disguise the fact that he was estimating my cup size. As I always did in situations like this, I calculated the possible advantages of letting him encourage himself. I caught myself brushing back a lock of my unconfined hair and decided not to cut him off at the knees yet; being on good terms with one of the denizens of the place might be useful.

“Matter of fact, I heard a couple of shots a while ago,” said Aitch.

“Did you?”

“Uh-huh. In the house.” He held up two fingers. “Don’t tell me — I’m not so bad at guessin’. Sounded like a small caliber revolver. Twenty-five or thirty-two?”

I looked hard at him; he did know what he was talking about. “Thirty-two.”

“Good for you, ma’am,” he said with a smile. “Though I guess it didn’t do what you might of thought it would.” His manner grew serious. “Why’d ya shoot at him?”

I was silent, veiling my eyes. “Oh, Jesus. That must have pissed him off. Did he hurt you?” Aitch was doing an excellent job with the deep voice of concern.

“He hit me.” I touched the sore side of my face. “But he was more interested in finishing what he’d started.”

“He tried to, uh... sleep with you, ma’am?”

“That’s right. It must be the whole reason he brought me here. I said no and I asked him to stop, but he didn’t.” This seemed like the right approach; if Aitch thought I was aligned with Deadman, he would probably clam up and leave. I could tell he had something to impart to me — asking the caliber of my gun hadn’t been random conversation. “I shot him. When the wounds vanished and I realized what he was, I was petrified. He dragged me upstairs and...”

“That son of a bitch!” he said with conviction. “He’s finally gone off the deep end! Are you OK?”

"Yes, thank you. I'm perfectly all right. He didn't beat me up while he was doing it." Aitch's expression of outrage didn't quite cover up his delight that I had a significant complaint against Deadman. "Good Christ, ma'am! If I'd had the least idea what was goin' on — "

"It wasn't your fault," I said, my voice breaking a little. "I don't think anything would have stopped him."

He made an angry gesture, as if he put himself in a category of upstanding and decent men obligated to shoulder the burden of women's defense against the unworthy members of his sex. I found it difficult not to roll my eyes. "Maybe not. I've never yet taken him down. But that don't mean I don't want to try."

"Yes, you tried right when I got here."

"Yes, ma'am. Sorry we lumped you in with him. Wouldn't have no self-respect if we didn't put up some kind of a fight once in a while. We all heal up fast anyway... well — "

"Ah... your wife told me your family are all in the same state he is. Undead. That you'd been living here like this for years, and that he takes advantage of you."

He smiled tightly and rubbed his short beard growth with a thumb. "You could put it like that."

"So you really want to get rid of him. Probably more than anything else."

"Well, that's easier said than done." Still not giving much away — he was admirably cautious, but I knew he was anxious to get something off his chest, if he thought I was a safe recipient of his confidence.

"Yes, I gathered that. Since he's a walking dead man and invulnerable and a servant of Hell and all that. I'm sure you know more about it than I do, of course."

"I'm damn impressed," said Aitch with a genuine smile. "You're a tough lady. He forced you to go to bed with him, and you shrug it off. And even though everyone 'round here knows what we are and shoulda got used to us a long time ago, they run inside and pull down the blinds when we come into town. You ain't scared of me at all. I like that."

I allowed myself a small smile of self-congratulation. "Can you tell me something about him? About Taker?"

"Sure," Aitch said. He began to approach me, putting his hands in his pockets. "What do you want to know?"

"I hear that there's a condition for his release from Hell. That he has to find a woman who's always loved him and always will remain faithful, and if he doesn't do it in another day or two, he's going to be bound to Hell forever."

"Yeah, that's true. He's got to marry her, point of fact, and she's got to be true to him 'til she dies. Makes me laugh, ma'am, 'cause I'm damned if I know how he's going to accomplish that in the time he's got left."

Aitch checked his watch. "Yeah, thirty-six hours. Day and a half, and it'll be fifty years since he smashed himself all to hell out on the highway. I know, 'cause I saw

him do it, and I saw him get up again and I lost my lunch — he was in that many pieces.”

“You saw it? Fifty years ago?” Of course — the family had to be as old as Deadman. “I understand. Tell me what happened. How he became what he is.”

“If you want to hear about something that happened so long ago. This is way before your parents were even born, ma’am, I reckon.” This was flattery; I was sure he could tell how old I was. His own apparent age was about the same as mine, but of course I had to add half a century to it to have any idea of his birthdate.

“I do want to hear it. What was he like before that?”

Aitch chuckled, tilting his head back. “Crazy mother. He never could pass up a race.”

“A racer?”

“Uh-huh. Had himself a real fine bike that he’d warmed up something amazing, and I swear he came up behind me once doing a hundred and twenty. I was going fifty in a Buick and thought I was a hotshot until he passed me like I was standing still.” Aitch drew a line through the air over his shoulder, back to front. “Like a streak of fire with that red hair of his in the sunshine, and he was laughing like he’d nothing more to ask of life than to let him go so fast.”

I had a little quiver; it was both excitement and a weird regret. I knew that reckless laugh...

Aitch caught his lip in his teeth for a moment and considered. “We had a sight more population out here back then, not so long after the war, and lots of guys had learned to ride a bike in the Army. We used to have drag races out by the Last Chance. He beat the pants off all comers, every single damn time. We’d have racers coming from far as Dallas or even Los Angeles just to give it a try. He swore he’d beat the devil himself if the devil knew how to pull a Harley ‘round a blind curve. And one night the Devil took him up on it.” Aitch smiled at me.

“Somebody came to challenge him to a drag run. Tall guy, even a little taller than Taker, and shoulders as big. He had a helmet with a face mask on, though, which you didn’t see much in those days, and he was all in red and black, covered head to foot. Never took the helmet off, so we never saw his face. He spoke a little odd, like his throat was bad, and a couple folks said he smelled of burning, but that was afterwards, so I don’t know about that.

“He came into the Last Chance and he said he’d got a bike that would put any other bike to shame, and Taker jumped up on a bar stool and hollered that he’d lay a hundred dollars he hadn’t no such thing, and we all went outside and lined up by the road to take a look. And the stranger got on his bike, which was black as anything, and he said that he wouldn’t accept no bets for money. All he would take was a soul. We laughed, ‘cause it sounded like a joke, and he said it again. He’d race for a soul and nothing else. Taker said he didn’t need his none anyhow, and he’d bet whatever he had to bet, but he’d beat that black bike on any day of the week and Sunday included. We laughed our heads off.”

“You laughed at the Devil?”

"I don't know that it was the Devil in person. I get the impression that he's the kind to prefer a messenger to do his work. Just for instance, 'Taker himself, as he is now."

"What was 'Taker's name?"

"Well, I'm embarrassed to say I don't know. I knew him, but he wasn't a particular friend of mine, and he went by a handle even then. We all called him Deadman — yeah, before it happened. Think it was a name he got in the Army. Just one of those weird damn things."

"Go on," I said.

"So... we watched the two of 'em ride back a quarter mile west, with the finish line being right in front of the bar, and a couple guys went with 'em to fire the starter pistol and certify it all fair and above board, and they got ready and lined those bikes up nose and nose, and the gun went off and they started. We saw the headlights coming at us like two bats out've hell. I don't know how fast they were going, but they went past the bar and they didn't stop for another half mile at least, though it's uphill past that point. It was too equal to call."

"They went back and they did it again, and it was the same thing. No one'd come that close to beating 'Taker, ever, and he was hopping mad. Swore he'd beat that bike if it was the last thing he did, and he'd keep riding 'til doomsday if that was what it took. It was like the weather changed when he said that. Something in the air wasn't the same. We'd all been laughing and joshing him for doing no better than a tie twice in a row, but we kind of sobered up at that point. He was looking grim. Zipped up his jacket tight and combed his hair back, and he got on his bike again and they lined up for one more go. And they were going faster than ever, greased lightning on a roadrunner's back, coming up on that finish line neck and neck, and there was a red flash like fire, and 'Taker's front tire blew."

I gasped and Aitch nodded solemnly. "Saw that bike take a hell of a tumble with him still in the saddle, end over end and the sparks flying off the pavement like a welding torch. The stranger crossed the finish line a moment later, but we didn't pay him any mind. We all piled into our cars and went to look. I could see him in my headlights when I got up to the spot. Still all tangled with the bike and blood spreading out around him on the pavement. I'd seen a man hit with a grenade or blown up with a shell more'n a few times over in Italy, and I knew he was dead."

"What did you do?"

"Some of us stood around lookin' uncomfortable, and some went and puked as quiet as they could, and someone else went back to the bar and called the coroner to come scrape the poor guy's liver off the highway, and then the stranger rode up and got off his bike. I figured at least he'd take his helmet off then, like a mark of respect or something, but he didn't. He just stood there lookin' at the dead body. Mentioned that he'd won, and we felt that wasn't quite appropriate under the circumstances."

"So we told him to get on his fancy black bike and show us the back of it right smart, or we'd reduce it to scrap and him along with it. We'd seen that flash and we had a notion he had somethin' to do with the tire going — it wasn't a clean win even

if 'Taker hadn't been killed. He paid us no mind. He looked at the body and he called him by name, and we all damn near fainted when the body sat up sudden.

"Had an eye hanging down from the socket and the brains showing on that side, and he'd lost an arm and a half, among other things, and his legs were smashed to jelly. But he sat straight up and seemed to be listenin' close. The stranger told him he'd forfeited his soul to Satan with his own mouth, and he was Satan's creature now and the Devil'd do with him as he liked. And he told him to get up. He kind of crawled around and collected his missing bits, and most of us blew chunks at that point if we hadn't done it already. There were two fellows went stark staring mad from what they saw that night. If I didn't believe in the Devil's doings and black magic before then, I surely learned better. And before I knew it, he was standin' up again and looking more or less normal, except for his eyes."

"What was wrong with his eyes?"

"They were green before, ma'am, but they weren't anything like that shade of green. Gave me the cold shivers and they still do."

"I... know what you mean. What did he do once he had been put back together?"

"Well, then the stranger led him to the black bike, only it had gone white for some reason, and told him to get on it and ride. He'd got his wish to ride 'til doomsday, and he had a job to do somewhere. He looked like he understood the deal better than any of us did, and he took off on that bike and left his own bike in its wreck on the road. He'd loved that bike like a woman. When the cops got there, the stranger was gone and no one knew how or where. They told us we were drunken fools and they left it at that. But everyone 'round here knows who he is and what he does, and he's done it ever since and never aged a day. That's the Undertaker."

"My God..."

"But I guess you asked me another question than that," remarked Aitch, a twinkle in his eye. "You want to know how he's supposed to get *out* of the mess he's in, not just how he got in it."

"Yes. Why did Satan impose a condition like that? Just to torment him?"

"Satan? What makes you think that part was the Devil's?"

"Um... I guess I assumed so. Or he said something to that effect. It's not?"

"It ain't. He'd been the way he is for ten years before he ever knew there was a way out. I heard him in in the yard one night speaking to someone I couldn't see, and I could swear he was crying. Got down on his knees and everything. I thought he'd gone nuts, but it turned out he was speaking to a messenger from the other side. Come to tell him he could be redeemed some day, and this was how. They'd bargained the Devil down and got him a chance, she said. He curses that angel now and calls her a lying bitch when he's good and drunk, because it was a false hope, naturally. There is no one like that. No woman's ever going to fall in love with the messenger of Death."

I found his certainty rather ludicrous. Was he a woman? "Then you don't know who this woman could be? I thought it must be someone he knew."

He shrugged. "Taker don't have much to do with women, at least living ones. I never heard of him being acquainted with any real close. Though I also never heard of him, ah, treatin' a woman dishonorable, like he's done to you. Frankly, aside from beatin' the tar out've anybody gets in his way on the job, he keeps pretty much on the straight an' narrow."

"I saw him beat someone — well, someone other than you." Aitch grimaced slightly. "But it wasn't on the job. Now that I think about it, he might have done it because the man was insulting me."

Aitch's eyebrows went up. "No shit — pardon my language, ma'am. He did that?"

"Yes. It was at the Last Chance, as a matter of fact. A man he called Rattlesnake started yelling at him and calling me names, because he thought I was one of the dead people Taker carries to Hell, I guess. But then after they'd fought, Rattlesnake tried to tell Taker to leave me behind, because I wasn't rightfully his. There wasn't anything Rattlesnake could do about it, though, because he'd been too badly beaten."

I didn't like the look on Aitch's face one bit; it was far too calculating and pleased. "Stepped out of line, did he? It's his night for that."

"But wouldn't you like him to marry this woman, whomever she might turn out to be? Won't he leave you alone if he succeeds?"

Aitch put a hand on the wall at the level of his head and a mere yard away from me, leaning against the hand and hooking the other thumb in one belt loop. The pose displayed his thickly muscled torso very well. "I'm not sure. None of us ever thought much about that comin' to pass. He'd be free from the Devil, but what goes down after that I ain't got a clue."

He laughed shortly. "Maybe he goes and crashes his bike again to get it over with, which isn't real likely. More like, he moves in on a permanent basis. Or he locks us all inside and sets the place on fire; I wouldn't put it past him. So it might not be much of an improvement from our point of view."

"Your wife thought I might be the one. She asked me if I was in love with him."

"Did she?" He looked slightly startled, but I had the impression that he was acting. Almost certainly his wife had reported her conversation with me. "But he's treated you bad."

"Yes, he has, and I'm not faithful in any case. I shot my husband and my lover dead this morning."

"No shit," said Aitch, his face lighting up. "You *are* a tough lady." I saw that I had removed a doubt; he clenched his fists and shadow-boxed in a moment of irrepressible joy. "Hey, I've got something to show you. Where's your gun?"

"Right here in my purse." I drew the revolver out.

He held out his hand and I let him take it. Popping the cylinder, he ejected the cartridges and examined the two empty casings. "Mind if I take the brass? I'm something of a hand-loader."

"Be my guest." Aitch crossed to the workbench and put down the gun and the cartridges. "What kinds of cartridges do you build?"

"Mostly .308s for my Winchester. Long-range for hunting. But I've got some handgun rounds in this cabinet." He opened one and pointed to a box on a shelf, stepping back as if he expected me to take it out. "It's that box, there — the one with the tape around it."

"That's a little high for me to reach."

Aitch looked around for a stool, but there wasn't one. "Uh... OK, how about I lift you up and you grab the box?" He held out his arms.

"Huh? Why?" Was he trying to get his hands on me?

"Hey!" he admonished me, palms out in a gesture of injured innocence. "I ain't that kind of guy, OK? It's just that — well, I guess I should probably show you. So you'll see what this is about."

Aitch turned to the shelf, blew out a breath and picked up the box with a quick, convulsive movement. I heard a strange sound through his gritted teeth, then he dropped the box into my hand. "There it is, so hold on to it." Turning over his hand, he showed me his palm and fingers. The lines of the box stood out red and seared, the skin blistering as I watched. "That's why."

"Oh, my God!" I nearly dropped the box myself, but it was neither hot nor caustic — it was only a small cardboard box, filled with something heavy that clinked. "What happened?"

Aitch grimaced and closed his hand around his injury. "It's the cartridges, ma'am. They burn me right through the box and through any weapon they're loaded into. In other words, I can't fire them and have a prayer of hittin' anything. Even a glove's no help."

"Then why make them? How did you make them? What on earth are they?"

"They're silver, but that ain't why they burn. I cast the bullets out've some old jewelry of my wife's and made the cartridges, and then I took 'em to a priest and asked him to bless 'em. He didn't really want to, you understand, but I kind of persuaded him. It wasn't easy getting 'em home, I'll tell ya; I was laid up for weeks."

"A priest blessed them, and they *hurt* you?"

"Yep. They'll kill undead, see? That's why I made 'em."

"They'll kill... 'Taker." My heart gave a great thump.

"Yes, they'll kill the Undertaker." His mouth curled in an intimate, triumphant smile, and then he shrugged. "Naturally they're a little lightweight compared to lead, and the hollow points won't mushroom much. They'll have the same effect on him that ordinary bullets have on an ordinary man, though. Aside from the burnin' thing, that is. That ought to make up for any ballistic shortcomings the silver's got."

He shivered slightly, backing away from me. "Blessed objects are like poison to us. I don't even like having 'em in the same room with me, which is why they're out here."

And his wife said that their family didn't believe in 'that kind of shit'? I opened the box and looked at the cartridges. Three dozen assorted: six each of six different calibers. I saw sets of .308 rifle ammunition, .22 long, .45 ACP, .38, nine-millimeter Parabellum, and .32. "It looks like you didn't know what sort of gun would be firing these."

"No, I didn't, so I put 'em together in some common calibers. There's a full load of .32s there. If you got *those* in your revolver, you'll have no worries. I know you've got the grit to use that gun." He looked me in the eye with transparent sincerity. "I'll feel better knowin' you have these. You can take care of yourself now."

"I guess I can." I picked up my gun and put the six cartridges in one by one, then smacked the cylinder home and spun it. "Thank you."

"My pleasure, ma'am. So if he tries anything again..."

"You think I ought to use the gun again."

"You might even do him a favor, ma'am. It's not like he confides in me, but I know he's given up hope. All he truly wants any more... is to rest. Destroy his body, and his soul goes free." He made it sound like an act of compassion; I wondered if his wife had told him about all my crimes.

"Free? To where?" I closed the gun in my purse again.

"I don't know. I can't know if he's condemned, but I can tell you that there won't be anybody to take him to Hell, because he's the Hellrider. The job's going to be vacant again, at least for a while. So maybe he'll just fade away into oblivion. That's what he wants anyway."

"If you say so." I left the purse sitting on the workbench and looked around the barn. "You don't have any animals."

"No." Aitch made a wry face. "They don't like being around us. Every one of them went crazy and died in a few days after we came home undead, and any others we bring here do the same. I wouldn't mind having a few chickens for the eggs and meat, but no dice."

I heard barking in the front yard a good distance away. "Your dogs don't seem to mind you."

"The *dogs*... ?" He let out a breathy laugh. "They look like dogs, yeah."

"... Oh."

"They're not ours. They just watch the souls he brings here, to keep 'em from escaping. No smarter than dogs, but they know their job. Like we do, though we complain about it plenty. I know why my family's here — it's to serve 'Taker.'

He looked at me. "It's the Devil that did this to us, just like it was done to him. My wife and my in-laws don't think so, but I know there's nothing else that would make us this way." He glanced at the burn on his hand. "'Taker needs a home base, so he was provided one. We're the crew and he's the captain of the ship, and no one can sign off and go ashore."

"How can you stand this?" I asked with a wrench in my stomach. "Existing like this. Knowing you're dead. Having to cater to him. Nothing changes or grows... what do you have to look forward to?"

Aitch shrugged philosophically. "Nothing, I suppose. The damn house is starting to fall apart, so that keeps me busy. I don't want us to end up sleeping in tents, but some day the termites are going to get the better of me." He mimed spraying bugs.

I laughed a little. "It's been fifty years?"

"Almost. I ran the car into the ditch six weeks after 'Taker started doing his job.' He smiled back. "I'd been married only a month. I hafta admit my wife is starting to let it get on her nerves."

"She doesn't seem happy."

"She ain't. I do my best, but it's not enough. Reckon I'm a little old-fashioned — " he grinned — "but a woman needs some kids to keep her occupied." I closed my eyes with sudden heartsickness, and Aitch stooped down to look in my face. "What's wrong, ma'am?"

"Nothing." I felt the tears begin to flow and put a hand up to shield myself. She *had* told him about all my crimes... "Y-you son of a — "

"God damn — I'm sorry." He reached out and enfolded me, drawing me against his chest. I stiffened. "C'mon, I didn't mean it like that." I looked up into his face and saw suddenly unsheathed desire there. "I'll make it better, sweetheart," Aitch murmured, bending to kiss my cheek. His tongue flickered out to smooth the tears away. "Come with me."

"N-no..."

"Come on." His mouth moved over mine. "It'll be good."

"For you, maybe. Getting tired of doing it to the same woman after only fifty years? How sad." I shoved him hard and broke out of his arms. He made a remonstrative expression and reached for me. "Don't touch me! You seem to have forgotten something!" I lunged for my purse on the workbench and Aitch seized my wrists.

"Now be reasonable, ma'am — "

Someone slammed a fist into one of the barn doors, sending it flying open, and both of us jumped. "Get away from my woman, you son of a bitch."

I turned and saw Deadman's huge silhouette lunge at us from the doorway, his coat sweeping around his legs with the violence of his movement. "Right now!"

FIVE

"I'm goin'," said Aitch, releasing me and putting up his hands. "I'm not interfering with your woman, OK?"

The rider came straight at him until they stood chest to chest. "Like hell you're not. I know you." He overtopped Aitch by half a head, and they stared at each other, Aitch with malicious innocence, Deadman with bald hostility. "Known you for way too hell of a long time, you snake in the woodpile!"

"I'm not afraid of you, Taker. It's what my wife would do to me if I dipped my wick anywhere else, right? I'd be more afraid of an angry woman than of any man, if I was you." Aitch smiled at me with a hint of cruel glee, which reminded me of his wife. "See ya."

He sidestepped the rider and left. I recalled hearing the roused dogs a few minutes before and realized Aitch had meant to let Deadman find me in a clinch with him; he was hoping to precipitate a confrontation between us and provoke me to use my gun.

To my surprise, Deadman turned on me with undiminished fury. "You let him kiss you."

"Let him? About as much as I let you!"

"Yeah, and you like it that way. Don't ya?" He grabbed the front of my shirt. "You like getting forced? You oughta like this, then." Deadman yanked me against him, seized my hair and slammed his mouth down on mine.

My lips throbbed with the fierce pressure of his kiss; a tickle began between my legs. Though I pushed against his chest, my head whirled and the pit of my stomach felt hollow with appetite. The rider grabbed my buttocks and I bit the corner of his mouth and tasted blood. His head jerked back, but his teeth were set in an avid smile.

"You little bitch!" Deadman growled, bending to kiss me again. He wrenched my lips open with his and his tongue surged into my mouth. I let out a moan of longing and began to breathe like a furnace bellows, my body going hot, twisting around his. Lacing my hands in his hair, I pulled it out of its braid and took it in both fists.

The rider grabbed the battery lantern, seized me around the waist and lifted me to carry me into one of the stalls. He hung the lantern on a nail, sat me on a covered feed bin and leaned into me, kissing me savagely as my legs went around his waist.

Grinding his hips into my crotch, he dry-humped me until my spine hit the wall. He pulled me against him and nipped my throat hard; I threw my head back and moaned.

“Baby...” he muttered into the underside of my jaw. For a few moments he kneaded my breasts, then stood up, shed his coat and unbuckled his belt. “Strip, girl.”

I slid off the feed bin and watched him unsnap his leather vest and open his fly. His cock surged upwards when he freed it from his clothing. I did nothing until he started to speak again, then began to open the buttons of my shirt. He paused to watch, his face changing to keen attentiveness as he followed my fingers with his eyes.

I exposed my bra and slowly shrugged the shirt off, dropping it on his coat. After unhooking my bra, I dropped it as well and felt my breasts relax slightly to their natural contour.

Deadman wet his lips with a slow caress of his tongue. I zipped my jeans down, taking my time, and he put a hand on his erection and stroked it. I kept my eyes on his hard cock as I wriggled my hips out of the jeans and pushed them down my legs.

The tickling sensation between my legs intensified; I bent over and stepped out of the jeans, then put my thumbs into my panties and pulled them off. I stood naked in front of him, the harsh light of the lantern streaming across my skin and throwing my breasts and the inward curve of my groin into deep, shadowed relief. Drawing my long auburn hair over my shoulders, I let it fall into a waving cascade that veiled my delicate flesh in its darkness. So many men had seen me like this; alluring, teasingly aloof though insatiable. Only one had ever looked back at me with true understanding of what lay behind my sexual appetites, and with full assurance that he could satisfy every hunger I had.

Deadman’s chest rose and fell under his open vest; his gaze kept roaming my body as if the simple sight of me inflamed him. I put my hands on my breasts and lifted them under the curtain of hair, pushed my dark nipples forward and brushed them with my thumbs. His whole frame vibrated. “Yeah. Touch yourself,” he said low.

I kept one hand on my breasts and gradually slid the other down my torso, stopping to circle a fingertip in my navel as if I had misunderstood him. Deadman smiled crookedly and met my eyes, then looked at my groin. I let the hand continue to its destination, stroked the narrow triangle of dark hair above my sex, dampened my forefinger with saliva and slipped it into the narrow slit.

He snarled silently, eyes following my every move. As I caressed my moistening folds and parted the lips to let him see what I was doing, he slowly jerked off in the same rhythm, the skin tightening and relaxing over the shaft and head of his cock.

With a fingernail I scratched hard across the upper curve of one of my breasts and drew blood; the rider’s eyes widened and burned green as I smeared the blood across my chest and stroked the stained tips of my fingers over my nipples. His fist clenched on his penis and he let out a gasp. I was so wet by now that my fingers made a sloshing sound in my vulva. The rider’s face turned red.

Suddenly he grabbed both my hands and plunged my sticky fingers into his mouth. He sucked them clean of both blood and juices, licked the stinging scratch on my breast and pushed on my shoulders to force me down.

I knelt on the pile of clothes and looked up. The rider shoved his jeans down past his buttocks and took my chin in one hand. I opened my mouth and let him impel his cock inside, the head so large it strained my lips. He tasted sharp and salty, with a hint of semen from the droplet that had formed at the tip of his penis. With only a few strokes in the wet interior of my mouth he was groaning out loud, his hands in my hair and his hips pumping.

I put my hands on his bared buttocks and smoothed the velvet fuzz, opening my throat as much as I could. Although I could take only the first six inches or so of his cock, I knew he was going to come quickly; he was so hard there was almost no give to his skin.

Glancing up along his body, I saw his face contorting and his eyes squeezing shut. He stumbled a step backwards against the stall divider and leaned there, taking strangled breaths and shaking. I laid my hands on his lower abdomen just above the red-blond hair at his groin and felt the deep contractions in his stomach muscles.

The rider moaned as I withdrew him slightly from my mouth and swirled my tongue around the head of his cock. "God... woman..." I stroked his slippery shaft, then scraped the thin, taut skin with my teeth, watching the little beads of red well up. "UH!"

His moans accelerated as I plunged him back into my mouth and tasted blood mingling with the sharpness, a strong metallic tang like the scent of burnt gunpowder. I felt the surge of his orgasm beginning. He grunted and yelled and roared; his stomach jerked in and his cock throbbed between my lips. His first spurt hit the roof of my mouth and I drove him deeper, swallowing rapidly to take all of his ejaculation. Some of it dribbled from the corners of my wide-open mouth despite my efforts.

He kept shooting down my throat for several moments, his face expressing near-transfiguration. When it ceased his body jackknifed and he slid down to the floor, taking me with him. I lay with my face pressed against his stomach and watched his penis subside, his sweat springing out under my cheek.

After a minute he began to stroke my hair. "Baby... you got a helluva fire in you."

"I'll burn you to ashes," I replied, sitting up with my hair over my face and baring my teeth at him through the dark curtain.

Deadman smiled similarly and gathered up a good handful of my hair near my scalp, lifting me up as he rose. "Let's see about that." He pushed me to the feed bin, turned me around and bent me over it, bumping my buttocks with his hips. His erection had renewed already — his body obviously recovered quickly from any kind of fatigue as well as injury. "Spread yer legs, baby."

Forcing a hand between my thighs, he shoved them apart and leaned against my back. My hair tangled around my neck and into my mouth; the rider held his cock, guided it to my soaking pussy and rammed it in.

I howled and rolled my hips to meet him. Deadman held my head down, pumping rapidly into me, and locked his hands around my throat. His thick cock pulled and tugged my swelling tissues, stretching me to the limit, and his strokes were so long that I screamed an entire breath on every one.

The rider squeezed, his hands cutting off some of the blood flow to my brain, and the intensity of feeling increased tenfold. I tossed my head wildly within the confines of his grip and bucked my hips to the excruciating rapture of his fucking, my vision going dark and dizzy.

Half throttled, my brain starving for oxygen, I felt as if all the nerves and veins in my body were in my pelvis, all engorged with electricity and with blood. I could barely scream with his hands around my throat, but gasped out a violent orgasm and slumped, barely conscious.

I came to a moment later as Deadman eased his grip and let go of my throat. He lay on my back and kissed my face and forehead. When he slid a hand around my hip to clasp my groin I reared up and ground my buttocks into him, and when he rubbed my clit with a roughened forefinger I climaxed again in two thrusts.

The rider threw both arms around me to keep me upright as I writhed and gasped, turned my face to kiss me, then returned to tormenting my clit with his fingers. My body undulated and rolled against him as he settled down to a steady rhythm, taking me over and over with vigorous thrusts.

The feelings spread through my entire body, from sex to thighs to stomach and outwards, my heart pounding so hard I could feel my breasts quivering. I burned with wantonness for him, for his penis and hands and lips, and I gave him nothing but what I truly felt.

It was a novel and terrible feeling, like my skin peeling back to reveal my secret underpinnings, and no man had ever provoked me to it before. My moans seemed to come from the deepest core of myself: sobbing, howling, crying out to him to rip me open and tear the heart from my breast.

The rider kept fucking me. I could feel him beginning to shake again, one palm moist and rough on my back. While still stroking my slit, he slid the free hand down and over my buttocks, searching between them and pressing a thumb on my anus.

I took a deep breath and bore down to let it inside, the sharpness of the penetration blending into the almost unbearable arousal I felt and pushing me over the edge again. Screaming, I climaxed a third time and a fourth without interruption.

Deadman let out a choking moan and rammed faster. With trembling legs he shot into me, his cock pulsing. Both of us collapsed on the feed bin and fell to our knees on the rough board floor, our bodies pouring with sweat. His face dropped to my hair and I felt his hot breath just above my ear.

“Irene,” Deadman said in a rasping tone, folding me in his arms. “Irene...” He kissed me and for a few minutes held me cradled back to belly while our bodies gradually cooled.

I shivered in his arms, though the parts of my skin touching him were hot as fire. Reaching for his coat, he wrapped it around me, rose and straightened his clothing and handed me mine in a bundle.

When I stood, still a little shaky, he put one arm around my back and the other under my knees and lifted me, hoisted high against his chest. I looked into his face, illuminated by the white light of the battery lamp, and saw something there that made me tremble. I hid my face against his throat and he carried me out of the barn.

When we passed the now-darkened garage I heard a repeated buckling-metal sound and a high-pitched gasp, and looked up to see Aitch industriously humping his wife on the hood of the Firebird, pants around his ankles. He briefly raised his head and gave me a salacious grin as Deadman carried me to the house.

The rider took me up the veranda steps and into the house, up the stairs and into the bedroom and put me down on the bed. He lit the lamp with a match and replaced the chimney. Taking the coat and clothing from me, he tossed it all on the floor and stripped himself.

I reclined in a dream-like state while he lay with me and entered me once more, slowly rocking me and caressing me, soothing my body and somehow my tormented soul, taking again and again what had always belonged to him.

By all rights, the sun should have come up. I was sure that I had lain for hours in this bed with Deadman beside me, making love at wakeful intervals, sleeping now and then with his heavy body half atop mine as it was now. A long time had passed since I had realized what was happening, and in that time, I believed, I had embraced my doom.

I had been right about the implications of sex with this man — I had passed to another state of being, utterly transformed from what I had been, and in attaching my fate to his I had crossed a barrier that kept the world of the living separate from that of the dead. Never again, though he was undead and half demon, would I have the power to part from him.

My heart, unerringly guarded and cold, had opened to him as it never had to any man, and either I was a different person, or I had discovered who I truly was. I had entered into this state of my own free will, but in another sense I had been compelled, because it seemed that everything that had ever happened in my life had pointed me to this night, this bed, this feeling that burned within me and seemed to sear clean all the guilt and foulness of my soul.

Free will and destiny intertwined nearly indistinguishably like the bodies of lovers; the night had passed in the ecstasy of existence made meaningful for the first time.

But the room was still dark. I still saw the glow of the lamp on the window that showed the blackness outside. I turned my head, my chin brushing the rider's left forearm which lay across my neck, and looked right into the tattooed eyes of a skull cradled in a wizard's hand. Just above the rider's elbow, a spectral death's-head figure crouched, its long dark hair trailing as it looked over a precipice.

I turned my head farther to the left. My cheek came up against Deadman's ear and sideburn, for his face was pressed into the pillow above my shoulder, possibly in an effort to muffle his deep, resonant snoring.

His left leg lay relaxed over both of my thighs, pinning me down with its weight alone, and his loose hair was tangled with mine. Warm in my nostrils, his scent enfolded me, and I closed my eyes for a moment and kissed his arm on the bony lips of the eyed skull.

The rider muttered something in his sleep and turned his face out of the pillow towards me. When his eyes opened inches from mine, he regarded me solemnly for a minute. Strange, acid green; no trick of the light, but a constant reminder of his unhuman nature.

The musky, dreaming fancies of sleep began to dissolve, but one thought remained; what was I, that I lay entwined in sensual langour with the dark angel of death?

"Evenin'," he said.

"Uh... hello." Evening? My eyebrows went up.

"You've been asleep for quite a while, girl. All day, matter of fact."

"Oh. That's why it's dark." Something sprang awake in my mind, and I tried to sit up. "The police! I've been lying here all day? They'll have — "

Deadman pulled me down again. "Ain't seen no cops today. And if I did, you wouldn't see 'em for long." I looked at him, and he smiled sideways with a click of his tongue. "Don't you worry none about them, darlin'."

He leaned forward and kissed me briefly, then rolled over and sat up, swinging his feet to the floor.

"My Papa never got here?"

"Nope. Probably driving in circles and turnin' his road map inside out. Not like the locals are gonna show him the way to *this* hacienda." He chuckled.

"Um... Deadman?"

"Yeah?" he replied, pulling on a pair of jeans.

"What's your name? Your real name?"

"What?"

"Will you tell me your name?"

He looked at me in some amusement, standing and zipping his fly. "What for... Irene?"

"Well... I mean, we've been doing, um, rather intimate things — "

"Don't like fucking a guy when you don't know his name? You ain't generally so particular, darlin'. Least not from what I've been hearin'."

With that shot he opened the bathroom door and went in, leaving me bewildered. I thought I knew how he felt about me; he had expressed it over and over with every

touch on my skin, every look in his strange eyes. Did he doubt how I felt about him, or how I could feel about any man?

I had to admit he had reason to do so — I began to doubt it myself. So unfamiliar a feeling, so novel and terrible. I confided and did strange things during sex — might that incredible emotion have been only a queer impostor? It still lingered as a burn in my breast, but perhaps I had imagined it into being.

I had never outright told a man I wanted him or that I loved him. I teased, I glanced, I provoked, and I let myself be taken, but never gave anything back. I liked to pretend I was being forced, because then I expressed nothing of my own desires. I only took a man's desire, played with it, and threw it back in his face.

Could I really have changed so much in one night? Had I really given Deadman my heart and soul? Did I have a heart and soul to give? In this small, shabby bedroom, the events of the night seemed like a dream. I was no authority on emotional attachment, having used physical connection as a substitute for it my entire life. Perhaps Deadman's face and touch had expressed nothing more than his carnal desires.

I sat up and looked for my clothes. They weren't on the floor, but they had been washed and lay folded on a chair at the side of the bed. Knowing that Stephanie had unwillingly done the work, I felt a pang while dressing. She hadn't asked for her fate. She'd been an ordinary farm girl once, and her brand-new husband had gone into a ditch and taken her and her whole family with him.

What had she thought in the last moments of her life? Had she panicked or prayed? Had she felt pain? And what had she thought when her ruined body had been reconstituted and she and all the people she loved most had stood lost and wondering at the side of the road, waiting for the reason for their continued existence to arrive? When had it sunk in that this was all there was?

Never to have a child while she longed for one, embracing her husband night after sterile night; all the potential life in a young woman's body cut off at the source. No wonder she had soured like curdled milk. It wasn't right that they should linger here neither alive nor truly dead, taking out their pain on each other, but what could be done about it? How could they fight the forces of Hell, and did they even want to?

Hearing a splash of water in the bathroom I rose and walked to the open door. Deadman was shaving his throat and cheeks with an old-fashioned straight razor, the strop hanging down next to the sink.

He raised his brows at me for a moment when he saw me in the mirror and wiped soap from the blade. "Yeah?" he said, drawing the blade along his skin.

"You have to shave?"

"Yep. And eat, and take a crap. Might as well be alive, hey?" He grinned at me.

"Why were you made that way when you were raised from the dead? Um... Aitch told me how it happened. The race."

"Aitch," he said, expression darkening, "has got a big damn mouth. And a wandering eye, you may have noticed."

“Yes.”

“And he’s such a sweet-talkin’, good-lookin’ son of a bitch.” He wiped his gleaming blade again and gave it a few strokes on the strop. “He was a hired hand on this place after he got out’ve the Marines, just no-account scum on a dollar a day, and he got the boss’s daughter tumbled out behind the barn, and took her off and married her quick before she could think it over. In a week even Daddy was singin’ his praises.”

He inspected the edge of the blade. “He’s got himself a lot more practice with that kinda thing under his belt in fifty years, I’ll tell ya, an’ you shoved him off you like he was a dead skunk. Didn’t quite see it that way at the time, but I guess that’s what you did.”

I smiled a little into the mirror over his shoulder; he was almost apologizing for saying that I wasn’t particular. And asking a question at the same time. “I could see what he wanted the moment he came into the barn. He took me by surprise, though, because he’d been... helpful. Up until that moment. Will you tell me why you’re so human? Why do you feel pain and have emotions? When you’re the Undertaker? The Hellrider?”

His face disappeared under a towel as he wiped off all the soap. “Why?”

“Because I want to know.”

Deadman swirled his shaving brush in the mug and applied a new coat of soap around his goatee; apparently his beard was dense or he was taking special care with the task. “You want to know what makes me tick, hey? Last night I was a ‘disgustin’ hoodlum’ or some such, and you even put a couple bullets through me.”

“But — ”

“And then you fucked me like nothin’ I’ve ever had, darlin’.” He looked as if he was trying to cover his expression with the soap. “Nothin’ I ever dreamed about. And it got me wonderin’ why, at least in the cold light of day. I went and sat by the crick a spell while you were sleepin’, and I thought it over, and I couldn’t see any reason why that would be so. Why a lady like you would just turn to fire under my hands.”

The blade scraped down his throat. “I saw that house of yours when I went to look for your husband. I went through all the rooms searching for him, and I saw that fancy carpet, and the windows, and the furniture, and all the clothes and geegaws you had in the bedroom.”

He flung soap and bristles off the end of the razor. “I’ve seen every kind of place where people live, naturally. I’ve seen palaces. But this was the place you lived, so I kind of paid attention. That was a fine house, and it cost plenty of money. I gather he got his money dishonest, and he sure was a waste of valuable space and drinkin’ water. But you married the man for his money anyhow.”

“I was sorry for it.”

“You cheated on the guy.” He tested the smoothness of his jawline with a finger drawn through the soap. “You said the vows, and you broke ‘em. Killed him dead to top it off. And then you came to these parts and looked at me the way you did, like, ‘c’m on there, you big dumbass, get yer hands on me right smart or you’ll be

regrettin' it the rest of your days', which in my case is a hell of a long time. I guess I don't regret it, because I'll remember last night for that same hell of a long time. But, dammit, woman — ”

He finished shaving and scrubbed off all the remnants of soap. “When that Papa of yours comes to get you, or when I let you persuade me to take you into town to call him, I’m gonna regret that I ever had a feeling bone in my body. Why I had to find a woman like you, of all people, at this time of all times...”

He broke off and resumed in a harder voice, splashing his face from the sink with both hands and with his head lowered so that I could not see his expression in the mirror. “Reckon Aitch blabbed about how I’m bound to find a faithful woman if I’m ever to be free. I’ve longed for that, because I want to be released. I want to lie down and never open my eyes again. She would have brought me rest, I guess. But I don’t suppose she’d ever have brought me a night like that, Irene.”

He dried his face and turned to look at me; the burn in my breast had become a full conflagration, and I had no way to hide the glow from him.

Deadman slowly shook his head. “You’re a coy, fickle bitch. You ain’t quite sure what you want, or you’d rather you were made to take what you want without ever having to say you want it. You’ve killed and you’ve lied and you’re the opposite of true. But I wouldn’t have passed up that one night for all the faithfulness in the world. I guess I’m a goddamn fool, but that’s the gospel truth.”

Tossing down the towel, he brushed past me into the bedroom and rummaged in his motorcycle saddlebags, which were lying on the floor near the bed.

“Deadman,” I said through blurring eyes. “I won’t forget it either. I know I’m not the kind of woman you were looking for. I wasn’t looking for you either. But for some reason we did find each other, and I... I think I was meant to be here.”

“Don’t be crazy,” he said, pulling a black T-shirt over his head. “Yer pop will get here or we’ll go find him. I’ll give you a lift into town after dinner. You’ll go on home tonight one way or another.”

“Don’t... don’t you want me to stay?”

“What the hell for? This joint? You don’t like it any here, girl, and don’t go telling me different.”

“Not the place, no. Of course not,” I said with a slightly teary laugh. “The food’s bad and the people aren’t friendly. Or too friendly. But that’s got nothing to do with you. It’s you I was meant to be with. Don’t you understand... what I mean?”

The rider pulled his hair out of the neckline of the shirt and looked skeptically at me; obviously the thought had never yet crossed his mind and was having a tough time making it from one side of his brain to another. “You sound like you need a little food in ya, girl. Come on downstairs.” He put an arm around my waist and urged me along.

I sighed through a smile. Of course this sounded strange to him — it sounded strange to me. I could not come right out and say the words — *I want you... I need you... I'm yours and somehow I always have been...* ’ And so all I could do was show him in any way I could. “All right.”

Going downstairs with him, I noticed that the bloodstains from the previous night had been scrubbed away, though not entirely. The bullet holes were still there, ragged and dark around the edges. The rider noticed my furtive examination of the wall and laughed. "I ain't holdin' a grudge, darlin'. How about you?"

"Me?"

"Yeah, you." He stopped and let go of me at the base of the stairs. "As I recall, you told me to knock it off, and I didn't do that. That's why you used the gun, right?"

"Well... I was afraid the police would catch up with me if I stayed much longer. Obviously I shouldn't have worried — "

"That wasn't the only reason you shot me, darlin'. You figure I done you wrong?" I hesitated in answering and he bent down to look in my face, putting a hand on the wall. "Tell me, Irene. I thought you wanted it and I was right, but I guess that ain't the same as sayin' yes. Did I do you wrong?"

"You... said you know I wanted you." I looked up at him; his expression was stern and serious. I wondered why this meant anything to him — it hadn't the night before.

"Sure I do, but like I say, that ain't the whole story. If a judge was to ask you in a court of law, official like, what would you say? I was kinda forward and I didn't quit when you said to stop. Or suppose you were tellin' someone — one of yer girlfriends, say? Would you tell her I treated you bad?"

I couldn't imagine discussing him with any woman I knew. "I'd never accuse you of a *crime* for taking me last night."

"All right, I'll take that as a no." He nodded gravely, apparently satisfied, then smiled with his mouth closed and leaned forward to kiss me; again a brief, dry contact, but I put my hands around his neck and opened my lips against his.

Deadman took a deep breath through his nose and let me stroke his tongue with mine. His arms went around me and our bodies began to fit together as we stood at the foot of the stairs.

I combed my fingers into his long hair, cupping his face in my palms and humming softly into his mouth. The rider's hands slid down my back and curled around my buttocks, lifting me to tiptoes and massaging in slow circles.

His lips were warm and wet, his mustache tickled under my nose, and he let out a soft groan, hips rotating into mine. Through his jeans I could feel his penis hardening against my stomach and pressing a groove into my flesh.

I put an arm around his waist — it didn't reach all the way around — and placed the heel of the other hand against his groin. Under his clothing, the firm ridge of his erection shifted into my palm.

I began to curve my fingers around it and Deadman stood back with a gasp, removing my hand and adjusting himself through his jeans. "Whoa there, girl. If you want anything to eat before morning, you better slow down."

I laughed in my throat and brushed my hair back over my shoulder. Deadman rolled his eyes and blew out his cheeks, then followed me into the kitchen. No one was there, but he didn't seem inclined to call anyone to do the work.

"Caught me some fish while I was sittin' by the crick, Irene," he said. "They're outside the door." I opened the door and looked; four fair-size trout were swimming slowly in circles, nosing the sides of a five-gallon bucket. The place was quiet and I noticed that the Firebird wasn't in the driveway.

Finding a chopping block, I put it in the galvanized sink and fetched a large knife. Deadman watched as I hooked a trout with a finger through the gills and held it on the board while it flopped and struggled.

WHACK! I stunned it with the handle of the knife and quickly slit its belly. Its body still quivered slightly as I gutted it and rinsed the blood from the cavity, but I knew it hadn't felt pain. I put it on a plate and reached for the next one.

"You do that pretty good," remarked Deadman.

"I grew up in the country," I said. "I don't like fish, but I know how to clean them." WHACK! The next fish gave up its life.

"Sorry, but I thought they might be better than canned meat."

"I hear that Spam's popular in the South Seas."

"Yeah?" Deadman opened a cupboard and got out a bag of cornmeal. "Why?"

"Well, the islanders liked to eat each other before the missionaries got there. Cannibals. And apparently when the Marines came through during the war and hired the natives to help build airstrips and so on, they paid them in food and Spam was the most popular item. It reminded them of human flesh — pork is the closest thing to it — so they still eat it for old time's sake." WHACK! "Or so I hear."

Obviously something had truly changed between us; the conversation wasn't precisely casual but compared with that of the night before it was amazingly easy. He seemed to accept that I looked on him very differently now, though perhaps he didn't trust it very far. I wasn't sure if I did either.

"No shit," said Deadman, laughing. "I always kind of liked Spam, even in the Army." He put a pan on the stove and turned on a burner, striking a match to light the gas. The flame sputtered and burned yellow. "Christ. There ain't much pressure left in the damn tank..."

"They were messing with it last night. The valves. Maybe Aitch turned the pressure down too far."

"Ahh... they probably fucked it all up." He fiddled with the knob for a moment and got a blue flame. "OK. That'll cook fish." Reaching for the gutted ones, he salted them and rolled them in cornmeal. I killed and cleaned the last one and handed it to him.

He fried all four in hot shortening and turned them out on a pair of plates, their dead eyes bulging white under the yellow-brown coating. "There we go. You gonna be OK with this for dinner?"

They actually smelled decent, since they were so fresh, and I nodded. "That's fine." Deadman took three fish and I took one, and with a few slices of bread we sat down to eat. I tried a small bite and to my surprise it tasted good; hot and tender and not very fishy. He knew his fish cookery, obviously.

He cut each of his in half with a fork, speared and ate them bones and all; I scraped the crisp skin and flesh off the ribs and avoided the head and fins. The rider chuckled at my fastidiousness and got up to fetch a bottle and glass.

"You want a drink?" It was a fresh bottle of rye whiskey, and he broke the seal and poured himself a stiff slug.

"A little. With some water in it." He chuckled again and got out another glass to make me a drink. I took it from him and sipped it while he threw the liquor to the back of his throat, let out a rasping breath and poured himself another. "You don't seem to get drunk very easily."

"Nope. I can't be poisoned, so it takes some doin'." The rider grinned at me over the rim of his glass. "Ain't impossible."

"Aitch said that when you were drunk you cursed the angel who told you how you could be saved. Do you think she was lying?" He curled his lip. "I'm sorry to mention Aitch again, but he and his wife are the only ones who told me anything about you."

"Persistent, ain't ya?" He screwed up his face for a moment and downed his second drink.

"Uh-huh."

"Fine, I surrender. There's no stopping a woman when she gets curious." He took a deep breath. "No, I don't guess it was a lie, but I can see it ain't gonna happen. In sixteen hours, that hope's gone."

He pointed to a grandfather clock in the dining room. "Eight o'clock now. Noon tomorrow is the deadline. That race happened at midnight fifty years ago, and there's some leeway just to make sure justice is done — heh. If you happen to meet some candidate for sainthood what wants to be faithful 'til death ending at high noon, you can give me a heads-up." He chuckled sardonically and poured himself another drink. "Well, I'm permanently in the job at that hour. I can't be taken by the Devil after that either, so it sort of balances."

"Taken by the Devil?"

"You wanted to know why I was still mostly human? Because I've still got my soul in my body, that's why. It's not burning in the pits of Hell. It's right here." He tapped his chest. "If I were to break the terms of the contract — that is, commit a mortal sin — I'd lose my soul entirely. Satan's got power over me since he animates my body, and I can't quit what I do without that faithful woman, but he can't take my soul from my body unless I fuck up, and that's only in the first fifty years."

He gulped his rye, saw my quizzical expression and smiled. "Hey, you asked. I don't make the goddamn rules. Seems I got a break in that big law court in the sky, since all I really did was run off my mouth at the wrong time. Fifty years probation."

"What would become of you if Satan took your soul?"

"Well, I'd be sizzling in the fires, that's what would become of me." He took the pan he had fried the fish in and threw it in the sink with a loud clatter. "And he'd have to find himself a new Hellrider, I guess."

I had the impression that his tongue had loosened partly because he was getting tipsy — he had three double whiskeys in him and was pouring yet another. I was halfway through my first, which was three-quarters water. "Though he might have something else up his sleeve — hell, that's guaranteed where he's concerned. Tricky bastard. Leave that shit; she'll clean it up. Hey, you wanna sit in the parlor?"

I was beginning to wonder where the family was, since the car was gone and none of them had showed themselves inside or out. Not wanting to talk any more about Aitch, I said nothing.

We went out to the front room and sat on the sofa, Deadman bringing the bottle. It had not escaped me that we were nearly replaying the previous evening's activities, but reversed in order and attitude as if in a mirror. I curled my legs up under me and held my drink as Deadman leaned into the corner of the sofa and threw an arm over the back. His movements were far looser and more relaxed than usual, even careless.

"So after tomorrow noon, you can't be condemned no matter what you do?" I said.

"Right. Then I'm safe, though it means I'll have to do what I do until doomsday. No way out, ever again."

"Job security?" I tried to joke.

He laughed with a hollow ring. "I've hated this for fifty years, and I'll hate it for the rest of time. I find those dead souls that I'm told to find, and the way they died and who they took with 'em ain't generally a sight for the delicate-minded. They fight me tooth an' nail and they try to run, 'cause they know me for who I am."

"I guess they would."

"Talk my ear off all the way, tellin' me they don't deserve this. Then when I get near the gate, they start to cry. Moanin' and wailin' and gnashing their teeth. They know what's coming. That's when they seem most human, you know? Sometimes it seems they have a good case. Not all the damned wrote their own tickets."

His face was paler than usual, his eyes staring a hole into the opposite wall. "I've got my human soul, but sometimes it seems that does me more harm than good. I wouldn't pay them no mind if I wasn't still human. So I hafta kinda spike that human part to do my job, and it might be getting easier at long last, and maybe that's good and maybe it's not. I have to get them there, and I have to fight anyone who would take them from me on the way. No matter what they say to me, I have to do my level best, every time. So many times..." The whiskey was drunk and poured again.

"Did you have to take anyone today?"

"Yeah," he said, taking his fifth drink. "I went on some trips. I got back here a few hours ago. I went up to see if you were awake, and you weren't. I stood there looking at you sleepin', all that dark-red hair spillin' over the pillows..." Deadman trailed off, reaching out and twining a forefinger into a loose lock of my hair.

"What is it?" I asked, for his face had changed.

"I dunno. I had a flash of something when I saw you like that. I'd forgotten until now." He closed his eyes for a moment and brought the lock of hair to his nose, sniffing it. "Just because of the color of your hair, I guess. Like dry blood all around your head, and you lyin' there so still and beautiful..." Deadman rubbed my hair over his cheek.

"As if... I were dead?" I wasn't frightened; I felt a strange warmth, my breasts rising and falling with my deep breaths. "You saw a vision of me dead?"

"Maybe I did. I know I won't have you for long, darlin'." Did he mean that he was going to send me home in a little while, or that my mortal tenure on the earth would be much shorter than his endless span?

"All I wanted was to get in there with you and sleep forever. So I got undressed and I crawled into bed and wrapped your hair around my throat and until you woke up I slept the way the dead ought to sleep. I didn't even dream about the children."

"Children?"

"Children. Burning in hell, forever. Who made this universe, dammit?" Deadman let go of my hair and dragged a hand over his face. "I hoped I'd get out of this. I believed that angel all the time, somewhere in my heart, and it's kept me going up to now. After that hope's gone..."

He grabbed the whiskey bottle and took a slug straight from it, wiping his mouth. "I wish I could get shit-faced on less'n a whole fifth of whiskey. Takes too damn long."

"You've taken children to hell... ? What's going to happen to that soul of yours if you have to do this for eternity?"

"Damned if I know," he said, with meaning in every word. "Like I say, he's a tricky bastard. He won't give up just because he's forbidden to take my soul. The contract don't say nothing about me offering it free of charge."

For a moment, his face cracked, but he struggled with it. "Listen to me — drunk and mournin' on my own sorry ass. I sound like a goddamn fool."

"I'm sorry," I said, reaching out to touch his knee. "I wish..." He turned his head away, then looked back with such pain burning in the harsh lines of his face that I felt it lance through me like a spear. "I... I'm so sorry..."

With every cell in my body, I wished I were the woman of his dreams. To release him from this endless, merciless, damned existence... I moved forward and put my arms around him, my head on his breast.

The rider remained motionless for several moments, still holding the bottle. My tears began to flow silently, running down my nose and cheeks and wetting his shirt. They streamed from my eyes and washed pity, compassion, yearning for redemption through me until it seemed I would break apart from the swelling of my heart.

He put down the bottle and took hold of my arms, seeming to want to move me away from him, but I clung tighter. "Don't send me away. Let me stay with you," I said. "I want to help you. Please."

"Now, darlin'..." he said with a quiet note of despair. I pulled his head down and pressed my lips to his. "Aw, Irene..." Deadman kissed me back, his arms sliding around my waist and shoulders. "It ain't no good in this world, but I couldn't pass you up for anything. God, you taste like paradise..."

His tongue slid into my mouth and we lost ourselves in voluptuous kissing and savage caresses for what seemed like hours. Somehow his clothes were off and I was raking my nails over his back and chest, leaving furrows that bled and closed up again in moments. Deadman alternately grimaced and moaned, licking his own blood from my fingertips, and stripped me naked there on the sofa.

His face went between my legs and he ravished me with his mouth while I screamed, yanking at his hair as he sucked hard at my clit and pressed his long tongue inside me. I whimpered with orgasms, my hips jerking from side to side with his heavy head and hands pinning me down and forcing my thighs open. He lapped and nipped the folds, pillaging every crevice of my cream and juices and ramming his tongue into me until I was sore and throbbing against his teeth.

Finally he left me alone, wiping the dampened hair of his beard with his palm and falling back with his erection rampant in his lap. I lay panting for a little while, but soon rose and straddled him as he sat upright on the sofa, the bedspread and afghans wrinkling around my knees. My vulva was raw, but I raised up as high as I could and spat on my fingers, spreading the saliva between my buttocks and working the moisture into my anus.

"Now, you hold on there," Deadman said with a snort when he realized what I was doing. "Not that I'm bragging or nothing, but your little back door's not going to let my cock in so easy. Matter of fact, I ain't never done that but once, and she told me to pull it out right smart soon's I got it in."

"I'm used to ass fucking," I replied with a sensual smile. "But I'll get something to help." Leaving him with a kiss, I took the can of shortening from the kitchen and returned with it, sitting on his lap. "Want to?"

"Why the hell not?" he said with a quirk of his mouth. "Seeing as you're used to it." He watched me insert a finger into myself and push in the shortening, which melted to slipperiness from my body heat and spread inside me and over my hands and buttocks. I thrust the finger into the tight hole and pressed and stretched it, using the other hand on my clit and rocking my hips up and down.

His face was flushed and his cock remained hard, and his tongue came out to lick his lips, eyes hooded and smouldering. Stroking my breasts, he looked up at me with a lascivious smile. "You're a crazy woman, you know that?"

"Uh-huh." I was as ready as I was going to be, so I positioned myself, kneeling over him on the couch and straddling his hips. I got a good dollop of the shortening on my fingers and greased him thoroughly; his cock quivered, sliding through my hand. I put the slick hand on my vulva and used the other to brace the head of his cock against my anus. I took a deep breath and bore down, then flexed my knees and thrust downwards. "Aaahh!" I moaned, feeling the nudge and stretch of his gradual entrance.

Though Deadman remained still, letting me guide every movement, he gritted his teeth and began to breathe harder. When the tip of his cock popped into my ass, the intense sensations crackling through my nerves, he bucked his hips and gasped, nearly dislodging himself. “Sorry... that feels so fucking tight...”

“Just wait,” I moaned, bearing down harder and frantically rubbing my clit. I was going as slowly as I could, knowing I had to be careful with a man of his size, but the incredible fullness was driving me wild. “I’m going to get your cock all the way in, because I want you to fuck my ass...”

“Never could turn down an invitation like that,” he said in a growl.

“Uhh... ohh... please... you’re so big...”

“What a pretty little slut you are.” I worked my way down his cock, my tight passage filling with him, the feelings so intense they crossed over into pain, though the grease made me slick. “You’re the hottest lady I ever ran across. You’ve done this a lot?”

“Uh-huh... I’ve been fucked up the ass... uhh... while another man was eating my pussy... and another one forcing me to suck his cock.”

“What?” he said, incredulous. “You liked that?”

“Aaahhh...” I moaned, because I was nearly sitting on his balls, my anus stretched so far I knew I was going to bleed. Every movement sent scorching responses through my pelvis and down the backs of my thighs. “Ohh... you’re making me take all of you...”

I was impaled on him, penetrated in the most purely licentious way I knew. The sordid, taboo aspect of anal sex had always appealed to me, and the mere knowledge that I had a man’s cock ravaging my ass always provoked me to orgasm after orgasm.

“You screwed more’n one man at a time? You into that kind of thing? Or you got gang-banged or something, baby?” His hands went around my waist as I quivered, my sphincter muscles gradually relaxing around him but still somewhat tense. “Damn, I’m hurtin’ you.”

“Yes...” I answered to all his questions. My fingers frantically worked my slippery vulva as I gradually humped up and down on his thick, agonizingly arousing cock.

“Well, get off me, then.” He started to sit up.

“No! I’m fine — uhh! Do you like it?”

“Feels damn tight and hot... if that’s what you mean. Did you get raped sometime, Irene?”

“Yes... Ohhh!” I threw back my head and climaxed. “Ahh... ohh... I was raped at a frat party in college when I was seventeen.”

“Sorry to hear it, girl.” He cupped my breasts and applied his thumbnails to my nipples. “Bad scene, huh?”

“Not like that... I was looking for trouble.”

"Not you," he said in mock surprise.

"Everyone warned freshman girls about that particular fraternity's reputation, so I made sure to accept the invitation. I drank some spiked punch on purpose just to see what would happen, and I got so stoned I couldn't stand up. Three men took me in a bedroom and used me for hours."

My fingers kept going; I was so hot I felt as if I might explode. "All three of them fucked me, and two of them raped me anally. I had to clean them with my tongue and suck them off after they had come in my ass... I deep-throated one of them while another one was ramming his prick in my ass, and the third man lay underneath while I was on hands and knees and performed oral sex on me at the same time. It hurt, but I came over and over..."

"God damn." Deadman's eyes had narrowed with a hint of anger, but I could tell the idea turned him on — he was getting harder and rolling his hips slightly, though he seemed careful not to work me too much. "Well, now, knowing you — what'd you do to them when they let you go?"

"I called Papa when the drugs had worn off a little and I could talk. He was so furious he could barely breathe and he said he was on his way to take care of it because they'd hurt his innocent little girl. He also told me he'd given me that gun for a reason. So I went back with my revolver while I was still pretty out of it and I shot all three of them. First in the balls, then in the head..."

"No shit. You went askin' for it, they made you take it, and you killed 'em for it?" I felt Deadman's cock hardening to its largest extent in my ass. "Bloodthirsty lady..." He began to move slowly up and down under me, scraping my nipples with his nails. The scratch I had inflicted on my breast still stood out as a red streak against my fair skin. I put my nails to his chest again and dug them in.

"My Papa got it hushed up... he's got some influence... with the governor. Self-defense, sort of, and they had given me the drugs; the authorities closed down the frat and left it at that. Papa was... proud of me... he said he'd have done it for me if I hadn't... .aahhh ... aaahhh, OOOHHH!" I climaxed again, drawing blood from his pectorals.

Deadman gasped. "Man, I can feel your tight little asshole grippin' me when you come... feels real good."

"Your cock's taking me... make me fuck you with my ass..."

"That why you like gettin' forced, girl? You got off on being raped up the ass?"

"That's not the reason I like being forced, no. That was when I discovered what it was like for me." I'd never told anyone this; I was drunk on sex again, giving him the key to me as he had done for himself earlier that evening. "I haven't let it get so out of my control again, though. It was rape in a legal sense — I was intoxicated and underage. I told Papa that I'd had no idea what was happening to me, and he was very sympathetic. He still doesn't know I asked for it, or that I wasn't a virgin when it happened. But I think about that night and I get so wet..."

"Thinkin' about the raping, or the killin'?"

"Both..." I said in a breathy, sexy whisper.

The rider smiled into my face, teeth showing between his sensual lips, and shook his head with a slight laugh. "You are one hundred percent crazy, girl."

"I know... I'm fucking *you*, aren't I?" I smiled and let the next orgasm seize me, the waves of muscular contractions deep and searing, as they always were when I was being taken anally. "Ohhh... OOOHHH! Ohhh... you like me this way, anyway..."

"You got a point there," he replied, and let out a low, rumbling growl. I knew he was about to come in my ass and pumped up and down on his cock as rapidly as I could. "You know, you make a habit of killin' men who fuck you."

"I suppose I do..."

"You gonna try killin' me again, darlin'?" He was breathing hard, his face wrinkling in a snarl, and I felt his cock begin to pulse inside me. "Gonna... put another bullet in my head? ... Nnnggghhh!"

"Not until you shoot that load in me," I replied smiling, and he came with a roar.

SIX

“You OK, darlin’?” Deadman asked me as we went up the stairs, his arm around me. I leaned on him with a yawn. “I saw there’s blood on my thighs, and it ain’t mine. You didn’t hurt yourself bad, did you?”

“No...” It was a fierce, throbbing burn between my buttocks, though it hadn’t kept me from dozing for an hour on the sofa. “Well, a little.”

“A little? You don’t heal up the way I do,” he said, shaking his head. “You ought to be more careful.”

“Don’t lecture me — you’re not my father,” I said in irritation.

“Damn straight I’m not...” He squeezed my bare bottom with a chuckle and opened the bedroom door. “OK, you take care of yer pretty ass on your own. Hope it don’t bother you while you’re riding on my bike.”

“If I could get a warm bath, I’d be fine. Can I... ?”

“Yeah, there’s actually hot runnin’ water in this dump, believe it or not.” Deadman shut the door behind us with one hand; the other arm remained around me.

“Though since the propane’s screwy tonight, I dunno how much of a tubful you can get. Wonder what the hell’s wrong with that tank — I guess I’m gonna have to go take a look at it. Once I get my clothes on, that is.”

“I just need to soak a little, that’s all...” I yawned again and stretched, my back curving in his embrace as he bent over me from behind and nuzzled my ear. “And then we’d better go look for my Papa in town, even though it’s getting late. There’s a motel there?”

“Yep,” said the rider with a breath into my ear, running his tongue around the rim. “Only one for a long way, so there’s not any other place he could have got himself a room.” He turned my face and kissed me on the mouth; I responded lightly, a languid warmth moving through me. “Mmm... you sure you want to go out, darlin’?”

“I’m sure I want a bath,” I said with a smile, then sighed. “Papa is going to be frantic by now. I have to get hold of him somehow.”

“Heh. Guess I need a wash too.” He took the armful of our clothes that I held and threw it on the unmade bed. “Still got road dust and sweat, not to mention you, all over me. Mind if I join ya?”

“Not at all.” I winked at him and went into the bathroom to fill the tub. There was no shower, only an old footed tub with a hand sprayer and a corroded, mineral-encrusted tap, rust stains running down under it and surrounding the drain. The

white tile floor was cracked and discolored in spots but wasn't dirty — the room, like the whole house, gave an impression of maintained decay.

The rider came in after I had located some shampoo and bath salts that obviously belonged to Stephanie. With the water running warm, I added a handful of the salts and wet my hair with the sprayer while kneeling on the worn mat. Deadman watched me wash my hair as the tub filled, his expression changing from a slight smile to a silent, concentrated regard. I quickly rinsed the suds out and pulled the long wet strands back from my forehead, occasionally glancing at him as he stood naked behind me, his arms folded.

"That looks real pretty," he remarked in a quiet voice. "A woman washin' her hair and getting ready to go out ridin' with me."

"You like it?" I asked, wringing some of the water out of my hair and wrapping a towel tightly around my head.

"Uh-huh. Been a long time since I saw something like that." The rider's eyes narrowed in thought. "There was someone I knew with hair 'most as long as yours... I don't recall who." He frowned and let go of the recollection, then came forward, put an arm around me and lifted me into the tub with him. His long body lowered until he sat with his back against the end and his knees bent up out of the water, cradling me between his legs.

I leaned forward to turn off the water, which was starting to run cool, then lay back against his chest. He wrapped his arms around me and put his chin on top of my towel-turbaned head. With both of us occupying the tub the water lapped as high as my armpits, the warmth beginning to soothe my aches and stings. "You think your Papa's goin' crazy lookin' for you, huh?"

"I guarantee it. He's very protective of me, you know. Even though I'm not a child any more, obviously."

"Guess I'd take good care of you if you were mine, darlin'." One big wet hand raised up to stroke my face. If I were his? He'd said last night that I belonged to him; he'd taken me with little thought to my wishes; but now he seemed doubtful of everything that had passed between us, while I had a deepening conviction that I didn't want to go home with Papa after all.

I had to contact him to let him know that I was all right, but the thought of simply saying goodbye and leaving Deadman to his lonely, bitter existence was repulsive. A couple of nights of passion? Was that all I could ever give him — a thing so many men had taken before him?

His lips wandered over the back of my neck. "But you've been away from home for a while, right? Why's he gonna be so bent outta shape?"

"Well... I'm an only child, since my mother died when I was born and Papa never remarried. He raised me by himself and I'm all he has. His only family, that is. He keeps busy, because he made plenty of money in business before I was born and he knows a lot of people in the legislature and the state house. He does consulting and lobbying work."

"Whatever ya say, darlin'. I thought you said you grew up in the country."

"Uh-huh. We lived on my grandfather's farm most of the time because Papa thought it was better for a child than the city. Pure and innocent environment; you know the idea. He's kind of an old-fashioned guy. Sees things the way he wants them to be."

"Yeah," said Deadman in an ironic tone. "Pure as the driven snow around these parts. So Pop takes care of his pretty little daughter 'cause she gets in trouble without him?"

"Oh, he did everything he could to teach me to take care of myself. He arranged his whole life around me until I was twenty, and then he let me go my own way. He's a wonderful father."

"That so? Sounds like there's a lot you ain't never told him."

"He wouldn't believe it even if I did tell him, and I'm not going to. I don't want to break his heart. I love him, and he loves me."

"Irene..." the rider said after a few minutes of silence while I washed myself with a cloth. "I, uh..."

"What?"

He let out a breath and seemed to change his mind about what he was going to say.
"You ever going to tell me *your* name?"

"My name?" I twisted my head up to look at him, but saw only his nose and forehead at the periphery of my vision. "No."

I felt his abrupt laugh, but he seemed somewhat taken aback. "Suit yourself." His hands moved over my upper arms and breasts, ostensibly helping me wash, but with a gentle caress on my skin. I floated a foot out of the water, pointing my toes to curve my calf and ran my palms down the leg and back up again. "Damn, you're pretty," said Deadman for the fifteenth or sixteenth time, sounding resigned. "I don't generally go for someone as little as you, and I reckoned I liked blondes, but you are the prettiest damn thing I've seen in..."

"Fifty years?"

He let out a short chuckle. "Yeah, in fifty years."

"Tell me something about the women you've had."

"Oh, boy," he snorted, letting his arms fall into the water and sending up a splash that hit the cracked tiles. "Here's where you get jealous and scratch my eyes out, right?"

"You know all about *my* sex life, so turnabout is fair play. How many women have you slept with?"

"I don't recall nothing about any women. I never messed with any woman on God's green earth, including you." Deadman slid forward in the tub, pushing me to the other end as he raised his legs to give himself room, and lay down to duck his head under. The tub nearly overflowed.

For a moment I saw the rider's pale face and muscular torso through shifting water, his eyes closed and his long hair swimming, wet-darkened nearly to my color and

spreading like a stain around his head. The tattoos on his arms were blurred and half-readable.

My insides went warm at his virile beauty; even though I sat in water, I could feel the moisture between my legs. Then he sat up with a gasp and tossed his hair back, splattering water over the whole bathroom. He blinked through the rivulets that ran from his scalp and grinned at me.

“Tell me,” I said stubbornly.

“About what?”

“You heard me, Deadman.”

“Oh, you want to know I got my nickname?” The rider slicked the water out of his eyes and reached for me, settling my back against his belly again and holding my left breast in his right hand. “Well, I was in the 28th Infantry in the Ardennes...” he began in a humorous tone, then paused. “No, that ain’t it. A neighbor of mine was in the 28th.”

For several moments he turned his head from side to side, searching the air. “Damn, I forgot my battalion number — must be gettin’ old, huh?”

“How could a G.I. forget his battalion number?” I said in utter surprise, leaving aside for the moment that he was still evading my question.

“Damned if I know. I was a squad sergeant in B Company, 4th Platoon, I know that. Definitely the fuckin’ infantry. I was drafted in January of ’43 and I shipped out three months later. Shit, I oughta go write it down before I forget that too.”

“Are you losing your memory in general?”

“Eh... maybe I am. I lose bits of it here and there.” He scratched his head. “Just little stuff like that. Little, but sort of important. I can’t recall my dad’s name any more.”

“That’s strange. How long has that been going on?”

“Ten or fifteen years, maybe. I didn’t really notice at first. Starting to get annoying, though.” He shrugged against my back. “What’s to do? I ain’t going to any doctor about it.”

“No, I guess not!” We both laughed.

“He’d be saying ‘Nurse, this man’s dead! No wonder he’s losin’ brain cells!’”

“But you remember being in the Battle of the Bulge? My grandfather used to tell stories about that. He was a sharpshooter in the 33rd.”

“Yep, I’m livin’ history — with a bad memory. I got almost killed twice in that battle... well, I wasn’t wounded. But I should have been dead. That’s how I got the name Deadman.”

A thrilling twinge went through me. “Should have been dead? That almost sounds like what happened to me when I blew my tire.”

“Maybe so.”

“Tell me how it felt — if you remember, that is.” I turned my ear against his chest and looked up at the underside of his jaw. For the first time, I realized that

Deadman had no heartbeat, and a little chill went through me. He could bleed and his face could flush with emotion — his circulation must operate by necromancy alone. He seemed so alive, with his bodily appetites and his sense of humor, and to recall that this was a man who had lost his life fifty years ago was almost a jolt.

“Sure, I remember,” the rider said, looking a bit quizzically at me. “Let’s see — the first time was the worst. I was in this shell hole with half my squad and a brand-new second lieutenant who’d got separated from his command, and a Kraut grenade landed right at our feet.

“The lieutenant grabbed it and tossed it to get it out, but like a goddamn fool he threw it in my direction, and since I’m so damn tall it hit my helmet and bounced back in. Went off in the air about a yard from me and a few feet down from the rim of the hole, so the explosion was kinda concentrated in there. Those potato mashers didn’t throw a whole lot of shrapnel, but they sure did make a bang. I was knocked flat on my ass, and when I looked up all I saw was red.”

He made a wide gesture with one hand. “Every man in that shell hole was smashed to hell — all my best friends were splattered everywhere. Except me. I wasn’t touched. Covered with blood and bits of G.I. from eyebrows to bootlaces, but I hadn’t a scratch. Like I’d been marked out for special protection.”

“God.”

“Yeah, I felt damn weird about it, and when there was a break in the fighting and I had a chance to let it sink in, I was real torn up about all my buds biting it at once. I didn’t give a crap about the officer.” Deadman laughed. “But their guts all over me and everything — I had me a little attack of the screamin’ heebie-jeebies. Everybody in the whole company that had a flask with ‘em gave me a drink, ‘cause I was so spooked my eyes just about fell out’ve my head. But stuff like that happens in a battle. You’ve got no idea why things happen, but they do.”

“You don’t sound as if it preys on your mind, though.”

“Nah. It was a long time ago, I guess.” He made a sound deep in his throat, halfway between a growl and a chuckle. “I recall the taste of it in my mouth. All that blood, and my uniform stunk of it for days until I could get a spare. Made me sick... at the time. Guess that wouldn’t bother me much now.”

I closed my eyes and thought about my accident. “What happened at the moment of the explosion? Did you feel as if... you’d been up into the air and back? So fast it took the wind out of you? Did you see a flash of light?”

“Sure. The damn grenade went off.”

“Well... not like that. Sort of inside your head. But all around you too, as if it came from every direction... I’m not describing it right, I know.” I had an impression of power, something essential that defied all words. “A brightness you couldn’t look at, but that went all through you. Does that sound at all familiar?”

“No, I don’t recall that. More like, red and black on the insides of my eyelids, an’ a really terrible smell. Now that I think about it, it felt like the meat was rottin’ right off my bones. Guess that’s what freaked me, even more than the blood. Why? This flash of light happen to you?”

"Uh-huh. Just for an instant, and when I opened my eyes I was still sitting in the car." I looked at my hands and flexed the fingers, wondering. "What about the second time you almost died?"

"Well, I wrote the grenade off to dumb luck, and then it went and happened again. About a week later. I was takin' a shit in the bushes during a lull, freezin' my bare ass off, and then the goddamn Nebelwerfers started up and rockets were falling all around. I grabbed for my rifle with one hand and my pants with the other, and *whheeeooo*, I heard a 105 millimeter comin' straight down on me, screamin' through the air above the trees." He whistled a loud fluttering crescendo and arced a pointed finger down into the bathwater. "You could tell just from the sound if it was headed for your vicinity.

"I still had my pants around my ankles and I didn't have nowhere to run anyhow with those rockets hittin' on every side, so I just squatted there and waited for that shell to burst on my head and prayed that it was a dud. It wasn't no dud — it landed a couple yards in front of me and the ground just seemed to lift up and set down again like hell was havin' itself a good sneeze. I smelled that bad smell again — it wasn't H.E. or cordite. Worse than rotten corpses.

"When I could tell what the hell was happening, I was lyin' on my back at the bottom of the crater, starin' up at the sky, and there was dirt still droppin' down on my face. The trees were all knocked flat for twenty yards in every direction, pointing out from the spot I was at, and the snow was all gone or covered with that black dirt. That shell killed a dozen grunts and a chaplain, but even though I was at ground zero it only knocked my helmet off and scorched my hair. Lost my rifle, too.

"I crawled out've the hole and stood up in the middle of the slaughterhouse when the medics came running with stretchers. There was a boot with somebody's leg still in it and a pile of guts nearby, and my head was smokin' and my pants were gone and the rest of my uniform half blasted off, and the medics looked at me like I'd grown horns and a tail. Crossin' themselves and saying Hail Mary.

"When I got to camp the captain told me by rights I oughta be a dead man. Couldn't argue with him. They'd been calling me Tiny before that, just to be funny. Or 'Hey, you Texas asshole'. I was Deadman for the rest of the damn war."

"You sound just like my grandfather. Though according to *his* war stories he could pick off gun crews better than Sergeant York."

"Yeah, I must be near as old as your grandpappy," snorted Deadman. "Thanks for the reminder, girl!"

"He died when I was ten, so he lived to sixty-three. He was born in 1918."

"Aw, shit. I'm *older* than him. This is fuckin' embarrassing."

I giggled and put a hand over my lips while he groaned; I could barely help it. "So when were you born?"

"Eighty-eight years ago. 1913. March the... um." The rider paused again, searching for an elusive fact in the same way. "Twentieth? No, the fourteenth — shit."

He balled his fist and thumped the side of the tub. "I don't fuckin' believe this — I don't remember my own damn birthday! What kind of idiot forgets his birthday?"

He seemed exceptionally upset, so I tried to lighten the mood. "I know some women who'd like to pretend they never have any."

"Not you, baby. You're a good age. Just about the same as me when I went into the Army." He sighed. "That damn Army changed me a lot. I was a nice, quiet guy before the war, 'cause I was half a head taller and six inches broader in the shoulders than any other man in eight counties once I hit seventeen or so. I didn't have to be a loudmouth to get my way. I went a little... crazy afterwards."

"Riding motorcycles?"

"I had me a bike before the war. But I didn't go ridin' it at a hundred miles an hour — the roads weren't that good, and I wasn't acting like I didn't care if I crashed myself to hell. I was a wild one when I got back from fuckin' France. A real desperado, frankly, even for a native-born Texan. All those guys were dead, and I wasn't. Didn't seem fair."

"So you rode hard and lived hard. Did you drown your sorrows in drink, or women?"

"Both, I guess — aw, I'm busted." Deadman slapped himself on the forehead.

"Walked right into that one!"

"Yes, that was a trap. Now you have to tell me all about it."

"Heh heh heh... ain't nothing wrong with *your* memory, baby."

"No." I reached up and patted the side of his face and he kissed my fingers.

"OK, you got me dead to rights. Gotta make my confessions. I had me a lot of women in my time," said Deadman expansively. "They liked my bike and they liked my attitude. I was a new face anyhow, 'cause I didn't take a job out here 'til after I was mustered out. I wore a leather jacket and I wore my hair long — that's down to the collar, mind you, since most fellows 'round here had crewcuts. I screwed girls every chance I got, before the war and after, and even back then when their daddies toted shotguns, you'd be surprised how horny the women were where I was concerned. I got me the bad girls and I got me the good girls who liked bad boys. I got me a blonde with big tits every Saturday night, right?"

He was laughing. "I'd take 'em out for a ride and drape 'em over the handlebars doing top speed — "

"Oh, you're making it up!" I elbowed him in the ribs.

He kept laughing. "You asked for a little teasin', darlin'. Gonna get out that gun again?"

"I'm seriously considering it — oh!"

"What?" He tensed at my sudden exclamation. "Somethin' wrong?"

"I left my purse in the barn — with the gun in it. I wonder if..." I recalled the blessed silver bullets that Aitch had given me. Perhaps the family had left my possessions alone for fear of the cartridges, or perhaps they had stolen everything I had.

"Last night? You took it out there?" The rider sat up straight and turned me around between his knees so he could look into my face. "What the hell did you do that for?"

"Why wouldn't I hold on to my purse?" I said.

"No, the gun. You picked up your gun and headed out there while I was gone?" He didn't seem precisely angry, but alert and even apprehensive. "I wondered what the hell you were doing out in the barn. What were you aimin' to do?" Taking my face in both hands, he looked severely at me. "You wouldn't go tryin' to finish up what that flat tire didn't do?"

Suicide, he meant. I stared at him, seeing the green fire in his strange eyes. He was dead, in a sense, and he feared what would happen to me if I joined him in that state. "What would it matter if I did? You don't want to have to take me where I'm going? It's going to happen sooner or later. What would it matter if it was a little sooner?"

"Holy shit, girl!" Deadman hissed through his teeth. He let go of me and moved back as far as he could in the tub. A small tidal wave sloshed over the end. "Don't even fuckin' think it, you hear me?" He jabbed a finger at my face. "I don't have any chances left. You do. Don't go wasting 'em!"

"A chance for me?" I shivered; the water was cooling. "I'm as doomed as you are. Didn't you know that?"

"You're still alive. There's always a chance while you're still alive!" He was breathing hard, his forehead creased and his eyes burning into mine. Somehow the indifference that I had noted on our first meeting had given way to something else. Somehow life and death mattered to him in my case — it mattered a great deal.

"I've told you what I've done."

"Yeah, and you ain't sorry for it that I can tell... except for that baby of yours." His face darkened. "And you told me to call you by her name, and you must be feeling your guts twist every time I do. What the hell did you tell me that name for, Irene?"

"I don't know." I started to get up to exit the tub, and Deadman grabbed my arm and forced me back down into the water with him.

"The hell you don't. That name's hers. That poor little deformed baby, that you knew wouldn't live the moment she came out of you." I began to weep, but his harsh voice kept hammering at me. "It was a mercy killing, you say, and still you know it was wrong, and it's about the only thing that makes you cry, you cold-hearted bitch — !"

"Shut up!" The tears were streaming down my cheeks as I struggled with him, but still he held me. The towel fell from my head; my damp hair snaked over my breasts. I had cried for him; had he forgotten so soon?

"It's the goddamn truth. It's the only damn thing you're sorry for, and you want to keep gettin' reminded of it. You're wanting me to stab you in the guts at the same time I'm fucking you." I couldn't speak for crying and he went on. "You love gettin' fucked, but it's gotta hurt or something? If you ain't gettin' forced, you're hurtin' yourself." Deadman poked his finger at my scratched breast. "That's twice you made yourself bleed just to get me hot."

"And you loved it, didn't you?! You can't tell me — !"

"Course I did! That's who I am." The acid fire burned green in his eyes. "Why the fuck would a woman want to get the Hellrider hot? There ain't hardly been one in fifty years who'd even get in arm's reach of me. I already knew you were crazy, but I guess I was flatterin' myself it had somethin' to do with ME, not with what I do. What's the final act of that kinda play? You're fucking me like crazy, you're hurtin' yourself worse and worse — you working yourself up to something?"

"What if I am?" I cried, trying to avert my face.

"You just keep askin' for it, don't ya?" The rider seized my chin in one hand and turned my face towards him. "What are you tryin' to make me do to you, woman?"

"I said — "

"I don't mean that you like getting fucked against your will. I mean you keep askin' for the worst kind of trouble, and yer hopin' it's gonna be as bad as possible so you won't have to do it yourself. You confessed to yer husband's best friend and you waited at home for the penalty. You were real scared to get on my bike, but you did it anyway. You saw me beat the hell out of Rattlesnake an' Aitch, I took you away when you were screamin' to escape, and still you let yer pretty hair down right where I'd get an eyeful. You used a gun on a guy like me, and then you came right out and said it — '*Just kill me!*' You keep beggin' for death, you little fool. Sweet Jesus — !"

The look in his eyes frightened me; he was angry with me for thinking of him as a means to an end, but not because he thought he had been played for a fool. I knew at that moment that I hadn't been wrong in my half-dreaming ideas of how Deadman felt about me. What burned behind his anger was the emotion I had first seen as he carried me from the barn, and again it made me tremble.

The caresses of his huge hands: the looks he lavished on me while he took me and gave himself. It was the opposite of the evil, caustic glow that Satan had put in his eyes; a force far brighter, far more human, and far more transcendent of mere humanity. But could the one wash away the other? I thought it was impossible. How could love face down the power of Hell? Love was impermanent, elusive, indefinable and deceptive. It was there one moment and then gone, like the flash of light I had seen when my tire blew.

"Don't be crazy," the rider said, nearly choking. "You ain't got the right. You could commit any crime that's possible to commit, and you still wouldn't have the right to hand yourself the kinda punishment you want. That judgment ain't up to you."

My chest and stomach shook with choking sobs, but I fought to get myself under control, pressing my hand to my mouth. "How do you know? How do you know what God thinks I deserve?" I slipped my wet arm from the rider's grip. "Look who found me on the road. The Dead Man. Satan's dark angel."

I leaped out of the tub before he could stop me and grabbed a towel to wrap around my naked body. "I've been making love to Death. Death is what you are. Death and fiery damnation! Why didn't you kill me and carry me off where I was meant to go? *I belong in Hell!*" I screamed.

The rider's face went stark white. "Bite yer tongue!" he gasped. He surged up and vaulted out of the tub, water streaming from his thighs and genitals. "You ain't got a clue who's listenin' to ya!"

"It's only words."

"Words mean a lot when you speak of things like that, darlin'. If they're spoke at the right time, in the right way — or the wrong way. It ain't just hot air. Believe you me!"

"Oh, that's right — you got yourself into trouble that way, didn't you? The bad boy with an attitude and a big mouth? Looks like you're better at getting yourself fucked than I am. You drove into the gates of Hell at full speed when you had no idea where you were going. That's a heck of a lot more foolish than knowing your direction from the beginning."

He snarled at me and shook his head like a lion, drops of water hitting me from his wet hair. "Don't you speak to me that way, girl. I got a lot of years on you, and I ain't fuckin' stupid. I know what's in store for me."

"You know you're going to lose your humanity? That your soul is going to wither and decay into something horrible, fit for your master? That you were always reserved for a special honor? Who do you think saved your life twice in order to kill you at just the right time?"

"What?" The rider's eyes went wide in his pale face.

"Hadn't you figured that one out yet? You were hand-picked a long time ago, and the Devil is getting impatient. The web is closing around you. Every day you move closer to his ultimate goal. Once you went frantic with grief for your dead friends, and now you've come to love the sight and taste of blood. You've become as intimate with death and depravity as I am. You hadn't had sex in fifty years because women were too afraid of the Hellrider, and then you just decided to take me. You're losing the memories that remind you of what you were, and the more you lose the less you'll care. You won't remember me for very long — I'll fade away into nothing, because I'm only mortal. Some day, you won't even remember that you were once human!"

"No!" His face was reddening with fury, his jaw jutting. "I'm a man. I'm a Texan, dammit! I'll never forget who I am."

I laughed wildly. "You think Texans have a special dispensation? In another fifty years, or a hundred, you'll be nothing but a huge, foul demon with a human face. A loathsome slave to everything that's evil and bloodthirsty in this universe. You'll rape and strangle any woman who takes your fancy. You'll eat the flesh of those children you still pity and split their bones for the marrow. You've served only fifty years in Hell, Deadman. You haven't even *tasted* what's in store for you!"

He made as if to backhand me and I instinctively ducked.

No blow fell. I looked up to see him clenching his fists and directing a sickening, acid stare somewhere in the vicinity of my breasts, his lips drawn tightly against his teeth.

He didn't even seem to see me. His demonic nature flared in every line of his face and powerful body, but he couldn't win a struggle with his own substance.

Shoulders quivering, he brought his fists up to his blazing eyes and pressed them closed. I watched silently, my body trembling in both anger and terrible pity.

I couldn't help him. There was nothing I could do against the power of Hell. Two condemned human souls cowered naked against the awful domination of fate and death; whether they clung desperately to each other's bodies or clawed and devoured them like cannibals, the darkness would ultimately bring all their efforts to nothing. Both of us by our own actions had consigned ourselves to darkness. Both of us had thrown away reconciliation with the light.

But he was right; I still had a chance, however slim. He had virtually none. His last hope would evaporate in a few hours, and then inevitably he would become what Satan wished him to be. I didn't touch him as he slowly regained control of himself, because I knew he was beyond comfort. He loved me, but even if I had been able to offer him such a blemished gift, the love of a woman like me was nothing kindred to salvation.

"You'll be wantin' to get back to your Papa," he said at last.

"Yes," I replied, wiping my drying tears from my face. I turned away and went into the bedroom, found my clothes and hurried them on. Deadman followed after a moment and picked up his jeans. My boots were somewhere downstairs, so I pulled my still-damp hair over my shoulder to avoid wetting my shirt and took a barefoot step or two towards the door.

The rider reached out, slipping an arm around my waist and stopping me. He had not yet snapped his jeans and they slid a little way down his hips as he pulled me closer and put his face into my hair.

Drawing a few deep breaths through his nose, he stroked my cheek with one palm and held me in silence for several minutes. I didn't resist, but I didn't relax against him either. This was the point of no return, and both of us knew it.

"Don't go yet, baby," he said in a voice both soft and nearly shattered.

"I have to go."

"Not yet." The rider turned me in his arms and bent to my lips. "Oh, my darlin'," he whispered in between kisses. "You can't leave me like this. Just once more... I want to love you one more time."

"Please... don't..."

"Uh-uh. Not like that. I won't use force on you — don't you want me, Irene? I'll call you anything you like. Just come and love me." His jeans gaped open at the fly as he pulled my hips against his; the warm scent of his body surrounded me.

My hands pushed against his bare chest, my fingertips in the light hair. His voice had a strange note of desolate tenderness. "Won't you tell me you want me, darlin' Irene?"

"I... I..." The burn in my chest nearly choked me. But I couldn't say the words; I had never said them. He was right — words meant a great deal, because some of them were impossible to form in my mouth. If I ever could say them, my transformation would be complete. All I could do was stare into his face, my lips trembling.

"C'mon, lie down with me," Deadman said, moving backwards with his arms around me and approaching the bed. "Kiss me, baby. It's the last time, so let's make it a good one." He nuzzled my throat through my hair. "It ain't nothing but good with you, darlin'..."

"The last time... ?" I echoed.

"I won't ever see you again. I want to remember you like that, Irene. Long as I can. You, all soft and naked and pretty. Hair all around you on the pillow. Your skin tastin' real sweet..."

He followed every phrase with a gentle, penetrating kiss, his hands stroking and tangling my hair. "Damn, you are so beautiful. So sexy — but you ain't a nice girl at all. You know about the things I know — seems like you were born that way. Like you were made for me."

Deadman raised his head and looked at me with an ardor that gained potency by its very hopelessness. "Course, there ain't no such thing. I'm gonna lose you tonight. I wish it was gonna go on a little longer, but that's the breaks."

"Don't you want me to stay?" I cried, suddenly clinging to him. "Don't you believe I was meant to be here?"

"Nah, you ain't." He shook his head with a rueful smile. "You want to get on home to Papa. You don't want to be here at noon tomorrow, anyhow. I'll be gettin' some visitors. Hope I was a good fuck for a couple nights."

"You... you know it's more than that..."

"Too bad, then. I'm gonna miss you. Come an' fuck me sweet, baby." He spoke softly, seductively, letting his Texas drawl sand off the rough edges of his deep voice. "Spread those pretty legs for your ol' Deadman. He's lookin' for a little old-fashioned lovin'."

"Yes," I said. "Yes." He put one knee on the bed and curled down with me.

For the last time, he unbuttoned my shirt and stroked my breasts. For the last time, he stripped me and himself and covered me with his huge body, my toes reaching his upper calves.

His weight sank both of us into the mattress as he raised his hips and rubbed the big head of his stiffening penis up and down the cleft of my sex. "I ain't gonna hurt you if I put it in? Don't lie to me, now."

"You won't hurt me." I clasped my hands around his muscular neck and arched my head back, my body offered up to his. "Just fuck me..."

"You ain't never gonna have to ask me that twice, darlin'," he said with a lascivious growl and kissed me with hungry lips. I was a little dry from the bath, so Deadman wasn't immediately able to find an easy passage. He kept his swelling cock pressed against my vulva while he put his hands on my breasts and massaged them, rolling the nipples between his fingers. His wet hair lay cold on my shoulders.

I looked into his face above mine, studying every line and feature, and put my fingertips to his cheeks. I wanted to remember him; I knew that he was going to

remain with me in my dreams no matter what, but I tried to encompass him with my eyes and hands while I still had him.

His long jaw, his sloped nose, his red beard, the creases around his heavy-lidded eyes, the wide, grim, sensual line of his mouth. All of him — I listed every mark and scar and freckle, the bulky curves of his muscles, the litany of dark images that sleeved his massive arms.

Everything about him seemed made for me as I seemed made for him. I longed for his touch; he was an astonishing bedmate; I knew he had fallen in love with me. And both of us knew that it was impossible. He had his fate and his burden and I had mine. All we had left was one more chance to warm the darkness.

“Deadman...” I sighed.

“Right here, baby.” He lowered his body to mine and took his erection in one hand, working it between my labia. “Aw, feel that. Gettin’ all wet for me...”

“Yes...” He left his penis half lodged in my entrance and ran his fingers through my pubic hair. My clit seemed to spark when he touched it, his calloused fingers stroking my moisture up and around the hood until they slid easily and he could stimulate me. I tilted my pelvis to help him, opening my thighs wide around his body.

Looking down between our chests, I saw his hand flexing between my legs, his fingers large and a little rough but long and even graceful, coaxing my body to respond. My buttocks tightened and relaxed at his ministrations, but the warmth and sensual enjoyment I felt depended even more on the intense, cherishing expression on his face as he watched me.

He loves me, I told myself. He truly loved me for what I was, not just for my body or my sexuality, though that was a great part of the attraction between us. The darkest colors of my psyche were beautiful to him, as his deathly nature was to me. If only I were capable of the emotion that even a demon could feel...

Gradually his cock pressed forward, easing my tight walls apart. Closing my eyes, I rocked my hips to show him the rhythm of my pleasure, and moaned with every slight addition of his length within me. The rider kept rubbing my clit and inner lips; my stomach muscles clenched with my increasing arousal.

Opening myself even wider, I ran my hands down to his buttocks and pulled him inward. Deadman responded with a powerful thrust, my pelvis rolling up and back when he slammed into me. His thick shaft caught at my entrance and I let out a gasp. “Baby?” he said hoarsely. “I ain’t hurtin’ you?”

“Ohh... keep going...” The pinch eased when the rider drew out, and when he surged forward with a groan he sank deep inside my body, my moist, congested tissues yielding to him. I cried out, my breasts heaving.

He answered me with another groan, his eyes closing tightly, and kissed me. Drawing one foot up along his body, I pulled it from under his arm and bent my leg over his shoulder to let him go even deeper, moaning at his still-growing hardness as it filled me. His penis was so big I could feel it bumping my cervix, but after receiving

it so many times over the last twenty-four hours I could now accommodate it more easily.

Deadman began to make love to me, thrusting in and out with my slick juices now smoothing his movements, taking long slow strokes as if to make the experience last forever. Within a few repetitions he was grimacing, his cock rock hard.

The flared rim of the head stretched my entrance when he withdrew almost all the way and plunged back again, balls swinging against my buttocks. I tossed my head from side to side on the pillow, then lay back with a long sigh of ecstasy and felt his body shake.

Although he maintained a slow pace, he seemed overcome with passion, barely able to control himself, and as he took me I stroked his face and beard and watched his restraint grow thinner and thinner. His possession felt wonderful, his cock opening me to the depths with every penetration, but I concentrated on the emotions that provoked his changing expressions and his rapidly less-deliberate movements.

Already his sweat ran freely down his face and he breathed with a laborious, irregular cadence. Almost involuntarily, the rider began to thrust faster, sending quivering reverberations through me from groin to fluttering heart, and a great surge of tenderness for him mingled with the burn in my chest.

“Do you like fucking me, Deadman?” I whispered breathily. “Do you like pumping your hard cock in me?”

The rider moaned as if he were in pain. “God, woman!”

“Are you going to fuck the life out of me, lover?” He was going too fast for me to keep up, but I didn’t care. Knowing that I could send him to such fiery heights was bliss and I wanted to know how violent the inferno could become. “Are you going to shoot that hot load in my pussy?”

He nearly strangled on his cry. “Darlin’... if you keep talkin’ like that, I ain’t gonna last five seconds — !” His hands hit the pillow on either side of my head and he reared up, all his weight on hips and palms.

“Then come in me,” I replied. “Hard as you can.” The rider took me at my word and began to thrust fiercely. Wrapping my legs around his waist, I threw my head back and gave myself up to his savage lovemaking. Bruisingly heavy and fast, his strokes pinned me to the mattress until he howled deep in his throat and climaxed.

“Irene!” he yelled, lashing his head so that his hair whipped over my face and breasts. “God, I lov — ”

I caught him by the ears and kissed him to cut off the phrase. It had slipped out without his meaning to say it, I knew — he had tried to stay aloof as long as he could, and he wanted to be able to let me go.

If everything was spoken between us, if every word that could be said was said, we would never be able to continue on our former paths. Everything would change; as Aitch had described it, the very weather wouldn’t be the same.

Deadman thrust deep and held the stroke; his cock throbbed with the ejection of his seed, my hip joints crackling from his force and weight. He went limp and crashed down on me.

For a few moments I couldn't get a breath, the rider's shoulder blocking my mouth and nose and his weight on my lungs expressing every ounce of air. I couldn't stir him an inch by my own efforts. Massive as the lid of a granite sarcophagus, his body lay still except for his heavy panting.

My vision began to dim, but he roused himself and rolled to the side, his softening penis leaving my body, and eased me out from under him.

Several minutes passed before either of us could speak, and I cradled him in my arms, stroking his hair as he breathed hot exhalations in my ear. My heart thumped hard against him, but there was no answering vibration in his chest.

Thoughts whirling with emotions strange to me, I imagined that I could take some essential life force from my body and share it with him: the only thing he lacked. He and I barely seemed to exist as separate people; we were one entity for a little while, life and death lying in one bed, eternal lovers with a single heartbeat.

SEVEN

Eventually he raised his head and pulled a few strands of my hair out of his mouth. “You’re such a little thing, Irene,” he said through a sardonic grin. “And you knock me down like a real fighter. Every damn time.” The rider settled on his back and urged me over to him, resting my head against his chest. “Sorry. I didn’t give you a chance to come.”

“That’s all right. I wanted you to lose control...” I rose up on my elbows and leaned for his mouth.

“You oughta be careful about that, baby,” he said, chuckling. Our lips met. “Mmmm... you know what?”

“What?... Mmmm.”

“You kiss good.”

“So do you,” I said, throwing a leg on top of him. He put one hand on the small of my back, tucked the other in the crook of my knee and kept kissing me. Our tongues slid together and wrapped around each other; I tasted his warm saltiness with dizzy pleasure and nibbled softly on his lips.

Again I was conscious of a new feeling — a simple delight in a man’s body and in his caresses. I was here because I wanted to be with him and for no other reason. I had nothing material to gain in this bed, nothing but my pleasure and his, no advantage to win nor message to convey but our expression of pure desire and longing.

Glimpsing, so briefly, a kind of connection between man and woman that I had not believed existed, at least for me, all I wanted to do was make him some return for the love he had given to me, though it was almost unspoken and would remain so. Although I had a vast experience in bedding all sorts of men, I began to wonder while wrapped in Deadman’s arms if I had ever realized the true purposes of sex.

His penis, sandwiched between us, began to rise again in slow surges. “That’s a talented cock you have there,” I teased him.

“You just ignore him, baby. He’s got a mind of his own.”

“Now why would I want to do that?” I replied, snaking a hand down to clasp his cock. “Especially whe he gets such good ideas...” Moving entirely on top of Deadman, I sat on his thighs and took his burgeoning erection in both hands, my fists fitting between base and head with room to spare.

With gentle squeezes, I firmed the erection entirely while its owner watched in mild astonishment. I kissed the tip of his penis and rose up on my knees to fit it against my dripping vulva.

"You ain't worn out or anything yet? God damn." The rider shook his head slightly, smiling, and I leaned down to kiss him.

"I know... I can't get enough. Why?"

His lips muffled me. "Well, I'd be takin' a lot on myself to answer that question, darlin'," he muttered when he ended the kiss. "Don't want to brag or nothin'..." I used one hand to hold his cock steady and pushed downwards. Parting me again, his stiff penis entered me to the hilt with one smooth slide.

"Aaahh!" I moaned, throwing my head back and beginning to move on his shaft. "I love... the way that feels..."

"Yeah, I kinda got that impression," said Deadman, grabbing my hips, a few beads of sweat springing out on his forehead. "Irene, I ever mention you are one incredible lay?"

I couldn't answer, occupied as I was with undulating my body up and down on his cock. Riding him, I rose and fell, my buttocks flattening against his thighs when I drove him as deep as he would go.

Deadman kept his gaze level, watching his cock go in and out of me, and slightly flexed his hips at the top and bottom of my thrusts. Although he didn't move much, I could tell he was utterly absorbed in what I was doing; his face looked flushed and his left eyebrow twitched.

He stroked my thighs along their length, curving his palms over my bent knees. Back and forth, his calloused hands sweeping over my skin. Traveling higher, his hands smoothed my waist and sides and breasts.

When he reached to touch my face, I caught one of his big thumbs in my mouth and closed my lips to suck it and twirl my tongue along it. My motions accelerated when I did so, my pelvis rotating around his cock.

The rider chuckled and slid the other hand from my hip to the top of my widely-parted sex, and when he touched my clit, I let go of his thumb and threw my head back so far that my hair pooled behind me on his thighs. Reaching around my head, he flipped my hair forward over my shoulders.

I spread it out to veil my breasts and watched his face as I approached orgasm. With both his cock filling me and his fingers stroking my clit I knew I would come soon, and when he bent his knees and began to move his hips to thrust up into me, I let out a moan.

"That feel good, baby?" he said through a smile.

"Y-yes... ohhh..."

"I love lookin' at your pretty face when you come. I love lookin' at all of ya. Holdin' you while you fuck me." Still working my clit with two fingers, he brushed my breasts with the other hand and flicked the nipples. "I wish I could keep ya, Irene..."

I answered him with a kiss, leaning down to meet his lips and fence with his tongue. The flutters of orgasm caught me by surprise and I cried out into his mouth, my body jerking with a sharp climax. Deadman let me writhe out the last paroxysms, then put his hands on my hips and made me ride him hard, ramming his cock into me from underneath. My sensitive labia and entrance were pulled and stretched and compressed, engorging them with burning blood.

I met every stroke with my own wild movements, panting and gasping and tossing my head. My clit rubbed against the hair at his groin and my breasts bounced, the hard dark nipples tingling and protruding through the veil of my hair.

"That's right, baby," he said through a sensual snarl. "Fuck me good, 'cause yer mine and you know it. Ain't ya?"

"Yes..." I moaned, Deadman's words provoking a great wash of feeling within me and in my hot, throbbing groin. "I'm yours. Take me... I want you so much..." The admission burst from my lips, startling me, and I stared at him as he smiled half triumphantly, half with ardent happiness. He was about to come again as well, judging from the tremors in his body and the way his nostrils flared.

There was something else I longed to say to him, but I wasn't sure what it was. I would never truly part from him — he was an element of my being now; he always had been. I had never felt this way with any other man, and I knew no other man would ever again evoke such emotions.

Never knowing that I was capable of feelings like these, I had few words to describe them, or I might have let some kind of confession tear out of my deepest recesses, the way he would have done a little earlier without my intervention.

But I closed my teeth and climaxed again, feeling my spasms trigger his until we moaned and cried out together, his fingers digging into my hips. Again, for the last time, the rider shot into me, while the waves of muscular contractions shook my body and narrowed my mind's focus to nothing but the man beneath me.

I fell forward onto his chest and into his arms and buried my face against his throat. The rider stroked my hair and my back and buttocks, humming softly in my ear with a low note of utter contentment. I took a long gasping breath, and another, and kissed his throat with my eyes wet.

"Oh, baby, yer cryin'. Don't tell me I hurt you."

"No..."

"Why the tears? You thinkin' about — "

"You. I was thinking about you." That I would never wake to a sunrise in bed with him. That a few moments of physical pleasure was all I could give him. That I had to leave him to his fate, knowing that my passionate lover would inexorably become a monster.

The tenderness and humor of which he was still capable would moulder away, distort into the blackest evil. He would fight, rape, kill, rend and devour without compunction, with appetites even larger than those he had now. The last sight his victims would see was the mocking green eyes that burned in that compelling face.

He would still be a big, handsome man in outward appearance, but within his decayed soul would live only a remnant of human consciousness, if anything remained of him at all. The man would be gone, perhaps truly dead, perhaps suffering still within the shell of his great frame. And I mourned for him.

"I... you're... I'm sorry, it's hard to say what I mean..."

"Don't worry about it none, darlin'." He kissed me with warm lips. "I think I know what yer sayin'."

"Do you?"

"Yep. I can read it in yer pretty eyes."

"Oh..." I hid my face again. "I hope... I wish I could help you. I wish I could do more..."

"Well, I don't think about nothin' but you when you're coming like that, baby," he said with a chuckle.

"I can't think about anything but you either," I said, snuggling my nose against his chest. "Nothing but you."

We lay relaxed for some time until I shook myself out of a doze. "What time is it?"

"Gotta be pushin' midnight, darlin'. You still want to go out?"

"How about you? I'm worried about my Papa, but — "

"Anything to chase those worries away, baby." Deadman took a deep breath and sat up with me. "You better fetch your stuff, if it's still there. If it ain't, I'll beat it out've 'em."

"OK." I began to get off the bed and he put a hand on my arm.

"Thanks, darlin'."

"Oh — " I knelt on the quilt and hugged him, kissing his shoulder. He patted my back.

"I'll come out to the barn with ya this time, Irene," he said with a sidewise smile. "I ain't lettin' you out've my sight until I have to."

I found a comb in the bathroom and worked the snarls out of my hair, then coiled it and used my clip to hold it in a chignon. We dressed and headed downstairs, Deadman picking up his motorcycle saddlebags and throwing them over his shoulder. I located my boots in the front room and put them on as well as my jacket.

"I hope none of them touched my gun, not to mention my bank cards, but if they did, it's my fault," I said. I went out the kitchen door as Deadman opened it for me; he put his long coat on over his denim shirt and tied a bandanna over his forehead to keep his hair out of his eyes. "I can't believe I just left it out there. I don't usually like being separated from my gun."

"He's right here with ya, darlin'," said Deadman, grabbing my hand and placing it against his crotch. "He'll go off any time you pull the trigger."

I rolled my eyes and laughed, but saw his answering grin cover up a resurgent pain. What we had just done had been wonderful, but it still was the last time. Face

changing, the rider pulled me to him with gentle hands and bent down. He gave me a soft kiss with mouth closed, which I returned with a sense of farewell, pressing my lips against his for a few moments.

When we parted his eyes were closed and a slight inward smile moved on his face. My heart constricted and filled again, accompanied by a liquid sensation in my groin.

“Darlin’,” the rider murmured, his eyes opening, and stroked the back of one hand against my cheekbone. The only fire I could see in his eyes at that moment, the light of the exterior floodlights white on his pale face, was the glow of a passion both new-minted and a lifetime old.

We descended the side steps with my arm around his waist and his draped over my shoulders. The rider put the saddlebags on his parked bike and we went up the drive past the garage. It sat dark and silent, no television glowing in the window. Nothing moved except the lazing dog-demons, their tongues lolling out as they rolled in the dust.

“Where are they, anyway?” I asked. “Did they all go out somewhere?” Perhaps Stephanie was having a shopping spree on my credit cards! I didn’t precisely grudge it to her, but I was more concerned about my gun.

“Dunno,” replied Deadman, peering at the dark shape of the barn as it loomed up before us. “Did I put the damn lantern back where it goes?”

He had wrapped me in his coat and swept me up, paying no attention to anything else. “Um... no, I don’t think you did.”

“I don’t think I did either. Shit, I’m gonna bark my shins on everything in there lookin’ for it.”

“We could get a lamp from the house,” I suggested.

He snorted and pushed the barn door open. “Yeah, let’s bring an open flame into a barn full’ve old straw bales. Could be more fun than watchin’ it fall down for the next fifty years, I guess.”

“True. Papa always warned me about fire. Aren’t there any flashlights?”

“Maybe.” Deadman felt the wall to the side of the door. “Hey, the lantern’s here. Somebody put it back.” Clicking the battery lantern on, he turned the beam and sent the light out through the structure.

Everything looked exactly as it had the night before, the rats scattering to the dark corners and into the long shadow of the derelict tractor. I saw my purse still sitting on the workbench, snapped closed over the revolver.

“There it is,” I said, letting go of Deadman and picking my way around the debris. He followed, passing me with a few strides, and before I could stop him, picked up the purse with the apparent intention of handing it to me. “Oh — ! Don’t touch that — !” I ran forward.

“Shit!” he hissed in surprised pain, dropping it back on the workbench. “What the hell?” I grabbed his hand and saw the scorches emerging in the pattern of the

purse's seams. "That thing burned me?" Darting a look at me, he lowered his brows. "You knew it would? What the hell's in there?"

The taped cardboard box was still on the workbench as well, its top open to show the other cartridges. "I — I'm sorry. I should have told you. It's these cartridges. Aitch made them."

Deadman took his burned hand out of my grasp and shook it with a grimace, glancing in the direction of the garage. "Aitch, huh?"

"These are made with silver bullets, he says, and he had them blessed by a priest so they'd affect the undead. He... he made them to kill you."

The rider's head jerked around to face me and I took a step backwards at the look in his eyes.

"That's why I talked to him for a while. He heard the shots in the house, so he knew I had a gun, and I could tell there was something up when he came out here... I mean, besides the fact he was interested in a newcomer..."

I trailed off; Deadman's eyes were slits of green fire.

"You just now gettin' around to tellin' me this? That you loaded yer little gun with bullets made to kill me?"

"Uh... I didn't have a chance to tell you. Well, I mean, when you came in here, that was the last thing I was thinking about."

I saw him run over the evening in his mind, his eyes darting back and forth. "You talked about Aitch plenty tonight, girl, and you had to turn up that little nugget in yer mind while you were doin' so. Why the hell didn't you see fit to mention it?"

"I... I don't know. At the time I was thinking about it, I guess I... I still didn't trust you."

"Didn't trust me?" His face tilted and his expression slanted into something close to malevolent, lip curling up over his sharp teeth. "You thought you'd ever be able to trust the Hellrider?"

I hissed in a breath and retreated again, coming up against the rusty tractor. Where was the man who had not been able to stop himself from telling me he loved me? Right in front of me, that was where, with a look like the devil's own on his face.

The rider took a step towards me and I gasped. Throwing my hands up before me, I felt my heart pound like gunshots. "No —!"

Deadman stopped, squeezed his eyes shut and ground his jaw for a moment. "Sorry, Irene. You kinda sucker-punched me there."

With my fingers pressed to my dry mouth, I watched him consciously rein in his anger. "You told me a little late, but you told me. An' I guess you mean you got Aitch to tell you about these bullets and give 'em to you, which he might not have done otherwise. Right?"

"Yes," I said, still shaking.

"Irene." Deadman put a hand towards me, the burns showing on his palm. "I'm sorry, darlin'." I remained where I was despite his apologetic expression and the abject sincerity in his voice. "I shouldn't've scared you like that."

When he reached out and took me in his arms I didn't resist, though my whole body felt stiff and wary. "Aitch is a goddamn skunk, all right. He's been out here to take a look and he left your things right where they were, 'cause he was hopin' you'd fetch the gun and shoot me. It ain't your fault; it's his."

He put my head on his breast and stroked my hair while my spine refused to relax, my eyes wide as I stared blankly over his arm. "He wants to send me straight to Hell, all right, and he'll do anything he can to get that done, including messin' with you. Guess I'm gonna hafta arrange me a little discussion with that backstabbin' son of a bitch. You realize what would happen to me if I got shot with those?"

"Um... Aitch claimed your soul would fade away into oblivion, since there wouldn't be anyone to take you to Hell."

"Did he now?" said the rider with an angry sneer. "That skunk — he's damn well figured who would turn up to take me. In person."

"What?"

"You think the Devil would miss a trick like that? He'd have first claim on me. If I hadn't been redeemed yet, that is, and I ain't gonna be redeemed. There ain't no angel going to fight Satan for my salvation." He looked down at me, again with a strange, desolate tenderness in his tone. "Guess I fucked that one up, huh?"

"I'll take Aitch's cartridges out of my revolver." I moved out of Deadman's embrace with a little shrug, or perhaps a shudder. "I'll get rid of them." I felt rather than heard him give a deep, slumping sigh as I took the gun out of the purse.

Taking a surreptitious glance over my shoulder, I saw that his head was hanging and his lips tight, sadness haunting his expression. I looked away, heartsick but still uneasy. "Oh, no."

"What?"

"Aitch took the rest of my cartridges." They weren't anywhere on the workbench, or in the storage cupboard, which held reloading supplies. "If I take out the silver ones, I won't have any in the gun. I didn't bring any extra ammunition with me."

"Better keep 'em in there for now, Irene."

"What? Why?" I paused in the act of popping the cylinder.

"I don't know where the skunk's gotten to, or the rest of his damn family, but knowin' about this kinda puts a different complexion on them all being gone at once. There's somethin' up, all right. See, he's taken his rifle." Deadman nodded at the whittled gun pegs, which were empty.

"It's not hunting season," I said with a prickle of apprehension.

"Nope, and I figure he's got more firearms stashed around." He motioned for me to pick up my things. "Let's go. Just be careful how you hold that purse. If any of the

bums show up and things get sticky, you've got a real good deterrent right there in that gun."

I looked at him; he had managed a slight smile. "Turnabout is fair play, you said. Use the damn things the way they were meant to be used. Against undead."

"I'll take the whole box," I said, tentatively returning the smile. "I won't leave them for Aitch, even though he says he can't use them himself." The box wouldn't fit in my purse, so I picked it up and slung the purse on my shoulder. "I guess they should be destroyed... but I can't just throw them away."

"Why the hell not? Drop 'em in the septic tank." Deadman smiled a little more broadly.

"He said a priest blessed them. Obviously they've become holy objects, and..."

A slight hint of derision entered his smile. "Whatever you say, darlin'. Just don't get absent-minded and hand me that box."

Was I being foolish? I realized that the supernatural happenings and atmosphere of the place had stimulated a growing resurgence of my childhood religious feelings, which had once been intense. Since I had discarded my faith in adolescence, my remembered Catholicism was still that of a child: dogmatic, literal, unexamined, with a strong undercurrent of superstition.

Knowing that there were such things as undead, demons, and a Hellrider had done nothing to dispel that. I had a deep dread of what might happen if I simply cast the cartridges aside. Blasphemy and desecration? Wasn't it a greater desecration to have forced a priest to bless something meant for such a purpose?

"Do you... do you think I can put these in the saddlebag?"

"I dunno. If they burn me right through the gun and the purse, maybe not. 'Long as you're holding 'em, I might not even be able to touch you.' The rider frowned at me. "I ain't gonna try it out right now, so don't look at me like that." Turning to the door, he reached for the battery lantern.

I followed, and nearly bumped into him when he halted in the doorway, hand poised at the switch. "What the fuck?" he said, sounding incredulous and angry. His nostrils twitched as if he smelt something on the breeze. "Son of a bitch! It ain't time yet!"

He whirled around and met my questioning eyes. He wasn't angry with me, I knew, but the look burned like acid. "Not time yet!" he hissed, and ran out of the barn. I stood puzzled for a moment, then went after him.

Outside, the dogs had lined up along the drive, tails wagging, and headlights were coming up the drive. A long black car emerged around the bend as we passed the garage and came up alongside the house, a hearse with tinted windows. I couldn't see the driver's face. It pulled into the yard and stopped. Deadman slowed his pace, and so did I.

After a moment, the back opened and a man clambered out, a very fat man with jet-black hair and a small mustache. He wore a black suit and red shirt with a red tie, and under his arm he bore a long rolled-up scroll with irregular edges. One look at

his dark-rimmed eyes and smug triple chins, and I retreated up the side steps to the veranda, fear roiling in my guts and a strange tightness in my throat.

Deadman came slowly past his parked bike and alongside the house, fists clenching and unclenching. He halted at the bottom of the front steps, between me and the fat man, and folded his arms as if tempted to belt him but wanting to restrain himself for the moment. "What the fuck are you doing here?" he said.

"Undertaker," said the fat man in a formal manner, making a bow so slight it was an insult. "I greet you in the name of our mutual Lord and awesome Master."

"Your lord and master, not mine. Go to hell. You got no right to be here."

"Ah, but I have." The fat man indicated the scroll under his arm and smiled a hideous, toothy smile. His voice was eerily high-pitched and sibilant. "Ohh yess. There have been serious allegations made concerning the Hellrider's personal and professional conduct during the last twenty-four hours, ohh yess. Considering the pivotal event that is about to take place, this matter cannot be delayed. And so..."

"Allegations? What allegations?"

The fat man glanced up at the veranda where I stood. "I believe you are well aware of the contractual limitations on your behavior. Both for major and for minor matters, ohh yess."

"Who's accusing me?" Deadman spat. Aitch emerged from the hearse, grinning, and dressed in what obviously had been his Sunday best fifty years before — a rusty dark suit and tie, his hair slicked back. "You," said Deadman, pointing aggressively to him, his lip curling. "You sneaking, belly-crawling — "

"Hey," said Aitch, holding up his palms with an exaggerated air of sober probity. "I only know what I heard. Straight from the lady's mouth." I put my hand over my lips in sudden uneasiness.

"From you, that's rich," retorted Deadman. "Goddamn skunk! Yer white stripe is a yard wide — or is that a yellow streak?"

"Oh, but she talked a blue streak in the barn with me," said Aitch. He looked the rider up and down. "I'm such a good listener, you know. She had a lot to get off her mind. And you ain't hardly got off her since you brought her here. Makes a man sick to his stomach to see a lady mistreated like that." Aitch shook his head with a nasty grin, not even bothering to fake a convincing sense of moral outrage.

"You're a damn liar," said the rider through his teeth. "She ain't told you nothing of the kind." But he glanced over his shoulder at me with the beginnings of misgiving.

I gazed back at him with hand still clamped over my mouth, my eyes wide, and his misgiving began to harden into suspicion.

He tore his eyes away from mine and glared at the fat man. "So. You think I've broken the terms. What's your evidence? Pile of steaming horseshit, I'll bet."

"Unfortunately, my evidence is incontrovertible." The fat man didn't look as if he thought it was particularly unfortunate. "Ohh yess. However, the situation may be resolvable — "

"You mean, I'm immediately released from the contract? That's about the only damn resolution I'm interested in."

"That is of course impossible — but perhaps we could conduct our negotiations in the house?" The fat man made a move toward the steps, but as Deadman didn't seem inclined to step aside and let him pass, he halted a few feet away. "Won't you introduce me to your new acquaintance?"

He smiled smarmily at me; I saw pure malice in his eyes. "I am the Bearer of Indictments, madam."

"Fuck you," Deadman replied with a snarl.

"That, alas, is not the problem. Applied to this young woman, however — "

"Shut your damn face," hissed Deadman. "We'll talk in the yard, and you are going to leave her out of it."

"That is also impossible, Undertaker. She is an integral part of the problem, ohh yess. You are not allowed to have any kind of physical or emotional involvement with anyone, especially not with your charges. There is only one person that you may attach yourself to, as you know — the true, faithful love of your redemption. If, that is, you manage to find her within a few hours."

He smirked. "This commandment you have repeatedly broken in regard to the young woman here present, in addition to many other misdemeanor infractions and major violations."

"Says who? I know my rights — you've got to prove what you say or you can't do jack."

"Indeed, it is my function to establish the proofs. You are not interested in mediation? Then we shall hold a formal proceeding immediately. Is this your desire, as it is your right?"

"Yep. Let's get the stink out in the open."

"Very well. I declare this court to be in session, and will proceed to business." The fat man brought out the scroll, partially unrolled it and began to read. "The indictments pertaining to the case of the present occupant of the function of the Hellrider, also known as the Undertaker. Dated this night of twoscore and ten years since the imposition of the contract pursuant to that function, by the grace and sufferance of our Lord and Master. Herein is contained an itemized list of the accusations, indictments and charges against the aforesaid Hellrider."

He cleared his throat. "Synopsis. It is alleged that the Hellrider has committed numerous offenses against Clauses VII, VIII and XII of the aforesaid contract, and in addition has violated the major terms of aforesaid contract in such manner as to render himself open to a charge of primary malfeasance, subject to immediate termination, or such action as our Lord and Master may deem sufficient and necessary, at his pleasure and discretion alone, or at that of his duly appointed — "

"Fuck that shit," said Deadman impatiently. "Read the charges."

I looked at the irregular edges of the scroll. It seemed to be made of some kind of parchment, a treated animal skin, and was fairly long and narrow with a dark seam up the middle.

“As you wish. Item. The Hellrider encountered this woman, self-identified as ‘Irene’ and now present, at the scene of an accident while in the performance of his duty. He allowed her to take nourishment and transported her to a public place, attested to by many witnesses, although he is well aware that is strictly prohibited for the newly departed while they still linger on the earth.”

“WHAT?” the rider exploded. “She’s not — ”

“Kindly do not interrupt me, Undertaker. This is a formal proceeding. Item — ”

“No! Explain that! This woman ISN’T dead!”

“Indeed, she is not dead now.” The Bearer of Indictments smiled. “But she died when her car ran off the road. It is a treacherous curve, as you know, and your initial conclusion was correct. She was killed. Ohh yess.”

I felt a dreadful throb of blood in my temples and looked at my hands and body in horror. The jolt, the tearing sensation, the flash of light... I had died after all? All this time, I had been dead? Or —

“Undead?” gasped Deadman. “The bastard’s done that to her?”

The fat man inspected his fingernails, his tone slightly evasive. “It has been done before, ohh yess.”

The rider looked flabbergasted, gesturing over his shoulder to me. “But she doesn’t heal. I saw her put a mark on herself last night that isn’t gone yet. She ain’t nothing like me.”

“It is a measure of your arrogance, Undertaker, that you discount the possibility that any other sort of revenant human exists. Because you were made a certain way does not require that our Lord and Master make all of his servants after the same pattern.”

“His servants?” Deadman looked at me with a horrible blaze starting in his eyes; my jaw dropped and I shook my head slightly, trying to deny the accusation that formed in the air between us. “This woman’s one of his creatures?”

“No — ” I said in a strangled voice. “No, I’m not undead. I can touch holy objects.” My heartbeat pounded in my ears, another proof of life. What could the Bearer of Indictments mean? “Like these — ”

Deadman suddenly glanced at the cartridges I had been about to display, and I broke off and hid them inside my jacket. Aitch hadn’t missed the exchange, though I wasn’t sure if he had noticed what I was holding before I concealed it; his sharp eyes went back and forth between us.

“How could I have died in the first place?” I scoffed. “My car didn’t even go in the ditch! All I had was a flat tire.”

"I assure you, madam, you were killed," said the Bearer of Indictments, making an exaggerated bow in my direction. "You have passed through the valley of the shadow of Death. And, obviously, made a return from hence."

"You're lying."

"No, he ain't," said Deadman unexpectedly. "He ain't allowed to tell a downright lie." I looked at him in startlement. "That don't mean he can't find some damn clever ways around it, 'cause he's a devious son of a bitch and I ain't surprised in the least that ol' Aitch has gone and took up with him. But if he says you died, woman, you died."

He looked at me more carefully, again visibly restraining his fury. Perhaps all that held him back from the brink was the thought of his misstep in the barn — he'd bitterly regretted frightening me, though he had looked on me as an ordinary mortal at the time. Was I indeed undead, and if I was, what did that mean?

Of course he recalled that I could touch without harm something that had instantly attacked his sorcery-infused body, but since neither of us knew anything about the cartridges other than what Aitch had claimed, that evidence couldn't be conclusive.

I put my hand on my pounding heart, pressing it slightly in the hope that my lover would remember its living beat against him. But could its action also be a necromantic trick? So recently, we had lain together, sharing everything, and now even I doubted what my motives might have been. He could see that doubt in my eyes, I knew, and his gaze struck into me like a knife.

"I dunno," said Deadman slowly. "It seems likely you're undead. There ain't any other way you could have died and still be eating and drinkin' an' making... and so on. Far as I know, that is, that's the only way, an' I guess I know somethin' about the Devil's methods."

"Er-hem." The Bearer of Indictments cleared his throat somewhat awkwardly, seemingly anxious to get off the subject now that he had introduced it. "In any case, this woman arrived at that spot with a heavy burden of unatoned, unconfessed mortal sin, and so her death alerted you."

"Yeah, something did," said the rider. "That much fits, if she died. I got a call." His first shocked reaction had given way to cautious suspicion; he might have been letting me have the benefit of the doubt, but it was impossible for us to convey much to each other with such an audience, and he turned and kept his back to me, facing the Bearer of Indictments. "What she is now — that's a question. But I do know I got a call."

"Ohh yess. She was legitimately one of your charges, if only for a moment. You arrived and found her there some hours later. That she was no longer dead — ah, technically dead, is immaterial. You believed her to be dead, and so the transgressions you committed are as serious as if she actually had —"

"Bullshit," spat the rider. "Don't give me your hair-splitting legal crap, you devil's advocate. If that's all you've got on me, shut the fuck up and get your fat ass out of here."

“Very well. It is true that this is a venial offense, so we will proceed to more serious matters. Item. The Hellrider displayed a total lack of restraint in reaction to insults made to this woman, inflicting a severe beating on a person not directly interfering with the performance of his duty. Interviews with witnesses point to a possible major violation of the contract, as the mortal sin of anger constitutes — ”

“Oh, come on. These witnesses tell ya ol’ Rattlesnake picked the fight?” Deadman looked around at me. “You gonna back me up here, Irene?” His eyes narrowed; this was a test. “Who took the first shot?”

“Rattlesnake did,” I replied. “Twice, because he tried to hit you with the door before you’d even gotten out of the bar. And he challenged you to the fight.”

With a slanting smile, he turned back to the Bearer of Indictments. “There ya go.”

The fat man seemed undisconcerted. “We will set this item aside as well, then, and proceed to the heart of the matter.”

He began to read again. “Item. When the Hellrider brought the woman Irene to this place by way of the Road of the Dead, it was against her will, again attested to by many witnesses, and with the intention of sexual consummation. Item. He physically touched her and spoke to her in a seductive manner, attested to by a witness.” Aitch’s eavesdropping wife? Probably.

“Item. When she did not respond, he forced himself on her. Although she valiantly resisted, to the point of attempting to kill him to preserve her honor, he attacked her sexually, struck her in the face and raped her.”

The Bearer of Indictments unrolled another length of the scroll, its shape and details emerging more clearly, and I realized that it was made from a human pelt. A woman’s skin, the flayed legs sewn together to form the central seam and the groin still outlined with a patch of dark hair. My stomach roiled, an acid taste in my mouth. The foul hypocrisy of such an accusation written on such a surface!

Deadman was silent for a moment, then growled, “OK, the only thing you just proved is that your whole indictment is crap. *Rape?* Don’t make me laugh.”

The fat man looked up reprovingly. “Sexual contact is strictly forbidden for you, though technically, again a venial offense. But to force it on a defenseless woman is truly beyond the pale.” He looked down again at his piteous scroll. “Item. He repeated the attack — ”

“Defenseless?” snorted Deadman. “A woman who can pull the trigger so quick I hadn’t even a chance to dodge?”

“Item,” the Bearer said again. “The Hellrider repeated the attack, even more violently, and has kept her captive for many hours while indulging in the satisfaction of his lusts.”

Deadman rolled his eyes with a scornful grin, looking sideways at me. “No shit. She just happened to love every second of my lustful satisfaction. That written down in your goddamn scroll?”

The fat man snarled at him, his eyes glowing with a fire similar to Deadman’s, but red in color. “Item. He spoke disrespectfully to the Bearer of Indictments — ”

The rider flipped him off. "Fuck it on a stick, you fat-assed turd. This is bullshit from beginning to end. You're accusing me of rape on hearsay? Why not ask the lady herself what she thought it was?"

"The point being, that she resisted your advances — "

"Sure, she shot me! She still wanted it! Irene's not yer average all-American girl, you understand." He chuckled. "Rape it wasn't, and she's said so to my face."

The fat man returned to the scroll. " — And he denied the truth of the allegations made against him, in the face of all evidence to the contrary. This woman has accused you herself, and the testimony of many witnesses corroborates her."

"Bull. She hasn't accused me of jack-shit."

The Bearer of Indictments unrolled another part of the scroll, exposing the distorted breasts of the flayed skin. "Herein, an account of a conversation between the alleged victim and a witness." He indicated Aitch, who grinned.

"The witness inquired about the shots heard in the house, and asked the woman if she had angered you by shooting you. Her reply: 'He hit me. But he was more interested in finishing what he'd started.' The witness inquired if she meant a sexual advance on your part: 'That's right. It must be the whole reason he brought me here. I said no and I asked him to stop, but he didn't. I shot him. When the wounds vanished and I realized what he was, I was petrified. He dragged me upstairs and... ' The witness expressed concern for her physical well-being: 'Yes, thank you. I'm perfectly all right. He didn't beat me up while he was doing it.' The witness expressed a wish to have interfered with the attack: 'It wasn't your fault. I don't think anything would have stopped him.' A later comment by the witness: 'But he's treated you bad.' The woman's reply: 'Yes, he has.'"

He rolled the scroll and put it under his arm. "What could be plainer?"

There was a long silence from Deadman, who stood with his back to me, his head moving slightly as if he were scanning back and forth with his eyes. His jaw compressed and he swallowed hard.

"Don't forget the shell casings," Aitch put in.

"Indeed." The fat man produced an envelope, which Aitch opened. He held up two shiny brass casings — the ones that had held the bullets I'd fired through Deadman's body. "These were taken from the victim's firearm by the witness at the time of the conversation. A minor point, but a signal piece of physical evidence that corroborates her statement that she shot the Hellrider in an attempt to stop him from raping her." Aitch put the casings away. "What is your answer, Undertaker?"

"Irene," asked Deadman slowly, "did you say all that to Aitch? Did you give him that brass out've yer gun?"

"Yes, but — " He cut me off with a gesture. The fat man smiled and inspected his fingernails.

"OK, it's an accusation," said Deadman. "Could be a hell of a lot plainer, and it ain't proven yet. So ask her."

"Do you formally present this woman as a witness in this proceeding?"

"Yes, I do." He met my eyes with a level gaze. "Tell him the truth, darlin'."

"You are not to instruct the witness," snapped the Bearer of Indictments. Deadman put up his hands to signify compliance, and the fat man turned to me. "You are aware that this is a formal trial and that the verdict will be rendered immediately?"

"... I understand."

"And that nothing but the truth will be acceptable? I caution you, if you cannot speak the truth, it is far better for you that you remain silent." I felt the strange tightness in my throat and nodded, trying to swallow it away. "Very well. Have I read an accurate transcript of your statements to this man?" He indicated Aitch.

"Uh... yes." I glared at Aitch; he quirked the corner of his thin-lipped mouth. "It's accurate as far as what I said, but — "

"And you meant to convey that the Hellrider had sexually attacked you?"

"Well..." I glanced at Deadman, whose teeth were set and eyes directed out into the night.

"The truth, madam."

"I... meant to convey that, yes." I recalled calculating the benefits of getting Aitch on my side and mentally lashed myself. "But I — "

"Do your statements form a factual narrative of what happened between you and the Hellrider? Did you lie to the witness?"

"... No, I didn't lie, but I left a lot out. Can I explain why I — "

"You will confine yourself to answering my questions, madam. Did you desire sexual intercourse with the Hellrider when he approached you with that intention?" I hesitated, and he prompted me. "Were his advances welcome to you?"

"N-no, but I changed my — "

"I caution you again to confine yourself to factual answers. Your later state of mind is not relevant to this proceeding, only the actual incident in question."

"But — "

"I shall not warn you again, woman." His eyes glittered red at me and my throat tightened even more. "You resisted him when he laid hands on you? To the point of shooting him?"

"Yes," I choked, hand to my throat.

"And when he recovered from the consequent wounds, he overpowered you and carried you upstairs?"

"Yes."

"Did he strike you?"

"Yes. Only once. Not very hard." I couldn't form any words but these; my tongue seemed not entirely under my control. All I could speak of was the bare facts, as the fat man had demanded, and the words seemed to emerge spontaneously,

unsilenceable. Deadman was nearly trembling with anger, though it might not have been directed at me.

“Did you consent to sexual intercourse at this point?”

“No.”

“Did you in fact plead with him not to rape you?”

“Yes.” I put my face in my hands.

“Did the Hellrider then proceed to have intercourse with you nonetheless?”

“Yes,” I said, shaking all over. What had I done?

“Undertaker,” said the fat man with unconcealed glee, “you have heard the woman’s statements. Do you admit their truth?”

“There’s a hell of a lot more to it than that, and you know it,” said Deadman through his teeth. “I want to cross-examine her. I’ll represent myself.”

“Very well.” The Bearer of Indictments gestured in assent.

At that moment, headlights lit the trees that concealed the house from the road. The Firebird came up the drive with Shane behind the wheel and Stephanie in the front passenger seat. They stopped behind the hearse and piled out.

Someone in the back seat kicked another person out of the car, who fell to his knees, crossing himself. It was a Catholic priest in a black Roman-collared shirt and jeans, an elderly Mexican man with a fair amount of Indian in him. The large crucifix he wore was ornate in the Spanish style.

Vince emerged behind him holding the rifle and slammed the door, then kicked the priest again for good measure, sending him sprawling in the dust.

“Right on time,” said Aitch to his wife, who approached him with a smile and kissed him. “Everything’s going just fine. Have any trouble?”

“Not really,” she said scornfully, glancing at the priest, who was moaning quietly on the ground. “My Spanish is good enough that I could lure him out of the church, and they got him stuffed into the car in no time. But I burned myself on his stupid crucifix. That is such a crock.”

“Baby get an owie?” crooned her husband.

“Uh-huh. Daddy make it better?” She protruded her tongue-tip out of her mouth with an infantile smile and held up a reddened hand.

Aitch ran his tongue over the wound, glancing meaningfully up at me as he did so. “Baby’s a good girl. You guys keep the mackerel-snapper here until we need him. Don’t kill him or I’ll have your asses.”

“Got it, Aitch,” said Shane, brandishing an automatic. Vince pulled back the lever on the rifle.

I heard the priest begin to pray in a shaking voice as he huddled on hands and knees, and a prickle went over my skin as he recited the Our Father in Latin, the universal language of the traditional Catholic liturgy. “*Pater Noster, qui es in caelis,*

sanctificetur nomen tuum. Adveniat regnum tuum. Fiat voluntas tua, sicut in caelo et in terra..." The Bearer of Indictments hissed and backed away a few paces.

The words were so familiar that they fell into deep impressions in my mind, ones I had thought would wear away with time. They had not, and I found myself silently reciting the prayer with him. "... *panem nostrum quotidianum da nobis hodie, et dimitte nobis debita nostra sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris. Et ne nos inducas in temptationem, sed libera nos a malo. Amen.*" Automatically I crossed myself, clutching the box of cartridges under my jacket and watching the Bearer of Indictments snarl at me.

Another set of headlights lit the trees down by the road, and another car began to come up the drive. Aitch's gaze snapped to it, and he said, "Who the hell is that?"

"Uh... I dunno," said Shane. "Uh... I guess someone was behind us on the road all the way from town."

"You stupid son of a bitch!" yelled Aitch. "That's gotta be the bastard who was askin' around about his daughter! You led him right here!" I gasped in sudden hope.

"Uh... sorry, Aitch."

Up the drive came a black Range Rover with custom plates reading BGMOUTH2. It stopped just past the curve around the bushes, some distance behind the Firebird and almost out of the reach of the floodlights, and the driver opened the door.

A short, stocky man peered out, wearing a Western jacket and black Resistol hat, his eyes mere squints in his round face. Their gaze fell on me through his wire-rimmed glasses, and his mouth opened wide as if to cry out, but no sound came.

"Papa!" I screamed. "Papa!"

I dashed down the steps, past the startled Deadman and the others, and sprinted to meet my father. He leaped out of the driver's seat and ran at me; we collided in the yard with open arms and he picked me up for a moment, almost sobbing. "Honey! Oh, honey! Are you all right? Ah'm sorry Ah couldn't find this place earlier!"

"Oh, Papa!" I clung to him and buried my face in his shirt, smelling his familiar odor of horses and gun oil, and he hugged me tightly. "Papa, I'm so glad to see you!"

"Likewise, honey. Oh, thank God and the blessed Virgin Mary — Ah prayed so hard Ah'd find you safe. Are you all right? Not hurt?"

"No, Papa. I'm fine." I smiled joyfully into his face. "I'm OK. I told you on the phone, I only blew a tire out on the highway and — "

"Ah found the car, honey. It got towed to the nearest garage, and it's a real mess. How on earth did you manage not to get hurt?"

"What? All it had was a flat tire! Did the tow truck bang it up?"

Papa blew out his cheeks for a moment. "The front end was smashed in, honey, and there wasn't any windshield left. They said they had to winch it out of the ditch."

I blinked in surprise. "A truck must have hit it after I left."

"Maybe, but there was blood all over the steering wheel and the floor. Ah about had another heart attack when Ah saw that. You sure you didn't get hurt? If you hadn't left that message so Ah knew you were alive, Ah'd've been tearing my hair out!"

"Blood?" The Bearer of Indictments had claimed I had been killed in the accident. And he had not quite said how I had been raised to life again, if that were the case. In fact, he had evaded the question. "I... I'm not really sure about that. But I'm fine."

"All right, if you say so." Papa lifted my chin with one hand and carefully inspected my face. I was reminded of how the rider had looked at me in the parking lot of the Last Chance when he'd suspected I was alive rather than dead. "Honey — Ah talked to some people at the garage and bar there and Ah heard some mighty odd things. You went with some fellow named 'Taker?'"

"Yes, Papa. That's him." I looked around still clinging to my father and nodded at Deadman, who had come towards us and stood a few yards away. "He picked me up at the car."

I saw Papa's eyes go even narrower as he looked at the rider, an enormous dark figure in his black coat, his unbound hair straggling on his shoulders like stray lamp flames, bandanna over his forehead and his chest half exposed by his open shirt. "You there. Have you been taking good care of this young lady?"

"You could put it like that," said Deadman with a mild sarcastic inflection. "Pleased to meetcha, Pop. Been hearin' a lot about you." Neither man put out a hand in greeting to the other.

"Likewise — that's to say, Ah've heard some about you. Though Ah gather that this is a superstitious portion of the country. Well, if you've done right by my daughter, Ah appreciate your trouble. Honey, how've these people been treating you?" Papa frowned at the hearse and at the Bearer of Indictments, who stood with a slight, patient smile on his face. The family whispered together, their faces unpleasant.

"I'm fine, Papa. Really I am."

"That isn't what Ah asked you, honey," said Papa in a tone I had known from earliest childhood. I felt my face flush; something about Papa's presence always reverted me to eight years old. "You've been here for a couple days now, and Ah have to tell you there are some local rumors about this man, and this place, that Ah don't like one bit."

He glanced around the yard and at the family. "Though Ah certainly am not going to say Ah believe everything Ah hear, there is always at least a grain of truth in that kind of story."

"Can we get on with this?" hissed Aitch.

"Ohh yess, in due course," said the Bearer of Indictments in his eerie voice.

Papa flinched at the sound. His eyes fell on the elderly Mexican priest, who had risen to his feet but still muttered prayers in a desperate tone, and an intimation of suspicion began to enter his face. "What in the name of Jesus, Mary and Joseph is going on here?"

"It's some kind of trial, Papa. I'm a witness — "

"Padre?" said my father, addressing the priest. "Can you give me an explanation of these goings-on?"

The priest burst into a torrent of mixed Spanish and English from which I caught only the words '*demonio*' and '*El Muerto*' many times repeated among nearly incoherent warnings to run as fast as we could. The brother cuffed him and he whimpered and fell silent.

Papa looked peeved and turned back to me. "Honey? Who are these people? Who is this 'Taker person, other than the biggest, scruffiest-looking biker Ah've ever seen in my life?" He dropped his voice only slightly and Deadman pushed his tongue into one cheek and chewed his jaw back and forth for a moment. "You know Ah don't like you to associate with that kind of fellow, and you know why."

"Yes, Papa."

"Ah don't know what it is about motorcycle riders, but they tend to lack a complete set of moral principles and they don't treat women well. Ah have to say, it was unwise to accept a ride from him, honey."

Papa and Deadman exchanged chilly glances. "Though Ah know you can defend yourself, that was too trusting of you. Men are animals, and you're so pretty, so innocent still. You're just a child, really!" Deadman gave him a slow blink and stare with indrawn chin, obviously somewhat taken aback. "Ah hope he hasn't made unwelcome advances to you while you've been here."

"Shee-it," said the rider in disgust.

"Uh... well..." I dropped my gaze and flushed guiltily again.

"Undertaker," said the Bearer of Indictments, who had remained silent until now. "Do you wish to continue your cross-examination of the alleged victim?"

"Damn straight I do," he shot back. "Let's get this goddamn kangaroo court over with."

"No — wait — " I gasped. "Not here!" Papa gave me a strange look. "Can you... can you wait until later? Without my — " I broke off; the fat man's smile had become a vicious grin.

"This court is still in session," he said. "Undertaker, in your capacity as your own representative, continue the cross-examination of the witness."

"All right, woman." Deadman pointed to me with an air of barely controlled impatience and anger. "You wanted it all along, didn't ya? You let down your hair and you kept lookin' at me. I knew you were thinkin' just what I was thinkin' — you wanted me to take you down an' spread your legs. Right?"

I looked at the gathering thunder in Papa's face and at the wide-eyed priest and my tongue clove to the roof of my mouth.

"Come on, woman. Tell the man," persisted Deadman in a harsh voice. "You like gettin' persuaded, kind of under compulsion. I did it just the way you wanted me to, an' you got off so many times I guess I lost count. You loved fucking me, didn't you?"

"What is he sayin', honey?" said Papa in a dangerous tone, his accent thickening.
"This hoodlum's done wrong to you? Is that what he said?"

"Papa..."

"Honey, he said he's had you. Is he a liar, or did he force you? Ah know you're a good girl — you wouldn't sleep with some man you just met, not of your own free will." His expression said 'especially not a man like this'. "Is he lyin'?"

"N-no... he's not lying..."

"No shit," snorted Deadman. "This lady likes it any way you can think of an' probably plenty that ain't occurred to me yet. I had her in every hole she's got!"

"*Santa Maria!*" gasped the priest.

"Oh, honey... !" Papa looked stricken to the heart. "If only Ah'd got here sooner. Ah blame myself. Ah've failed you again, honey. Ah didn't keep you safe." He drew me into his arms and patted my hair, tears in his eyes. "Ah know it's not your fault, sweetheart. He's abused you day and night since he got hold of you? Ah promise you, he won't get away with this."

"N-no... it wasn't... I... he..." I couldn't go on, wrapped in my father's loving arms.

"Does this conclude your cross-examination, Undertaker?" inquired the fat man with a malicious smile.

"No, it don't!" Deadman insisted. "Woman, talk to me. Tell the fuckin' truth!" I looked at him with panicked eyes. "Tell him, dammit!" he shouted at my silence. "Tell him you wanted me!"

I glanced up at Papa, who seemed incredulous, and my tongue remained paralyzed. I couldn't say it. I had said it only once in my life, and to repeat it in front of Papa and a priest — it was impossible, though the world depended on it.

By admitting my desires to my lover, I had begun the final phase of my transformation, but it had been only a few tentative steps down a steep precipice. I looked into the abyss below me, and the fear of the unknown took away all resolve, all voice, all intentions. My long-forgotten religion closed around me like an iron wall. "What the hell is the matter with you, Irene? Tell him!"

"*Irene?*" said Papa. "Why on earth is he callin' you Irene, honey?"

"IRENE!" Deadman yelled. "TELL HIM YOU WANTED ME TO FUCK YOU!"

I hid myself from him and buried my face against my father's shirt, my breath coming in sobbing gasps. Papa held me close, one hand pressing my head into his chest and the other patting my shoulder. I could feel his heart beating furiously against my cheek.

"Honey, Ah'm taking you out of here. Ah don't care who these people are or what they think they're doin'. Let's go to my car." Loosening his grip on me, he threw aside the left-hand flap of his jacket. "Ah've got my Colt, honey, and there's a shotgun and rifle in the rack. They are not going to stop us, you understand? Papa's takin' care of it."

"Yes, Papa," I whispered.

“Irene,” said the rider, his voice shaking.

“*Por favor, señor,*” cried the priest, “do not leave me here!”

“Course I’ll give you a ride, Padre,” said my father. “Don’t run, now.” He glanced from side to side at Deadman, the family, and the grinning fat man. “Take it easy and walk slow. Get in the back seat.”

“Irene,” the rider repeated.

“It would seem, Undertaker,” said the Bearer of Indictments, “that this young woman is unable to corroborate your contention that she willingly submitted to sexual intercourse with you. In light of that failure, the court now finds — ”

“Irene, you have to speak. If you don’t, I’m condemned. You understand that?” I looked around Papa and met Deadman’s eyes. They were all ablaze with acid fire, glowing baleful and green in his twitching face. “Speak now, or I’m done for.”

Desperately, I tried to find my tongue. “I... I...”

“Don’t you say one word, honey,” said Papa, touching the shoulder holster under his jacket. “Listen to me, you foul-mouthed ruffian. You’ve raped my precious daughter. If you speak to her one more time, so help me God, Ah will shoot you dead right where you stand!”

He pulled me to his Range Rover and opened the front passenger door. At his urging I began to get in. The priest dashed over and fumbled with a rear door. When Shane objected, raising his automatic, my father reached into the car and grabbed for his shotgun, giving it a hard jerk to slide the grip and cock the weapon with an ominous ‘shhklick’.

“The verdict of the court will now be rendered,” said the Bearer of Indictments.

“Irene,” gasped the rider, his face going blank with shock. “You can’t go running out on me now! You faithless bitch — ”

“Shut your vile mouth!” yelled my father. “You will not speak that way to my daughter!” He leveled the shotgun.

“What are you, woman?” said Deadman through gritted teeth. “Who do you belong to? What was your job? START TALKING!”

“No, Papa!” I seized the end of the shotgun’s barrel. “He d-d-didn’t rape me,” I blurted out, shaking and stuttering with the awful tension. “I... I resisted, but I w-w-wanted him... to m-m-make me... have-have-have s-s-sex with h-him.”

“Oh, thank God!” Deadman took a sagging breath and tilted his face up to the stars.

“Indeed,” said the fat man. “A game of withheld consent? For purposes of titillation?”

“S-s-something like that...” Papa looked at me in horror. I began to hyperventilate and sob, awful noises accompanying every gasping breath.

“And yet you shot the Hellrider with the intention of killing him. Yess?”

“Y-yes. B-because I was afraid the... p-police would... find me here... if he kept me too long!”

“In other words, your withholding of consent was entirely serious.”

"Uh..." My head spun; I reeled from my uncontrollable breathing. "N-no... I... It wasn't b-because — "

"It is logical to conclude," said the fat man in his horrible piping voice, "nay, it is a fact, that when a woman shoots a man who has made advances to her, she is unwilling to submit to him. Your feeble attempt to exonerate him of the charges, at his instigation, is *prima faciae* absurd and points to either coercion or confusion of mind. Ohh yess. This portion of the victim's testimony is therefore stricken from the record of this trial."

"No — NO!" I cried. "I'm t-t-telling the truth!"

"You can't throw that out!" yelled the rider in utter shock. "This is BULLSHIT!"

"He's drugged you, honey! That's it — Ah knew it had to be something like that!"

Papa dropped the shotgun on the seat, seized my shoulders and looked into my face, pulling down one of my lower eyelids. "He's fed you something!"

"The verdict of the court will now be rendered," said the Bearer of Indictments. "By testimony and his own admission, the Hellrider is adjudged guilty of the crime of rape, which constitutes in one act the mortal sins of lust, anger and greed. He is therefore in primary violation of the contract imposed fifty years ago this night, and stands liable to all penalties, sanctions, and disadvantages appertaining thereto." He clapped his hands. "This court is adjourned."

"YEAH!" whooped Aitch, leaping into the air and shadow-boxing. "Got you, you son of a bitch!" Stephanie screeched with laughter, embracing Shane, and Vince grabbed Aitch's hand and pumped it in congratulations.

"NO!" roared Deadman, swinging a fist in a furious gesture. "This ain't over! That ain't the truth, and you KNOW it!"

"On the contrary. This verdict cannot be appealed."

The rider charged at him. When the Bearer dodged behind the hearse he vaulted over the hood and landed in front of him with a crash. Stalking forward, he forced him to retreat. "Like HELL! It's a goddamn lie! You can't ignore her testimony! She told you the truth! Irene — !"

"Not at all," squeaked the fat man. "It is her former silence that is instructive! If she meant to exonerate you, she would have spoken when first asked! You threatened her in the court's hearing, and she has fabricated an implausible story meant to appease your wrath!"

He paused, his eyes blazing with red fire. "Even if such a story were believable, telling it in such a manner would destroy any impression of its truthfulness. Which it has!"

"I don't care who you are, you piece of shit," hissed Deadman, throwing off his coat and grabbing the Bearer by the collar. "I'm gonna pound you into the dirt until you listen — "

"Aid me!" shrieked the fat man, pinwheeling his arms.

The driver's door of the hearse flew open, and a man stepped out. Huge, muscular, even larger than the rider, and dressed from head to foot in close-fitting red and

black. He wore a mask over his face and his hair was long and straggling. He and Deadman stared at each other for a moment.

"I know you," said the rider. "You were ridin' a bike the last time I saw you."

"I was," said the man in a rasping voice. "Release the Bearer of Indictments."

"And if I don't?"

"The verdict has been rendered. You invite the direct wrath of our Lord and Master."

"Let him come!" shouted the rider, his temples turning red. "Let him come, and I'll smash his face for him, if he's even got a face! What did he do to my darlin' Irene?"

Suddenly he shoved the fat man to the ground, ran around the hearse and came straight at me. "Irene! Tell him again! Tell him —" His eyes blazed green, his flaming hair backlit by the floodlights as he charged; I let out an involuntary scream of panic.

"*El Muerto!*" quavered the priest. "Santa Maria, protect us!"

Deadman broke off, breathing hard and advancing more slowly as I huddled in my father's arms. He began again in a quieter tone. "Darlin'... I know I scared you, and I'm sick about it. You know I'm sorry. I'd never hurt you, darlin' — don't you know that? You gave me everything you had to give, and I'm grateful. I guess I ain't supposed to say how much. But you got to tell him again how it was!"

His deep voice broke; I almost thought he was going to weep. "Why didn't you say it straight off? That you an' me were makin' real love?"

The priest chose that moment to begin another prayer. "*Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum,*" he muttered, quivering in horror at the rider's approach.

"*Benedicta tu in mulieribus, et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Iesus. Sancta Maria, Mater Dei, ora pro nobis peccatoribus, nunc, et in hora mortis nostrae. Amen.*" My father recited the prayer out loud as well, defending me in his arms, his body stiff.

"Irene?" Deadman begged. "Please?"

"She's a good girl," said my father between his teeth. I could feel his frantic heart rate and the sweat beneath his shirt. "She's a baptized Christian, and she's my daughter. She wouldn't ever consent to lie down with scum like you."

"I didn't ask you, Pop," said the rider, turning his eyes to Papa. "I asked her." My father closed his mouth with a snap; he was terrified to an extent I had never seen before. "My darlin'... it ain't too late. Just tell that you wanted it with me. Nothin' more than that. I ain't askin' for you to say that you feel..."

He compressed his lips; his eyes filled with all the adoration he had shown me, mixed with acid fire. "Didn't you want it with me, Irene? Just say yes." I said nothing, mesmerized with both fear and guilt, and yet unable to take my eyes off him. My father's terror and religious dread was contagious — I had always been closely attuned to his emotions, and the tightness in my throat almost strangled me. The abyss loomed below me and I held like death to the only refuge I still had.

"One word," my demon lover prompted me. "Yes'."

I still had the cartridge box pressed against my chest, and I could feel Papa's crucifix in the opening of his shirt. I put my hand on it just as Deadman reached out to touch me. His fingers hovered above the skin of my cheek; he stared into my eyes, pleading silently, and then brushed his palm softly against my face.

I felt only the contact, but a horrid sizzle hissed in my ear and Deadman jerked back with the hellish light flaring in his eyes. Looking in disbelief at his hand, he displayed a new set of burns, black and smoking with a sickening smell. I dropped the box on the ground and it broke open.

"It appears that you have received your answer, Undertaker," said the Bearer of Indictments with a furious squeak, struggling dusty and disheveled to his feet with the huge man's help. "Accept the verdict, and there is still room for negotiation. Resist it further, and there will be nothing for you but the FIRE!" His voice rose to a high-pitched scream on the last word, echoing eerily through the yard and reverberating from every surface.

"Negotiation?" Shane began in an aggrieved tone. "I thought they were just gonna take him an' — "

"Hush," hissed Aitch. "That's why I had ya fetch the priest!" The son shut up.

For several minutes, the silence was oppressive. The family stood tensely by the house, the Bearer and his driver waited by the hearse. My father and the priest seemed paralyzed and I was motionless as well, all staring at the rider. He looked only at his burned hand, his desolate eyes glowing with the flame of Satan.

"So you say she's sent me straight to the pits of Hell," he finally said in a dead-flat tone. "I've broken the terms of my employment, put myself in Satan's absolute power, and I've no more rights than any other condemned soul. You say my mortal sin's given me over to the Author of Sin. A few more hours, and I'd have been untouchable even by the Devil himself. You say this woman's destroyed me."

"That is indeed what I say." The Bearer of Indictments rubbed his hands. "And now. You admit that my bargaining position is immeasurably superior to yours, Undertaker. But the result of your crimes is not set in stone. Shall we go inside? We must discuss the new terms that our Lord and Master has provided for you."

He smiled his horrible smile again. "We are inclined to be generous. Ohh yesss. We have been well pleased with your performance, Hellrider. All we require... is your mortal soul."

"Get the mackerel-snapper," said Aitch to his in-laws, and they began to advance with their firearms.

"I'll make a counter-claim," said the rider, still toneless, his great shoulders sagging. "About the tactics that got used to make me break the terms." It didn't sound as if that would gain him anything.

"No..." I whispered, finally finding my voice. It had all been twisted; my own perversity, calculation and ambiguity of mind used against him in a diabolical design. "No... I never meant..."

Aitch bared his teeth at Deadman and Stephanie tried to embrace all her relatives at once, pulling the family into a tight knot. The rider looked at me and them, putting

us together in one category. His eyes returned to me. "You deceitful slut. I thought — well, I'm a fool. You told me yourself how treacherous you are."

His eyes closed. "I see now. For once that fat asshole's told the whole truth, because you're Satan's creature, and you've done the job you were sent to do. A flat tire on that left-hand curve?"

My lover slowly shook his head. "No more an accident than Aitch's was. In the same place they all died — I should have known. All of you are his servants. You were given to me by the Devil, the pack of you, and you've destroyed me."

He turned his back on me, and I collapsed in racking sobs.

Four white crosses on the embankment of a ditch. Four members of a family, hand picked for a purpose. As I had been? Picked for the Hellrider's service, and for his ultimate downfall? Everyone but Deadman looked at me as I wept, wailing in an agony of regret; Stephanie stopped her ears and a couple of the dog-demons set up a consonant howling. Gradually I subsided, wiping my nose on my sleeve, but the tears kept streaming silently down my face.

"OK, get the priest into the house with the guns," Aitch ordered his in-laws. They seized him and hustled him away from the Range Rover; my father clutched at me, seeming to need my support. He still shook with terror and didn't even seem to recall that he was armed. I'd recovered far more quickly than he, because the strangeness of this place and its denizens had become so familiar over the last thirty hours.

"*I am* that damn good," gloated Aitch. "As for this little lady..." He smiled at me and then looked at his wife, who eagerly pulled guns and boxes of ammunition from the Firebird. "She did good, and it seems she's just like we are. Do we kill her too, or get some use out of her?" He took a double-barrelled shotgun and loaded it.

"Dear God... I didn't know..." I moaned. "Why did this happen? No... please... give me another chance! Please, God!"

"Whatever you want, baby," cooed Stephanie, looking up at him with a worshipful gaze. "You do anything with her you like." Aitch gave me a slow, salacious grin, his eyes glinting reddish in the floodlights. "I wonder if she knows how to cook..."

"Who cares?" replied Aitch, loosening his tie with an eloquent yank.

"No," I repeated, my throat gradually unbinding. Some alien oppression had lifted from me, though everything seemed dim in my sight since the rider had given in to the verdict. The tightness was easing, and the Bearer of Indictments was paying no more attention to me. Now that I didn't matter to his purposes?

My mind clarified with every passing moment. He had done something to me; constricted and limited my speech to the 'facts' of my liaison with Deadman — which added up to a lie. He'd seen that my father's presence would make it almost impossible for me to admit my sexual preferences. And so he had orchestrated this trial to give the appearance of impartiality, when it could not have been more unjust.

The Hellrider had been railroaded; perhaps that was why he still had to be bargained with before they could take his soul. I knew exactly what was going to happen to him: my lover's memories and humanity destroyed, immediately and

forever, and it was my fault. Maybe the Bearer of Indictments couldn't tell a direct falsehood, but like any lawyer worth his salt he could make a lie out of truth and hatred out of love.

A fitting servant of Satan, for the Devil could quote Scripture! Never had the cruel nonsense of Deadman's redemption seemed more obvious, for what had seemed to be something strong, undying, wonderful, a force of light and warmth miraculously generated between two people devoted to darkness, had turned to ashes in a few moments.

A flash in the void, no more, as it seemed to me at that moment were all faith and hope. Evil and despair were stronger than love. Love could not conquer the darkness. I stared at the rider's back, everything that had passed between us washing over me. I knew what my unfamiliar emotions were; now that it was too late, I had no shame, no barriers in my mind, and at last I could call everything by its right name. Too late, I was transformed.

Deadman stood by himself, fists clenched at his sides and facing out into the night. "Why?" he raged in a whisper. He didn't seem to speak to anyone present. "Why? I hadn't had a woman in fifty years, and I had to be tempted? Why? To put the last nail in the coffin of my hopes? To make sure I wasn't going to find my phantom redeemer? You've tortured me for fifty years! When does it END?"

He stamped on the earth, his voice rising to a cry. "Why did you put her there to wait for me? A woman with blood-red eyes, a woman who smells of death? You knew I couldn't resist her!" he howled. "Not when she let down her hair like a waterfall of blood and told me she knew about death! Not when she put those eyes on me and wouldn't look away. A demon temptress who's killed men and bathed in their blood. The only kind of woman I couldn't walk away from! WHY?"

Aitch walked up to me with the shotgun and pointed at my purse. "Drop it on the ground." I brushed the strap from my shoulder and let it fall. He seized me by the arm, wrenching me away from my helpless father.

I braced myself for the sizzle, but there was none; the cartridges lay on the ground and I wasn't touching Papa's crucifix. I had no more protection from the undead.

Aitch smiled into my face, took the clip from my hair and put the shotgun on his shoulder. "Come on inside, ma'am." My hair fell down my back, uncoiling with a soft sound like a whispering voice. "We got us some catching up to do."

With awful clarity, I realized he wasn't bound by any contractual conditions — no one was going to put him on trial for what he meant to do to me. His free arm slid around my waist, the muscles hard as iron under his suit jacket.

"You will accompany me, Undertaker," piped the Bearer of Indictments. "Bring the Hellrider to me," he ordered his driver. The huge man in red and black walked over and laid a hand on the rider's shoulder, but for the moment he didn't move a step, seemingly oblivious.

"Irene..." he groaned, so low I barely heard him. "God, Irene..." He wasn't calling to me; this was nothing but the last spark from the dying embers of his love. Deadman

rolled his head irregularly from side to side, his shoulders heaving as if he were trying to suppress sobs. "You never... wanted me..."

The abyss yawned wide before us. In a moment, darkness would devour both of us and every hope we had ever possessed would be snuffed out forever. Though I knew all effort was futile, I had to rage against the dying of the light. Entirely unprompted, I had to tell him the truth.

With the last of my strength I pulled away from Aitch — I had my voice again, I had some power to move, and without even forming the resolve to descend the precipice, I leaped into the unknown.

"I LOVE YOU!" I screamed. "I LOVE YOU, DEADMAN!"

Aitch's in-laws, who had taken the guns and were heading up the steps with the priest, suddenly froze.

"I never meant to betray you! I wanted you from the moment I saw you. I've wanted you all my life. I love you as I've never loved any man!"

"What?" said Papa.

"Huh?" said Stephanie, straightening up and hitting her head on the frame of the Firebird's door. "Ow! What did she say?"

"I love you. *I... love... you!*"

It was the truth, the searing, agonizing, perfect truth, bursting from me like a life-force torn from my vitals, and the words seemed to change the very nature of the air. Deadman stood motionless, his back still turned to me. He didn't even seem to breathe.

"Stop!" screeched the Bearer of Indictments. "Be silent, woman!"

There was more I needed to say, as if a sweet voice whispered a liturgy in my ear. "I will always love you. I will remain faithful to you unto death. I swear it before you and in the presence of this company!"

The man in red and black suddenly released Deadman and moved away. The rider staggered as if he'd had a support beam struck out from under him, a hand going to his forehead. He lurched around to look at me.

"NOOO!" squealed the fat man with hideous wrath building in his face. "NOOOO!" He shook his fist at me, his eyes flaming red. "Daughter of Eve, beware! You'll regret this, human sow! Your pitiful soul — "

"Shut up!" said Deadman, his expression mixing fury and an extraordinary piercing joy.

"Ohh... fuck," moaned Aitch. He backed away from me as the family stood in shocked silence, the shotgun dropping from his hands. Obviously he knew only too well what had just happened, and the aghast look on his face suddenly slammed it home to me.

I was the Hellrider's redeemer. I was his salvation — I, a woman who had used her body for any purpose but God's before she had met her one undying love. I was the woman he had been seeking for nearly fifty years.

A horrible, ululating cry like that of a bird of prey went up from the direction of the hearse. I jumped, and everyone stared at the fat man's gibbering rage. He danced and shrieked, tearing up his scroll. The bits vanished in puffs of flame.

Screaming to his approaching driver, he opened the door of the hearse and jumped inside; the doors slammed and the hearse reversed down the drive.

The priest broke free from the paralyzed men and stumbled down the steps into the yard. Howling and whining, the dog-demons chased the big black car; Deadman kicked one as it went by.

"Hounds of hell!" he bellowed. "Run back to your master!" Ignoring the family, who milled in confusion around the yard, the rider took three long strides forward, pulled me into his arms and kissed me.

"What the hell is going on?" shrieked Stephanie. "I thought you said we were going to get rid of him! I thought you said you had it all figured out! What the hell happened?"

"Goddammit!" yelled Aitch. "Goddammit!" He caught up the shotgun, leaped into the Firebird and took off after the hearse, making a wide detour around my father's Range Rover.

His wife screamed and ran a few steps in pursuit, but the car was gone. "Daddy! Tell me what she said! Why did the Bearer leave? We've still got the priest — can we — ?"

"No good now!" Vince yelled, seizing her by the hand. "Run! Fore he gets us!" They all sprinted up the steps and vanished into the house, but Deadman had no eyes for anyone but me.

"Darlin'," he whispered, kissing me and holding me close. "Darlin' Irene..." Was it true? Was I his redeemer? Or was he mine? I felt cleansed, burned free of filth again, mind and body new as if reborn, and I surrendered my lips to him with no thought of anything but redemption and forgiveness.

"I love you, Irene... You wouldn't let me say it before. I love you."

"I know, my love," I replied, tears streaking my cheeks. "I love you so..."

EIGHT

Some undeterminable time later, the Firebird returned. The family hadn't left the house; no lights were visible in the windows. My father and the Mexican priest huddled on the ground next to the Range Rover, heads in hands or faces lowered to their knees. Neither of them had said a word in a long time, either to each other or to us.

Deadman and I sat in the yard, I on his lap with his arms around me. He had fetched his coat and wrapped it around both of us to keep us warm, for in the hours before dawn the night had grown cold. We weren't speaking or kissing; we only sat quietly, gazing up at the stars. They glittered white, far above us, and all I felt, for the first time in my life, was peace.

Deadman's hand smoothed my hair away from my face and I rested my head on his breast. Still I felt no heartbeat, and I wondered vaguely what his release from servitude would mean to his undead nature.

Aitch's headlights came up the drive and he stopped the car behind the Range Rover with an abrupt screech of brakes as if he were afraid to pass it or startled that we were still there. I could hear his agonized breathing when he got out, leaving the keys in the ignition to provide for a quick getaway.

"Where's my wife?" he said with an attempt at belligerence.

"Right where ya ran off an' left her," said Deadman with amusement. "What, he wouldn't come back for another shot?"

Aitch moaned; it was almost a sob. "How'd you do it? She hated you!"

"Afraid you got that one wrong, sport," replied my lover, breathing in my ear. "Guess you ain't too well versed in the minds o' women."

Aitch let out another moan. "What are you gonna do to us?"

"I ain't even thinkin' about you," said Deadman. "I got better things to do." He leaned down and kissed me.

"Ah, get a room," snapped Aitch, apparently emboldened, and went swiftly up the drive and into the house. My father finally roused himself, his face pale, and stood up leaning on his car.

"Honey?" he said in a faint voice. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, Papa. Are you feeling better?"

“What was that? Why did you tell him that? I felt... something. It knocked the wind out of me.”

“I know, Papa. It was a condition he had to fulfill, to be released. Obviously the words had a lot of power.”

“What?” he said, uncomprehending.

“You asked me what I was,” I said to Deadman. He looked down at me. “I’m not really sure... but I don’t think the Devil raised me from the dead with black magic.”

“I kinda got that notion, darlin’,” he said with a smile.

“So what am I? What are you?”

Deadman stretched out a hand and looked at it. “I don’t feel so different. ‘Sides the obvious, that is.” The burns he had taken remained on his palm.

“I understand... you’re free, but you aren’t transformed. What happens now? Are you going to exist as undead forever?”

“I don’t know, darlin’.” He kissed the top of my head. “That might depend on you.”

“I said I’d be faithful to you until death, and it was the truth.” I reached up and stroked his cheek. “But how could I say that and have it mean what it meant, unless I’m alive?”

“You got a point there.” Deadman checked my throat pulse. “You sure seem alive to me, and you could handle those cartridges with no problem. That fat asshole never said flat out you were undead — that was me. I think there’s somethin’ else goin’ on here.”

“You must be right. Papa said my car was a mess and there was blood all over... Papa?” I stood up with Deadman and went over to my father, giving him a kiss.

“Honey?” He had helped the groggy priest to his feet and was straightening his clothes.

“Show me your crucifix, please.”

“Of course, honey.” He pulled the chain out of his shirt, the little gold cross and silver Christ tinkling against the gold ring that hung on the same chain, my mother’s wedding band. I took the crucifix in my hand and kissed it, warm from Papa’s body. “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.” Papa put a blessing hand on my head and made a cross on my forehead with his thumb.

“There. You see? I can’t be undead. There’s nothing of the Devil in me; I’d know it.”

“Yeah,” said Deadman, nodding. “So maybe he *was* lyin’ about the accident.”

“No, I don’t think he was. Not about my being killed. Just letting us make assumptions about the manner of my restoration. After all — ”

“What?” said Papa. “Honey, you are making no sense. You’re wandering. Ah have to get you to a hospital.”

"I did have a job to do, and so I couldn't be allowed to end there. The way things have turned out, it's obvious whose purposes I had to achieve. You're redeemed from Hell, and I..."

I sighed quietly, biting my lips. "I have a great deal to be forgiven, if I'm ever to be saved. I can't atone for what I've done — nothing but grace will take away my sins. But... perhaps, I've been given a wonderful grace already."

Deadman's forehead creased, comprehension dawning. "Pop said yer car was all smashed up. But you didn't see it that way, and neither did I."

"No. Your life was saved twice by the Devil, and the way he did it nearly drove you insane. My life was restored... by the Creator of all life. I saw an all-pervading flash of light. A tiny glimpse of ultimate power." A joyous sob caught in my throat. "It wasn't traumatic, and it wasn't meant to be. So I didn't see that my car was wrecked and that my blood was everywhere, and since you and I were there together, you didn't see it either."

"But I could smell it on ya, darlin'. That's why you smelled of death so strong." He glanced at my father, who looked uneasy. "Don't you worry, Pop. Sounds like she's been in the best of hands all along."

"Yes." I raised my face to the dark sky, the stars twinkling coldly down at us. "I'm alive. Truly alive. But for a moment I was dead, and I was sent back. It wasn't time for me to die." I crossed myself, tears blurring the stars, and folded my hands.

"Thank you. Thank you for giving me another chance at redemption." God was merciful... and God was also just. What would I know of God in the end?

"You got a new life," said Deadman in wonderment. "A real life."

"And a new name. I christened myself. You see?"

"Yeah, I think I do. Want to celebrate?" He didn't wait for my answer, but turned to the priest. "Yo, Padre. You got the stuff to do a marriage?"

"*Que?*" he said, apparently shocked into his native language.

"A marriage, Padre. A weddin'. Can you get us hitched?" He mimed putting a ring on my finger.

"*Matrimonio?*"

"Yeah, matrimony. Right here and now. I want to marry this woman. Irene?"

"I will," I said without hesitation. "I'll marry you."

Deadman leaned down to kiss me, but my father's furious objection halted him.

"You're insane," said Papa. "You can't marry my daughter!"

"Says who?" said Deadman.

"Papa, please — "

"Ah will not allow this, you insolent hoodlum," said Papa. "You don't have my consent to this!"

"Papa, I'm thirty years old and I've been married before. We don't have to have your consent!"

"Honey, this man's done something to you. Drugged you!" He grabbed me by the hand. "Come with me. We'll get you to a hospital so you can press rape charges against him."

"*Madre de Dios...*" muttered the priest.

"You mind pipin' down, Pop?" said Deadman with a cold glare.

"I'm not going to do anything of the kind, Papa. Weren't you listening? Leave me alone!" I pulled away from him and backed into Deadman's arms. "I love him. Please believe me. I want to be his wife."

"You met him yesterday! He isn't even Catholic!" yelled Papa, his face turning red. "Roy had his little faults, sure, but he was a good Mass-going Roman Catholic!"

"I ain't convertin'," said Deadman with ironic humor. "I was always a true-blue Methodist."

I rolled my eyes at the thought of a dead man changing his denomination, but before I could respond, I heard a sound of breaking window glass. Deadman and I were facing away from the house, a few yards from the Range Rover, and Papa and the priest stood with their backs against the car. Papa's eyes opened wide and the brim of his hat went up. "Honey! Watch it!"

A rifle spoke, and a round drilled itself into the side of the Range Rover inches from the priest's hip. It wasn't immediately clear to me who Aitch was aiming at, but if the .308 had gone about a foot and a half to the left and hit Deadman in the back, it would have gone clean through his body and mine as well with barely a loss of velocity.

The rider apparently had the same thought, for the next moment I found myself flying through the air as he vaulted over the car with me and pulled me down.

Shielding me, he growled deep in his chest. "Damn! Thought he was whipped!"

Papa and the priest scrambled around our side of the Range Rover in the next moment, the priest grey-faced under his natural tan and Papa sweating. "This is no shelter!" yelled Papa. "He's firing high-powered rounds and they will go right through the car!"

He reached up and unlocked the rear door as another round shattered the rear side window. "Ah need my Remington!" The windshield went out.

Papa jumped up immediately and grabbed the rifle from the rack, narrowly avoiding the next shot. It tore through the broken window and the open door and buried itself in the earth six inches from my feet. "What is that maniac doing?!"

"I think he wants to kill us, Papa."

"Ah got that! What Ah want to know is, why?" Another bullet; a tire sank. Papa jammed in the Remington's magazine and pulled back the bolt.

"I'm not sure he's thought it over all that well!" I looked up at Deadman, who held me sideways with his body between me and the car, presenting as small a target as possible. "Can we get to the bushes?" Between the car and the road was thick brush, but separated from us by about ten yards of open ground.

"Not real easy," said Papa. "He's firing from that upstairs window, so he's got a high trajectory and a line of sight into almost the whole yard. But he hasn't got auto-fire and he can't aim at all of us at once, so if we make a dash — "

"Nix that," said Deadman grimly. "There's only one of us he's really gunnin' for." He held me closer and Papa frowned. "You're the one who messed it all up for him, darlin'. He knows he can't kill me, so he's gonna take you away from me if he can."

"What?" said Papa. "What does he mean he can't be killed?"

"Shoot the lights if ya can," said Deadman. "He can't see in the dark." Papa looked at him for a moment, then angled the Remington over the hood of the Range Rover in preparation. The sixth round hit a wheel and whined off.

"He's reloading, Papa!" I said, but he had already jumped up and fired. BKAM! said the Remington in answer to the Winchester, and the front floodlight went out. Papa pulled back the bolt, fired again and knocked out the one on the side of the house; the yard fell into darkness. Only the floodlight on the garage remained, but it cast little light this far out.

"Nice shootin'," remarked Deadman. Papa didn't reply, and quickly sat down again as Aitch skimmed a new round over his head. I heard him yell from the window, a stream of obscenities in a near-hysterical shriek. He emptied his rifle again as fast as he could shoot, bullets whacking and whining all around us.

The priest jumped out of the shelter of the car and tried to make a run for the bushes. Aitch's last round drilled him through the lower leg and he fell, moaning in pain. Papa and I seized his feet and dragged him back again while Aitch reloaded.

Another bullet tore through the car door and hit Deadman in the back of the left arm, rocking him over so that he had to catch himself with his hands. I felt the shock reverberate in his body and reflexively grabbed the wound, his blood making a slippery spot on the leather coat.

"Ah, shit," said Deadman, letting out a grunt of pain. "Even with the light out, his aim's gettin' better!" Aitch kept firing. "Feels like crouchin' in a foxhole again. Damn, I hated the Army."

"Are you all right?" I gasped, pulling down the shoulder of the coat to get a look at the wound. It was too dark now to see much, but my probing fingers found only a wet patch of skin. The hole had closed already.

"Yeah, it only smarts like hell, and that'll pass." My hands slid over another wet patch on his ribs — the bullet had gone into his body, but there didn't seem to be an exit wound. Papa glanced over, his face nearly invisible in the starlight, but I knew his moods and I could tell he was angry at my solicitude towards the rider.

"Better bandage up the Padre — he's losin' blood." Deadman offered me his bandanna and I took it and tied it tightly over the priest's leg wound. As a field dressing it left something to be desired, but there was nothing else I could do at that moment.

"Ah'll fire at the window next," said Papa grimly. "When he reloads, Ah'll wait for him to get up, and Ah'll take the top of his head off."

"Papa, that won't kill him!" I said. "Not unless you use..." I looked under the car and thought I saw a dim glint in the dust, my eyes getting used to the darkness. The broken box of silver cartridges. "If I could get those for you, you could kill him."

"If you could get what for me? Why on earth won't a .308 do the job?" BKAM! said Aitch's rifle.

"I don't know how I can make this sound plausible, Papa, so I'm just going to have to tell you flat out. Aitch is undead, and so are all his family." I decided not to mention that Deadman was in the same condition — my father already feared and resented him sufficiently. "Wounds from ordinary bullets will heal up in a few moments, but those cartridges out there have been blessed, and they will kill him."

Papa said nothing.

I lay flat and tried to reach under the car; some of the cartridges had rolled here and there, but most of them were still in the box. My arms weren't long enough to let me retrieve anything, though I pushed myself as far under the car as I could go, my face nearly touching the still-warm undercarriage.

"Oh, no — I can't reach them!" Papa's arms weren't much longer than mine and the priest lay writhing in pain from his bullet wound — was I going to have to go out in front of the car where Aitch could see me plainly?

Deadman pulled me out and lay down on the ground himself. "I'll get 'em."

"But you'll be — "

"Never you mind that, darlin'." He shoved himself under the car, his chest so deep he scraped his back on the undercarriage, and lunged forward.

"Nnghhh!" he grunted, his fingers scratching in the dust, and when he touched the box he hissed and involuntarily snatched his hand back.

I smelled his burning flesh and bit my lips in sympathy, but he reached out again, scrabbling with the tips of his fingers, firmly seized the box and shoved it backwards under the car. I dove to retrieve it, and Deadman sat up, the fingers of his right hand curled and twisted with the burns.

"I gotta quit doin' this," he said, clutching his right hand in his left.

"Oh!" I said, nearly in tears. "How badly are you hurt?"

"I'd jump into a fire for you, darlin' Irene." He leaned over and kissed me on the lips. Papa let out a furious breath. "It'll heal. Just takes a normal amount of time, y'know? Give the damn things to Pop, an' let him fire away."

I searched the box by touch and found four of the .308s, handing them to Papa. He ejected the round from the Remington's chamber, popped his magazine and removed four rounds from the top, then put in the silver cartridges and replaced the magazine. He pulled back the bolt to chamber the new round.

"Guess Ah'll have to get him in four shots," he said quietly. Apparently he was willing to go along with what I had said, though I didn't think he actually believed me. "Honey, you have your revolver?"

"No, it's out in the yard in my purse — I never picked it up." I didn't mention my reason — that Deadman could not touch me while I held it.

Papa sighed slightly, counted Aitch's sixth round, and jumped up to fire again. I had half expected that the handmade cartridges wouldn't function properly — who knew how long their maker had held onto them? But Papa's rifle bucked with a heavy recoil and the bullet struck the upper half of the window Aitch was using as a sniper's nest.

"Ah missed — these rounds have a lot of powder in 'em and it went a little high," said Papa, breathing heavily as he ducked down again. Aitch's rifle was silent. "Well, fiddlesticks!" This was as close as Papa ever got to swearing. "He'll be waiting until Ah look up again, and take me out!"

"I'll go out there to draw his fire," said Deadman, getting up on his knees. "He can put all the damn bullets through me that he wants!" Papa seemed startled, but didn't object; he yanked the bolt and got ready to fire, crouching at the back of the Range Rover. "Get set, Pop. Count of three. One, two — "

On three, Deadman rolled out from the shelter of the car and got to his feet, scrambling for the house. I lay flat and put a comforting hand on the priest's back when he moaned. BKAM! That was Aitch's rifle, and he was firing at my lover; I squeezed my eyes shut and prayed.

The Remington answered as Papa stood and fired and pulled the bolt. The next two rounds went off almost simultaneously and Aitch's bullet crashed through the car door just above me. I felt a searing blow to my shoulder and cried out.

Once more Papa's rifle discharged, the report ringing out into the dying echoes of the last volley, and from the house came a bloodcurdling yell and a woman's high-pitched scream.

"Honey?" Papa's anxious voice as he fell to his knees beside me. "Are you hurt?"

"N-not much..." I put my hand to my shoulder and felt blood. "I think it only creased me."

"Thank God." Papa's hands fumbled with my jacket.

"Where — ow! — where is 'Taker?' I thought it unwise to refer to him as Deadman. "Was he shot?"

"Yes, Ah think he was," said Papa with no audible emotion. "But Ah got that maniac in the window. Right through the brisket, if Ah don't miss my guess." Hysterical screams and shouts from the house seemed to confirm the statement. He tore a sleeve from his own shirt and bandaged my wound, then pulled my jacket over it again.

I heard nothing from the yard for a few tense moments — then a muffled curse and a scraping sound, and Deadman limped around the end of the car, dragging one leg.

"Busted the bone when it went through," he remarked, and sat heavily down next to me. "But I think ya nailed him." I felt the blood soaking the thigh of his jeans. "There we go." Deadman straightened his knee and rubbed the spot where the bullet had torn into his flesh.

Someone flung the front door of the house open with a crash; someone else slammed it again and the voices rose higher. A downstairs window went up and an automatic cocked.

KRAK! KRAK! KRAK! The shots went wild or bounced off the car. "Nine-millimeter, I think," said Papa. "Won't do much."

Deadman noticed that I was clutching my shoulder and trying to hold back whimpers of pain, and he turned to me.

"You OK, darlin'?"

I began to reply, the automatic fired again with a sharp report, and my entire field of vision lit up with a yellow-white glare. For a moment, I saw everything clear as day: my lover's face with a startled expression, the priest's shoes, the bare yard with shadows radiating across it as sharp as if they had been cut from black paper.

Then the shock wave hit, the car rocked towards me on its side wheels, and I was knocked into a backwards somersault and flat on my face.

Deadman landed on top of me, huddling me into a tight ball and covering me with his body. Through my closed lids I still saw the bright glare from the house. I hadn't really heard the explosion — my ears were shocked into partial deafness by the blast, and the yells and moans around me were thick and dull.

What had that been? A bomb? Chunks of flaming wood began to fall all around us, Deadman flinching as they hit him. The priest's clothes caught on fire and the car crashed down on four wheels again.

"Holy Mother!" shouted Papa, sounding as if he were a mile away. He rolled the priest over to put out his smouldering shirt and threw dirt on him to smother the flames. "They've blown the whole place to kingdom come!"

"Wasn't on purpose!" said Deadman, sitting up and speaking close to my ear. "Smell that?"

"Gas?" I said.

"So that's what the hell was wrong with the propane tank!" He laughed uproariously, his stomach shaking against my back. "Been leaking all day!"

I gasped, recalling the sloppy job Aitch had made of the valve adjustment. "Oh, no! They're burning in there!" Jumping up, I leaned on the hood of the Range Rover and looked at the house. It wasn't really there any more. Only a collapsed heap of blackened timber, the flames raging in the skeleton of the walls. The barn roof was on fire, as was the side wall of the garage. The whole place was a funeral pyre.

"That'll take care of 'em just as good as a silver bullet," said Deadman with satisfaction. "It collected in the cellar first, I reckon, and the gun touched it off when it got high enough on the ground floor. Rough luck."

He kept laughing. I sank to my knees and crossed myself, saying a silent prayer for their souls. I didn't have much hope for any of them; perhaps there was a chance. But my skin began to crawl, my nostrils trying to close up against a dreadful smell, far worse than the gas or the burning house, which had started to take on a stink of roasted meat.

"What is that?" I quavered, reaching for Deadman. He put an arm around me and clamped me to his hip, putting the other hand on my head as we knelt side by side.

"Quiet," he said. "Padre, if you kinda felt like prayin', now would be a good time." The stench intensified, clogging my throat and wrenching my stomach, and I clung to my lover, who breathed with short huffs through his mouth. Papa dropped his rifle, bent over and vomited. "Yeah, I know that smell. Funny how a smell brings back the memories."

"Memories?" I choked, a hand over my nose.

"Did I say I felt like I was in a foxhole again?" Deadman grinned harshly, his red beard and hair glinting in the firelight. "I may have to introduce ya to an old acquaintance. Met him somewhere in Belgium, December of '44. There was a little altercation goin' on in the woods at the time."

The smoke stung my eyes and rasped in my throat, and the heat from the burning house rippled across my cheeks and forehead until my skin felt half-cooked. My body remained in the shadow of the Range Rover, somewhat cooler than my face, but I didn't want to duck down or turn away from the conflagration.

Four people — all undead, yes, but human still — were withering away in that inferno. Their souls had no remaining place of residence on the earth. No power would fight for their freedom, and though none of them had treated me kindly, I watched the fire with horrified pity for its victims. Was this divine justice or harsh retribution? Was this what God intended for them or the triumph of the Devil?

Perhaps there was nothing I could do for them, but I still couldn't look away. Combined with the horrible smell that Deadman recognized and the dread of what its presence meant, I had a premonition of Hell.

I saw the whole property bathed in orange firelight, the smoke twisting and billowing up in a giant plume. Fragments of wood and miscellaneous contents of the house lay all over, most still smouldering. I saw part of the sofa with the flat springs emerging like bones from the burning upholstery, some scattered pots from the kitchen, the upper half of the grandfather clock.

One indistinct lump of blazing debris lay on the ruins of the veranda, catching my attention for some reason, and when I realized it was a body, missing head, arms, and upper torso, all the terrors of damnation weighed suddenly upon me.

Everything in life would come to ashes, and though I still had a heart beating in my breast, though I had been given a new life, that too would end one day. What would become of my mortal soul? My consciousness of a terrible presence intensified, a personification of darkness and despair and eternal agony emerging from the earth and coalescing around the house like a miasma of all the foulness and decay of countless millennia. The smell became overwhelming, making it difficult to breathe at all.

The side of the garage next to the house was entirely engulfed in flames and the roof was catching; the barn's dry shingles burned like paper. In an hour or less, there wouldn't be a stick standing on the property.

"He's here," said Deadman quietly. "In person." I could barely stand now, my hands clutching the heating hood of the car, and he hunkered down to the ground with me, surrounding me with his arms and speaking in a soothing voice. "Darlin', it's all right. He ain't here for you. He can't take you."

"Not yet," I whispered. "Not yet..." I felt sick to my stomach, my flesh creeping, but at the same time my deepest nature called out to the rank, evil aura of the overwhelming presence. Blackness in my soul: every sin I had ever committed, every crime standing out in red letters against the utter darkness. I had killed, I had betrayed, I had debauched myself.

I gritted my teeth, feeling a horrible arousal, my pelvic muscles clenching and releasing as if I were being penetrated with an invisible appendage. My head fell back against Deadman's shoulder as I arched my body, writhing in abandon.

For a moment I responded to the call. I submitted myself to the Devil and his influence began to enter my mind. "Ohhh!" I moaned, my body jerking at the burning caress of corruption.

The darkest, most powerful lover of all, who would take me entirely for his own, never letting me go as long as the universe lasted. He hovered around me and inside me, insinuating himself within my entrails. He knew me, because I had been his creature in so many thoughts and actions, and some day perhaps not long hence he would call my name. He had chosen me a long time ago. Who or what would defend me against the power of Hell? Not myself. I knew I would give the embrace only token resistance; a little judicious force would propel me into his arms.

"Irene?" the rider said in alarm. "Fight it, woman! He ain't what he claims to be. He's a damn liar! The Author of Lies!"

He held me, kissing my hair and rocking me back and forth as I moaned. Grasping at the protective arms around me, I tried to pull myself from the depths. Only he would defend me; only he could.

My lover had been redeemed from Hell. He had escaped the fire and the darkness, and he had the courage both of new hope and of old experience. I had flirted with the darkness all my life never really knowing what I trifled with. He knew this presence as a longtime acquaintance — I had just met face to face for the first time with the essence of evil.

"Hold onto me, darlin'. Let me help you fight it..." I laid my face against Deadman's breast, finding the opening of his shirt and rubbing my nose against his bare skin. The feel of the crisp hair that covered his chest and the warm, musky scent of him began to bring me back to myself, and I slid my hands under his coat and around his sturdy waist to hold him even closer.

I loved him. I'd met him only the evening before, but he was the man I would love for the rest of my life. The thought of living with him, sleeping every night in the same bed, filled me with terrible joy that was almost dread. He had taken me in a way no man ever had.

My groin clenched again at the recollection of his penis inside me, his hands on my breasts, his lips on mine, and I tried to fill myself with the memory of his love.

Would I be able to stand such bliss so often repeated? Was I worthy of it? Could it ever be again the way it had been these two nights past?

A strange doubt began to creep into my mind: would he even be faithful to me? A man of such appetites, still undead and near-invulnerable, dyed so deeply in blood and horror — what would he be when loosed upon the world? In redeeming him from slavery, had I done the right thing, or unleashed a monster?

“No,” said the rider suddenly. “Shut up.” He wasn’t speaking to me. Again he addressed the air, his face hardening. “I won’t hear any of this, so you can just do what you came to do and get out! I won’t listen to you!”

I realized that the presence was communicating with him as well and I shuddered, but he held me with iron hands. “Shut up! She’ll never betray me! She’ll be true to me, because I’ll snap the spine of any man that gets within ten yards of her!” He showed his teeth in a grim smile. “Get behind me, Satan! I’ll never do your bidding again!”

“Get behind me, Satan,” I echoed, and the awful doubts began to ease. Opening my eyes, I saw my father sprawled on the ground, moaning. He still dry-heaved and choked at the smell, though it began to lessen, retreating back into the earth.

Almost I heard, at the fringes of my perception, a thin chorus of screams: an empty plea to the ether. He had what he had come for, and he had left behind ruin and terror. None of us had rejected him entirely unheard.

The priest lay flat, his shaking hands holding up his crucifix as he prayed. Papa rolled over and struck his fists against the earth, crying out in an inarticulate voice. I thought I heard my name repeated in between curses of a kind I had never heard him utter.

What had the devil said to him? Could he shake it off, or would it insinuate itself into his mind until he couldn’t tell hellish thoughts from his own?

He had lived such a pure life, on the surface; he neither drank nor smoked, and for all his money, he had not taken a mistress in all the time since my mother had died. He never used a four-letter word or a blasphemy, conscientiously keeping his every utterance clean. The epithets he’d used on Deadman were among the strongest I had ever heard him speak, but the language that spewed from him now was as foul as a sewer. “Papa!” I cried. “Papa, are you all right? I’m here!”

“Honey?” he muttered, his eyes scanning frantically from side to side. “Honey, where are you?”

“Right here, Papa!” I broke out of Deadman’s arms and stumbled to him. “Papa?”

“You’re gone, honey! He’s taken you away! No...” he sobbed, grasping at me. “That’s my daughter! My only child, and you can’t have her, goddammit! Ah’ll fuckin’ kill you, you son of a bitch! You’ve abused her and tormented her — you don’t love her! How could someone like you steal a good woman from her family? Give me back my daughter!”

“I’m here, Papa. Please... I’m here. I’m all right; no one’s taken me away.” Deadman loomed up behind me, stooping to put a hand on my shoulder, and my father screamed.

"Nooo! Not you! Not you!"

"Who, Papa? Who are you afraid of?"

"Death," he said, staring at me with wild eyes. "Ah'm afraid of Death. You'll be the death of me, and there's Death himself standin' behind you!"

"Oh, Papa..." I was the one to cradle him now, holding his head against my breast and rocking back and forth.

"He all right?" asked Deadman. "Sounds like the bastard hit him pretty hard."

"I guess he did..." Papa gradually began to calm down, and eventually sat up and looked for his hat. He smoothed his hair back and jammed it on, his expression still a little wild.

"Señor..." moaned the priest. "Por favor, help me..."

"Oh!" I said, suddenly conscious that we had neglected the poor man. "Papa, do you have a first-aid kit?"

"Y-yes... look in the car, honey. Under the back seat." He seemed to revive at the idea of helping someone else, so we got up and went to the priest.

Though conscious, he was in great pain from the gunshot wound in his calf and his burns, and Papa and I worked over him with gauze and adhesive tape from the first-aid kit until the bleeding stopped and he was properly bandaged.

There wasn't much we could do for the burns other than wet them down with anti-bacterial spray. The only painkiller available was a bottle of extra-strength acetaminophen tablets, and Papa consulted the label and gave the priest four pills with a drink of bottled water. I felt my shoulder wound again and took some painkiller myself.

Deadman stood back and watched the buildings burn. Still the fire lit the whole area, and soon the barn roof fell in with a huge plume of sparks. Although the house fire was burning low, the whole garage was on fire by now; the heat felt like mid-day.

Papa lifted the priest as he moaned in pain and helped him to the car. "Easy, now."

"I'd give ya some whiskey, Padre," said the rider, "but it was all in the upper left-hand kitchen cupboard by the dining-room door. I'm fresh out." He gave a half-laugh. "Don't believe it myself, but I'm actually gonna miss that dump. Knew it like my dad's house."

Papa glared at him for a moment, then helped the priest lie on the Range Rover's back seat and got into the driver's seat.

With so many of Aitch's bullet holes in it, I wondered if the car was still driveable. The big .308s might have cut hoses and punctured tanks, though most of them had gone through the passenger compartment. All the glass was gone and the doors and seats sported numerous holes. Even the Jesus fish on the rear bumper had a bullet score across it.

Papa fumbled the key into the ignition and tried to turn the engine over. It choked and stuttered and subsided. "Fiddlesticks," he said, and slumped over the steering wheel. "We've got to get the Padre to a hospital, and..."

“What is it, Papa?”

“Ah didn’t want to say this in front of... well, the people at the garage told me there were state troopers around earlier. Asking about you.”

He glanced at the rider, who smirked. “You know, about the, um, missing persons report. We need to... um... get you to a safe place.”

“I know what she’s done, Pop,” said Deadman. “She told me, so don’t get all mysterious on us.”

“She told you?” Papa glanced at the priest, whose eyes were closed.

“Yep. I got the scoop. Six-barrel divorce.” He winked and headed for the house, which was mostly embers at this point.

“Honey,” Papa hissed, “what did you do that for? If he knows you’re wanted for murder, he could —”

“What? He’s not going to turn me in!”

He slid out of the car and shook his finger at me. “Why on earth are you so sure about that? Now he’s got something he can hold over your head!”

“He loves me, Papa, and I love him. He wouldn’t ever threaten me with that. He knows what Roy was like, anyway!” I turned away from him and followed Deadman towards the ruins of the house, curious to know what he was doing.

He was kicking aside fallen timbers that still glowed red around the edges, apparently looking for something. A gleam caught my eye. “Hey, there’s one of the handlebars,” he said.

“Your bike?” It had been parked right by the side of the house and shingles and kitchen hardware littered the ground, along with large fragments of the outward-blown walls.

“Yep, my bike.” He shot his coat sleeves over his hands and grabbed the handlebar. “Shit, it’s hot. Watch it — it’s liable to spill coals everywhere when I yank it out.”

Deadman seemed to ignore the burns on his right hand, though I knew they must be paining him. With a heave he loosened the debris packed around the bike, and with a few more yanks he pulled the white Harley out from under a big piece of blackened exterior siding. The bike seemed intact, though covered with soot and fire-stained.

“Ahh, my saddlebag’s burned to hell. Lost all my stuff, ‘cept what’s on my back.” He brushed away the charred remains of the leather bags and kicked a half-fused bit of chain with the toe of his boot.

“How did the bike survive?” I asked in surprise. Even the leather saddle and the tires were unharmed.

The rider looked at me as he dragged the bike away from the smouldering pile. “This ain’t your standard-issue Harley roadster, darlin’. It’s had to stand up to a lot in its time.”

“Oh.” Behind us Papa was looking under the Range Rover’s punctured hood and fiddling with the adhesive tape from the first-aid kit; perhaps he had found a ruptured hose. “I suppose an indestructible vehicle has its points!”

“I had it the whole time I was the Hellrider. Now that I’m just an unemployed bum, I guess I still got the wheels.”

“You don’t want to keep it, do you?”

“Don’t know why not. It’s a fine bike.” Deadman set the Harley up in the yard. “Just got to wait for it to cool a little. Won’t take long — I’ve had it red hot sometimes.”

“If you say so,” I murmured, somewhat taken aback. I heard the car hood bang down and glanced over my shoulder. Papa leaned on the car with his back to me, hunching over something he held close to his body.

Click, click, click, went a succession of small sounds; I saw a glint of stainless steel, and I realized he was checking the load in his Colt .45, removing and re-seating the cartridges in the clip.

I thought he must be worrying about running into state troopers; although Papa was a deeply moral man, I didn’t put it past him to defend me from arrest with everything he had.

Deadman came up behind me and put his arms around my shoulders. “All right. We got some unfinished business with the Padre here, an’ then we can figure out what the hell to do next.”

“Unfinished business?”

“Gettin’ married, darlin’. I ain’t lettin’ you slip through my fingers.” He kissed the top of my head.

“Oh...” I actually blushed. “That.”

“You ain’t changed your mind?” He turned me to face him, a serious expression on his face. Papa tried the ignition again and started the engine. “You ain’t gonna try runnin’ out on me again? I see Pop’s got the car fixed.”

“No! Of course not!” I raised my arms to him and he swept me up into his embrace and lifted me slightly, my toes dangling in the air. “I want to marry you. Isn’t that part of the condition?”

“Yeah, it’s part of the condition, but that ain’t why I want you to be all mine.” He kissed me on the mouth, his soft lips and prickly mustache sending cascades of warmth through me. My desire for him began to stir, my body jolting with memories of acute pleasure. “I love you, and I need you bad. You know that, darlin’.”

The engine turned off again. “I want to take you down, baby. I’m gonna lick yer sweet pussy ‘til you can’t stand it no more. I’m gonna fuck you ‘til I can’t move...”

“Yes,” I whispered, kissing him back and running my hands through his loose hair. I couldn’t wait to have his body close to mine again. He was everything to me; I knew I would glory in his bed my whole life long. “Oh, I love you...”

“Take your dirty hands off my daughter, you scum!” My father came running up, shouting in fury. “How dare you touch her?” He seized me by the upper arms and tried to wrench me from the rider’s grasp, hurting my shoulder wound.

“Ouch! Papa!” I protested, startled at his vehemence. Hadn’t he realized yet how I felt about this man? “Let go of me!”

“It’s obvious you can’t protect yourself from him, honey, so Ah am going to have to do it for you!” Papa pulled me away from Deadman, who let go to avoid bruising me. I stumbled backwards and shoved away from Papa.

“Stop it! There’s nothing wrong with me!”

“You’re delusional! Stoned on something! You’re talking nonsense and you have been ever since Ah got here! Ah’ve tried to play along in hopes this would start making sense, but it hasn’t, and we’ve nearly been killed getting caught up in this scumbag’s local feuds! Come with me now, honey. The car’s started up, and Ah am going to drop the priest off at a doctor and take you home.”

“I don’t mind going home for a little while, Papa, but first I am going to marry him. It’s very important that I do so!”

Papa nearly popped a vein. “To his schemes, Ah suppose it’s important! You told him who Ah am, he knows you stand to inherit a great deal of money, and he wants to make sure he gets a cut! Even if it’s annulled in a week, he can blackmail you about Roy! Claim to the prosecutor that you killed your husband so you could marry a filthy *biker*!”

“That is ENOUGH, Papa!” I shouted. “This is the man I love, and I won’t hear — ”

“Where the hell did he get an idea like that?” said Deadman with frowning incredulity. “You listen to me, Pop. I don’t care what the hell you say — I’m gonna marry her if I got to fight the Devil off all over again! I love her, and she’s saved me from Hell. This is MY woman!”

“This is my man, Papa. The one I’ve wanted all my life. I’ve promised to marry him, and there’s nothing that’s going to stop me!”

Papa reached into his back pocket and snapped out his wallet. “Fine. If Ah’m forced to, I’ll buy him off!” He shot me a look that conveyed his intention to deal properly with my lover as soon as he was able. “How much does this low-life want for drug money? Or should I call it ransom?”

“Stop it, Papa!”

“Here.” Papa brandished a wad of bills with a rubber band around the middle. “Ah have five thousand dollars here in hundred-dollar greenbacks. Ah thought Ah might run into some difficulty retrieving my daughter, though Ah had no idea how much trouble there was going to be, or Ah would have brought more! Take it, you piece of filth!”

He threw the money at Deadman; it hit him in the chest and fell to the ground. “Pick it up!” Gasping with anger and shame, I put a hand over my mouth.

The rider gave my father a slow, feline blink, his green eyes glowing, and slightly shook his head.

"Don't you look at me like that, you white trash!" Papa was in an apoplectic rage, shaking his fist and trembling all over. "You have no right to look at me like that!"

Deadman sneered at him and walked up to the car where the wounded priest lay, opening the door and leaning inside. "Hey there, Padre," he said in a casual tone.

"Si?" was the weak reply.

"You feelin' up to performin' a little weddin' ceremony?" He rubbed his beard with finger and thumb, giving me a quirky smile.

"Que? There is no license..." the priest protested. "It is not legal!"

"That's for sure!" yelled Papa. "This is ridiculous!"

"I ain't concerned about a damn blood test! This ain't for the benefit of the state government — it's between us and the Almighty." The rider reached out for me as I approached and held me to his side.

"But... you are *El Muerto*. How can you marry a woman?" I knew the meaning of the Spanish name, and I recalled something I had said to my husband the last time I had seen him. 'No one can be married to a dead man'. I supposed I was about to prove myself wrong.

"Ah've got something to say on that subject as well!" said Papa in fury. "How CAN you marry her? You aren't her kind! You aren't even a fraction of what a son-in-law of mine should be!"

"I can marry her the same way as anybody else, Padre," said Deadman in a curt tone, slitting his eyes at Papa. "Just say a few words, and that'll do the trick. Man and wife."

"No! My daughter will never say vows with a piece of slime like you! It's been a while since you could get out of a rape charge by marrying the girl, even in this state!"

Deadman snarled, his expression baneful, and began to turn in my father's direction. "Pop, you are taxin' my patience something awful — "

"Since you are so insistent," said the priest suddenly, "I must say yes." He glanced at my father and seemed to convey something with his expression, for Papa gritted his teeth and began to subside. "Is there a ring for the ceremony?"

"I don't have one," I said, looking at the indentation on my finger from my discarded wedding ring. "Taker?"

"Nope," he replied, scratching his beard. "That important?"

"Yes, for a Catholic ceremony, but..." I turned to Papa. "I'm sorry about this, Papa. I know you're not happy about it, but this could be the most important thing I've ever done in my life. May I have Mama's ring?"

His hand went to the chain around his neck. "What?"

"Let me wear Mama's wedding ring. You offered it to me once before, when I married Roy, and I wouldn't take it — I guess you know why. Will you let me have it now?" His red face went pale. "Please, Papa."

"Honey, Ah love you. You are my only daughter, but you can't ask this of me. To desecrate — "

"I love you too, Papa. I wouldn't do anything to desecrate Mama's memory. I love this man and I've pledged to be faithful to him. Will you believe that my intentions, at least, are good?" Papa looked at the ground; I thought he was about to cry. "Please let me have the ring."

"*Señor*," said the priest, "will you do as your daughter asks?" Again I saw him convey something with his eyes — perhaps it was an assurance that no harm would come of it. Wordlessly, my father unclasped the chain that hung around his neck and removed the ring from its place with the crucifix, kissed it and held it out to me on his palm.

"Thank you, Papa." I kissed his cheek, which quivered under my lips. The ring was plain narrow gold, slightly worn from clinking against the crucifix for thirty years. I'd held it only a few times in my life, for Papa didn't ever take off his chain, day or night. "I'll take good care of it."

He didn't answer me, and to my surprise, let his chain and cross drop to the ground. "What are you doing, Papa? Why did you — "

"*Por favor*," said the priest. "Will the persons to be married approach?" Deadman took my hand and led me up to the open car door. I handed him the ring and he weighed it in his palm for a moment, then closed his hand around it and put it in the pocket of his coat. Papa moaned and covered his face.

The priest struggled to sit up and I gave him an elbow to grab. "I don't remember all the wedding service in English, I apologize. I must make it from my head. Very short, because my head is not thinking good right now."

"That's all right, Father," I said. "I'm sorry; if it wasn't so important, we wouldn't bother you."

He closed his eyes for a moment, his face grey. A wisp of smoke from the barn drifted over our heads. "We are here to witness this marriage. This man, this woman." His eyes opened. "What is your name, *El Muerto*?"

"My name?" said Deadman. He glanced at me with a smile. "I ain't gone by my christened name in a long time."

"This is a proper time to use your christened name," said the priest with a touch of asperity.

"My name is Luke," he replied more seriously, then smiled at me again. I squeezed his hand.

"We are here to witness the joining in Christ of Luke and Irene. Are either of you already married in the Church?"

"I was married," I said. "My husband died a couple of days ago."

The priest looked a little startled. "There is no obstacle in the Church's eyes?"

"No, Father." Aside from unatoned mortal sin, that was. "May I make confession?"

"Confession? Are you in a state of sin?"

"I don't know, Father. I had better tell you, and you can decide."

"Very well. Will the others go for a moment?" Papa sighed and walked a little distance away, turning his back.

"I heard it all anyway, Padre," said Deadman.

Ignoring him, the priest steepled his hands and recited a formula. "I am ready to hear your confession, *mi niña*."

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned... it is thirteen years since my last confession. I have killed two men... and one child."

"*Que?*"

"Three men raped me thirteen years ago, and I killed them, but I confessed to a priest and did penance at the time. I've committed many sexual sins since then... too many to count. I married a man I didn't love, and he gave me a deformed child. When she was three years old, and the doctors had given up on relieving her pain, I held her in my lap and smothered her. That was a year ago."

The priest crossed himself. "*Madre de Dios.*"

"I loved her, Father. I begged God to take her, and when he didn't, I gave her to Death. I know it was wrong." Deadman put a hand on my shoulder, but for once I held back the tears. "It was murder, and a mortal sin. I've always known that."

"That is a question, *mi niña*."

"What?"

"Who were the two men you have killed?"

"My husband and his best friend, two days ago. That man was my lover, and I confessed to him that I had killed my daughter, and both of them came to kill me. I shot them dead, and I fled here. My car went into the ditch, the Bearer of Indictments claimed that I was killed, and I believe I was returned to complete a task. I was trying to reach my father's house, but this is where I ended up. You saw what happened — I am the Hellrider's redeemer."

"I saw. It is very strange. This killing of your husband and his friend was defense of self, then?"

"I suppose so... but the only reason they wanted to kill me was because of my daughter's death."

"The only reason you took her life was to take her out of pain?"

"Yes, Father."

He let out a heavy sigh. "I can't assign penance for such a crime. It is not a matter of saying many rosaries."

"I know."

"But I can offer a thought, perhaps. God ennobles suffering, the Church teaches us. It is not for us to end it ourselves by taking life. If there is suffering, God has it in His heart for a reason. My English will not say it all correctly, but if you were taught well, you know it."

"I attended Catholic school, Father. I know it."

"Good. But I will say, though it was sin for you to end your daughter's life, she is now with God. You prayed for her pain to end, and it has ended. God does not work directly, as you know. He has His instruments. His messengers. It is not for us to judge God's method, but perhaps you were made the instrument of mercy for your child — that is how it is in English? It does not excuse the sin."

"I..."

"It's only a thought, no more. My head is not good, with the pain. You have a strange fate, it seems, and some of what is willful sin for others may be something else for you. You are an instrument, you have free will too, and you have had strange tasks to fulfill. To redeem *El Muerto* from his damnation... I thought it was impossible." He shook his head. "Do you determine to abstain from sin, *mi niña*?"

"Yes, Father."

"The sexual sin? If you marry, you must be faithful to your husband." He wagged a finger at me in the immemorial way of priests.

"I will be faithful." I smiled.

"I cannot absolve you. Say a rosary often. Ten times daily."

"Yes, Father."

"We got the bases covered? So let's get married," said Deadman with a touch of impatience.

The priest mumbled a rapid boilerplate lecture on the purposes of marriage and inevitably brought up the Church's position on the natural procreation of children. Deadman cleared his throat with a hint of embarrassment; I looked at him in sudden realization and he shrugged philosophically.

We would never have children, of course. He wasn't able to impregnate a woman, any more than Aitch had been able to do so for his wife, and my womb would never quicken again.

A sinking sadness went through me. This choice was inevitable, it seemed, something that had always been meant to happen, but even though I longed to be his forever, it was a choice of death over life. This marriage wasn't like any that God had ever blessed, and I wondered what the ultimate result of it would be.

The priest concluded the homily, which even he seemed to think inappropriate, and took a long breath. "Luke, do you consent to be Irene's husband?" Papa approached again and stood listening, his fists clenching.

"Uh-huh," Deadman replied.

"Irene, do you consent to be Luke's wife? There is no forcing?"

"I do, of my own free will."

"Will you, Luke, take Irene to be your wife?"

"I will," said Deadman.

"Repeat after me. I, Luke, take you, Irene, for my lawful wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part."

Deadman repeated every line until the last, when his tongue stumbled. "Until death — um, death has parted us."

"Will you, Irene, take Luke as your husband?"

"No, she does not!" interrupted my father, apparently goaded beyond endurance.

"Stop this travesty! Stop it now!" He seized me by the arm and tried to pull me away. Deadman turned and backhanded him.

Papa staggered and sat down hard, though I could tell he had been hit with no more than a fraction of the full strength of that arm. The rider leaned over, put his hand on Papa's head, and rolled his eyes back. They flashed white and Papa collapsed in a heap to the ground.

"Papa!" I exclaimed, kneeling to check on him. He was limp and couldn't speak, but his eyes moved back and forth, his expression agonized. "Oh, no!"

"Ah, he ain't hurt much," Deadman muttered.

"Did you have to hit him?" A dark blotch was forming between Papa's right cheekbone and brow; he was going to have a magnificent black eye. "If you can still use that ability, couldn't you have just... ?"

"Sorry, Irene — I got a little mad."

"A *little* mad?"

"I pulled my punch, OK? Nothin' but a bruise; no broken bones. He ain't on his best behavior for a weddin', you got to admit."

I moved Papa into a more comfortable position. The rider took my arm again and we turned back to the priest.

"Go on, Padre." The priest's eyes were wide and fearful, his face blanching even paler, and he held up a defensive hand. "I ain't gonna do nothin' to ya," said Deadman in exasperation. "Just finish up the marriage!"

The priest breathed raggedly and muttered in Spanish for a moment. "Where did I leave the ceremony?"

"You asked her if she'd take me. Come on!" His eyes flared acid green and my heart rate jumped.

"Ah... uh... *Madre de Dios*... will you, Irene, take Luke as your husband?"

"I — I will," I said.

"Repeat after me."

"I, Irene, t-take you, L-Luke, for my lawful husband, to h-have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until d-death do us part." I repeated the vows trembling with emotion, some of which was fear.

“Ego conjungo vos in matrimonium in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti. Amen,” recited the priest, making the sign of the cross, then translated for Deadman’s benefit. “I unite you in wedlock in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

We were married, at least in some sense; I considered the marriage binding, and perhaps Heaven was listening, for all the flaws of procedure. “The ring,” he said, and Deadman handed it to him. He muttered over it in Latin for a few moments. Blessing it, of course — I gasped when he held the ring out again, wondering what would happen when he put it back into my new husband’s hand.

Nothing at all happened. Deadman took my left hand, small and tan in his great pale calloused palm, and slipped my mother’s ring on my third finger. The priest had left out an essential part of the blessing, then, which might have been what he had tried to convey to my raging father. If he’d meant to invalidate the marriage, I knew he hadn’t succeeded. Again, the air had changed.

“You may kiss the bride,” said the priest, and collapsed back into a reclining position on the car seat. My husband pulled me into his arms and pressed his lips to mine.

NINE

“All right,” said Deadman, grinning ear to ear. “I got you, baby. You are all mine!” With another kiss, he ravished my mouth, sliding his tongue past my lips and thrusting it hard in the moist interior, his caresses as lustful as they had ever been.

I pulled away for a moment, then returned the kiss with trembling lips. He was my husband — the thought made me shake with both gladness and trepidation. A man who had served Satan for fifty years; the most vital lover I had ever had, though his body was dead; and I was bound to him for life.

“You love me?” he said exultantly.

“Yes... I love you...”

“Ain’t you happy, Irene? You look kinda queer.”

“I... it’s just sinking in, I guess...” The priest lay flat, obviously about to pass out, and Papa sprawled in the dust with his mouth half open, beginning to stir but still limp and helpless. “Thank you, Father.”

The only light, though it had to be near dawn by now, came from the burning garage and barn, and the air was thick with smoke, hiding the stars. “It’s strange. Everything’s been so strange.” I embraced my husband and held my ear to his silent chest. “Your name is Luke?”

“Yeah, just plain ol’ Luke. Never mind callin’ me that — I probably wouldn’t even turn around if I heard it. I’ve been Deadman so long, and it makes the most sense anyhow.” Papa groaned from the ground; I kept a tight clutch on my husband. “I gotta admit it don’t feel much like a regular weddin’. I know what it needs — we need some goddamn music to celebrate.”

Deadman reached into my father’s Range Rover and turned the keys that he had left in the ignition. The radio went on and he rolled the dial to an FM station. The throaty hum of an electric guitar boomed from the speakers.

“Yeah, that’s a good one,” remarked the rider with a grin. “You know, maybe I should’ve gotten killed in the war a couple times over, but I’m glad I didn’t miss rock’n’roll.” He grabbed me and danced with me, lifting my feet clear of the ground.

*“All right now... baby, it’s all right now
All right now... baby, it’s all right now...”*

"Damn straight it's all right," remarked Deadman. "I got my freedom, I got me a bike, and I got me a woman to hold on in back. What the hell else do I need?" He laughed, the sound falling through the smoky air, and my father groaned again.

The radio faded into another song, a quieter one sung in harmony. By the end of the song we stood silent, holding on to each other and slowly swaying. The station went to a commercial and Deadman turned the radio off. "OK, darlin'. Time to go. Pop's wakin' up, so he can take care of himself."

"Where are we going to go?"

"I dunno." He raised his head and took a sniff of the air. "Sun'll come up soon. I'll head west, I think, and we'll find a motel. Someplace they don't know me. I got enough cash on me to last a while."

"I have a little money with me."

"How about headin' out to California, hey? Want to see the ocean?"

"Yes, I do." I anticipated the sunrise; I wanted to see my husband's face in the full light of day. Dusk, electricity, kerosene lamps and firelight: I knew him only in the dark.

Papa stirred and sat up, knuckling his good eye. "Are you all right, Papa? Can you drive?" He didn't answer, but nodded his head. "You can take the Father to... well, where should he go?"

"There's a doc in town. If he heads back east, he'll find it easy."

"Don't worry about the police, Papa. Tell them you didn't find me, just my car. Maybe they'll believe I'm dead." He got up and stood swaying for a moment, then went to his car, climbed in and started the engine. When I went to the window to say goodbye to him, I rested my arm on the sill and he grabbed me by the wrist.

"Come with me now, honey." He had a low, furious tone. "This charade is over. Ah'm takin' you home."

"No, Papa."

"Not another word, honey. You get in the car." He leaned over, still holding my wrist, and opened the front passenger door. "Now." His purple-black eye lent his face a peculiarly clownish aspect.

"I will not! Have you listened to anything that's gone on here?"

"Child, get in the car!"

"Now you just hold on there," said Deadman evenly. "That woman's my wife."

"No, she's not!" spat my father. "That was not a legal marriage! This is my daughter, and she's coming home with me!"

"You're not taking my wife from me, Papa or not." Deadman reached out for me, broke Papa's grip on my arm and pulled me away from the Range Rover. "She's vowed before God to be true to me, and I'm going to hold her to it." He looked at me. "Get on my bike, Irene."

"You don't even call her by her right name! She is NOT your wife, you ruffian! You've drugged her and raped her and she doesn't even realize it yet! Ah will NEVER let you take her!"

Deadman gave me a gentle push towards the bike. "Go and get on, darlin'."

"Stop!" Papa shouted. "Don't do it, honey!"

"Papa, please... he IS my husband. In my eyes at least." I began to back toward the bike. "And in God's, I believe."

"No!" Papa jumped out of the Range Rover and started for me; Deadman blocked his way.

"Just get back in the car and go on into town, Pop," he said, his voice gaining a dangerous edge. "Yer startin' to get on my bad side."

"Ah... will... NOT... let... you... take... my... daughter," hissed my father. "Never, you dirty biker scumbag! Ah'll see you in hell first!"

"What you plannin' to do about it?" the rider inquired. He held up one huge hand and slowly closed it into a fist. "If I gotta pop you another one, Pop, I guarantee I ain't gonna pull the shot this time."

"Please don't hurt him!" I begged. "Just take me out of here!"

"I dunno, Irene. Maybe I ought to teach him a lesson, hey?" His eyes, when he looked around at me, were blazing. "We better clear this up once and for all!"

"That's my father! Don't hurt him, or..."

"What?" he began in a challenging tone, then saw my face. "Irene?"

"If you hit him again, Deadman — "

"He's a thug. A hoodlum. White trash!" seethed Papa. "Threatening me like that!"

"Aw, dammit!" shouted Deadman. "I'm sorry I have to offer to fight him, woman. But he's been askin' for it ever since he got here!"

"Maybe he has, but he's still my Papa! Papa, please, just get in your car and go."

"Ah won't, honey! Ah'd never be able to live with myself. You know what he's going to do to you! Use you, degrade you with his filthy carcass until he's tired of you, then throw you aside in a ditch. He doesn't love you! All he wants is your body — he's an animal!"

"OK, I've had enough of this crap," said Deadman, and grabbed my father by the front of his shirt. "I am gonna whip your ass, Pop, and don't say you didn't have it coming!"

"Ah dare you to hit me in front of my daughter, you dirty thug!"

"No!" I seized Deadman's elbow. "He's not well! He's had two heart attacks!"

"Then he shouldn't go mouthin' off to ME!" Easily wrenching out of my hands, he swung and socked my father in the jaw. Papa went flying and landed hard on his back. Deadman strode up and stood over him, boot raised, his long hair hiding his face.

"You see? You see?" Papa shrieked, hand to his face. "He's an animal!" My husband kicked him hard in the ribs. "Augghh!"

"You'll kill him! STOP!" I lunged at Deadman and held on to him with both arms.

Papa rolled away and staggered to his feet, covered with dust. His face was swelling and purpling to match the black eye. "Trash! Scum! All you understand is what you can HIT! How long will it be before you start beating HER?"

My husband's muscles swelled with fury and he shook me off. I grabbed at him again and he shoved me away; I fell to the ground and he sprang at my father.

Papa backpedaled, pulling his jacket aside and yanking at his shoulder holster. Deadman came at him, his broad back blocking my view of my father for a moment.

"Papa!" I shouted. "No — you'll only make him angry! Don't — !"

With one hand Deadman seized Papa by the throat. I screamed, trying to scramble up. Deadman heaved Papa into the air and held him out at arm's length, a yard clear of the ground. My hand bumped something in the dust — my fallen purse. Papa's face flushed red, his eyes bulging and his feet kicking in the air.

"STOP!" I screamed. "Please!" Grabbing up my purse, I felt the weight of the gun inside. Deadman's face had transformed with rage once more, his eyes ablaze with hideous, acid, hellish green.

I saw his fingers tighten on Papa's throat and Papa's face turn purple, his lips open and gasping for breaths that he could not draw into his lungs. His hands clawed uselessly at Deadman's arm.

"PLEASE!" I howled. "My love, stop!" My husband ignored me. "You're killing him! You're killing my Papa!"

Deadman turned his horrible eyes to me for a moment, his teeth clenched in an evil, lustful grin. "Oh, no shit?" he hissed. "I reckon I am." He licked his lips.

At that moment I could see nothing of him but the Hellrider, the corrupted, demonic flesh-eater I had known he would become. That I had loosed upon the world. I yanked the gun out of my purse and let the purse fall.

My gun went off as if by itself. I had no conscious thought that induced me to pull the trigger, only pure horror and fear.

Although I hadn't even taken a fix, the bullet hit its target — my husband. It struck his upraised forearm and he lost hold of Papa, who fell to the ground in a sprawl. Three more bullets went straight into the rider's body as he stood sideways to me, hitting upper arm, shoulder, hip. He grunted as each slug struck him, but his focus only slowly came away from my father to fix on me.

"Irene?" Deadman clutched his injured right arm. Shock gave a little humanity to his face; he stared at me, green fire dancing in his eyes. "What are you doin', woman?" The blood sprang from his wounds, soaking his coat and jeans with a cascade of dark red, the streams raining from his outstretched fingers into the dust. The realization streamed over me as well — the necromantic spells that animated his body would not stop the bleeding this time, the holes would not close and

vanish. He seemed dazed, unbelieving. The way Roy had been when I had shot him with the same gun, the last act of a marriage based on treachery.

What was I doing? I had shot my husband with the silver bullets Aitch had made to kill him; I had betrayed him utterly to Hell.

"No... no," I whispered. "What have I done?" I had redeemed him once. I could not do it again, and I had just destroyed his redemption with my own hands. Entirely of my own volition?

Appalled at the implications, I stood frozen, the gun hanging from my limp fingers. Deadman looked at the blood running down his arm and pooling on the ground, only now seeming to realize the extent of his wounds. His face contorted and he howled with pain. I heard a hissing sound, which at first I thought was his breath rasping through his teeth. It was a hiss of vaporizing blood — it literally boiled as it bubbled from his wounds.

Smoke rose from his shoulder and hip, and once again I smelled burning flesh. Though the wounds might not be mortal on their own, some of the bullets had lodged in his body and were searing him from the inside. He doubled over for a moment, staggered and cried out, but didn't fall, his left hand still tightly clamped to his right arm.

"Oh, my God!" I screamed. Deadman looked up at me, the anguish in his face not concealing a desperate appeal. Even with the wounds, he had recovered from the demonic rage in which he had almost killed my beloved father — I now saw my husband again, his human half coming to the fore. He loved me; he begged me for my help. Though I had shot him to prevent him from murdering my father, I loved him with all my soul.

At that moment we forgave one another without words, without reservations. Papa struggled to his feet between Deadman and the car but I paid him little attention — he was apparently all right. Perhaps I could do something — I could probe the bullets out, I could relieve Deadman's pain. I let my gun fall and started towards my husband.

A heavy sound and a whine; the discharge of a large-caliber automatic and a ricochet. The bike shuddered from a blow and Deadman's body jerked. A drop of blood hit my face and I jumped.

Looking down my body, I saw a pattern of red splatters, but I wasn't wounded. In my husband's abdomen, a hand-size crater had opened through shirt and flesh, ragged and dark, and it gushed blood.

He had been shot in the back, the mushroomed bullet blowing a huge hole in his stomach; it had torn through him and caromed off the frame of the bike a few yards behind me.

Deadman's eyes opened wide and he spun around. Papa's big stainless steel, walnut-stocked Colt .45 automatic was still raised, his arms out straight and the gleaming gun braced in both hands.

He shot again. The second bullet hit Deadman's abdomen just above the first, an entrance wound to match the exit wound, and blood sprayed in every direction. He yelled, wrapping his arm around his torso, but still advanced.

I flew to my husband and tried to shield his body with mine. "Papa, no! He'll kill you! He can't be hurt with —"

"These?" shouted my father. He kicked something on the ground — the broken cardboard box. It turned over and some of the extra cartridges spilled out.

He had reloaded with the silver .45s.

I screamed and whirled to embrace my husband. "My love!"

Papa's face was filled with desperate triumph, his cheeks blotchy, his eye blackened and his throat and jaw mottled with darkening bruises. "Those bullets will kill him when nothing else will, won't they? He's a DEMON!" Deadman staggered forward out of my arms, nearly falling, and Papa took a new fix on him. "Fifty years dead, and still walking the earth!"

"How did you — ?"

"Ah KNOW what he is. A monster! Did you think Ah wouldn't figure it out?" His finger pumped the trigger. A third bullet struck my husband in the chest at close range and he stopped dead.

"STOP!" I threw myself between them again. "Don't you know what will happen if you destroy his body?!"

"Ah heard it all from the people around here, and until Ah saw it for myself, Ah wouldn't believe it. His wounds vanish. He can't touch a blessed object. He's the Dead Man. The Hellrider. The messenger of Death and the servant of Satan himself. Ah had to save you from him!" Deadman took another step forward and sank to his knees.

"You don't understand. I had to save HIM from Satan! I pledged to love him and be faithful to him unto death — I've betrayed him, and now you're dooming him to — Oh, God! NO!"

Everything that I had said and done, my profession of love, my transformation, my marriage, my new life — for nothing? I felt the imminent presence of evil and the overwhelming smell of decay. "DEAR GOD! NO!" My husband collapsed prone in the dust and I flung myself at his side.

"He's done for, honey," my father snarled, aiming his Colt. "Get away from him!"

"My love... my love..." I sobbed, covering Deadman's bleeding body with mine, my hands clasped over his head. "I never meant to betray you!"

"Irene..." he choked out, writhing in agony. "I know... but it ain't no good now... he's come back for me."

I screamed at the air as the miasma formed around us. "You can't have him! He was redeemed!"

"I love you for it, Irene... I know you tried..." He howled like a dying animal.

"I won't let him have you. I'll do anything!"

"There ain't nothin' you can do, darlin'..." He rolled a tormented gaze up to me, his eyes all green fire. "I'm goin' to the pits of Hell, and Satan's got his revenge."

"There has to be something I can do. God let me live to save you. There has to be a way!" He only shook his head, his eyes closing. Papa came up to us and grabbed my hair, throwing me away from my husband. I rolled backwards in the dirt and my hand came up against my fallen gun.

"Say goodbye to the miserable bum!" Papa yelled, kneeling and jamming the muzzle of the .45 to Deadman's temple. "Since he won't die fast enough, Ah'm gonna shut him up quick!"

"NO! PAPA, NO!" I picked up my revolver, snapped it into a braced grip and aimed while kneeling. Deadman moaned, a stream of blood running from the corner of his mouth. "Back away from him!"

My father looked reproving. "Honey, you know well as Ah do that you are not going to shoot your own Papa."

"You don't know me at all," I said. "Back away from my husband."

"No, honey, Ah won't. This monster deserves to die for what he's done to you, and if what he says is true and his soul's on the fast track to hell, that's justice!"

"Decock the Colt, Papa. Put on the safety and throw it towards me. Now."

Papa slowly shook his head and rose to stand. Deadman rolled face up, hands pressed to his abdomen, his features wrenching with pain. "Honey, there is nothing that is going to stop me from killing him. Put the gun away."

"I will shoot, Papa."

My father turned and aimed the .45 again as he stood over my husband, drawing a bead right between his eyes. "No, you won't." I saw his finger begin to tighten on the trigger and I fired.

The bullet hit Papa square in the chest and spun him around, a look of pained surprise on his face. Stumbling, he caught my eye for a moment, then fell straight backwards. The spasmodic reflex of his hands fired the Colt on the way down, emptying the magazine into the ground.

His hat rolled away when his head hit and the Colt clanked against a stone. Paralyzed, I watched his hands twitch and jerk and his knees flex briefly, boot heels scraping in the dust. Then he went entirely still.

"You shot yer Pop?" said Deadman dazedly. "Irene?"

The gun fell from my hand, and I let out a whimper. It rapidly rose to a howl, and I screamed in horrible grief, rooted to the spot. "Papa! Papa!"

"Oh... God damn, woman... n-not for me..."

"Papa..." I crawled over to where he lay and fell to my knees. "Oh, Papa..." His eyes were wide open and unseeing, his expression still surprised. I found his crucifix on

the ground before me; he had cast it away after the Devil had spoken to him. "Oh, Papa... oh, Papa... I love you... I'm so sorry!"

I knelt in the dust and wound the chain and cross into his limp fingers, nearly blind with tears. My father, my little daughter. The only two people I had loved from the moment I knew of their existence, and I had killed both of them with my own hands. Could God ever have meant me for this? I closed his staring eyes. "Ohh... Papa, why wouldn't you listen to me?"

"Somebody else... was talkin' too loud," said Deadman in a quiet, weary voice. "Though I reckon he would've shot me no matter what. Oh, woman... you didn't need to kill him for my sake. I'm dyin' anyhow." He coughed up a great gout of blood and spat it out of his mouth.

"Dying?"

"He's gut-shot me twice with that .45, and he's plugged me through the lungs for good measure. Lot bigger bullets than yer little gun. I ain't gettin' up from that." The dying flames showed a huge pool of blood around him, soaking into the earth.

"I'll get you to a hospital..."

"No good, Irene. I've got ten or fifteen minutes left, maybe, and there's no doctor that would do a dead man any good. It don't hurt so much now anyway. I can't feel anything below my heart." His expression changed; he flushed and seemed to listen to an unheard voice.

"What is it?"

"No," said Deadman clearly. "I won't." He spoke to the air, to the curling miasma. "I know what yer promises are worth, and even if it was true, I wouldn't do it."

"Deadman?"

"He's givin' me an offer," he said, staring into space. "He can heal me even now. There's someone coming he can use for raw material, he says. He'll restore my body and let me serve him. I'm still his Hellrider, he says, and he wants me back. I'm still the dark angel of Death. And the first one I can take to him is you."

He smiled, his teeth bloody. "He wants you bad, but you're my woman. I told him no."

Headlights and flashing colors lit the trees by the road. Up the drive came two state police cruisers, lights revolving, but no sirens sounding. One pulled up behind the Firebird and the other beside the Range Rover as if to block it from leaving, and I could see the drivers and their partners taking down shotguns from their clamps.

One trooper got out and shone a big flashlight at the smouldering ruins of the house and the outbuildings, then darted it around the yard. When the beam struck us, it stopped and held position.

Another trooper got out, shotgun trained on me, as I was the only person of the three of us not lying flat. I heard a bullhorn click on.

"You there. Ma'am. This is the state police. Are you Mrs. Roy Famillo?"

"I was," I said, reaching for my revolver on the ground. One bullet left. "That's not my name any more."

"Ma'am, you are under arrest. Let's make this easy on everyone. Lie down and put your arms out to the sides." Someone helped the priest out of the car and put him into a cruiser.

"No," I said, and slightly raised the revolver so they could see it. "Not right now. I need a few minutes, please."

I heard the safety of a service automatic click off. "Ma'am, put down the gun. Throw it over here and put your hands behind your head."

"I have a gun. Aren't you going to kill me?"

"We're not here to kill anyone, ma'am. We want to take you into custody, and we're going to do it now. Throw the gun towards us."

It was too risky to simply point the gun at them and hope that their marksmanship was better than that of the average state trooper. I didn't like the idea of a spray of buckshot — far too much margin for error.

I realized, at long last, that I was going to have to carry out my task myself. No wonder I had always longed for death; I felt only overwhelming peace and joy now that it was so near.

I put the revolver to my head and heard their sharp intakes of breath, nearly simultaneous. "Ma'am, put the gun down."

"Back off, or I'm going to blow my brains out in front of you," I said. Deadman moaned. "I'm not going to try to escape, but I want you to go down the drive and wait at the road. It will only be a few minutes. You'll know when to return."

"Is that man alive?" said one of the troopers. "Does he need an ambulance?"

"No, he's not alive," I said. "Go down to the road and wait, or you get to see me die. If you don't hear anything in five minutes, you can come back. All right?"

"Can we get someone to talk to you, ma'am? Before you do something like that? A member of the clergy, or a friend of yours?"

"No." I thumbed the hammer back with a long, ratcheting click. "All I want is for you to go down to the road and wait. Call the suicide crisis team or something. I don't care." I saw them whisper to each other for a moment, the shotgun still trained on me.

"Look, what is going to happen will happen. It might be better if you can say you didn't witness it. I'm trying to do you a favor here."

They consulted with each other again, then backed the cruisers off a few yards behind the Firebird, keeping us in sight. I heard the crackle of radios as they reported in, realized that was all the space they were going to give me, and turned to Deadman.

He lay with his hands on his breast, staring up at the sky, his pale face streaked with blood.

"My love, tell me something. I've betrayed you?"

"It ain't your fault... maybe you've bought it back anyhow, 'cause you killed him." The dying fire flickered in his eyes. "Oh, my darlin'. I know you loved him..."

"There is one part of your redemption still missing. I'm going to make it come true, and that will free you forever. I know it." I looked up at the lightening sky. No stars, but the sun would come soon. "And... perhaps, this is truly what I was meant to do. I was given a new life for a reason. It's time to give it back."

"What?"

"Don't you understand? I'm not only your redeemer; you are mine. I've committed far worse crimes than you have. You made a foolish vow one night and wouldn't pass up a race. I've taken life over and over, and I need absolution far more than you do. This is what you were meant to do for me. I'm faithful to you, my love, and if I die now, my faithfulness will have been unto death."

Deadman began to speak, but I dropped the gun and laid a finger on his lips. "Hush, my darling. Let me give up my life to save your soul, and perhaps that will also atone for my crimes. God made me the instrument of mercy for my child, and you are the instrument of mercy for me."

I took his hand; he pressed it, his unhuman strength still lingering in his sinews. "This is the only chance I have left of salvation. You can still do it. Kill me."

"No," he whispered. "I can't kill you. I love you." The firelight paled and dwindled, for the sky was grey with approaching dawn, but I knew I was never going to see my husband's face in sunlight as long as I lived. "Irene, I love you... stay with me. Please..."

I knelt straddling his hips, picked up his left hand and put it around my throat. He didn't squeeze; he caressed my face with shaking fingers, his breath starting to come in gasps. I bent down and kissed him, tasting his blood on my lips.

"You're dying. If you die before I've completed my task, the Devil will take you and your soul will burn forever in hell. I won't let that happen. I don't care what will happen to me, but I won't let that happen to you. I love you, Hellrider. I love you, Undertaker. I love you so, Deadman."

"Luke..." he said, so low I could barely hear him. "Please... call me by my name."

"I love you, Luke."

His eyes closed and tears seeped from under the lids.

"I was born of a dead mother. I've killed men. I killed my child and I killed my father. All I've ever brought forth is death. Death is the only thing I've ever loved. I've always loved you."

I moved away from him, picked up the gun again and lay down in the blood-soaked dust, as close as I could get without touching him. My long hair spread out and pooled around my head as I settled into my final resting place. Here was our everlasting bed of earth, our deathbed.

"You've always loved me?"

“Yes.” He was Death, and I loved Death. A pale rider. I knew why he had found me on the road all alone; I knew why he had taken my body for his own. It belonged to him, because he had always been my faithful companion. My entire life had been a love affair with Death. I only wondered why he had taken so long to meet me on the road. Thirty years.

“I’ll love you forever,” I said. “Here I am, faithful to you unto death.”

“Love... don’t die,” he whispered. “Irene...”

“Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now, and in the hour of our...”

I put the muzzle of the revolver in my mouth and closed my lips around it, tilting it upwards until it bumped the back of my throat. I tasted its metal and the tang of gunpowder. I looked at the man I loved lying in his own blood on the ground, his green eyes fixed on me, his burning tears running down his face, his acid fire nearly washed clean. He had never looked so human.

And as the sun touched the tops of the trees, just revealing itself to the world, I pulled the trigger.



END