

Final Hour

by Dean Ray Koontz, 1945-

Published: 2015



Table of Contents

Chapter 1 ...	Unwanted Knowledge.
Chapter 2 ...	Wipeout Without Nose Guard.
Chapter 3 ...	Share a Kiss or Kick Some Butt?
Chapter 4 ...	Where She Walks, the Earth is Scorched.
Chapter 5 ...	The Necessary Computer Wiz.
Chapter 6 ...	Ursula and the Evil Twin.
Chapter 7 ...	She Walks in Beauty Like a Polyester Resin.
Chapter 8 ...	The Shooter and the Shot.

Chapter 9 ...	Your Only Reliable Resource in Times of Crisis.
Chapter 10 ...	A Pause in the Day's Occupations that is known as the Children's Hour.
Chapter 11 ...	Happy Families are all alike.
Chapter 12 ...	The Final Hour.

* * * * *

Final Hour is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.



Chapter 1

Unwanted Knowledge.

That September day, an offshore breeze polished the glassy breakers, which were sweet ten-footers pumping in powerful sets, and though Makani wanted to be surfing, a chance encounter with a wicked woman left her riding instead waves of dread and chaos.

Morning broke over scattered reefs of eastern clouds painted coral-rose by the early light. From the high hills graced with fine houses pinked and gilded by the sun to the harbor where thousands of sleek vessels were moored, Newport Beach seemed to assemble itself from sunlight, as if it were a Fata Morgana, too beautiful to be other than a mirage.

Some men said that Makani Hisoka-O'Brien was also too beautiful to be true, but she was real enough: at twenty-six already a local surfing legend, an entrepreneur whose car-customizing shop booked all the work that it could handle, a hot-rod aficionado who could build a stylish street-eating machine from the ground up, a woman with a secret that distanced her from those she loved and that for a long time had made the prospect of a lover too dangerous to contemplate.

The problem with being real was that reality kept intruding on a life that, to others, seemed like a dream. After walking her black Labrador, Bob, at first light, she and the dog went to her office at Wheels Within Wheels. Patience was the

heart of hoping, and good Bob had a heroic capacity for hope, watching his mistress adoringly as she reviewed accounts payable, in expectation of a touch or treat, and then padding along at her side when she toured the sprawling shop to determine what progress had been made on the four current jobs. The primo was a sleek root-beer-red '49 Ford Tudor that had been given a 1.5-inch chop, a two-inch nose rake, a five-inch deck-lid extension, a custom grille, and enough tasteful sparkle to out-bling a Rose Parade float.

When her employees arrived, a couple of them had problems to share with her. They were good people, hard workers, gifted stylists and mechanics, but they were human and, as such, had their worries and dissatisfactions. In addition to being the boss, Makani had to listen and sympathize, offer considered opinions, provide thoughtful counseling, and have a ready purse. Financial crises arose, children fell into trouble, wives and husbands cheated, beloved parents died, and to one degree or another, her employees' problems were her own.

More than she realized, those who worked with her thought of her as unusually caring. Although there was a sense of family among those at Wheels Within Wheels, though Makani was seen as a generous person and emotionally available, everyone remained aware that she was physically reserved. Except with Bob, she wasn't a toucher and had a sense of personal space that she maintained by countless small strategies and evasions. The theory that she might be gay, physically available and fully comfortable only with women, came and receded and returned, but no one was ever convinced of that. Perhaps she'd been badly hurt by a man too foolish to see what a treasure he had in her. Perhaps she had suffered a loss so terrible that she couldn't talk about it; and now she saw herself as a widow forever. New theories bloomed from time to time, and withered, and all were wrong.

Her gift, her curse—she knew not which—was that by a touch, skin on skin, she saw the other person's darkest secret or whatever hatred or acidic envy or unworthy desire corroded his soul at that moment. If violence coiled in the other's heart, Makani felt it as sharp as a serpent's bite. Usually, their angers and jealousies and resentments were petty, but too often seeing just pettiness in their minds diminished her opinion of those she read, until the mere act of touching threatened to deny her the blessings of friendship and leave her isolated. Being able to read their minds entire or to see some of their worthier thoughts might have helped, but she was wired to receive only their darkest emotions and wickedest desires.

Her one defense was a certain physical distance, an enforced personal space that made others wonder about her reticence.

By the time she and Bob left Wheels Within Wheels, shortly before 11:00 that morning, her longing for the ocean was no less compelling than it had been when she had awakened to see the painted clouds and the gold-leafed morning light. Her shop was inland from the harbor, but in minutes she could be on Balboa Peninsula. At the peninsula point was a surfing destination called the Wedge, where the Pacific often mounted powerfully to the shore. In extreme conditions, surfers had died on the rocks of the channel-entrance breakwater, so that when she dared those waves, she felt the mortal challenge in her bones, felt the bond of

all those who lived for the love of the ride and who felt the truth of eternity most vividly when they were as one with the eternal sea.

From her ideal Hawaiian childhood on the island of Oahu until now, Makani's best friend had been the ocean, which concealed nothing worse than sharks and rip currents. It possessed no capacity for calculated deceit. Even Bob, for all his sweetness and loyalty, had an agenda of his own, but the sea had none.

On any other day, with her surfboard already slung in a padded vinyl case in the backseat, she might have left Bob in the care of her employees, might have driven her street rod—a fully customized, glossy black '54 Chevrolet Bel Air—straight to the Wedge. But that evening she would be having a man to dinner, the first hope of romance in a long lonely time, in fact the best chance ever, and she had preparations to make.

Bob rode shotgun.

Instead of the Wedge, she allowed herself a quick drive to the part of Corona Del Mar that locals called the Village, stopped for a large latte, curbed her car on Ocean Boulevard, and sat with Bob on a bench in the seaside park. She watched formations of pelicans ply the air with only a rare beating of wings, dolphins schooling south through the sun-sequined deeps, and glassy surf breaking on the beach, leaving filigrees of foam upon the ebbing water.

Having finished the latte, she disposed of the cup in a trash can and, with Bob on a leash, headed back toward her car, which was when she spared a young woman from a serious fall and, by doing so, brought darkness into the day.

The stranger was about thirty, a blonde in a baseball cap, a well-filled yellow tank top, cunningly tailored white shorts, and running shoes: a variety of eye candy not uncommon to the wealthy neighborhoods of Newport. With an iPod clipped to her belt, a wire trailing to her left ear, she maintained the remorseless stride of a girl who knew the profound social and financial value of well-toned muscles, who yet had miles to go before she would allow herself a lunch of cantaloupe and thin slices of Italian ham. Her expression was one of grim determination. Behind her wraparound sunglasses, her eyes no doubt looked straight ahead with the resolve of one who dared not look back.

Maybe the woman was lost in whatever music she piped into her ear, or maybe she was distracted by the thoughts that Makani would soon read, ruminations about a murder and the rewards that it would bring her. She didn't hear the two rude and perhaps pot-high teenage boys who were in violation of various city rules when they bore down upon her from behind, hooting and raucous as they competed to see who could maneuver more recklessly on his skateboard, racing side by side, flailing out at each other in hope of scoring an upset.

The park was largely deserted at the moment, and the boys were as oblivious of the woman as she was of them. Only Makani saw the three of them and the collision imminent.

She snared the blonde by one arm, pulling her off the sidewalk, onto the grass, as the teenagers rocketed past in a clatter of wheels and squeals of idiot laughter. The runner's momentum sent her staggering with her rescuer for a few feet, at risk of falling over the dog and his leash, before they regained their balance.

Looking after the skateboarders, the blonde muttered, "Dimwit little shits."

At first Makani couldn't speak, because she had seen into the stranger's rat-maze mind and glimpsed at the center a windowless room where a woman was kept in chains, a woman being tormented and starved to death. The room existed somewhere, as real as this park and the plumb-fall of sun that had shrunk the late-morning shadows. The victim was real, too, in a desperate condition, pale and gaunt and hollow-eyed, and fiercely hated by the blonde, who wished for the prisoner a slow and painful death.

"Somebody should cut off their pathetic little peckers," said the stranger, "teach them a lesson."

Makani had snatched her hand away in horror at what she had seen. Still reverberating with the shock, she asked, "*Why?*"

Regarding her rescuer through a black-plastic curve that didn't reveal the color of her eyes, let alone the expression in them, the blonde said, "Why? I'll tell you why. Their useless shit-for-brains parents don't know how to spell the word *discipline*, let alone enforce any."

Bob liked people more than he liked other dogs, but he did not wag his tail for this woman.

As the vision echoed through Makani's mind, she realized that the prisoner's hair had been the same shade as her jailer's, and in spite of being painfully thin and haggard, she also had resembled this woman who wanted her dead. Relief trembled through Makani at the thought that she had misunderstood, that what she had seen was not another woman in dire circumstances, but instead this runner's mental image of herself as someone's victim, trapped perhaps in a bad marriage or in some other relationship that left her feeling tormented and starved for affection.

"Something wrong?" the runner asked, pulling her sunglasses down on her sculpted nose to fix Makani with a cold blue stare.

Makani's eyes were blue as well, but a different shade from the pair that chilled her now, the warm color of certain hydrangeas, in striking contrast to her Hawaiian features and complexion.

The blonde searched Makani's eyes as if she, too, were psychic and sought secret knowledge. "Hey, anybody home? Is something wrong with you?"

"No. Nothing, no. I just... That was close. I mean, they could have hurt you big-time, broken your neck or something."

Bob had backed away as far as his leash would allow.

Perhaps as intuitive as she was well put-together, the blonde regarded Makani with suspicion. "Something's wrong here."

Because she could not bear to leave the issue unresolved, Makani reached out and, with a hesitancy that might have seemed like tenderness, touched the runner's bare arm. She knew at once that what she had seen was not this woman's mental image of herself, born of self-pity. The prisoner was real, alive now but being starved to death, and she was this murderous creature's twin sister.

The blonde snatched her arm away from Makani as if she felt some alternating current jittering back and forth between them. She rubbed her flesh where she had been touched, and in a voice heavy with scorn, she said, "What're you going all creepy on me for?" Her eyes widened. "You're a girl's girl, aren't you? I don't

swing that way, honey. Find some Jane who's a Tarzan, or go home and make it with a mirror."

She pushed her glasses higher on her nose and set off once more in a run. She glanced back just once with mild contempt, not as if she expected to be pursued, but as though she knew from experience that people she turned off would stay turned off.

In the grip of sudden purpose, Makani hurried with Bob across the street to her car. She started the engine and waited until the blonde was almost out of sight before pulling into the street and following at a distance.

Chapter 2

Wipeout Without Nose Guard.

Riding shotgun sans shotgun, Bob made a gruff noise that seemed to be a query.

As she drove, Makani said, "I don't know. What *am* I doing, huh? Why do I always feel I *have* to do something? It's not seeing their thoughts that gets me in trouble, it's this dangerous compulsion to *do* something about it."

The last thing that any boardhead wanted was responsibility for anyone beyond his or her circle of family and wave-riding friends. When you gave your life to surfing, either entirely or, like her, as much as you could after you'd spent as few hours as possible earning a living, the point was to give the finger, politely, to everyone and every social force that would fence you in and saddle you and break you like a wild horse. Time would be your prison master if you let it. The timeless sea was freedom, and the surfer's life was ideally lived always in the moment, shorn of striving and struggle, with simplicity, without the envy that led both to regrets about the past and to a focus on the future at the expense of now. Those who wanted to change the world were certain to do great harm to it, while those who loved the world as they found it, those who shunned politics and theories, might discover in themselves a grace to match that of the sea; they might live a life that would be a beautiful line of calligraphy written not in ink, but in sunshine and mist, written in the wake carved in the water as you navigated the face of a wave, every trace of it gone with you when you left the planet, no stain or wreckage left behind.

The tireless running blonde turned left off Ocean Boulevard, onto Poinsettia, a street of charming houses in many styles, as were most of the quaint streets in the Village. Over the years, the sidewalks had been ramped here and there to accommodate tree roots; therefore, she ran instead on the blacktop, which was lightly traveled at this hour, with the tourist season past.

"What kind of person would starve a twin sister to death?" Makani asked.

Bob whined.

"Yeah, we know what kind. Dirty crazy California girls." The day that she had left Oahu six years earlier, against her family's wishes, her great-aunt Lokemele,

who had never traveled outside the islands, warned her, *Stay away from dirty crazy California girls and fast-talking nasty boys*, instructions with which Grandma Kolokea and tearful Uncle Pilipo solemnly agreed.

She pulled to the curb and stopped, driving forward once more only when the runner was nearly out of sight. Three blocks and then left on Third Avenue, another left on Orchid, back to Ocean and a right turn, then another right, heading inland again on Narcissus. The woman was a running machine, her route evidently programmed, for she never hesitated at an intersection and never glanced back. She was running all the parallel streets named for flowers, so that it was easy to anticipate her next move and let her get out of sight from time to time.

To Bob, Makani said, “She could crack walnuts with those butt cheeks,” and the dog grinned at her.

She’d left Oahu when she was twenty, afraid that if she stayed in the company of her family, her terrible gift would gradually alienate her from them. They were good people; however, a touch, a hug, a kiss would reveal to her only their darker thoughts. She had given up her island birthright to preserve in her heart the love of family that she could not live without.

Eventually, the blond runner stopped at a silver Mercedes sports car with a convertible top that was open to the sunshine. Curbed a block away, Makani watched the woman snatch a towel from the storage space behind the two bucket seats to blot her sweaty face, neck, and limbs.

Surveillance became trickier when the pursued and pursuer were rolling on rubber. Makani had to stay far enough behind to escape detection, letting other traffic get between her and the Mercedes, especially because her heavily customized ’54 Chevy was a standout that didn’t allow her the anonymity of most other vehicles. Yet she needed to get through the traffic lights that the blonde cleared or be left behind at an intersection.

She was never quite close enough to read the license plate on the convertible, which was the minimum information that she needed. But when the blonde pulled into the parking lot at Gelson’s market, Makani was given the opportunity to get the number on the tags and perhaps more.

She parked at a distance from the would-be murderer and watched the woman move away across the sun-baked blacktop. Undulant currents of heat shimmered up from the pavement, slightly distorting the blonde’s taut form, as though her body might be only a superb illusion, a masquerade by which something demonic passed for human.

The moment the woman entered the supermarket, Makani told Bob, “Wait for Mommy,” sprang from the Chevy, and hurried to the Mercedes convertible. With a felt-tip pen that she had taken from her purse, she quickly recorded the number of the license plate on the palm of her left hand.

Even if the blonde intended to buy only one or two items from the market, she would be gone at least five minutes. More likely ten. The convertible’s top was down, an invitation.

Makani opened the passenger door, slipped into the seat, and popped the lid on the console box. Chewing gum, a tin of breath mints, a matchbook-size folder of lens-polishing papers for those wraparound sunglasses, a ballpoint pen clipped to a small notepad, the required proof of insurance, about a dozen business cards

from local shops and restaurants...She plucked out the vehicle registration, which revealed that the owner was Ursula Jean Liddon; there was a familiar street name that Makani knew to be located in a gate-guarded community in that neighborhood of Newport Beach known as Newport Coast.

Having taken less than three minutes for her investigation, she returned the registration to the console box, closed the lid, and got out of the convertible. Returning to her '54 Chevy, she saw that the pickup once parked beside it was gone. The driver's door stood open, and the long-legged blonde sat sideways on the driver's seat, reading the vehicle registration.

Bob had either bolted to the backseat or had been moved there.

He hung his head out a window, looking aggrieved.

When she saw Makani, the blonde flung the registration onto the pavement.

Makani hurried to retrieve the crumpled paper before the light breeze skittered it across the parking lot. When Makani rose from a stoop, the registration in hand, Ursula Liddon was less than a foot away, looming over her.

That piercing blue stare, which had earlier been cold, was now hot, radiant with malice and contempt. "Makani, huh? Hisoka-O'Brien. Baby, sorry to tell you, the pretentious hyphen can't disguise the fact that those are two mongrel races, which makes you a mongrel twice over."

Makani did not respond, but neither did she look away.

Ursula Liddon said, "You think I'm stupid, I wouldn't notice this souped-up joke car of yours? I told you, butch, I don't want what you're selling."

Accepting the cover story that the blonde's misapprehension offered her, Makani said, "You can't know till you try."

"You think there's *anything* I haven't tried? So you want me. So does everyone. Get over it. You come near me again, best you'll get is a nasty scar."

A four-inch blade flicked from the yellow plastic handle of a knife that appeared in the blonde's right hand no less mysteriously than a dove might manifest from a magician's silk handkerchief. The point was half an inch from Makani's navel. They were standing so close together that anyone chancing past would probably not have seen anything amiss.

Although Makani's first impulse was to take the weapon away from Liddon, she restrained herself for two reasons. First, there was a small chance she would fail, in which case the blonde, who seemed considerably less stable than a gyroscope, might in a panic slash and stab. Second, Makani's display of physical competence and street smarts might suggest that she was not what Liddon had taken her to be, that her motivation had nothing to do with girl-on-girl romance or sexual desire. Anyone who would starve and murder her twin sister must see the world through a lens of paranoia; her ready suspicion, easily pricked, would cause her to abandon the perception of Makani as a gay-girl stalker and embrace the idea that she was a threat of an unknown nature.

Feigning more fear than she felt, though not overplaying it, Makani stepped back from the blade. "I don't want any trouble."

"You don't, huh?"

"Of course I don't."

"Well, here I am."

"I just thought..."

“I know what you thought, butch.”

“Don’t call me that. It’s mean.”

“Pathetic little butch.”

Makani focused on the knife as if with greater fear. Instead of glinting on the cutting edge, the bright midday light seemed to part around it, soft as butter.

The blade flicked into the handle. The blonde pocketed the weapon. “I’ve got your address, Hisoka-O’Brien.”

Makani meant her response to sound like a shaky pretense of confidence. “And I’ve got yours, Ursula Jean Liddon.”

The blonde’s smile served also as a sneer. “Why don’t you come around sometime? Bring a knife of your own.”

She surveyed the parking lot, the rows of shining vehicles, as though to assure herself that their confrontation had elicited no attention. Like much that Liddon had done, the subsequent blow was unexpected—a vicious slap in the face that stung, as did the harder backhand slap that at once followed and brought involuntary tears.

Makani’s instinct was to give worse than she got, but repaying violence with violence would reveal that she was not the meek and desire-besotted girl that Liddon took her to be. She let her mouth go loose, to suggest that the tears were tears of disappointment and humiliation.

The blonde winked and turned from Makani. Lithe, intentionally seductive, she walked away and didn’t once look back.

Each slap had been a touch. Each touch had revealed the same vicious desire. Ursula Liddon considered herself a man trap of singular effectiveness. To be mistaken for a girl’s girl cut her ego to the quick and infuriated her so much, she wished that she could pay back Makani by getting her alone and cutting out her eyes.

Makani got into the driver’s seat of the Chevy, leaving the door open. She plucked Kleenex from the console. She smelled blood, and tasted it when she licked her lips. The rearview mirror revealed a scarlet thread unraveling from her left nostril.

A few decades earlier, when pointed-nose surfboards had first become popular, injuries in wipeouts increased due to that dangerous point. The soft silicon-plastic glue-on nose guard was invented to solve the problem. Although she had allowed the blonde to dominate her for good reason, Makani felt as if she had just screwed up and gone through a wipeout without nose guard.

In the backseat, Bob whined.

“It’s not what it looks like, Bobby,” she assured him. “I allowed the bitch to biff me.”

Just then, Ursula Liddon drove by and tapped her horn twice, as if in a jaunty farewell.

When Bob whined again in a specific way, Makani recognized his meaning this time. He needed to pee.

She walked him on a leash to a grass sward past the parking lot, where he relieved himself against a signpost.

The sign declared REDUCE SPEED AHEAD. Having encountered absolute evil often before and having survived, Makani knew that the sign’s advice had no value

for her, although with all her heart she wanted to heed it. However, the only way to deal with people like Ursula Liddon was to tramp on the accelerator and run them down.

Chapter 3

Share a Kiss or Kick Some Butt?

The gulls were curiously quiet as they kited through a sky not quite as blue as Makani's eyes.

The harbor water appeared more deep green than blue, every ripple silvered by the sun.

Fish were mostly shadows if one cared to lean over the railing and search for them below the surface. The occasional sea lion, in spite of its enormous size, slipped through the channel silently, swimming more than half submerged, skin glistening like wet rubber.

Wearing only khaki shorts and a good tan, in a comfortable lounge chair on the afterdeck of a sixty-eight-foot coastal cruiser, Pogo from time to time looked up from his copy of *The Adventures of Augie March* to watch one of the more beautiful yachts or racing boats cruise past. Thousands of vessels were moored in the harbor, hundreds of millions' worth of watercraft, but he coveted none.

Pogo held a part-time job at Pet the Cat, a surf shop near the first of the two piers on Balboa Peninsula, but now that the summer season had passed, the shop was closed on Mondays. Usually he would have been on his board and in the water, whether the waves were double-overhead honkers or those small, fast inside zippers that were easy fun. This evening, however, he had a date, as they say, with an angel, and he chose to conserve his energy for romance.

By romance, he didn't mean sex. His date was with Makani, and they were letting their relationship evolve slowly. He had known her for more than two years, but he'd learned about her psychic talent, her see-by-touch, only a month earlier. He had long liked her. But she'd always seemed reserved, holding back a significant part of herself. Now he knew why, and the knowledge bonded them as never before.

She said he was the only person she'd ever known in whom she had never glimpsed a dark intention or perverse desire. He didn't know why that should be the case. Although all he wanted in life were sea, surf, sun, friends, good food of the diner or Mexican kind, a beer when he was thirsty, and books, he figured that he must have a dark intention now and then, though he could identify in himself no seriously perverse interests, or at least none that seemed perverse to him.

A lot of the time, he lived with two other surf rats, Mike and Nate, in a studio apartment above a thrift shop in Costa Mesa. But frequently he took jobs house-sitting or boat-sitting while the owners were away. In this case, he was looking after both a house on the fabled harbor and a sweet boat docked in front of it,

living in luxury without cost or stress, without any need of a lawyer or an accountant or a living trust.

He didn't hear Makani venture along the dock or come aboard—as quiet as the gulls, the fish—until she stepped through the gate in the railing, onto the afterdeck, and said, “Any beer aboard?”

“What kind of yacht would it be if there wasn't?”

In blue Surf Siders, white slacks, and a blue halter top, her lustrous dark hair held back by two barrettes from which dangled blue silk ribbons, Makani looked like a sea goddess who had waded ashore to find a mortal mate.

“You look like a sea goddess who waded ashore to find a mortal mate,” he said, because he knew a good thought when he had one.

“Just tell me where to find the freakin' beer,” she said.

He described the route to the galley, and a minute later, she returned with two ice-cold bottles of Corona.

By then he realized that she was in a state of distress, and though he wouldn't have been surprised if she needed both beers, she gave one to him. She sat on the edge of the lounge chair next to Pogo's, but he remained half reclining.

“Saul Bellow,” she said, indicating the book he had put aside. “What would your parents think?”

“They'd be ecstatic.”

Pogo came from a family of busy achievers who, had they been aware of his true IQ, would have arm-twisted him into law or medical school. From a young age, he had known that he needed only a life of common pleasures, that he was born to live in the moment, which was, by his assessment, the only place where anything was real. The formidable name on his birth certificate had Roman numerals after it and imposed upon him a weight he had no desire to carry. When still a child, he insisted on being called Pogo. He had escaped the expectations of his family by quietly pretending to be a simple soul of limited intellect, concealing his passion for books, scoring a consistent 2.0 in his schoolwork, remaining in character for so long that the greatest actors of stage and screen would have admired his performance.

“Sometimes,” he told Makani, “I feel bad about deceiving them. Then I think about a life of country clubs, imported cars, vacation homes, five-star restaurants—and I break out in a cold sweat.”

She shrugged. “They love you the way they think you are, and you love them. That's as good as families get.”

“Which reminds me—where's Bob?”

“On the dock. He likes to hang his head over the side and watch for fish.”

Pogo nodded. “I'm like the Bob of my family. So...what's got you so torn up?”

“How do you know I'm torn up?”

“I can't read your mind, O'Brien, but I can read your face.”

She watched a serrated formation of brown pelicans slice the sky and leave no scar.

A young couple oared past, standing up on paddleboards, perhaps headed all the way to the back bay.

Makani was never silent just for effect. Her silence must mean that what was on her mind had a terrible weight.

Pogo was the pattern of all patience. He gave her time.

* * * * *

Makani took small sips of her beer until she had finished half the bottle.

White sails raised on mainmast and mizzen, but for the moment motoring toward the harbor entrance and the open sea, a fifty-foot ketch passed, and she yearned for the freedom it represented, a freedom that her paranormal gift might never allow her.

At last she said, "If I tell you about it, you'll say we have to do something."

"You touched somebody," Pogo guessed. "You saw something bad."

"Story of my life."

"Whether or not I say 'Do something,' you'll do something."

"I don't have to."

"You don't have to, but you always do."

"This one scares me."

"You've been scared before."

"Maybe not like this."

"Who was he?" Pogo asked.

"Not he. She."

"She who?"

"This hot blond psycho in the park along Ocean Boulevard."

"How hot?"

"Some guys, the thought of doing her would melt the fillings in their teeth."

"Can you hook me up with her?"

"Not funny, Gilligan."

The last thing Pogo, the ideal California surfer boy, needed was a girl to pursue. In his case, they were the pursuers, and he was the pursued, a truth he seemed loath to acknowledge. He found his good looks to be an annoyance, in part because those drawn to him solely because of his appearance tended to be tiresome.

He was such a handsome guy that Makani could think of no word adequate to describe him. Even the Hawaiian language, with its tendency toward lyrical hyperbole, lacked the words. He wasn't merely *nohea* or *maika'i*. *Hua-pala kumu* didn't say it, either. When someone's good looks had an element of sexual appeal, it would always be expressed poetically, through metaphor, with reference to rain or mist or spray, as Hawaiian had no word meaning *sexy*. In Pogo's case, the closest she could come to describing him was to resort to the word *glory* as a synonym for male beauty: *Hanohano Pali-uli i ka ua noe*, which was said of handsome men and meant *The glory of Pali-uli is the misty rain*. Pali Lookout was the most dramatic place in the islands: a spectacular thousand-foot cliff at a low point in the Koolau Mountains, where the trade winds rushed through with tremendous force. But as far as Makani was concerned, even the great power of tropical rainstorms and fierce wind combined with the thrill of a thousand-foot drop did not convey the effect Pogo had on her the first time she saw him—or the ten-thousandth, for that matter.

If he could have read her thoughts, he would have been embarrassed. He wanted to be just one of the guys. As special as he was, he truly saw nothing

special about himself. If he hoped to be admired for anything, it was his surfing skills. He rode hurricane waves, quaking monoliths, tore them up with style, allowing himself no fear, hooting with delight even when he realized he was skating across a hydrocoffin that would collapse and hammer him off his board.

He would have been mortified if she told him that his humility only made him more desirable to her—to any woman with half a brain.

“The blond psycho’s name is Ursula Jean Liddon,” Makani said. “She’s keeping her twin sister in a windowless room, tormenting her, starving her. She’s going to kill her soon.”

Pogo sat up, swung his legs off the lounge chair, sitting knee-to-knee with Makani. “What room? Where?”

“She lives in one of those gate-guarded communities in Newport Coast.”

He frowned. “Doesn’t seem like a place where that kind of thing happens.”

“Where does seem like a place such a thing happens? We’ve got to figure it’s her house until we search it and rule it out.”

An anonymous tip to the police would not be taken seriously, especially when the accused was a person of means and, ostensibly, enjoyed a spotless reputation.

Makani dared not reveal her paranormal ability in a bid to gain credibility. She could read the darker secrets and desires of the police, thereby convincing them of her gift—but at what risk? She would be thought a freak...and a dangerous one.

As always, it would fall to her to do what needed to be done. And now, to her and Pogo.

“Tell me the rest,” he said.

She told him.

He shook his head. “She’s a lunatic, all right, turning you down like that.”

“She’s not into girls, and if you’ll think about it, you’ll remember that I’m not, either.”

“That’s no excuse,” Pogo declared. “I mean, look at you.”

Makani wanted to kiss him. She hesitated.

With each kiss, each touch, she risked reading him. Although she never saw in him any meanness or unworthy desire, he was human, and the possibility that he would one day disappoint or even shock her was not remote.

The heavier burden was his, because he knew that, for her, every kiss or touch might be a window into his mind, into the soul that dwelt there. With her he could keep no wicked secrets, conceal no corruption, conduct no fraud undetected, cloak no fault. He could never mislead or deceive her—unless what he intended was a surprise born of kindness or love, for she could read in others only their darker passages.

Pogo reached out, as did she. He held her hand, surrendering his privacy, and the sunny day was not shadowed by any disclosure that rose from him to her along the telepathic bridge that her terrible gift laid down between them.

She dared a kiss, and so did he.

Gulls flew in a bath of sunlight. Fish swam in the coolness of the harbor. The distant laughter of women was so musical floating across the water that it might have been from celebrants on one of the many boats—or in this moment of quiet magic, perhaps it was the delight of mermaids.

One kiss, and then she said, “One thing I saw that I didn’t tell you, and I should... This Ursula Liddon creature would cut out my eyes if she had a chance.”

“We won’t give her the chance.”

“So we’ve got to do it.”

“Oh, yeah,” he agreed. “Got to kick some butt.”

“Or die trying.”

“There’s always that.”

Chapter 4

Where She Walks, the Earth is Scorched.

The highway pavement is dark. The land it splits is bright, and the September sky is brighter still.

The retracted roof allows sunshine to caress her face, arms, bare legs. The hot light celebrates her flawless skin.

Ursula Liddon wonders if there exists another, like her, that the light of the sun adores so passionately. Its warmth is as erotic as a lover’s touch, but it is better than a lover, because it wants no more from her than to revere—and to extol—her beauty.

With sun glow on her silken skin, she is exhilarated, as though in expectation of a profound pleasure. This is the perfect state of being. She knows from experience that the tremulous anticipation of orgasm is always more satisfying than the event itself.

She is the still point of the turning world.

How could she not be?

The sun itself has crowned her.

If ever she meets another who, like her, the sun adores so passionately, she will not be pleased. She will do then what she has done before: ensure that she is the only one so venerated.

To prevent the sun from taking full possession of her, she wears heavily tinted glasses. Nothing or no one will ever fully possess her.

In spite of the glasses, the land is bright and the sky is brighter still. Defenses are always needed when one is as desirable as Ursula Jean.

She is en route to see Undine, her identical twin. These visits require great courage, because Undine is evil.

On an open road like this, Ursula always drives as fast as she dares. Speed limits are for others.

She recognizes no limits.

If time cannot touch her, neither can the law.

She looks the same at thirty as she did at twenty.

She lives in time but is not subject to it.

Fast, faster. Faster still.

Perhaps she will prove time powerless by arriving at her destination before she started.

She owns eight cars, one for each day of the week, and a white Rolls-Royce for special occasions. This silver Mercedes convertible is for Mondays.

She remembers a time when she felt content with seven cars. Then she met a woman, Benetta Norquist, who possessed eight.

Benetta also had scored a wealthy husband, Proctor. And a larger, more luxurious house than the one in which Ursula lived.

If any woman on Earth owes everything to a surgeon, it is Benetta, a skank reshaped into eye candy.

When Ursula learned that Benetta had signed a prenuptial agreement, there was no need to kill the corrupt and ever-grasping bitch.

Equally corrupt and an even greater fool, Proctor had been easy for Ursula to seduce, enchant, and marry.

Benetta the skank sued to overturn the prenuptial. She smeared her husband every way she could. Among other things, she claimed, to Ursula's eventual benefit, that Proctor abused cocaine. She lost the case.

Benetta lives still, but in misery, eaten by resentment, bitter and self-hating for having accepted only four million in the prenup.

One of Benetta's greatest faults is greed.

Greed is destroying her life.

Ursula has no patience for the greedy.

Greed and happiness cannot coexist.

Ursula would pity the woman if she didn't loathe her.

Easy to seduce, Proctor had been easier to kill. Like this:

Although she doesn't touch drugs, Ursula has her sources. She removes his stash of cocaine from his bureau drawer, replaces it with uncut heroin of deadly purity, in a bag and decorative box identical to those that hold the cocaine.

Soon thereafter, he inhales himself to death.

Ursula returns the cocaine to the bureau drawer. Two identical stashes. How foolish of him to make it so easy to confuse them.

Under the cold eyes of the authorities, she weeps copiously. Men are always deeply moved to see such a vision weeping.

She speaks of her efforts to encourage Proctor into rehab. Both household maids testify to having overheard those conversations.

Even suspicious homicide detectives cannot believe Ursula's flood of tears might be faked. See the sorrowing softness of her full mouth. See the tender curve of her throat convulse with sobs.

Benetta, when questioned, says, "The lucky bitch. Why couldn't the bastard OD when *I* was married to him?"

When told of this, Ursula weeps again, moved beyond endurance to think that Proctor had been so hated by a woman he once loved.

Following a respectable period of mourning, Ursula reverts to the name Liddon. And thus the episode concludes.

She hadn't signed a prenup. Proctor so adored her that he had poured his all upon her without conditions.

Now she drives her Monday car at high speed, pleased by the dotting sun.

Ursula slows as little as possible for an off-ramp and enters an industrial area that, measured in miles traveled, is not far from Newport Beach. Considering the graceless nature of the structures, considering the cruelty with which the sunlight falls upon these buildings and the vigor with which it is rebuffed, this place might as well be on a different planet from the one on which Newport shines.

Among her father's numerous properties that she inherited, there is a four-acre parcel surrounded by a high chain-link fence. The motorized gate responds to her remote control.

She parks between two large buildings of concrete block and corrugated steel panels. She gets out of the gleaming car. From the luggage space behind the two seats, she retrieves a small picnic cooler.

An overhanging roof paints its sharp-edged black shadow across half the ground between structures. Sunlight claims the other half.

She stands in sunshine. Although no one is here to see her, she is pleased with how dazzling she looks in this crude setting.

With a key, she disengages two heavy-duty deadbolts. She steps through a door into the larger of the two buildings.

She stands for a moment in the warm velvet darkness, which seems alive and alert and approving of her.

High overhead is a row of windows so filthy that the midday sun is pale on the glass and all but incapable of penetrating.

When she switches on banks of fluorescent lamps, a cavernous space appears. Concrete floor. Rows of steel support posts rising to massive tie beams. A catwalk high above. The machinery is long gone.

Something was once manufactured here. She doesn't know what product they made. She has no interest in the making of things, only in the taking of them.

Steeling herself for the encounter ahead, carrying the picnic cooler, she walks toward the north end of the building.

Ursula isn't driven by greed, as is the despicable Benetta, that secret skank in starlet's skin. Ursula has many millions, more than she will ever need.

Greed is a sick motivation, the reason for the want and ruin of the world.

Greed is the blood in every movie villain's veins.

Ursula is inspired instead by the emotion that, in her time, is widely honored and celebrated: envy. She is a correct-thinking woman who wants to take only what other people have *but don't deserve*.

Carved, injected, clipped, stretched, and pinned to be made desirable, Benetta did not deserve a wealthy husband.

Deceiving others, making them think that they wanted the land he developed and the houses he built, even at outrageous prices, Proctor was an exploiter of the worst kind, deserving nothing.

At the north end of the structure are single-story offices side by side, drywall boxes with windows facing the production floor. And a door to a stairwell.

The stairs lead down into darkness.

She can feel the evil radiating from below.

She reminds herself that all of the sunlight that has revered her is now contained within her, that she is radiant, and that she will triumph here as always she triumphs.

She switches on the stairwell light.

Boldly she descends, though below waits the monster that is her twin sister, Undine.

Chapter 5

The Necessary Computer Wiz.

In Makani's '54 Chevy, she and Pogo and Bob crossed the harbor on the bargelike ferry to visit Simon Hunter. They found a parking place a block from their destination, in the shade of an Indian laurel. The day was warm, and they left each of the four windows open a few inches, to ensure Bob's comfort.

"Guard duty," she told the Labrador as she locked the car.

He was the most mellow of dogs, but he answered those two words with a growl of werewolfian menace. In Makani's absence, if anyone tested the doors, good Bob would growl with such ferocity that the scoundrel would be reminded of the savage attack dogs who often protected the most nefarious of supervillains in the movies, and would retreat—unless she was Ursula Liddon.

There were only a few things that Bob was from time to time asked to do to earn his keep, and he was always proud to serve Makani. He sat at a rear window, his noble head raised, the very picture of a dedicated guardian.

"Do you sometimes wish you could read animals?" Pogo asked.

"Oh God, no. Though if I could read dogs' minds, I suspect they'd make even the best of humans seem like devils."

"Present company excepted?" he asked.

"Probably not."

"I love your honesty."

"Dude, you don't have a choice."

Simon Michael Hunter didn't live in a loft with industrial décor or in the basement of his parents' house. He didn't conceal himself in a shabby tenement apartment surrounded by a contrasting fortune in electronic gear. He didn't dwell in a generator-equipped motor home parked inside a cave, nor in a caboose among scores of rusting train cars in a forgotten railroad storage yard, nor in an abandoned missile silo, nor in a yurt.

He owned a waterfront house on Balboa Island.

His home was not filled with *Star Wars* or *Star Trek* posters and memorabilia. Nor with arcade games restored for home play. No Steve Jobs or Che Guevara posters. No collection of comic books or graphic novels. There was none of the clutter and wild disorder that are supposedly evidence of a free spirit and a genius intellect.

The house was neat, clean, and furnished with Art Deco antique furniture, sculptures, and paintings.

Simon was neither weirdly thin nor obese. He had not shaved his head, and yet he did not have a wild mass of tangled hair. He didn't wear sneakers with the laces

untied. He didn't wear cheap jeans and flannel shirts, or T-shirts emblazoned with the faces of cultural icons, or T-shirts imprinted with things like OPEN THE POD-BAY DOOR, HAL.

Or short-sleeved white shirts with pocket protectors jammed full of pens. Or pants pulled up four inches above his navel.

Instead, this day, he wore loafers, white chinos, and a polo shirt. He was clean shaven, well barbered, pleasant looking, with white-white teeth, a respectable tan, well-manicured fingernails, and an air of normality that, in the mind of any Hollywood casting director, would disqualify him for the role of a computer hacker.

In the foyer, Pogo and Simon hugged. Makani, meeting the wizard of the digital universe for the first time, managed to avoid a touch without giving offense.

"Doesn't look the part, does he?" Pogo asked her as Simon led them along the ground-floor hallway to his study. To his friend, he said, "I guess you've read every novel by William Gibson."

"Haven't read one," said Simon, "though I mean to."

"Surely you've read at least *Neuromancer*."

"No. I'm a Philistine."

"You were probably the first subscriber to *Wired* magazine."

"*Wired*? Is that a magazine about getting stoned?"

"How often have you seen the movie about Julian Assange?"

"They made a movie? I must have been on vacation the weekend it was in theaters."

Makani sensed that this conversation was almost a routine they went through, in one form or another, every time Pogo introduced Simon to someone new.

The study was an elegant space, with a Deco desk and sideboard of amboina wood inlaid with ivory: sleek, lacquered, golden. A pair of comfortable macassar-ebony armchairs might have been by Ruhlmann.

"But surely," Pogo continued, "in the rebel spirit of the video pirate Kim Dotcom, you must have crazy-wild parties with champagne fountains and bowls of free cocaine and naked girls."

"Don't do drugs. Drink only fine red wines. And I'm gay."

To Makani, Pogo said, "If there was a hackers' union, they would throw him out."

"Not least of all," Simon said, "because I earn my living by identifying and hacking other hackers who've stolen money or data."

His two computers, printers, and associated equipment did not stand upon the fine furniture, but on a table in an alcove.

"He's a bounty hunter," Pogo told Makani. "Like Duane 'Dog' Chapman from that old reality TV show, only without the macho."

"I'm as macho as they come," Simon said as he settled into an office chair before the computers. "You're just jealous."

"Aren't there days," Pogo asked, "when you yearn to man the barricades and rebel against the system?"

"The system invented computers and the Internet," Simon said. "Without the system, hackers would have nothing to rebel against and nothing to rebel *with*. And I'd still be poor."

Like the narrator of an old radio drama, Pogo portentously said, “Simon Michael Hunter—wise man or sellout? The answer lies only in the shadows of his own tortured heart.”

At his keyboard, Simon flexed his fingers as if he were a pianist about to bring music from a Steinway. “On the phone, you said this woman has no Facebook page, no website.”

Makani said, “We’ve got some search skills of our own. So far as we could learn, she doesn’t blog, doesn’t tweet, has no email address. Ursula Liddon is off the grid.”

“No one is off the grid, sweetheart, not even those who’ve worked their ass off to get there. You gave me her street address, which is all I needed to find everything you need to do whatever dirty work it is that you’re doing.”

“It’s not dirty work,” Pogo said. “It’s just delicate.”

“It’s all relative,” Simon said. “One man’s delicate is another man’s dirty.”

“I’m an honest man.”

“Yes, so you’ve told me.”

“I’ve been a house-sitter for you twice. Ever been as much as a doily missing?”

“There’s never been a damn doily in this house,” Simon said, “and there never will be.”

“You see? Not one missing.”

“The first two times, you might’ve been setting me up, winning my confidence. Next time, I expect to come home to nothing but empty rooms.”

“You have problems with trust. I pity the man you marry.”

“*That* will never happen,” Simon said.

To Makani, Pogo said, “Simon is a traditionalist. He still opens doors for women, wears a coat and tie to fine restaurants, and laments the hoi polloi’s increasing inability to properly use *who* and *whom* in speech.”

“I should have been born around nineteen hundred. Here we go.”

Simon indicated the computer screen, then the printer, which began to feed paper through its laser jet and into the output stacker. “I’ve created a file for you, anything useful regarding Ursula Jean Liddon, who was briefly Ursula Jean Norquist, bride and widow within four months, now Liddon again. She keeps a low profile. Fortunately, the cokehead horndog who married this looker wanted to show her off, so there was a little coverage in what passes for the high-society publications here along the California Riviera, those slick luxury-living magazines we all love to drool over. Now give me your phone.” Pogo gave it to him. “I’m going to load a little app for you, my own creation, but customized to your needs regarding the pneumatic Ms. Liddon. With this, you’ll pretty much know where she is twenty-four/seven.” He succinctly explained the app, and when he finished installing it, he suggested, “Say, ‘Thank you, dear Uncle Simon,’ and quietly be gone. I have a *paying* job to finish for a Fortune Five Hundred company, and *they* would never insult me by implying that doilies are a part of my décor.”

Chapter 6

Ursula and the Evil Twin.

The basement of the factory lies under the thick floor of the main work area, which is an effective lid to prevent all sound from rising out of the rooms below.

Ursula finishes descending the second of two wide flights of stairs that lead to a fireproof steel door.

Webs have been spun where treads and risers form tight corners, but there are no spiders on the stairs, as though none would dare attend her.

She is aware of the grace and authority with which she moves even in this drab place, in these dismal circumstances.

There is a freight elevator in a fireproof shaft, but it no longer functions.

With a key, she disengages the deadbolt. The heavy door swings smoothly, easily on ball-bearing hinges.

Another wall switch. More overhead panels of fluorescent tubes.

The ceiling is high for a subterranean space, about eleven feet. The walls are poured-in-place steel-reinforced concrete.

Even small noises should echo off these hard surfaces, but they do not. An unnatural silence rules, as if this is the one place on Earth where, at the end of time, all sounds will come to die.

This dungeon—for it is a dungeon that the hideous Undine deserves—has no windows.

The ductwork that brings air from the main floor contains a series of filters that muffle all cries for help. Those cries are further repressed by the continuous *whoosh* of the fans that force air through the ducts.

Daddy had been a man of foresight. He built a fortune. And it seems as if he'd known that his favorite daughter, Ursula, would need a prison like this for the abomination that is her twin sister.

Daddy was only fifty-six when he died three years ago.

She doesn't exactly miss him.

But she often feels his absence. Like a tooth that has been pulled and not replaced with an implant. An abscessed tooth.

The basement contains a series of large rooms. All are separated from the hallways by thick, fireproof steel doors.

Some rooms had housed enormous boilers that, if a pressure regulator failed, might have exploded.

Other rooms once contained equally dangerous equipment, though she had never bothered to learn what any of it had been.

She imagines massive vats of dangerous acid, forges full of molten metal, towering pressurized tanks of liquefied gases that, if accidentally released, might bring instant death to all who breathed the fumes...

Her father had been a greedy man who wanted everything his eyes beheld.

He would have risked every life within a mile radius if he could have made a dollar.

Daddy is the reason Ursula despises greed.

The thing one remembers about an abscessed tooth is the pain. Although the absence of the tooth is felt, the pain is not missed.

All of the boilers and other dangerous equipment are gone, stripped out and sold for salvage or for scrap.

Behind each door is a large empty space, as if these are the dreary rooms beneath a pyramid erected by a minor pharaoh who lacked the resources to provide for himself the resplendent chambers of a true king's tomb.

Each room is slightly cooler than the one before it.

She doesn't mind the cool air on her bare legs, bare arms. The sun's adoration will be greater than ever when she ascends once more into its light.

Ursula comes to the door of the chamber in which resides the hateful creature who is Undine.

Perhaps the wicked one is dead.

Finding her dead would be satisfactory.

On the other hand, Undine has not yet paid a high enough price for her treachery. The sleazy bitch's punishment is not yet complete.

Undine is the greediest of the greedy.

Ursula unlocks the door, flicks on the lights, stands watching the creature with whom she had once shared a womb.

There is a mattress on the floor. A chemical toilet. A couple of cases of bottled water.

Those are the only amenities within Undine's reach.

They are more than she deserves.

Undine is secured by a steel manacle around her left foot. A chain leads from the manacle to a ringbolt firmly embedded in the floor.

In preparation for this righteous imprisonment, Ursula had installed the ringbolt and prepared the space.

A few feet beyond Undine's reach stands a straight-backed chair. Ursula sets the picnic cooler on the floor beside it.

Undine lies on her side on the mattress, wearing the blah slacks and blah blouse—off the rack from some third-rate retailer—that she'd been wearing when she had come to dinner at Ursula's home sixteen days earlier.

"Don't pretend, baby sister," says Ursula, as she sits on the chair. "I know you're not sleeping."

Ursula is fifty seconds older than Undine. But decades wiser.

Undine opens her eyes. They are the blue of her twin's eyes.

At one time, looking at Undine was like looking in a mirror.

After more than two weeks without food, Undine is pale. Dark circles around the eyes. A hollowness in the cheeks.

Her hair is oily, lank. She stinks of stale sweat.

She is no longer Ursula's equal in appearance. If she ever was. She always has lacked a certain... vivacity.

Undine will become more ghastly day by day, until her exterior matches her interior. That will be a kind of justice.

"Stand up," Ursula commands.

From hard experience, Undine knows what will happen to her if she disobeys.

She rolls off the mattress, chain rattling. Gets on her hands and knees. Head hung, she pauses.

There is about the woman an air of deep weariness, of defeat.

Ursula leans forward in expectation of her sister's weeping.

But Undine holds back her tears. She struggles to her feet.

"Dizzy?" Ursula inquires.

There are consequences for not answering questions. Therefore, Undine says, "Yes. Dizzy."

Her voice is weak. Thin. Self-pitying? Perhaps. But not enough to satisfy her sister.

"Dizziness is from a vitamin B-twelve deficiency. Anemia," Ursula explains. "Ringing in your ears?"

"Yes."

"B-twelve again. Cramping in your legs?"

"Yes."

"Potassium deficiency. No organ failure so far, but that will be coming. Do you want to die yet?"

"No."

"You'll want it soon enough."

Ursula is the practical sister. She plans. Considers cause and effect, measures one strategy against another. Reason, facts, and figures guide her.

Undine is the dreamer. A poet and painter, successful in each medium. She favors emotion over reason. She has always been praised for her imagination.

Yet she'd been incapable of imagining that, on the evening she visited her sister, her wine would be spiked with chloral hydrate.

She had awakened in this place, chained.

Now Ursula takes from the cooler a split of fine pinot grigio kept chilled by blue-gel cold packs. A wedge of Dietz & Watson champagne cheddar. A small knife.

The cooler also contains two guns.

She peels the wax rind from the cheese and carves small pieces for herself.

Undine watches. She will be punished if she does not watch.

Eating slivers of cheddar from the blade of the knife, drinking wine from the bottle, Ursula is as pleased by the unrefined manner in which she consumes those treats as she is by the taste of them.

The sensitive Undine has always thought, although she never dared to boldly say, that Ursula is inelegant, coarse, even crude and vulgar.

But who has the cheese and wine, and who does not?

"The trouble with you," Ursula declares, "is you didn't know how good you had it."

Undine says nothing. Part of her punishment is to be instructed in her shortcomings.

"The trouble with you, Undine, is that you've always had too high an opinion of yourself. You've thought you're smarter than you are. You aren't smart at all."

A little cheese. A little wine. A little spite and retribution. Quite a satisfying meal.

Ursula continues: "The trouble with you is that you've had it all, and yet you want even more."

Undine's legs are trembling with the effort to remain on her feet. She says, "I forgive you for this."

"I've told you, an apology won't get you anywhere with me, not anywhere at all."

“I’m not apologizing. I forgive you for what you’re doing.”

“Don’t go there again,” Ursula warns her. “Don’t you dare.”

During a long silence, Ursula reins in her temper.

Dealing with Undine has always been infuriating. She had been an impossible child, so certain of her virtue and too pleased by it. In truth, she is a greedy bitch.

Undine dares to say again, “I forgive you.”

After putting down the wine and cheese and knife, Ursula takes from the picnic cooler one of the guns.

Chapter 7

She Walks in Beauty Like a Polyester Resin.

Pogo’s moods, whether good or bad, were not easily aggravated by events. He was not placid, but calm and steady; not by any means dispassionate, but generally serene. In Makani’s company, he found that he was even markedly more self-possessed than usual. Maybe she had brought with her from Hawaii the laid-back spirit of the islands. He suspected, however, that she would have had this effect on him if she had been raised in New Jersey. She influenced him because of how she was, what she was, and because of what, together, they might one day become. When he was with her, he was in all circumstances collected.

Even with a woman’s life at risk and hero shoes to fill, Pogo and Makani paused for lunch and to review what Simon Michael Hunter, hacker of hackers, had provided to them. Only a goob or a Valley cowboy with no surf sense would throw himself into the waves after being warned that sharks were schooling or, in this case, that a sister-killing Great White Bitch was on the prowl.

Makani had the perverse urge to take lunch in the seaside park along Ocean Boulevard, in Corona del Mar, where she had encountered Ursula Jean Liddon that morning. She thought a visit to the scene might spark in memory some important detail that she had overlooked, and Pogo agreed.

From a pizzeria, they scored a three-cheese pie with crab and black olives, bottles of iced tea, and a bottle of water for the dog. Five minutes later, they were sitting on a bench in the park with a view of the Pacific—and with Bob’s rapt attention.

Makani had a rule against giving her canine companion too much human food, but Pogo had a rule against denying him too much. After pouring the water in the dog’s collapsible fabric bowl, Pogo gave him two of the narrower slices of the thin-crust pie, which the Labrador consumed with vacuum-cleaner efficiency. The dog was not too proud to beg, but he knew better than to spend more than a few seconds angling for a third slice, whereafter he went to the nearby railing, rested his chin on a horizontal bar, and gazed down at the sea foaming on the shore at the base of the bluff.

As Makani and Pogo ate, with the pizza box on the bench between them, they examined the printouts that Simon had compiled.

Henning Liddon, father of the twins, founder of the family fortune, hadn't merely kept a low profile, but had been as secretive as a Medici pulling the strings of everyone from judges to cardinals in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy. He never sat for interviews. His various enterprises were private companies, which meant he didn't have to reveal anything to shareholders. On those few occasions when the business press wrote about him, he was referred to as "unknown and unknowable" or "enigmatic" or "close-mouthed." He had imposed upon his wife, Francine, and inculcated in their two children his obsession with privacy. When the twins were sixteen, Francine had died in a horse-riding accident on their estate in Montecito, and in the newspaper, her obituary had been as brief as that of any clerk or gardener. There were few photographs of any of the Liddons to be found online in any media archives—until Ursula married Proctor Norquist.

Undine had earned accolades as a poet by the time she was twenty-five and had as well become a successful painter. Yet she said nothing about her family, and the fact of the Liddon fortune did not enter her official biography until her twin sister married at the age of twenty-nine. Even then, little was made of Undine's heritage; she was seen as a contented loner with simple needs, living for her art.

Perhaps Ursula didn't value privacy as much as did Undine or their father; perhaps she even resented the anonymity that had been her lot until she married Norquist. After their marriage, however, when she began to show up with him at charity galas, the photos in the glossy lifestyle magazines (included in Simon's file) revealed not just a woman of stunning beauty, but also, at the edges and in the corners of her marvelous face, something that might have been anxiety about—or only impatience with—the attention that she was receiving.

"I don't think she really wanted to be at all these charity events," Pogo said. "She's for sure not like Frankie, all wound up about Jarvis's wedding."

"Frankie who, what Jarvis?"

"From a novel. *The Member of the Wedding* by Carson McCullers."

"I don't know when you have time to read so much."

"I don't know when I wouldn't."

Recalling what she had read by touch of skin to skin that morning, Makani said, "Ursula's no more charitable than a snake."

The day was warm, the sun insistent, but Makani shivered.

"Look at Norquist in these photos. He's showing her off, don't you think?" Pogo studied Ursula's face again. "She's enduring it, but she's not happy."

"She only had to endure it a little while," Makani said as Pogo turned the page and revealed the newspaper article about J. Proctor Norquist's drug overdose. "Seems as if there's a sad tendency for people in her life to die before their time. How did her old man kick off?"

Henning Liddon's obituary was the next page in Simon's file.

Scanning the obit, Pogo said, "Three years ago."

"Did he fall off a tall ladder?"

"Says here, he was fifty-six."

"Car brakes fail?" Makani wondered. "Set himself on fire while barbecuing? Accidentally shoot himself while hunting?"

"He'd been under treatment for a heart condition since he was fifty. Massive heart attack."

“Would there have been an autopsy?”

“Probably not. I don’t think they bother doing one if you die from a preexisting condition.”

“They should have done one.”

“Totally,” Pogo agreed.

Bob the dog returned from his contemplation of the sea, bumped open the lid of the pizza box with his nose, and snorted in disgust when he discovered not one slice left.

Makani said, “Uncle Pogo has spoiled my Bobby.”

The dog wagged his tail as though the word *spoiled* inspired hope.

Pogo reversed through the pages to study the photographs of Ursula. “You were so right that she’s a major hottie. Smokin’ hot.”

“Oh, good. So now you can trust me to pick out girls for you.”

He shook his head. “I’m too wise to respond to that with a smart-ass comeback.”

“Too wise or just unable to think of one? Anyway, she’s hot but she’s hard.”

“I have a great comeback for that one.”

“Because you’re twenty-one going on fourteen. I’m serious. She is perfect, she really is, but she has this gloss about her....”

“Gloss?”

After chewing on her lip, thinking about what she meant, Makani said, “It’s such a *polished* beauty, way polished, you know? Not that she’s had a surgeon’s help, she’s real enough, über-real. It’s just that... she almost has this shine to her, the hard shine like a newly waxed surfboard, like polyester resin or something.”

Take polyester resin, a liquid plastic, mix it with the proper catalyst and accelerator, and you had the hard outer skin that sheathed the foam core of a modern surfboard.

“Smooth, sleek,” Makani said, “glimmering, irresistible, but with hidden hooks.”

“You make her sound like a fishing lure.”

“Is that what I meant? I think it is. The way she was dressed this morning, the way she ran—certain she was watched, wanting to be watched. Like she was out to catch something.”

The final item in Simon Hunter’s file was a lifestyle magazine article about Ursula Norquist having eight expensive cars. She used a different one for each day of the week—a list of days and cars was provided—and a Rolls-Royce for special occasions. She posed for photos with the collection, no doubt at her husband’s insistence. The way she dressed, few men who came across the article would pay much attention to the cars.

“Simon said this was how we could pretty much know where she was at all times,” Makani said. “That app he loaded on your phone.”

Pogo took his smartphone from a pocket and gave it to her. “See if you can find her.”

“Cool,” she said, accepting the phone.

Again Bob nosed open the pizza box.

It remained empty.

As the lid fell into place again, the Labrador sighed.

Although the dog’s persistent hope should have amused Pogo, it did not.

For some reason, he thought of Makani's hope of living a normal life in spite of her terrible gift.

More often than not, whenever she touched someone, she was in a sense opening a box. But she could have no expectation of something good, like a three-cheese pizza with crab and black olives.

Each box she opened had the potential to be a coffin. Her own.

Pogo almost wished he didn't love her.

He was good at surfing, at pretending to be intellectually stunted, at house-sitting, at making friends, at reading books and *getting* them on many levels.

But one of the things he wasn't good at was loss. He couldn't handle losing people. He *stank* at that. He was pathetic when it came to accepting that death was natural, a part of life.

He almost wished he didn't love Makani, but he did. Profoundly.

Again, Bob nosed open the pizza box. Empty. He turned his gaze to Pogo.

Neither disappointment nor entreaty colored Bob's eyes. Dogs were uncannily intuitive. The Labrador's steady stare was solemn, even grave, and lit with sympathy, as if he knew that Pogo was no good at dealing with loss—and pitied him.

Chapter 8

The Shooter and the Shot.

Undine watches Ursula take one of the guns from the picnic cooler.

She appears to be unfazed, as though resigned to whatever punishment her sister wishes to mete out to her, even if it is a painful death.

Her indifference is a lie.

Undine cherishes the world for the beauty she sees everywhere in it. She always has. Still does. She wants desperately to live.

Undine cares less for her own beauty—and what it can do for her if well used—than she cares for the beauty of any flower or for that of a butterfly.

She is a fool. An impractical, childishly romantic, weak, and timid fool. But smart.

She entered college when just fifteen. Graduated at eighteen. Went off to that cottage on the outskirts of Santa Barbara, to write her treacle, her poetry, and to paint.

For six years, Daddy supported Undine before she was able to pay her own way.

What had she ever done to earn that money? Nothing. She is a leech.

Impractical Undine, foolish dreamer, did not deserve what Daddy had given her.

Ursula is a taker, though she takes only what others have *but don't deserve*.

Now Undine is relieved to see which gun Ursula draws from the picnic cooler. She pretends indifference, but her relief is obvious.

Although she barely has the strength to stand, though her twin has all the power and she has none, Undine can't resist taunting her jailer. She says what she has been forbidden to say, in spite of the pain that it will bring her.

She says, "I forgive you."

The gun is an instrument of control, not of death. Compressed air propels bursts of hard rubber pellets, three at a time.

The first barrage plinks Undine's throat. The pellets sting fiercely.

In fact, they sting so bad that they prick her voice as if it were a balloon, and she can speak no words, is able to issue only a brief whistle-hiss of escaping air.

The second barrage scores her upper lip and left cheek.

Undine drops to the mattress as if knocked down by a hammer.

How satisfying it would be to strike her with such a weapon. But not yet.

Fluorescent light lacks the warmth of sunshine, but Ursula knows that it finds a different beauty in her.

She steps closer to her sister, towering over the fallen woman in the hard white light.

She is an arctic goddess, deity of ice and snow and bone-chilling cold, the light revealing such an exquisite grace that no eye can look away even though the sight of her might freeze-blind anyone who stares too long.

This same light is not kind to Undine. Gaunt, pale, greasy, she lies like a broken hag, abashed at the glory of her twin.

Red welts mark the places where the pellets struck her face, swelling as would the work of wasps, her mouth misshapen as her upper lip distends.

The fallen woman raises her spread hands to protect her face, her eyes.

Two barrages bite her exposed palms.

Her stung fingers twitch and clutch wildly, as if they are the legs of albino spiders.

"You left at fifteen," Ursula says.

Undine cowers in guilt.

"I stayed," Ursula says.

Undine knows this litany, knows the truth of it.

"You never came back except for their funerals. I never left. I did everything. You did nothing."

Their mother, Francine, was no good at loving, but she *demand*ed to be loved, to be given affection and companionship.

From childhood, Undine did not give what Mother wanted, but kept to her books, her drawing, hiding from the woman by pretending to be otherworldly, lost in fantasies, a dreamy soul who couldn't focus on the grittier things Mother enjoyed.

It is Ursula who was forced to share Mother's passion for horses. Ursula *loath*es horses. Filthy, frightening beasts.

Yet from a young age she had no choice but to pretend to adore them. Groom them. Ride them.

It is Ursula who was required to learn archery and skeet shooting, because Mother enjoyed—and excelled—at both.

As a child, Ursula was terrified of guns. Not now.

It is Ursula who had no choice but to learn tennis, although the sport bored her. She had no talent for it.

It is Ursula who had to endure endless sets of tennis with Mother, who played aggressively and always won, always crowed about winning, always criticized her daughter for poor coordination.

Now, as Undine turns her face to the mattress, Ursula steps close and fires three bursts of rubber pellets at the back of her sister's head.

"I did everything. You did nothing."

It is Ursula who bided her time, who planned with such great care, who engineered the "accident" with the horse. Like this:

Three days each week, she is expected to go riding with Mother. These rides are portrayed as little adventures, girl time, but they are a bitter duty that if shirked brings on many subtle punishments.

Her mother is competitive. Often the ride turns into a race.

There are three trails that they regularly follow. One of these includes a lonely field bisected by a narrow drainage ditch.

The horses know the trail. They are trained to jump on command.

In this field, the ride *always* becomes a race.

A cool day. Overcast. Both riders wear light, roomy jackets.

Ursula has added two sturdy interior pockets to her jacket. In the first is an air pistol that shoots small lead pellets.

She conspires to trail closely behind Mother as they approach the drainage ditch.

Francine calls back to her daughter, supposedly encouraging her but in fact mocking.

Ursula draws the pistol. Fires three quick rounds. One hits the intended target, Mother's mare—Saffron—in the rump.

Stung, the horse breaks stride and rears, sees the ditch, but is unable to obey the jump command.

Mother holds tight, goes down with her mare.

Saffron rolls. On Mother. Scrambles up. Trots away, frightened and confused, blowing noisily.

Mother lies on her back in the wild grass, one arm across her breast, the other flung out to one side.

Ursula dismounts, pockets the pistol, and hurries to Mother, hoping for a broken neck.

It isn't that easy.

Mother's left leg is queerly bent and clearly fractured. She has rapped her head on the ground, in the fall, and is dazed.

From the second interior pocket of her jacket, Ursula removes a horseshoe. Using the nail holes, she had earlier attached to this shoe two lengths of sturdy wire.

Mother begins to regain her senses, bitterly cursing the pain.

As Ursula sits on the ground to wire the horseshoe to the bottom of her right boot, Mother shrieks at her to get help, damn it, to go now, now, hurry, *go, go, go*.

Ursula stands. She raises her right foot.

Mother's eyes widen.

Ursula stomps as hard as she can on Mother's exposed throat.

It works. Just the one time is all that's needed.

Ursula removes the wire, walks about fifty yards away, and throws it in the ditch. She pockets the horseshoe.

She leaves her horse, Jasmine, and climbs onto Saffron, who has settled sufficiently to be mounted.

Her excuse for riding home on Saffron is that Mother's horse is faster than her own.

How she weeps and wails when she delivers the news. Mother is horribly injured. She may be dying. Ursula is distraught, half wild with grief.

Nearly everyone rushes off overland in SUVs and a pickup.

The two servants remaining with Ursula cannot console her. She insists that she must do something for Mother, but all she can do is see to Saffron. At her tearful insistence, the servants allow her to tend to the mare alone in the stable.

Saffron is a sweetheart. She neither kicks nor becomes skittish when, with a penknife, Ursula pops from her rump the one lead pellet and treats the tiny wound with antiseptic.

Ursula removes the mare's tack, rubs her down, conducts her to her stall, and ties on a feedbag.

The horse seems grateful. Ursula can understand why.

She never rides a horse again. How could she do so when a horse killed her beloved mother?

Now, in the factory basement, speaking to welt-covered Undine, Ursula says, "I did everything. You did nothing. Nothing."

In the fluorescent light that so loves her, she returns to the straight-backed chair, a humble throne for an ice queen.

She puts the pistol in the cooler, beside the other gun.

Chilled, refreshing pinot grigio. She carves the white wedge of champagne cheddar and eats it from the blade of the knife.

Chastened, Undine lies in silence on the mattress.

After a while, Ursula says, "A few days after the funeral, when you had returned to college, I went to Daddy, pretending despair. He wasn't much good as a grief counselor."

Undine says nothing. Wise of her.

"Trying to cuddle against him was like trying to cuddle up to a scarecrow full of broomsticks and straw. I said that Mother had been so beautiful, that he must have loved her on first sight."

She eats some cheese.

"You know what he said? He said it wasn't Mother's beauty that he fell for. It was her strength, her power, her competitive nature, her insistence on winning at everything she did."

The pinot grigio is superb.

"I asked, was I as pretty as Mother, and the unfeeling bastard said, 'You're a pretty girl, Ursula, but not half as pretty as your mother. No one could be.'"

Undine turns onto her side, opens her eyes.

Ursula savors the cheese before continuing. "Then he said that I was as strong as Mother, maybe stronger, no less determined, no less competitive."

With her fingertips, Undine gingerly traces the lumpy welts that mar her face.

“Something about the way he said it, something about the look he gave me, I thought the sonofabitch knew I’d killed her.”

Undine has heard much of this before, but not this part.

“I had the feeling that Daddy was relieved to be rid of her. And it’s odd, isn’t it, how after that I became his favorite girl? How he stopped insisting that I would go to college and instead began to spoil me like he’d never done before.”

Undine closes her eyes.

“But surely he can’t have suspected me of killing her. If he had suspected me, wouldn’t he also have realized that I might one day be rid of him, too? Well, maybe not. Daddy was a narcissistic bastard. He loved himself so much, he wasn’t capable of imagining that anyone didn’t admire and adore him.”

Ursula and Undine are both silent for a while. Sisters sharing a bonding moment.

Chapter 9

Your Only Reliable Resource in Times of Crisis.

They returned to the Balboa Peninsula residence where Pogo was house-sitting. Pogo didn’t own a handgun. Neither did Makani. The owner of the harborside house didn’t possess one, either, but he kept a few small canisters of stream-delivery Sabre 5.0, which was pepper spray of a high potency used by law-enforcement and military personnel. They each borrowed a canister.

They traded Makani’s customized ’54 Chevy street rod for Pogo’s off-the-rack thirty-year-old primer-gray Honda. Her wheels were too distinctive, well known to Ursula Liddon and easily spotted even in bustling traffic.

Pogo’s battered bucket of bolts, however, was distressed quite by chance in a way certain to trigger the subconscious paranoia that infected Southern California motorists. At first glimpse of the car, they knew—or thought they knew—that its driver would be trouble. Whether posing as a sociopathic loner, a gang member, or a fiery jihadist, he would actually be the latest embodiment of the ancient evil that no one was able to name anymore, that was disturbingly ineffable. Better to pretend you hadn’t noticed such a vehicle, and *vital* that you did not look at its driver, lest eye contact be made, leading to road rage, high-speed pursuit, and gunfire.

Bob the dog knew the Honda and felt not in the least diminished to be asked to ride in it. He leaped into the backseat and looked forward eagerly, as if to say, *Let’s roll.*

As Pogo drove up-peninsula toward the Pacific Coast Highway, Makani used his smartphone, familiarizing herself with the app that Simon had invented for other clients and had this morning customized for Pogo’s immediate purpose. Ursula Liddon owned eight sparkling-new expensive automobiles: Ferrari, Maserati, Tesla, Bentley... Simon had hacked the DMV to acquire the motor-vehicle registration

numbers. With those, he was able to obtain the unique GPS signal for each car. Unless Ursula thought that starving and murdering a twin sister was a special occasion, she was not currently in her Rolls-Royce, but was still driving the Mercedes convertible, which was her Monday car. Makani chose the icon representing that vehicle, and after a moment, on the screen appeared the words SUBJECT NOT IN MOTION, followed by an address, which wasn't that of Ursula Liddon's estate in Newport Coast.

She read the address to Pogo, and he said, "Bit of a drive, kind of a gnarly area."

"Gnarly how?"

"One of those industrial areas where most businesses moved to Texas like an eon ago."

California had been legislating its middle class out of jobs and into poverty for years.

"So it's just empty warehouses or something? Doesn't sound full-on gnarly."

"Unoccupied old buildings tend to find their uses," Pogo said. "Like wagering on cockfights, dogfights."

Makani grimaced. "Cruel. And against the law."

"Lawless is cool these days—didn't you get the memo? It's the kind of area for one-night raves with a bazaar of drugs, bunkhouses for illegal aliens being paid dirt in unlicensed garment industries, word-of-mouth brothels, you name it."

"What would she be doing there?"

"Let's find out."

Makani activated the GPS function, and a map appeared on the screen. A blinking green dot represented the location of Pogo's smartphone, as the Honda proceeded along the peninsula's primary street.

From the phone came a cool, collected, yet seductive female voice, which informed them as regarded the distance to their next turn. Then the silken-voiced robogirl said, "*This assistance is provided by Simon Says, your only reliable resource in times of crisis.*"

To the east, the afternoon heavens arced as clear as Lalique. To the west were only a few long, low, lumpy stratus clouds and, high above them, several fragile cirrus formations peeling apart like the layers of phyllo-dough pastries.

"How did you meet Simon Hunter, anyway?" Makani asked.

"I was paddleboarding the back bay at like two in the morning—"

"That's not allowed, is it, at that hour?"

"A lot of things aren't allowed. So I was paddleboarding under the bridge and this car stops and Simon comes plunging down so close that the splash wobbles me off my board."

"He jumped off a bridge?"

"No, they threw him."

"Who threw him?"

"The guys in the car. Threw him and then took off. He was gagged and tied up, of course, and trammed hands to feet."

"This happens right in the heart of Newport Beach?"

"In my experience, not often. One of the mistakes they made was using ropes instead of chains."

"Which was a mistake—why?"

“In those days, I carried a Swiss Army Knife everywhere.”

“When was this?”

“I was fifteen, like six years ago. These guys were too dumb to be archvillains. Another mistake they made was not weighing him down with a sack of bricks or something.”

“Wouldn’t he have drowned anyway?”

“Yeah, but it would have been faster with bricks. I had enough time to get him on my paddleboard and start cutting him loose.”

“Why did they want to kill him?”

“He said they were pissed.”

“Evidently. About what?”

“He never said. I don’t need to know.”

“You saved his life.”

“Well, I was there, I didn’t have anything else to do.”

From the smartphone, robogirl informed them that they would be crossing Coast Highway in two hundred yards and continuing straight ahead for three-quarters of a mile. Then she declared, “*Simon Says is your only reliable resource in times of crisis.*”

Makani said, “Why did you used to carry a Swiss Army Knife everywhere?”

“I was a kid. It had seventeen tools with twenty-six functions. I thought as long as I had one, I could deal with anything.”

“And you did. You saved Simon.”

“That’s the only time it was ever useful. Well, except for opening beer bottles.”

“You shouldn’t have been drinking beer at fifteen.”

“Don’t mom me, *wahine.*”

“Yeah,” she agreed. “Sorry. I guess you’ve grown up to be a solid citizen.”

“Let’s not go that far.”

After reading the instructions on the label of the little canister of Sabre 5.0, Makani said, “This seems lame.”

“It isn’t a gun, it isn’t much, but it isn’t lame. And we have Bob on our side.”

“I don’t want Bobby to get hurt.”

“No sweat. If it looks like someone needs to be bitten, I’ll do it for him.”

After robogirl informed them of an imminent turn, Makani said, “I’m glad I’ve got you.”

He flashed a smile at her. “I’m glad I’ve got you, too.”

She said, “You’re my Swiss Army Knife.”

Chapter 10

A Pause in the Day’s Occupations that is Known as the Children’s Hour.

Ursula waits to discover if this might be the final hour of her sister’s life.

Undine's behavior will determine whether she dies days hence by starvation—or by a bullet in her perfect blond head just minutes from now.

Only rarely is Ursula given to profound philosophical thoughts. There are a thousand more interesting ways to be bored.

However, sitting quietly while her silent sister lies sullen and despairing on the filthy mattress, in the hush of the factory basement, Ursula thinks that nature is not perfect, as the pagans and the ecologists believe; nature makes mistakes.

Identical twins are no less an error of nature than is a calf born with two heads.

In fact, twins are the greater error.

Ursula's singular beauty isn't singular as long as there is another exactly like her. Twins of breathtaking grace and flawless form are too much of a good thing.

One calf with two heads is singular.

Ursula and Undine are redundant. The little sister, just by being, diminishes Ursula.

She will not allow herself to be diminished.

She has one life, and she will be the only one to have it.

Greedy Undine wants her own life and Ursula's. She plays a sly game, faking humility, affecting a taste for simplicity. But she wants it all.

Undine really seems to have believed that by pretending to be a paragon of forbearance, by responding to cruelty with absolution, she would win her freedom.

I forgive you, Ursula. I forgive you. I forgive you for what you've done. I love you and forgive you.

Such has been her unconvincing—patently absurd!—strategy to win release for these past sixteen days.

At first, Ursula was amused.

But not for long.

Greedy Undine wants everything that is Ursula's, wants to grow fat at Ursula's expense. Therefore, she has been starved thin.

Ursula hopes to break Undine. To force her admission of her true intentions.

But she grows weary waiting for her evil twin's confession.

Four days previous, Undine almost went too far, tried to sell one lie that was too outrageous to be borne. Infuriated, Ursula had plucked the more deadly pistol from the cooler, had almost shot her in the face.

Since then, Undine has dialed back her performance.

Currently she seems to think that silence will save her.

Daddy knew the ugly truth of Undine. Daddy left everything to Ursula, requiring only that Undine receive a fair annual allowance.

Although Ursula is more than fair, Undine isn't satisfied. She says the wretched economy has impacted the sale of her paintings. Oh, dear impoverished poet! Oh, great artist reduced to penury!

Undine claims only to be seeking an increase in her allowance, a payoff of the mortgage on her "cottage."

What she calls a cottage would be called a palace by the poor multitudes of the world.

In truth, the greedy pig, frustrated by Daddy's will, is eager to get at the trough. She came to kill Ursula.

She will never confess. She is incapable of giving Ursula the satisfaction of groveling, confessing, and begging for her life.

Undine is a mistake of nature. A freak, born fifty seconds after the true and rightful heir to the Liddon fortune.

From the cooler, Ursula withdraws the lethal firearm.

* * * * *

The once prosperous district was a reminder of California's golden past, but also a preview of a possible future of blight, decay, and disorder. Empty lots where shifts of workers had once parked. Peeling stucco. Crumbling masonry. Some windows broken, others boarded. Block after block, the buildings in which working people had once built dignified lives now seemed to stand subtly askew, as though tweaked slightly but repeatedly, repeatedly, by earthquakes that no one felt, in preparation for a quick collapse when the Big One came. Everywhere, the torqued and slightly canted architecture was testament to bad ideas enforced with all the best intentions. Here where working people had once thrived, the ideas of their self-appointed betters came to die, an idea graveyard that reminded Pogo why he had never wanted to presume to tell others how they should live or what was best for them.

As in the backseat Bob yawned, Pogo pulled the Honda to a stop in front of a chain-link gate, and robogirl spoke from the phone: "*You have arrived. Please remember that Simon Says is your only reliable resource in times of crisis.*"

Fifty yards beyond the fence, between two large buildings, stood a silver Mercedes convertible.

Makani said, "She's here, all right. Does this feel like a place where someone would imprison a sister in a windowless room?"

"The whole neighborhood looks like it was built just for that purpose," Pogo said.

* * * * *

The pistol contains ten rounds.

Ursula sits with it on her taut, perfectly smooth, perfectly proportioned bare thighs, watching her twin lying upon the mattress, hag-ugly, filthy, defeated, but still scheming.

She likes the feel of the gun.

She has never killed with one before. She has never needed a gun for that.

Now she needs the pistol, needs it so much that the desire to use it fills her with exquisite tremors of erotic pleasure.

Undine opens her eyes. She watches Ursula, the gun, watches with animal cunning and desperate hope.

"Do you really forgive me?" Ursula asks.

She wants to induce her evil twin to proceed from the absurd claims of absolutism to the bigger lie that almost got her killed four days earlier. When Undine says those words again, Ursula will shoot the bitch in her lying mouth.

"Do you really, really forgive me, Undine?"

* * * * *

Pogo said, "O'Brien, would you open the glove box and hand me the knife?"

"What knife?" Makani asked as she pressed the button-style latch release, but then she saw the Swiss Army Knife as the lid dropped open.

"I don't carry it everywhere anymore," he said. "But I try to keep it handy. Never know when someone might be thrown off a bridge. Wait here."

He got out of the car, scaled the gate, landed on his feet on the other side, as agile as he was good-looking. He knelt next to the metal housing that protected the motor and the two wheels of the chain drive that operated the gate.

She didn't know which of the twenty-six functions provided by the seventeen small tools he might have used. But in two minutes, he removed part of the housing; he must have crossed the right wires, because the big gate shuddered and then began to roll aside.

To Bob, Makani said, "I don't know how that man and I are going to make it work between us, what with this witchy power of mine and with him having no privacy every time I touch him. But one way or another, Bobby, that fella out there is going to be your papa someday."

Bob whined happily, as if he understood.

* * * * *

Although she sits quite still, Ursula has an acute awareness of her potential for speed. In a T-shirt and short shorts and running shoes, she is a hurricane wind waiting for the storm to gather itself. She is lightning waiting to flash.

The gun bridges her thighs, and her hands flank the gun.

Her thighs feel so warm under the palms of her hands.

Her ceaselessly moving hands feel so strong on her thighs.

She is the master of her world, this world. She needs no one but herself. She certainly doesn't need another Ursula named Undine.

"Do you, Undine? Do you really, really forgive me?"

As Ursula repeats the question insistently, Undine raises her head from the mattress.

The wicked twin knows which of the two handguns lies across her sister's thighs. And yet perhaps she dares to hope.

Ursula says, "When you started racing through high school, one year ahead of me, then suddenly two, I went to bed every damn night wishing you'd have a stroke or a brain hemorrhage, anything to make you stupid."

Undine has never heard of this before. Interested, perhaps wondering where this confession will lead, she sits up.

"I'd lie there in bed for an hour, longer, just seething at the injustice, wishing you brain damage. You had no right to be smarter than me. We're supposed to be identical."

Sitting with her legs splayed, as a child might sit, Undine plants one hand to each side, flat against the mattress, as though she might swoon backward if she didn't brace herself.

"You never did anything to earn your smarts. I envied you, envied your intelligence. Why shouldn't I? Greedy people have what they don't deserve. I have always—*always*—despised people who have what they don't deserve."

Undine's dirty, tangled hair has fallen across her face. She glares between those greasy, golden strands, her evil manifest in her blue eyes. Such a fierce blue.

"When you *flew* through college and went off to live on your own and write and paint, and I remained under Daddy's roof, under his thumb, I no longer wished you'd have a stroke and be struck stupid. I wished you dead. I wished you dead a thousand times. A thousand times a thousand."

Resorting once more to the strategy that previously had failed her, Undine speaks in a voice marked as much by compassion as by the pain of starvation and by weariness. "It's all right. I understand. I really do. I love you. Why wouldn't I? My sister. My only sister. I forgive you."

This is what Ursula wants.

This false kindness.

This insincere clemency.

This thickly poured syrup, this treacle of phony mercy.

It infuriates her. It justifies her. It brings them toward the most outrageous of all Undine's lies from four days ago, the lie that, if she repeats it, will be her final deception, the last words she ever speaks.

Ursula goads her. "I've done such cruel things. Look at you, what I've done to you, what a mess you are now. And I've enjoyed it, Undine. I've enjoyed every sweet minute of it."

* * * * *

Pogo parked the Honda just inside the property, facing the street, and closed the gate.

Makani thought perhaps they should leave Bob safely in the car, but Pogo wanted him with them. There was a bond between the Labrador and this special woman that seemed greater than that of just a dog and master, which might have something to do with her paranormal talent, even if she couldn't read animals at a touch. Pogo sensed that Bob wouldn't go full-on dog at the wrong moment, wouldn't bark and give them away or scamper off after a scent of interest to him but unrelated to their purpose here. As a surfer who had long been able to intuit which wave in a set would be worth standing for the ride, he had learned to trust his hunches.

They hurried to the Mercedes, which was parked in the deep-purple shadow of a large building, within ten feet of a man-size door. When Pogo tried the door, it proved to be unlocked. Beyond, revealed by banks of overhead lamps, lay a vast vacant room, as dreary as an abandoned bunker from a long-ago lost war.

With the canister of pepper spray clutched in his right hand, forefinger under the flip-up guard, he was prepared to press the firing mechanism. Makani was ready with her canister, too.

Pogo felt a little foolish, as if they were taking water pistols to a firefight. In retrospect, he realized that he should at least have armed himself with the fisherman's gaff from the yacht on which he had earlier been lounging, or the tire iron from the Honda.

Armed with dog breath and a lot of teeth, Bob squirmed between them, past Pogo, and went first into the building.

* * * * *

“You haven’t forgiven me,” Ursula says. “We were carried in the same womb, fed the same mother’s milk, grew up at the knee of the same father. You aren’t capable of forgiveness any more than I am.”

“I know you won’t let me go,” Undine says. “I’ve resigned myself to that.”

She sits there splay-legged, defeated, a ragged broken doll.

“I’ve resigned myself to death,” she says softly.

“You’ve resigned yourself to nothing, Undine. You’re always scheming. That’s how you’ve always been. I *know* you.”

“I’m resigned,” Undine repeats. “So it’s either anger or pity, bitterness or forgiveness. I don’t want to die angry and bitter.”

The bitch is going to go there again, go for the big lie that will earn her a bullet through the teeth and out the back of her head.

From a pocket of her shorts, Ursula fishes out the little key that will unlock the manacle binding Undine’s ankle. There is an opportunity for one last delicious bit of torment.

With the pistol in her right hand, she rises from the chair.

Undine is a vain creature. As she gazes up at her radiant sister, Ursula’s unblemished perfection must be a choking grief to her now, a piercing reminder of the repulsive wretch she has become.

“The only difference between us,” Ursula says, “is that you’re driven by greed that you conceal behind all your poet bullshit, all your sensitive-artist bullshit. I despise greed, especially yours, when I’ve done everything to earn what I have, and you’ve done nothing.”

This rant inspires Undine to rise shakily to her feet.

The moment approaches.

This is the final minute of the final hour.

Behind filthy ropes of hair, Undine’s haggard face contorts with a pretense of having been offended—more than offended, deeply wounded—by having her virtue questioned, her motivations impugned.

“Admit the truth about yourself, Undine.” She holds up the manacle key between thumb and forefinger. “Admit the truth, and I will set you free.”

Undine stares at the key so hungrily that it might be food.

“Admit the truth. It’s just that easy.”

But Undine knows she will never be set free. Besides, Ursula is such a pathological liar that the taste of truth is too repulsive for her to speak a word of it.

Instead, Undine says, “I forgive you.”

“Liar.”

She pretends sadness and compassion with conviction. “You’re sick, Little Bear.”

That is a nickname from their childhood, given to her by this deceitful sibling. The name *Ursula* is from the Latin *ursa*, meaning *she-bear*.

“It’s not your fault, Little Bear. You’re very sick.”

Little Bear raises the pistol.

She points it at her hateful sister’s face.

Undine does not flinch or even blink.

“Am I very sick?” Little Bear asks.

“Yes, love. You are. You really are.”

“What are you going to do about it?” Little Bear asks.

“There’s nothing I can do. Not now.”

“There’s one thing,” says Little Bear, tightening her finger on the trigger.

* * * * *

Bob the dog could see and hear and feel and taste, of course, but most of his extensive knowledge of the world came to him courtesy of his fine nose, which had twenty muscles more than the pathetic four-muscle human nose, and which provided him with a sense of smell many thousands of times greater than Pogo’s. By that one sense, he took in more data than all five human senses combined.

No sooner had Bob crossed the threshold into the abandoned factory than he caught a scent that interested him, perhaps one he recognized, possibly that of the bold woman who, in the supermarket parking lot, had earlier displaced him from the front seat of Makani’s Chevy and in the process damaged his pride. He padded to the north end of building, nose to the floor, following a trail of spoor undetectable by his two companions.

Pogo was impressed by the silence with which Bob set out upon the search. He seemed to have a cat’s ability to retract his claws, so that they did not click on the concrete, though this was not a trick that a dog should be able to perform. In spite of the physical exertion and excitement, Bob didn’t pant, either, or express his opinion of the quarry by vocalizing—with growl and grumble—as he closed on her.

They came to a door. Beyond the door were steps descending.

Below lay a maze of corridors and rooms.

Voices ahead.

* * * * *

Undine does not once fix her eyes upon the fearsome bore of the pistol, from the darkness of which her death will issue in a spurt of flame.

She meets Little Bear’s eyes and does not look away, as if her last best hope might be to mesmerize her executioner.

Little Bear says, “Tell me the one thing you’ll do for your big sister, the one thing in addition to forgiving me.”

Although physically damaged, Undine remains mentally sharp. She knows what Little Bear is daring her to say.

“Tell me what you told me four days ago, the lie that almost got you killed then. End your agony and tell me.”

“It’s not a lie.”

“So tell me.”

Undine hesitates. “I forgive you...I’ll pray for you.”

“Liar. Neither you nor I, nor anyone in this freakin’ family, has ever prayed for anyone or ever will.”

At such close range, she intends to blow off Undine’s hateful face, but the dog leaps upon her back, knocking her to the floor.

* * * * *

The pistol discharged, and the bullet ricocheted through the room, drawing no blood, clanging off one of the metal shades that directed the light of the ceiling-mounted lamps toward the floor, shattering a distant fluorescent tube.

Bob bounded off Ursula as she scrambled on hands and knees toward the gun that, knocked from her hand, clattered across the concrete.

Makani moved fast and kicked the pistol farther from the woman's reach.

When the blonde looked up, her expression was demented in a most peculiar way, so that she appeared almost to be a child again, furious that her dignity had been assaulted and that she had been denied something she wanted, as if she had never been denied before.

Makani pressed the firing mechanism on the canister of pepper spray, and the one-second stream spattered Ursula's eyes, her nose, eliciting from her a shriek of pain and fury.

When in an instant her pupils contracted, when at once her vision blurred, when the cold fluorescent light became a blinding whiteness, when she could not draw a breath that didn't burn, Ursula should have collapsed in defeat, but she did not. Her rage was that of a wounded boar, her energy demonic, and she scrambled toward the pistol with an uncanny instinct for its location.

Makani dropped upon the crazed woman, pinning her against the floor, reading in her a desire to *kill, kill, kill*. She seized a fistful of thick golden hair, twisted it ruthlessly. Into Ursula's screams of outrage, Makani shouted, "*Be still, damn you!*" Cursing, spitting, the blonde tried to heave her off, thrashed and squirmed.

Riding the widow of Proctor Norquist as if taking on a storm wave, Makani amazed herself as she pushed the woman's face to the floor and twisted the fistful of hair again, twisted and pulled with brutal intent, with the consequence that her adversary's power to resist quickly diminished. From her earliest days on Oahu, she had been a tomboy; until this moment, however, she hadn't known that, confronted by a wild and evil hellcat, she could play a game of tough cop with some authority.

* * * * *

The brave dog leaped, Makani followed through as if she'd taken down a thousand nasty perps before, and Pogo stood astonished for a moment, feeling as if he were a useless goob, one of those gutless ducks, one of those wish-was surfers who floated in the lineup with everyone else but never rose on his board to ride a wave.

He saw the gun fly out of Ursula's grasp. He saw light winking off the little key as it arced onto the dirty mattress, and saw the starving sister break into tears at the sight of it.

"Oh God, oh God, oh God," she exclaimed, snatching up the key with hands shaking so badly that she kept dropping it.

Pogo bent down, seized Ursula by one arm, and held her cruelly tight, giving Makani a chance to climb off the woman. The blonde wheezed and coughed, choked on the air that she so urgently inhaled. Even secondhand, he found the super-hot pepper fumes distressing. She probably felt as if she were suffocating, though she wasn't. Every effect of pepper spray was temporary; there would be no permanent damage from it.

Together, he and Makani dragged her to her feet and forced her onto the chair beside the picnic cooler. “You make so much as half of one wrong move,” Pogo warned her, “and I’ll empty this entire canister in your face. You hear me?” When Ursula only wheezed and blew her nose into her hand, he said again, “*You hear me?*” She said she did, she heard him. In a voice cracked and raw with hot-pepper fumes, she choked out a series of expletives that defined him as one part of the human anatomy after another, both male and female; she showed no gender prejudice in her choice of words.

When Makani turned away from Ursula to retrieve the pistol, the imprisoned but now freed twin sister had already plucked the weapon from the floor and stood with it in a two-hand grip. Although weak and shaky, Undine proved to be an excellent shot, at least at that close range, when she pumped two rounds into Ursula’s perfect chest, killing her instantly.

Chapter 11

Happy Families are all alike.

Undine never imagined she could be this happy.

She is famished, starving, *aching* for food, but she is no less ecstatic because of her hunger.

Tolstoy once said, *Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.*

He was right, if by “happy families” he meant families in which all the members are dead but for one.

They are all dead now: Mother, Father, and the greedy bitch-slut-pig sister.

Undine has wanted them all dead since she was ten. She has a secret stash of drawings and paintings that depict them mutilated and dead in many grotesque positions and conditions.

Twenty years of drawing them dead, wanting them dead. Patience pays off.

She might call this a miracle if she believed in miracles, but she doesn’t believe in anything except herself. And money.

The sexy but perhaps stupid white boy and his sexy but mongrel girlfriend look down in shocked disbelief at Ursula’s drilled body, which has slid off the blood-spattered chair and onto the floor.

“Who the hell are you?” Undine asks.

Staring at the corpse, they seem to have forgotten who they are.

“Are you friends of that thieving pig?”

“Does it appear like we were friends?” the boy asks.

“I don’t know what it appears like. What’re you doing here?”

The boy looks at the girl. The girl looks at the boy.

“We were just following her,” the boy says at last.

“Why?”

The girl shrugs. “Why not?”

They are both staring at the corpse again, still stunned.

“So you were up to some kind of no good,” Undine says.

The boy says, “It was just something to do.”

“Following her was just something to do?”

“Yeah.”

Maybe for the moment it doesn't matter who they are.

A slight vertigo afflicts Undine. She wills herself to be steady. She is two twins in one now. She has the strength of two.

“I need your help,” she says.

They turn their full attention to her, bewildered but beginning to recognize the consequences of this event.

The girl lost her pepper spray in the tussle with Ursula.

The boy still has a little canister. Undine tells him to drop it, he hesitates, she thrusts the pistol toward him, and he drops the pepper spray on the floor.

The black Labrador is slinking quietly to Undine's right, no doubt with heroic intentions.

“I'll shoot your dog dead if you don't control him.”

“Here, Bob,” the girl says. “Here, *now*.”

Reluctantly, the dog returns to her and sits at her side.

Undine says, “What kind of name is Bob for a dog? Why not Blackie or Midnight or Ebony?”

“Bob suits him best,” the girl says.

“Bob is a stupid name for a dog,” Undine insists. She is, after all, a poet. She knows a thing or two about names and words and the way they resonate. “What's *your* name?”

“Makani.”

“Is that a name? What kind of name is that?”

“Hawaiian.”

“*Hawaiian*. Jeez. Everyone wants to be exotic these days.”

When asked, the boy says his name is Pogo, and Undine says that would be a better name for the dog, and then for half a minute or so, none of them seems to know what to say next.

Undine breaks the silence. “I'm too weak to do what needs to be done all by myself. Help me, and I'll make you rich.”

The two look at each other, making whatever feeble calculations pass for their thinking.

Their names are so improbable that Undine has already forgotten them and remembers only Bob.

A little vertigo again. Less than before. She has the strength of two. She steadies her world.

A line from Shakespeare reminds her of the stakes: *Some o' their plants are ill-rooted already; the least wind i' the world will blow them down.*

Undine is not only a poet who knows a lot of Shakespeare; she is also deeply rooted, safe from all winds.

The girl says, “How rich will you make us?”

“A million dollars each. In cash.”

“You have that kind of money?” the boy asks.

"I will. The fat bitch finagled our egg-sucking, shit-for-brains father into leaving it all to her, with just an allowance for me."

"She wasn't fat," the boy says.

"She's fat compared to me right now, the jealous little whore."

The girl says, "If you only get an allowance..."

"I went to see her in that tasteless mansion with its thousand tons of garish furniture, supposedly to do a little dickering for an increase in my allowance, the two of us over dinner. But I didn't go there to dicker. That was bullshit. I went there to kill the vicious leech."

"But obviously you didn't kill her then. Why didn't you kill her?" the pretty boy asks, proving her suspicion that he is a moron.

"Obviously," Undine says, "the selfish sack of pus had a plan of her own."

"Starving you to death," the girl says.

"Your children will surely be geniuses," Undine declares scornfully.

She needs these two and shouldn't be cross with them, but she loathes stupidity.

She is swaying on her feet, and her arms are shaking, and the boy sees this. "That gun is heavy."

"It won't be as heavy if I put two bullets in your head. I may look shaky, but don't think you can screw with me."

Undine feels as if she's tilting. Or the room is tilting. She tells herself that neither is the case.

The girl says, "He isn't going to screw with anyone who can make us rich. Chill, Pogo."

Undine says, "My plan was to kill her, chop her up, put the pieces through an industrial Cuisinart, take the sludge far out into the desert, pour it out for the snakes and bugs and rats to eat, then take her identity."

"Become Ursula," the boy says.

"You *are* lightning-quick on the uptake. But now I'll need to lie low for a few weeks, gain some weight, get my looks back, before I can pass for that disgusting parasite."

"So what do you need us to do?" the girl wonders.

Indicating the corpse, Undine says, "Chop, Cuisinart, dispose of the sludge."

"All that for just a million?"

"A million each," Undine reminds them. "Two million total, for just a few hours of manual labor."

They stand there, thinking about it.

"What the hell is there to think about?" Undine demands.

"How do we know you won't kill us after we do it?" the girl asks.

The girl is stupid. Undine will not kill them until weeks from now, when she is restored.

Undine says, "Kill you? Are you crazy paranoid? If I killed you, I'd have to chop, Cuisinart, and dispose of you two, and *I don't have the strength for it, Bob!*"

The girl regards her with what might be pity when she says, "Bob is the dog."

"The dog is Bob," the boy agrees.

Bob is the dog, the dog is Bob: Something about those lines, spoken one after the other, affects Undine negatively, summons the vertigo that she has repressed,

no doubt because she is a poet and therefore highly sensitive to the way that words resonate with one another, to subtle rhythms that ordinary people are not capable of appreciating. She tilts, tilts, and the room turns. *Bob is the dog, the dog is Bob, Bob is the dog is the dog is Bob, Bob-Bob-Bob, Bob is the dog.*

Although the girl has spoken no command, the dog bolts, Bob bolts, Bob the dog bolts. Bolts into the slowly revolving room. Not toward Undine. Away from her. Which is confusing as she tilts. She'd shoot him if he leaped at her. Now boy and girl are between her and Bob the dog, the dog is Bob is the dog, as the floor undulates. If she shoots, she might hit them. She needs boy and girl. Desperately, she needs them as, with the power of twins in one body, she commands the room to be still. The dog barks in alarm—or is it the girl?—barks *Pogo, no!* as the boy drops to the undulant floor and bounces up again with something in his hand, bounces up like a leaping Bob, *pepper spray* in hand, and Undine fires twice just as the stinging, blinding, suffocating stream defines a Z by splashing from eye to eye, slanting across nose, from one corner of mouth to the other. Bob dog did a circle, Bob dog behind her, teeth in her slacks, Bob dog pulling, Undine tilting. The blur of a boy as the world goes white, the boy at her like a dog on two legs, Bob dog behind, boy dog in front and grappling for the gun, girl barking *Pogo, Pogo!* Undine smells his blood. His hands slick with blood, so he can't tear the gun away from her. Kill him. Trigger it. The sound is huge, the pain huge, and everything is wrong. The white pain is brighter than the white blindness of pepper spray. Gun is gone. Vertigo. Going round, going down. Going, going... How happy she is with all of them dead. Father, Mother, Ursula dead, dead. How happy, but how brief has been her happiness, how brief, how—

Chapter 12

The Final Hour.

Pogo had been shot. Undine fired two rounds as Pogo squirted her with the Sabre 5.0, and the second bullet tore through him.

Makani couldn't believe he stayed on his feet, but he launched himself at Undine, struggled with her for possession of the pistol, as Bob attacked her from behind. The gun fired again, and the sound seemed to pierce Makani's heart, arrested her breathing, for she was certain he was dead, shot at such close range. But it was the woman who dropped, still holding the weapon, as Bob skittered out of the way and as Pogo staggered backward.

In life, the dazzling blue eyes of both twins had appeared luminous, though the glow had been demonic. Their depthless stares were lightless now, their eyes as flat as buttons in the cold fluorescent glare.

Pogo sat on the straight-backed chair, breathing hard, his left hand pressed lightly against the wound in his right shoulder. There was an exit wound, too. He said that was good. The bullet wasn't in him. He said that made everything easier.

Makani wanted to call 911, but he refused to let her, even spoke sharply to her, which he had never done before—“*No!*”—because there was too much at stake.

She said, “Your *life* is at stake, damn it. You’re *bleeding*.”

“Exactly. My life, your life, our future. We have to be smart about how we deal with this.”

How they dealt with it was so scary, so stressful, that Makani found herself talking aloud to herself, which rattled her each time she realized that she was doing it.

She had to wipe clean whatever they might have touched. The picnic cooler contained, among other things, foil packets of moist towelettes. She used those, pocketing each of the empty foil squares lest she inadvertently leave a thumbprint on one of them.

She wiped down the door handle to the death room, though she had no memory of touching it. Fingers wrapped in a towelette, she switched off the lights in each area from which they retreated, the darkness flowing in behind, swelling toward them like a tide.

Pogo needed her help to climb the stairs. Bob dashed ahead of them, but kept pausing to look back, clearly worried.

Makani didn’t douse the lights on the ground floor. She would be returning.

The brightness of the day surprised her. She knew that night was still hours away, but for some reason she expected a menacing coagulum of dark clouds, although there had been none earlier, and bleak light that belied the California promise of a golden life.

Although Pogo didn’t need to lean on her to get to the Honda, the distance seemed greater than it had earlier. He settled in the front passenger seat, looking nearly as gray as the primer coat on the car.

“I can’t just leave you here alone.”

“I have Bob,” he said, and from the backseat, the dog chuffed. “But hurry.”

She closed the door and returned to the factory. With each step she took away from Pogo, she felt as if she were stepping out of her life, this life, and into another, meaner world where she would be someone different—and less than—who she had been until now.

In the factory again, she ran to the south end. Here, in more prosperous days, an enormous roll-up door had allowed trucks to pull partway into the structure to load or unload. Most likely, it had not been used in years. Maybe it would work; maybe it wouldn’t. She found the control box. Groaning and creaking, the big segmented door traveled up and overhead on rusted tracks.

Outside again, she glanced toward the Honda. She could make out Bob in the back of the car. She couldn’t see Pogo; he was slumped in his seat.

He’s okay. He’s all right. It’s not a mortal wound.

The electronic key that she had taken from Ursula Liddon’s body was in her pocket, and the push-button ignition brought the Mercedes engine racing to life. She hung a U-turn, drove to the open roll-up, into the building, and parked.

With another moist towelette, she wiped down the parts of the car that she had touched. She kept the electronic key.

She opened the hood and, as Pogo had instructed during their exit from the factory, she disconnected the leads from the battery. When the vehicle was

disabled in this manner, maybe its transponder would cease to emit a signal, so it couldn't be located by GPS. Pogo wasn't sure about that. Simon could follow up here later today.

In a day or two, or five, the police would be notified that Ursula Liddon was missing. When they realized that, of her eight cars, only the Mercedes was not in her garage, they would hope to find it—and her—by GPS. It was essential that they be delayed.

Pogo's car had been parked inside the chain-link gate. Anyone passing could have seen it. Although it was far less memorable than Makani's highly customized Chevy, the Honda was not as nondescript as a car fresh off the dealer's lot.

If the twins were found in mere days, the Honda would be fresh in the memory of anyone who had seen it. But if the bodies were not discovered for months or years...

She put down the roll-up, went to the side door, switched off the lights, and locked the place with another key that they had taken from Ursula's body.

Although the day was not blistering-hot, only pleasantly warm, Makani perspired heavily as she hurried back to the Honda. The sweat felt as cold as ice water.

When she went to the passenger door to check on Pogo, his eyes were closed. He was still and pale, and blood saturated the entire front of his T-shirt.

He opened his eyes. She could see herself reflected in them. "The gate," he reminded her.

"Yeah. I know. I just needed to... see."

The portion of the gate-motor housing that he'd removed lay on the blacktop with four screws. He had described the cut wires to her. Holding them by the insulation, she crossed the bare-copper ends, and they sparked, and the gate rolled open.

Using the flip-out screwdriver in Pogo's Swiss Army Knife, Makani replaced the section of motor housing, so that a police patrol—if one ever looked close—wouldn't notice it and be curious. Although this once-humming neighborhood was desolate, traffic passed in the street, and she expected every vehicle to be a black-and-white. Her hands shook, she kept dropping the screws, and the task took longer than it should have.

Pogo was okay. He looked tired, but he was okay.

She drove off the property and parked in the street, leaving the engine running and the driver's door open when she got out.

From this side, the gate could be closed only manually. She got the job done.

In the driver's seat, when they were rolling again, she said, "You need a doctor."

"There'll be one soon." His voice was hoarse and weak. She thought maybe he was delirious or something.

"Where? Where will there be one soon?"

"Where I'm house-sitting, where you left your Chevy."

"The owner isn't a doctor. And anyway, he's in Europe."

Pogo indicated the phone in his lap. "I called someone."

"Who?"

"Your only reliable resource in times of crisis."

"Simon? Simon's not a doctor."

“He’ll have one at the house soon after we get there.”

She didn’t like the look of the viscid mass of blood, dark and clotted, bibbing him from neck to waistline, but she couldn’t stop glancing at it.

“You need a doctor *now*,” she worried.

“Any doc you take me to will have to file a police report. It’s the law when there’s a bullet wound. Simon’s doc will be discreet.”

“How can he be discreet if it’s the law?”

“Probably he lost his license. He’s practicing without it. Or he’s willing to take risks. Moonlight for the right money. Doctors don’t do as well these days as they once did.”

“This sucks.”

“It sucks,” he agreed.

Bob was lying down in the backseat. He usually liked to sit up in a car, to enjoy the passing view. He lay quiet, as if he wasn’t in the mood to enjoy anything right now.

She glanced at Pogo. “You don’t look so good.”

“Thirsty. Dizzy. Tired. That’s all.”

She almost ran a red light, braked in time. The last thing she needed was to draw the attention of a cop.

Pogo closed his eyes.

She watched him.

She said, “Pogo?”

“Hmmm?”

“Don’t you go anywhere.”

“Only where you take me,” he promised.

She didn’t want to upset him by crying. She wasn’t a girl who cried often or easily. She cried quietly all the way to the house on the harbor.

* * * * *

She parked the Honda in the garage and helped Pogo into the kitchen.

He sat on the hardwood floor with his back against one of two Sub-Zero refrigerators, worried about getting blood on the furniture. “Not good for my reputation as a house-sitter.”

When she gave him a bottle of water from the second fridge, he drank greedily. He seemed to have a little trouble swallowing.

Makani hurriedly collected blankets, fashioned a makeshift bed on the kitchen floor. Pogo hissed in pain as he stretched out there.

She elevated his feet with pillows, in case he was in shock. Shock could kill.

Bob wanted to lie down beside his uncle Pogo, and Makani said no, but Pogo said yes. Bob cuddled up against him, nobly resisting what would have been an ordinary doggie urge to lick the blood.

“Where’s the damn doctor?” she wondered.

“He’s coming.”

“What can I get you?”

“I’m okay.”

She felt useless. Worse, she felt responsible. Her gift. Her curse. And all of it for what? Neither twin worth saving.

When she asked him if he was all right, he didn't answer. He was unconscious. Breathing shallowly.

His skin was cool, clammy. She took his pulse. It was rapid.

Doorbell.

* * * * *

The doctor wore tennis shoes without socks, khaki shorts, and a Hawaiian shirt that blazed with a colorful pattern of parrots and palm leaves. He carried a black medical bag and a small ice chest.

The ice chest contained two units of blood. Apparently, on the phone, Pogo had told Simon his blood type.

The doctor wanted to add padding to the kitchen table and use it for his surgery. Makani quickly gathered up more blankets, and they carefully transferred Pogo from the floor.

She said, "He's unconscious. Why's he unconscious?"

"Just the body conserving its resources."

The physician was clean shaven, well barbered, with a broad kind face. He seemed competent. She should have believed him, but she didn't.

The first time she asked his name, he only smiled at her. The second time she asked, he said, "Just call me Harry," though she suspected even that name was a lie.

After he had taken the patient's vital signs, inspected the wound and addressed it, sutured both the entry wound and the exit wound, and administered two units of blood, he decided they could risk moving Pogo upstairs in the elevator, to a second-floor bedroom.

Makani hadn't known that the house contained an elevator, but Pogo had informed Simon of its existence.

They found a wheeled office chair in a downstairs study, sat him in it, and rolled him into the elevator, still unconscious and in fact now sedated.

"This is so wrong," Makani said. "This is crazy, he isn't getting the right care."

"I swear to you," Dr. Harry said, "this is way better than a government-run hospital."

"Is he going to be all right?"

"He's young, he's strong, we'll see."

Throughout the ordeal, she tried not to touch the doctor. Twice, however, she brushed one of his hands with one of hers. She read him: the boating accident when he'd been drinking and should not have been at the helm, his young wife and child drowned, the little boy lost forever to the ocean, the subsequent descent into even heavier drinking, and the eventual sobriety.

She saw, too, that the texture of his guilt was as coarse and bristled as ever it had been; the years had not softened it. Nor had time diminished his shame. He recognized that continued suffering offered him the best chance of redemption, and he made the difficult choice to ignore the move-on-and-love-yourself advice of current pop psychology. He found a kind of happiness in taking responsibility for what he'd done. A peace settled upon him when he acknowledged that his selfishness and recklessness had destroyed two lives and that the only right

consequence was that the prospects for his own life be shaped and constricted by his thoughtless actions; it was the peace of genuine contrition.

Following the second unintended touch, the physician seemed to recognize some difference in the way Makani regarded him. He met her eyes with a new intensity and cocked his head and said, "Something you want to say, something you think I'm missing? Please be frank. You can't offend me."

She nodded. "I'm sorry I snapped at you earlier. You're doing right by him. I know that. I see that now."

For all the terror and grief her paranormal talent brought into her life, it also sometimes revealed to her whom she could trust.

"It's just that... Pogo means so much to me. Every day, I'm afraid of losing him. Maybe that sounds crazy. But every day. That's just the way I feel. Every day. And now this."

"It's not crazy," he assured her. "It's the sanest thing of all to live your life with the understanding that every hour may be the final hour."

* * * * *

The harbor raced with color under a red sunset so bright that it seemed even saltwater should burst into flame from its fiery reflection. From a window in Pogo's bedroom, Makani watched as the scene slowly darkled, until no sunshine remained in it and the only lights glimmering on the black water were from the houses around the harbor, from the docks that served the houses, and from the moored boats that wallowed gently in the receding tide.

Pogo woke shortly past eight o'clock. He knew who he was. He knew where he was. He said he loved her.

Dr. Harry was a live-in physician for twenty-four hours, and thereafter came to visit once a day.

* * * * *

Some Decembers, the weather sprites overpowered the weather gremlins, and Southern California received mid-year warmth at year's end, the gold-crowned sun ruling over this earthly paradise that, in spite of its imperfections, was perfect enough. If at least a mild El Niño effect brought warm water from South America all the way to this blessed coast, surfers could forgo the insulating neoprene wetsuits common to the season and hit the beach dressed as if the approaching holiday were July Fourth instead of Christmas.

Makani and Pogo paddled out to the lineup, straddled their boards, and made like a pair of buoys, a couple of dismo ducks, forgoing their turns while trying to stay out of the way of others more eager to thrash the waves or be thrashed by them. They didn't talk much because much had already been said.

Obeying doctor's orders for two and a half months, he refrained from surfing, which brought him as close to despondency as he was likely to get. She hadn't worried about him. She knew what he was made of, that he bounced back like Silly Putty. Two weeks earlier, he had returned to the sea, though not immediately to rip and slash it as he'd once done. He tested his shoulder, his balance, his skills, slowly working his way back by taking easy rides, then inside zippers, then somewhat more challenging waves.

Today, the surf had been solid normal when they paddled out, five-footers with just enough power to keep the veterans in the fight. But as they soaked in the lineup, sneaker sets began to insert from time to time, and then grew and became more frequent, until it seemed as if the sea must be aware that this was The Day for Pogo, the day when he hoped to prove that he was home and was once more totally who he had been.

As he drew his legs out of the water and knelt on his board, he said, "O'Brien, do you believe in evil?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"The important kind."

"How could I not believe?"

"You can't just walk away from it."

She thought of Ursula and Undine. "Maybe sometimes walking away is best."

"Maybe never. You know, even firemen don't always have someone to save."

"They like it better when they do."

"But if no one's in the building, they still have to put out the fire."

Big Mama rolled one of her best under them, and the next in the set seemed to be swelling even bigger as it darkened behind them.

"Stop jawing me about firemen," Makani said. "You're at the head of the lineup, dude. Go to your wipeout like a man."

He was grinning as he rose and caught the wave and found the lip and took the drop, for the moment disappearing from view.

The sea was deep, and the sky was deeper than the sea, and the day was The Day, fully bitchin', sweet, radical, as totally live as any day had ever been.
