

A photograph of two ancient mummies lying in a dark, stone-lined tomb. The mummies are wrapped in yellowish-brown bandages and are positioned vertically in the center of the frame. The surrounding rock is rough and textured, with some faint markings. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the mummies against the dark background.

Peter Drumbl

# The Embalmer

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## Prolog

There were numerous experts in forensic facial reconstruction who were able to render a face in such a way that it could be successfully used as an identification aid for criminal purposes. But few, if any, of them had reached the level of perfection of modeling faces so lifelike that they came back to life, as it were. Philippe Duprès was the undisputed master of this art.

It had not been easy for Cyd to track down the artist and get through to him. He lived in seclusion in a small coastal town in Oregon and rarely accepted commissions. And when he did, the task had to be particularly challenging for him. After questioning her at length over the phone about the nature of the matter, he finally agreed to receive her at his home.

After the long arduous journey, Cyd now stood in front of the front door of his chalet and summoned all her courage to ring the doorbell. She felt the fatigue of the last few days and anxiously wondered what kind of person Duprès might be. Artists were often considered capricious and headstrong. What if he rejected the assignment? She didn't want to think about what a setback in this matter would mean for her.

When the door opened, she immediately realized that her worries were unfounded. Duprès was an immensely pleasant elderly gentleman who greeted her with selected politeness and invited her into the house. He was kindness personified. Despite his fame and success, he had always remained a philanthropist, distinguished by modesty and reserve. The artist immediately recognized Cyd's mental condition and made a touching effort to dispel her uncertainty. He led her to a loggia that offered a magnificent view of the endless expanse of the Pacific Ocean.

"My personal therapy against the limitations of the human mind," he said with a smile. "What may I offer you, tea, coffee, cognac?"

Cyd took a seat in one of the comfortable upholstered chairs and felt her tension release. This was indeed a place to feel at ease. The

endless expanse and the sunlight reflected a thousand times in the waves to create a gently moving silvery backdrop.

"I will gladly take a coffee and the cognac too".

Duprès withdrew. Shortly after, he came back and served the drinks.

"I join you," he said with an approving nod. He poured strong black espresso into plain white cups, then filled their glasses from a decanter with cognac.

Cyd sipped carefully at her mocha cup and then leaned back with a contented sigh. Duprès stuck to the cognac first, lightly raising his glass to his health, taking a small sip and setting it back down on the serving table. He did not press her to speak, just looked at her kindly. The artist already knew about the nature of the task, which was related to a traumatic loss and had a therapeutic character, as it were, but she had not told him much more on the phone. Cyd was grateful for his patience. She had been going over and over in her mind what she would tell him and what information she would be better off withholding. But now that she had met him, she spontaneously decided to reveal the full truth to him. And so she told the whole story.

## Chapter 1

In the sheriff's office, for nostalgic reasons the Sonora Police Department was called that, the chief of police, Sheriff Vasco Jimenez, drank his first cup of coffee in front of the wide-open window in his office on the third floor of the headquarters. He enjoyed the hot air, which at this time of day carried with it almost a hint of freshness. He loved the view over the city and the Sierras on the horizon.

He was aware that the situation in the county and in neighboring regions equally affected by the heat had long since spiraled out of control. For weeks, National Guardsmen and aides, who had been given police powers by the governor, had been patrolling the county, making their presence felt especially at major bases. But the young inexperienced uniformed men were mostly preoccupied with problems of their own, and since their deployment a considerable proportion of medical missions had gone to the benefit of collapsed adolescents who were not up to field duty under such extreme conditions. In addition, the Sonora Sheriff's Department, which had jurisdiction over both the city and the county, had trained volunteers to help provide security as Qualified Armed Persons. But even this measure was only a drop in the bucket, given the exceptional situation.

What would the new day bring? The dawn was flooded by the first rays of the rising sun and began to turn into a deep ominous morning red - harbinger of the all-consuming glow that would settle over the city shortly thereafter and reduce all life to a minimum by evening.

Larry had it all arranged. Usually he drifted, resolutely refusing to pursue any productive or sensible occupation. However, when he intended to seduce a girl, he demonstrated remarkable organizational ability and determination.

The object of his desire this time was Linda Cavendish. She was the youngest scion of a clan whose family tree supposedly stretched back to the days of the Mayflower. At fifteen, she was actually too young

to drive across the country with Larry in his extravagantly tuned Dodge Viper. She had also been sufficiently coy at first, pretending to be a proper girl. In truth, she couldn't wait to have her first sexual experience with the in-boy of her clique. Not only was she attracted by the adventure and the possibility of gaining envy and admiration from her friends, it was an opportunity to get back at the hated clique. Now she sat by Larry's side in the open convertible, enjoying his attraction. Larry's experience had been that the best way to bring down slutty girls was with romantic sayings, while the surest way to bring down girls from good homes was with vulgar actions. His philosophy of life was, "The higher someone is enthroned, the lower he falls." An experienced strategist, he had factored not only the route but also the weather situation into his plans. The area was notorious for violent summer thunderstorms and after the long hot spell they would be in for a huge spectacle. He had expected special meteorological circumstances according to the weather report's predictions and with the help of his sniffer, but even he was surprised by the natural spectacle that unfolded before their eyes in a very short time. As if out of nowhere, the sky turned from a shimmering whitish haze to a deep purplish gray. At the same time, the atmosphere began to charge with electricity. It seemed as if what was happening was the creation of a virtuoso trick specialist. In the superheated atmosphere shadowy figures formed - surreal shapes and ghostly beings.

Larry had not expected this. He had planned to make the abandoned distiller's hut, which he had discovered a few days earlier, his quarters.

But in these weather conditions, he had doubts as to whether the old warped building was really the right place for his seduction plans. He worried for nothing. Linda was not fearful when it came to natural phenomena. Just as the atmosphere had become charged with energy, it was equally filled with libido seeking to be discharged. The old building in front of which Larry parked his Viper was exactly what she had envisioned as a love nest. While he was still considering

calling off the whole operation, Linda had already decided that this was the right place to lose her virginity.

"What a bizarre place. Finally a change after the sterile clubs. First you carry me over the threshold, then we call room service and order a bottle of vodka." Her enthusiasm straightened Larry out, too.

"Just a minute, Honey, I'll unlock the door and roll out the red carpet in a minute." He had expected that getting into the dilapidated building would be no problem. But now he was surprised to find that the cottage's entrance was secured with modern padlocks. After several unsuccessful attempts to break open the fittings with a stone, Linda took over again.

"What do you think about taking the jack?" Larry was annoyed that he hadn't come up with the idea himself. He got the device out of the Dodge and pried the door open. As they entered, the magic of a mystical place enveloped them. They entered a large, dry room. Long wooden racks were mounted on the walls. In one corner there was a simple sleeping place with straw-filled jute sacks and old blankets.

The old masonry with the rotten beams of the roof truss, the blinded panes of the window openings, the smell of the past and decay radiated a peculiar atmosphere of eroticism and decadence. The haunting atmosphere was further enhanced by the rows of sealed jugs that stood on the long racks of shelves.

The dim light coming in through the tiny dirty windows bathed the room in an eerie twilight.

"My God, what a haunted house." Linda realized that she needed to boost her anxious companion's self-worth if he was still going to be operational as a lover. She clasped her body with both arms and played the scared-to-death hag. Larry did not miss the opportunity to play the role of the strong man.

"Don't worry, baby, I'm right here with you. Be careful though, it's possible that there are scorpions or snakes hiding in here somewhere."

Larry deliberately avoided the subject of tarantulas or tarantulas, which were also native to the area. There was nothing that panicked him more than a large hairy spider. Again, doubts came over him as to whether it had been a good idea to pick this cabin for the seduction. He longed for his pad in the dingy basement of a downtown Korean restaurant. But while Larry was still looking for a way out, Linda was already impressively proving her practical intelligence by managing to turn the inhospitable place into a perfectly passable love nest. For Larry, it was a completely new and unsettling experience to have a woman take the initiative and rule over him. His script had slipped out of his hands. The distribution of roles was not at all to his liking. For the first time in his career as a teenage seducer, it happened that the role of the seduced was intended for him. But Linda was so confident that he soon recovered and gave up his resistance.

The powerful forces of nature, the mysterious surroundings and, last but not least, the desirable woman in the role of the seductress had an effect. In the semi-darkness of the room, Larry did what he did best. His tongue explored every corner of her mouth and her desirable body.

His fingers found their way into her panties and he felt the warmth and moisture of her pulsating vagina. This was what Linda had always dreamed of. Her movements took over his rhythm and as he penetrated her, she was close to losing her senses. Closely entwined, in ecstatic, ever wilder movements, they strove towards climax. The thunderstorm had broken loose and the bizarre staccato of the rain hitting the hut created a wild soundscape. Flashes of lurid lightning twitched through the semi-darkness of the room like the strobes of a discotheque. Searching for the perfect body position, Larry lifted the girl onto a ledge of the wooden frame. In this position, both hands clawed into the wooden beams, legs spread wide, Linda hung in the posture of a crucified woman, dying the first sweet love death of her nascent career as a 'Sex Maniac'. She was about to climax when a beam came loose and she fell, along with the wooden frame, onto

Larry. Wrapped in a huge cloud of dust, they landed on the floor, covered by all kinds of shards and the contents of the jugs.

"My God, what happened?" Larry extricated himself from the roughest debris and began to wipe the dust from his face. "It must have been an earth tremor, maybe even 'The Big One.' I think we're lucky the walls didn't collapse." Larry was crouched on all fours and it appeared that the incident had bought the last of his guts.

"The last bump was indeed a 'Big One', however I doubt it was an earth shock." Linda's tone left no doubt that she was enjoying the situation. Eventually, her bawdy remark helped Larry get over the shock as well, and together they burst into liberating maniacal laughter. Suddenly Linda, lying on her back with her eyes fixed on Larry, saw his laughter freeze and his wide-eyed face turn into a grimace of horror.

She watched in disbelief as his mouth opened and he just managed to turn away before he threw up. Her first reaction was disgust and anger. But as she turned to the side to get away from him, horror gripped her as well. The floor was littered with offal. Stomachs, livers, lungs, intestines were found in a desolate mess mixed with dust and shards. Now she also noticed how an infernal, all-pervading stench of death and decay filled the room. It was so unreal, so unbelievable, that she first froze motionless before she began to scream.

At the Sheriff's Office, the on-duty crew toiled through the sweltering evening. The department had always been chronically understaffed, but now the absences were compounded by illness and exhaustion. Jimenez had long since given up on creating comprehensive duty rosters or working with performance targets. Everyone was simply trying to do their best. The police chief was reviewing the latest weather forecasts when he was interrupted by the ringing of the telephone. The alarming effect of the ringing tone abruptly changed the mood. Everyone was wide awake as Detective Paul Lance picked up the phone.

"Sheriff, I have Phil on the line, they need help, preferably the whole team." Cooper's voice sounded panicked, foreboding of cataclysmic events.

"Bad?"

"Couldn't be worse. Human organs in a dilapidated lodge in the Sierras!"

Jimenez took over the phone. "Phil, where are you now?"

"I'm standing in front of a cabin about five miles south between Elpadre Tank and Coyote Creek. Fortunately, Louis is with me. We have a young couple here who discovered the body parts.

The girl is in a severe state of shock, the young man has completely collapsed. It gets better, guess who the girl is."

"Don't keep me in suspense, man, tell me what I need to know."

"Governor Cavendish's daughter."

"Shit!" The sheriff's curse was spontaneous and heartfelt. "Listen Phil, you stay put. We'll be with you in thirty minutes. Absolute news blackout. I'm holding you personally responsible for leaks."

Cavendish, of all people. He was considered a hardliner in the fight against crime and never tired of denouncing the incompetence and laxity of the police forces in the country. The fatigue and despondency of the department was blown away.

In ancient Greece, people who had been granted great good fortune used to pull their hair out and burst into loud lamentations. It was a strategy of worrying that the gods might envy them and send them misfortune and ruin out of ill will. This is what Cydney Alexander - sensational reporter of 'Life Events' - had to think about as she sat dejectedly in her car under the approaching thunderstorm, reflecting on the past days and hours. It was a depressing summation she drew as she reflected on her position at the station and her professional future.

Only a short time ago, she seemed to have reached the pinnacle of success - in the 'Olympus' of television journalism. A seemingly

promising and interesting job at 'Life Events', a much sought-after and devoted bachelor, envied by her girlfriends and colleagues, no red numbers at the bank for the first time and a newly occupied apartment in a good residential area. But instead of embracing this period of happiness with humility and sharing it with others, she had become arrogant and haughty, attributing success solely to her special talent and skill. She had stopped acknowledging the accomplishments of others, had looked with disdain on friends and co-workers who were not as successful or who were worse off. She had shamelessly flaunted success and prestige to elevate herself and hurt others. In her delusion, she had begun to make mistakes - only minor ones at first, but a series of small clumsinesses had created a snowball effect and brought her to the edge of the abyss she now faced.

When she arrived at the editorial office that day, she had sensed that the atmosphere had changed. She already noticed it in the greeting from the porter, which was less cordial than she was used to. Colleagues with whom she was on good terms were unusually curt or seemed to avoid her gaze. No sooner had she taken her seat at her desk than she received a call from the master's secretary.

"Leave everything, Mister Jenkins wishes to see you immediately". The phrase "to see" - not "to speak" finally set alarm bells ringing in her head. During the 'walk to the scaffold' she thought hard about what she could have done that was significant enough for a personal intervention by the great master.

Austin Jenkins was one of the most influential media people in the southwestern United States. He had started his career as a police reporter on the narcotics squad and had made it to the top with toughness, cleverness and iron self-discipline. There was a five-year gap in Jenkins' curriculum that no one seemed to know about, and was the cause of wild speculation. Cyd knew a wide variety of rumors that were circulating. There was talk of activities with the drug syndicate, forgery and the sale of antiques, organized art theft, large-scale trafficking, or even a large-scale pornography ring.

Like most of the staff and other people who knew Jenkins well, she could picture her boss in any and none of the assigned roles. She trusted him with a certain willingness to step outside the law at all times. It was undoubtedly the outlaw image that Jenkins seemed to cultivate, even, and especially, when he dismissed all questions regarding the mysterious five years by saying, "That's not of public interest." That morning, he made short work of her:

"We don't value employees who don't play by the rules. You've stepped on Ruth's toes several times, and you know what that means."

"I've taken advantage of opportunities, and I think that's a fundamental quality of a good reporter. What is it about Ruth that makes them all so great?" The icy look Jenkins gave her told her that she had now gone too far with her retort as well. She realized with horror that she had indeed lost all standards in dealing with the others.

"You are behind on your vacation days. I am relieving you of all duties. We'll talk again in three weeks." Reaching for the phone, he emphasized that the conversation was over.

Cyd left the office as if in a trance. She simply could not believe that everything she had achieved was to be lost in one fell swoop.

She didn't remember how she had gotten to her car and finally driven to the spot in the mountains south of town where she was now.

The deep fall had hit her to the core. Her brain seemed to be fogged in, her attention and perception focused solely on her failure and her injury, she sat in the vehicle and stared, paralyzed, at the natural spectacle of a brewing thunderstorm while she reviewed her life and, as so often, the trauma of her early youth came back to her as a paralyzing memory.

Suddenly, the mountain road was immersed in a sea of lightning that was not of atmospheric origin. Several patrol cars sped by with their lights flashing. Their dejection was wiped away.

The reporter's instinct pumped adrenaline into her veins and made her function like a well-programmed machine. She started the car and attached herself to the vehicles. Cyd was convinced she was a nimble and safe driver. But this convoy drove at an almost suicidal speed through the narrow mountain roads, and several times she narrowly avoided a crash. The drive was complicated by her effort to simultaneously get the frequency of the local police authorities into her multiband receiver. When she finally tuned into the correct station, she had to realize that all communications were coded. This confirmed the importance of this operation, but got her no further in her effort to get usable information to form a picture. So finally, despite the breakneck ride, she tried to reach Tom Albright in the newsroom. Tom was the one with the best wire in no-comment situations. Finally, she reached him on his cell phone.

"Please listen to me Tom and don't interrupt me. I can't give you any explanations right now. Try to find out what's going on at Coyote Creek. There's an insane operation here and the radio traffic is scrambled. Something is very wrong here. I'm on to them. Please hurry up and call me right back at the mobile."

"Actually, I should stay away from you - order from the top. But from the way you describe it, you seem to be on to something big. I'll do my best, Cyd." The conversation had caused the reporter to fall behind a bit and she was now in danger of losing her connection. But now the convoy was not moving. The emergency vehicles had turned into a dirt road and were now standing a few hundred meters from the road in front of a dilapidated building.

As she also attempted to turn, a Highway Patrol pickup truck prevented her from doing so. A state trooper with a Winchester Defender in his arms came toward her.

"Get out of here lady, this is a restricted area. "Cyd showed her press card.

"Life Events, Sheriff, we work with all law enforcement agencies. With an interesting case, we'll get the word out about you throughout the county."

"Get out of here," he growled again, "or I'll arrest you." Cyd knew this type of roughneck officer, and since spending the night in a cell was not conducive to her goals, she drove on.

At the next turnout, she stopped and took a small pair of binoculars from the glove compartment. With it, she stalked through the bushes toward the dilapidated house. As she put the glass to her eyes, the building and the vehicles parked in front of it seemed to jump out at her. She recognized a Dodge Convertible with a New Mexico license plate amid the emergency vehicles. She made a note of the license plate number and used the Internet on her mobile to try to find out the registration owner. After realizing that the access code to the central database of vehicle registrations had apparently been changed, she called Tom again.

"Hi, it's me again. How's it looking, have you found anything yet?"

"Sorry, Cyd, but you seem to have gotten yourself into a particular mess. Top-secret - there's general radio silence."

"Then please try to find out who the Dodge convertible with license plate SA342K is registered to. I'll call you right back." Tom seemed to be getting spooked by the case.

"Listen, before I let you rope me in any further, I need to check back with the boss to see if it's in the best interest of Life Events to get involved in a case like this."

"Come on, since when does a big boy like you need permission from Dad when he's on the trail of a big story?" With that, Cyd had hit the sore spot of Tom, who was always accused of being a good sleuth without personal responsibility - a talented stooge.

"All right, for you, girl, I'll make an exception. Give me fifteen minutes."

The time dragged on endlessly. Patience had never been the reporter's strong point, and sitting idly by was hell for her. But in this

situation, there was nothing she could do. All that remained was to observe the cordoned-off area with her binoculars. In the eerily circulating red emergency lights of the police car, she could make out a hysterically sobbing girl to whom a female deputy was handing a cup with a drink. Between the wall of the house and the squad car, a young man sat on a folding chair. He stared ahead while monotonously swaying his head back and forth. Another deputy with a notepad in one hand had his arm around his shoulder and was talking insistently to him. It seemed he was trying to get information from the shocked youth. Finally, their mobile became active again.

"I'm sorry, Cyd, but I've hit a wall. All channels are closed off. In my experience, that only happens every holy time, in extreme exceptional situations - national security or criminal cases involving the Overworld. If you want my opinion, don't bother. You can only lose in a situation like that. Jimenez is a smart guy who tries hard to have a good connection with the media, but in an emergency, he can't take a joke."

Cyd was frustrated and angry at the same time. And unfairly, she took her anger out on the person who least deserved it.

"What is this shit again - 'Overworld' - do the rich and beautiful think they can command the police apparatus like a private security service? It's high time a case like this was brought out into the open."

Tom remained calm. He knew Cyd and knew that her anger was not directed at him. "Have it your way, darling. Do what you can't help doing, it's your funeral after all."

No sooner had their conversation ended than Cyd saw a convoy of other vehicles arrive with their emergency lights flashing, including an ambulance and the sheriff's car. The vehicles braked abruptly and came to a halt in a cloud of dust. Alongside a MedTrust crew, she could make out Jimenez with two Sheriff's Department detectives. Cyd watched as the ambulance workers tended to the two young people while Jimenez got a status report from the deputies. Then they entered the cabin. A short time later, they came back out and Jimenez

walked purposefully toward the two young people, talking urgently to them. But it appeared that the two were not fit to be questioned. The medical attendants intervened and told Jimenez something, to which he shrugged his shoulders and turned away. While the sheriff gave his instructions, the ambulance left with the two teens. Cyd had just decided to leave as well when another vehicle arrived. To her amazement, she recognized the silver SUV of the head of the local FBI office, Elmore Spencer.

"This is getting weirder and weirder. Now the FBI is also interested in the case. So apparently it's a federal agency jurisdiction thing. What have I gotten myself into."

After a moment's consideration, she concluded that she wouldn't get anywhere here without backing from Jenkins, so she decided to deliver an interim report to her boss in hopes of being accepted back into grace for the sake of the story.

It was a strange feeling as she parked her car back at the radio station. How would Jenkins react to the story? Was he even still in the office? He was, after all, known as a workaholic who was the first to arrive and the last to leave.

"Anyone who needs more than five hours of sleep is not suited to media work and would be better off studying philosophy," was one of his life's wisdoms, which he would occasionally recite to his employees. But by now it was eleven o'clock at night and she couldn't imagine that her boss was still there now. But she was to be mistaken; when she arrived, Jenkins was just leaving the building. Indeed, the man seemed to need little sleep. He was surprised to encounter Cyd, but as a true media person, he recognized from her expression that something unusual must have happened.

"What's wrong with you, you look like you've met a ghost. Actually, I thought you would use your forced vacation to relax and calm your nerves." Without much preamble, Cyd got straight to the point.

"Boss, I came across a huge thing by accident. Give me ten minutes and you can still exile me." Jenkins smiled at her expression, but responded in a surprisingly friendly manner.

"I know you well enough to know that a huge thing out of her mouth is indeed a huge thing. So let's go to my office." Together they took the elevator to the seventeenth floor and walked through the empty corridors to the head office. Jenkins was gentleman enough for them both to have espresso from the machine before they took their seats at the conference table.

"All right, Cyd, forget the ten minutes, take all the time you need." A feeling of relief flowed through her, it sounded very different from the conversation that afternoon. In just a few words, Cyd recounted what she had observed over the past few hours, not leaving out anything important, but not embellishing her account beyond measure either. She knew how much her boss detested unnecessary elaboration. "Save all the gobbledygook for our viewers," was one of his standard phrases for employees who digressed from the topic. She could tell from his alert, concentrated gaze that not a word of her report escaped him. Very rarely, he interjected a question to clarify a detail or elaborate on a fact, but most of the time he simply listened intently. Finally, Cyd sat back and knew the die was cast as far as she was concerned; now everything depended on the great master's assessment. Jenkins sat in silence for a while before responding to what was said.

"I think you've actually hit on a big one there. Let me put it this way. I'm interested in principle, but I can't promise you anything. For now, go home and get some sleep. In any case, keep yourself on standby. I will use my contacts in this matter and research the background. I'll get back to you then." With that, he rose to indicate that for him the matter was settled for the time being. Cyd also stood up and said goodbye. She knew it was going to be a long night for Jenkins. And while she was disappointed at first that he hadn't asked her to be in her office at the start of work, she felt things were going

well for her. So she said goodbye informally and left the office. On the way to her car, she only realized how exhausted she was. And now she had only two wishes, a cold shower and a few hours of sleep.

When Jimenez entered the cabin, he thought he was in a chamber of horrors. The overturned shelf amid shards of clay, unbroken vessels and organ parts, plus the all-pervasive stench of death and decay. One look was enough for him to realize that a thorough investigation by the forensic investigation team was necessary here.

He had already requested it, just as he had notified Elmore Spencer, the head of the regional FBI office. He was quite fond of Elmore personally. The two occasionally did their marksmanship training together in the basement of the S.S.D., and Jimenez knew Spencer was an excellent shot with the Colt .45. Since there was nothing more he could do at the moment, he issued orders to provide comprehensive security for the scene.

In short bursts, the various special units arrived. Spencer, who had arrived before the forensic investigation team, was greeted by Jimenez. "Good evening, Elmore. Or should I say, good morning? An unusual time for a briefing, I realize. And I'm also not sure if we have a case for the FBI here. But if that's the case, I'd like you to be there from the beginning." Jimenez held out his hand and they greeted each other with a firm handshake.

"No problem my friend, I have experienced a false alarm many times before. But I'd rather be called for nothing than too late. As you correctly pointed out, our priority is to be notified in a timely manner. Just let's hear what you have once." Spencer reached into his pocket and took out an elegant platinum cigar case, opened it, and carefully selected one of the thin long cigars he couldn't seem to do without. After the usual ritual of lighting it, he satisfied himself that it drew well, then turned again to the sheriff, who informed him.

"I have only very rudimentary information myself. But what we do know has prompted us to give the matter top priority. Two young people apparently entered the cabin to have some fun. They may have overdone it and knocked over a shelf in the process. This caused many of the jugs deposited there to break and spill their contents onto them. An 'interruptus horribilis' one could say. Body parts of various kinds, at first sight mainly offal, partly preserved, partly decomposing, at least according to the smell. Really strong stuff. Even for me, the impression is shocking." As if to emphasize his words, the sheriff's face contorted into a grimace of disgust at this description.

"The two are of course in shock and are not fit to be questioned. The little information we have been able to get from them is not only incomplete, but also partly contradictory. But there is also a political component to the story. The girl is the daughter of Governor Caven-dish. And when he finds out about this, he's bound to get really nasty. Along the lines of 'Why can't county authorities make sure innocent young people can break into vacant houses and have their sex games without getting caught up in shocking experiences as a result of unsolved felonies.'"

Spencer laughed, then took a deep drag from his cigar. "Yes, those words could actually come out of the governor's mouth. On the other hand, his statements are so populist that no one really takes them seriously."

"None, except for the common people. You are not directly elected by the people in your position, but I am. Therefore, I cannot underestimate him as an adversary." The FBI man seemed to realize this, as he nodded thoughtfully while contemplating the embers of his cigar. In the meantime, the forensic team had also arrived. As usual, they mocked the destroyed tracks and the inadequate protection of the scene before they got down to work. Jimenez was about to turn his attention back to Spencer when his mobile rang. He listened tensely for a few minutes before answering.

"What I can confirm to you at this time, Mr. Jenkins, is an extensive police operation at Coyote Creek. I do not have any more information myself at this time. We are just at the beginning of the investigation." As was evident from the sheriff's expression, the interlocutor seemed to be quite insistent.

"Mr. Jenkins, you know better than anyone that I personally encourage and, when appropriate, seek cooperation from the media. But in this case ..." Again there were objections from the other side, cutting Jimenez off. Judging by the sheriff's pained resigned expression, he struggled to make a decision he didn't really stand behind.

"Okay, it is highly unusual, but I will make an exception for Miss Clark and have her here at the scene. But don't expect too much from it, I've already told you most of what we know."

With a deep sigh, he ended the conversation and put his mobile away again. "The bastard knows how to remind people of open favors. I think he's got leverage for every situation. He wants us to give his top journalist access to the scene and give her an interview. Well, this is going to be fun. The other media will be all over us."

Spencer waved it off. "What do you mean us, you're the one making this decision."

"You're right, they're going to crucify me. Now we're back to the point we made earlier, I have to run for election every four years, and in doing so I need all the support I can get."

Ruth stood at the barrier waiting to be let through. She had not the slightest doubt that she would be allowed to do so with the help of Jenkins' influence. Her boss had still managed to gain her access everywhere.

"May I offer you some refreshment?" The young deputy gave her an admiring smile as he handed over a misted bottle of lemon soda. "As you can see, our refrigerator in the squad car is not used exclusively for the delicate chemicals of criminal investigations." The conspiratorial grin sought fraternization.

"Thank you, very kind of you, but I am not thirsty." The cool aloof Ruth once again rebuffed a gallant cavalier, although her throat was parched and she was almost dying of thirst.

"Why can't I accept the slightest attention?" she asked herself for the thousandth time. How many times had she resolved to give herself permission to accept kindnesses when she felt like it. But in the end, she had always backed down. The resistance was simply insurmountable. She had neither the gift to give, nor could she accept. The only exception that came to mind was her privileged position at the station. Although she would not readily admit her privileged status as such, she knew deep down that Jenkins had a crush on her and definitely treated her differently than the rest of the staff. Only with Jenkins could her ego point to the tremendous value she represented to the station because of her popularity.

What she didn't think about was the fact that Jenkins could make virtually anyone a media star if he just wanted to.

Shortly before, his phone call telling her of Cyd's observation at Coyote Creek had jolted her from her sleep. Although the assignment in this case would actually belong to Cyd, he had nevertheless decided to send Ruth, who had more experience in dealing with the authorities, to the front as a scout. Since Cyd was unaware of his decision, he requested that she treat her action with discretion until he had decided on an official strategy. She was considering what that strategy would be when she heard the sound of approaching footsteps.

"I apologize for the wait, Miss Clark, but securing the scene takes precedence, as you will understand." Julio Jimenez clicked his hooks together in a military manner and indicated a slight bow with his head in greeting. Then he extended his hand to her. Ruth was all suavity personified. She knew how sensitive Jimenez could be when he was under pressure. And there was no doubt in her mind that Jenkins must have put him under pressure.

"No problem, Sheriff, I am deeply grateful to you for taking the time to even see me in this situation. From the looks of it, you've stumbled onto a delicate matter here." Jimenez was visibly taken by her polite self-effacing manner, and his posture relaxed. Still, he seemed unsure of the extent to which he could justify divulging information to a single member of the media. Therefore, Ruth decided to follow up a little more.

"Mr. Jenkins sent me to work out with you how we, as the station with the highest ratings, can assist the authorities in their investigation. Of course, we will be guided by your wishes and specifications. Naturally, we have an obligation to our audience to provide all information relevant to the public interest. However, no one specifies when we must provide this information. We can also offer to be helpful in the preparation of press releases. The only thing we expect is exclusive rights to publish the story from the insider's perspective, always at your discretion, and only after all investigations are complete. How do you feel about that, Sheriff?" Jimenez had come to a decision. Even though he had little useful information so far, he knew the case was shaping up to be a 'Triple XL'. He could use all the help he could get.

"Thank you very much, Miss Clark, I appreciate your offer and I am also happy to accept it under the conditions mentioned. So I can confirm to you that there is indeed a case. But we are still in the dark ourselves. The only thing we know about so far is the finding of a larger amount of body parts in clay jars, mainly internal organs, in this hut. Possibly this is an indication of the activity of a ritual murderer in our area. However, I must insist that you keep this information confidential until the official press release. Yes, and one more thing, little Linda Cavendish was one of the two people who discovered the depository. That information is top secret. Your boss will understand. Give Jenkins my best regards, and I will be in touch with him tomorrow regarding further action. And now I must ask you to excuse me. Good evening."

Ruth knew when it paid off in the long run not to insist or to go undercover at the drop of a hat. And so she smiled warmly at Jimenez once again and waved her hand briefly before walking back to her car and driving off.

Jimenez was seething with anger. This was not the first time he had been forced to compromise with power-hungry politicians. But never before had circumstances forced such concessions from him. A representative of the press in an investigation team. Such influence was outrageous and unacceptable. And yet he had no choice. Without the protection of Jenkins and his station, he was lost. He knew Cavendish and his clique all too well. If he did not have his way, the governor was capable of any deviousness in his rage. He would abuse all his power and influence to destroy him as a sheriff and a man. At the same time the chief was under no illusions as to Jenkins. He was only the lesser of two evils in this matter. In character, he was in no way inferior to Cavendish in ruthlessness.

## Chapter 2

Although he was in the deep sleep phase, the sleeper knew what was coming. It was the dream experience of many months which had let this sleep consciousness develop with him. It was like a knowledge of coming disaster, which could no longer be stopped, and which one had to endure helplessly and completely at his mercy. While the first dream images took shape, he had only the one desperate wish that he would be spared at least this once from the always same tormenting nightmare. But already the beautiful face of the woman in the prime of her life appeared, with a smile full of warmth and kindness, the radiant dark blue eyes sparkling with vitality and connection with life.

During the time of their journey together, she had left her mark on him and meant everything to him - love, tenderness, support, comfort, giver of courage, strength and meaning in life. The archetype of a wise strong woman, equally earthy and visionary. Now that she was no longer alive, she visited him nightly in his dreams.

And just as terribly as she had been torn from her life and his, he lost her again and again in his dreams. Like Orpheus, who reaches out to his beloved Eurydice, trying to touch her, to hold her, while she inexorably disappears, he has to watch stunned as her features dissolve and turn into decay. As if in fast motion, the process of decomposition unfolds before him until he sees the image of a gruesome grimace before him, the hair fallen out, the eye sockets empty and dilated, the open mouth distorted into a rotting grimace.

Like every night, it was his own screams that he heard as if from far away, and which reached his ears more and more insistently until he finally woke up drenched in sweat.

"I have let you down. Forgive me, please, ... I'm so sorry, you hear, I didn't mean it, forgive me. I didn't know what I did to you, I didn't know ..., forgive me, please ...", prayerfully, choppily, barely comprehensible, he pounded out the words.

Although he felt with every fiber of his body how desperately he needed sleep and rest, the fear of a repetition of the obsessive dreaming drove him out of bed. He walked with unsteady steps to the bar cabinet, picked up a bottle of cognac and a glass, and made his way to the terrace. Shivering, wrapped in a blanket, he sat there in the darkness, trying to numb his troubled mind with the alcohol and waiting for dawn.

The breathtaking view of the twinkling starry sky above the old trees meant nothing to him. He was a driven man, a curse-laden man, no longer devoted to the beauties of life. Sometimes, when the exhaustion was too great, he found brief respite in a light half-sleep until the first rays of the rising sun woke him.

The first way led him to the coffee machine, where he brewed himself a strong coffee. He took the stimulants that were supposed to make him fit for the day together with the cup of coffee back on the terrace. Then he forced himself to take his morning shower ritual - ten minutes ice cold, three minutes as hot as he could stand, and finally cold again. Having thus forced the spirits of life into his body, he was ready to go about his daily activities.

On the drive to his workplace, he hardly noticed anything. He steered his vehicle into the city, lost in his dreams.

Jimenez and his men had just returned from the cabin in the mountains early that morning. He had showered and changed clothes in the sheriff's department washroom. He had scheduled an emergency meeting for 10:30. But before that, he had to get the samples to the lab. He called for Deputy O'Brian.

"We need lots of strong coffee, Keith. As black and as strong as the machine can make it. I'm going to move through the emergency meeting quickly so that you guys on call can attend too, and the men on the night shift can still get some sleep. From the looks of it, today is going to be a grueling day. We can't afford any mistakes in the investigation. The FBI and the whole country will be watching our backs.

On top of that, the press will bombard us with questions. So we need to have alert minds and thick skins." O'Brian knew from years of professional experience what it meant to be fully on the job after a sleepless night. Now they had to stand together and do their best.

"We on standby have already coordinated. We're going to stay here longer today so the Coyote Creek team can catch up on some sleep. Just have the men relieve us when they're rested."

"Thank you Keith, I expected nothing less from you. Good people, that's the secret to success. We'll solve the case and nail the guy responsible, I promise."

Jimenez knew the case would overwhelm the sheriff's department. The many young women who had disappeared in recent years in New Mexico and Arizona, as well as the large number of victims, were signs of a crime that transcended state lines. That definitely meant FBI. So he had consulted with Spencer and agreed with him to set up a task force. S.S.D., FBI, profilers, forensic medicine experts, an interdisciplinary group of experts and, of necessity, the press.

Dr. Christopher Chambers had arrived at North Park Hospital before work, as he did every morning. He loved to walk through the ornate Japanese Garden. At this early hour, he could be sure not to be disturbed by anyone.

It was an enchanted place, an oasis of peace and contemplation. Watercourses and cascades flowed down several levels into small ponds, from which rose islands whose stony banks were lined with evergreen shrubs and trees or moss-covered stones. Simple wooden bridges connected the islands to the shore, and paths allowed viewing of the water from all sides.

Chambers preferred to sit on the stone bench in front of a small lotus pond. Once again, he wondered how it was possible for the operators of the park, which was part of the hospital's facility, to keep up irrigation for the park during this time of drought.

Few people who knew him were aware of what made him charismatic. And yet everyone agreed that he had special qualities that made him stand out among other people. Of medium height, slender with brown hair, at first glance he appeared rather unassuming. Nevertheless, there was something about him that made most people seek his closeness.

Colleagues described him as an attractive man with both erotic and paternal charisma. Among his peers, he was considered a scientifically accomplished, experienced forensic physician whose diligence and thoroughness had repeatedly led to the solving of spectacular cases, which is why he was regularly called upon by the Sonora Sheriff's Department and the FBI for difficult cases.

That morning, he was lost in contemplation of a lotus blossom when his mobile buzzed. He wondered about the call at such an early hour and saw on the display that it was the clinic's reception.

"Good morning, Dr. Chambers, I know you're not on duty yet, but since you're often in the Japanese Garden at this time of day, I just gave it a try. I have Sheriff Jimenez and a forensic evidence team waiting with me. They have work for you and would like to talk to you in person. What do you want me to tell them? Do you want them to wait or do you have time for them right now?"

"Tell them I'm on my way." That sounded like an important thing, top priority. So Chambers said goodbye to his little pond and took long strides toward the coroner's building. Parked at a side entrance were three S.S.D. minivans, apparently they had brought the work materials right along. As he made his way down the hall, he noticed the nervousness on Jimenez from a distance. He had never seen the sheriff like this before. His grim look revealed that he would have liked not to have to wait on such an important matter.

"Morning, Chambers, there's work to be done and plenty of it. We had a long night last night and now we desperately need your help."

"No problem Sheriff, good morning Linda, Ralph! Why don't we go into my office and discuss everything there in peace." Chambers never showed any signs of bustle or agitation.

When the small group arrived there, he offered them tea or coffee, but they declined. They had already consumed far too much caffeine in the last few hours. Jimenez wasted no time with long prefaces.

"We have come across a larger deposit of body parts and now need to find out what it is all about. The find consists of intermingled samples that had originally been in different jars that got broken and mixed up. In some cases we also have undamaged jars in which we suspect the same contents. The first thing we need clarification on as quickly as possible is whether the samples are of human origin, how many different people, age, sex, ethnicity, cause of death, time of death. The usual as an initial finding. We are under pressure from the press, and we also have the Governor breathing down our necks. I know I can count on you. Please let me know the minute you have something. Tomorrow at eight o'clock, the FBI Department has scheduled the first working meeting of the task force that has been formed for the case. We definitely need the results by then. I assume I can count on you, as usual, to make the presentation of the results to the task force in person."

For Chambers, the time constraints were nothing new; assignments from the S.S.D. or FBI always had the highest level of urgency. "Get everything to the lab and I'll get right on it. I should have the findings by tomorrow morning."

It was indeed a considerable amount of material that had been delivered. First Chambers marked all the unbroken jars, then all the containers in which the collected mixed samples had been delivered. Now he instructed his staff to prepare a corresponding number of laboratory vessels so that the tissue samples could be examined individually.

Cyd was about to leave the house when the longed-for phone call came in. It was Jenkins' secretary, telling her to report to the station at 12:00. No other clues. But Cyd knew what this meant. She was at it again.

While the sheriff at the S.D. was briefing his people and drawing up an operational plan in the emergency meeting, a similar meeting was taking place at the FBI Bureau between Elmore Spencer, Raymona Hayes, information technology expert Burt Foster, and Special Agents Chad Martin and Ben Kirby.

"Okay guys, I think this whole thing smells like a big deal. Once the organic material is evaluated, we'll see if I'm right. Until then, we can brainstorm and look for commonalities between the few clues we have. What do the facts look like? Raymona please design the flip chart.

Organ finds in larger quantity, high probability human, form of storage - in preservation liquid, method of storage - in clay jars, place of storage - abandoned hut in the mountains, found - by chance, probability of finding - low, securing - by padlocks. Any ideas about this compilation?"

"The organs were to be preserved because they still had a function to perform."

"Whoever stored them there didn't expect them to be discovered."

"Stolen organs from an anatomical institute for a black market of medical students in need of dissection materials."

"The hoard of a pathologist emeritus who could not part with the milestones of his professional experience."

"Trophies of a Serial Killer. Intestines are more intimate than, say, a cut ear, personal clothing, or identification."

"Human body parts that have been preserved for consumption. The so-called preservation liquid, which we know didn't really act as a preservative, is some kind of sauce or soup, whatever. That stuff was

left and then spoiled because the cannibal changed his taste, maybe died or got caught."

"Spoils of a ritual murderer, which served the humiliation of the victims. The body was disemboweled and deposited in various places. The murderer wanted to deprive the victim of the resting place of the dead and thus of dignity."

"Remnants of meals left by a cannibal as inedible and kept as souvenirs."

"It's a test situation from a TV station. They want to test us to see how we handle it."

"Testing situation through the FBI Academy at Quantico."

"Challenge by a killer who sets senseless acts that are hard to understand and thus hard to solve."

The ideas mentioned came spontaneously and were mentioned as personal ideas regardless of reasonableness or probability of being true. Spencer was satisfied and moved on to the next step.

"Now I am asking all those who have contributed an association to reduce it to a few keywords for the search engines. Burt, please record the keywords."

Entering the search words both individually and in combination with other search words did not yield any useful results. Spencer put the failure away without batting an eye.

"Okay, nice try. With the small amount of data, not too much was to be expected.

Now we go through our ideas step by step according to the if-then principle and discuss the possibilities of how to proceed." It turned out that most of the associations pointed to the activity of a serial killer. Although the facts used were extremely few, Spencer knew that the intuition of experienced investigators was a valuable resource and should not be underestimated.

"Well folks, we're almost certainly going to need a profiler. Any suggestions?" A total of five different names were mentioned, with three names familiar to all. Of these three, two were specialists in

serial killers with a penchant for cannibalism and trophy worship. The third was a specialist in ritual killings and death cults.

Even though the connection to cannibalism has dropped several times today, I'm leaning towards Frank Gillardi, the expert on ritual killings. Don't ask me why, it's just an intuition. You are encouraged to advocate for your candidate now." Surprisingly, no serious dissenting votes came. The basis for a decision was simply too thin, and those present knew that Spencer's analytical skills and years of experience gave him the best qualifications to make emotionally intelligent decisions.

"Very well, then my proposal is considered accepted. I will contact Gillardi and try to have him present at our meeting tomorrow. Until further notice, everyone is on constant availability and standby. Thank you."

## Chapter 3

Austin Jenkins, media mogul and bon vivant, didn't think much of friendliness. When he liked someone, he could be very nice, almost affectionate. But it was a spontaneous kind of friendliness, typically found in young children; just as spontaneously, he could be unkind or very hurtful. His sympathies for station employees centered almost exclusively on Ruth, the editor-in-chief of Life Events, the show with the highest ratings. Cyd's journalistic skills, on the other hand, he took for granted as professionalism, which everyone had to bring along anyway if they wanted to work for him. That day, too, he treated his employees - with the exception of Ruth - as if they were just stealing his time.

"I'm busy, you're busy, so let's get down to business. Ruth?"

Typical Jenkins, Cyd thought. I've uncovered the story, and I want Ruth to present it. But wait and see, my dear, maybe I'll manage to open your eyes on this one.

As usual, Ruth approached the presentation of the facts in a matter-of-fact and controlled manner. "The clearer the facts, the more professional the presentation" was her motto.

"It's a really big deal. Jars of body parts have been found in a cabin in the Sierras. The explosive thing is the fact that one of the two people who could be called the discoverers is the daughter of Governor Cavendish. The governor's influence also explains the absolute news blackout. Apparently, he thinks nothing of negative publicity. His 15-year-old daughter seems to have broken into the cabin with her boy for a philandering session. But be careful, should we portray it that way, we can shut down the station."

"How do we know about this if the gag order is so effective?" Now Ruth was pressed for action. Cyd loved Gerry for his question, because now everyone would know that she was the one who had uncovered the case.

Gerry had wanted to clarify the point for himself without ulterior motives, but he realized from the sudden tension that he had obviously touched on a sensitive subject. Ruth gave him an angry look before answering.

"We have contacts in the sheriff's department, they pass the most effective filters. Also, Cyd happened to be near the site and noticed the commotion."

Before Cyd could sharply retort, Jenkins, who knew the rivalry between his top female journalists, took the floor.

"I would like to update you on the very latest from the S.D.. After Cyd put her foot in the door of the event for us with her arrival at the site, the sheriff had no choice but to show his colors. He agreed to let us go to the site on the condition that we would not go public with any reports without consulting him. But in the meantime, the case is already in the hands of the FBI. The head of the local office is Elmore Spencer, with whom I have quite a good personal relationship. That means the chances are good for us to keep our foot in the door."

Most of those present wondered at this display with whom Jenkins actually did not have a "good personal relationship." Cyd knew that she had to make her presence felt now if she did not want to be passed over.

"After landing the case for Life Events, I think I should be in charge of coverage."

"I think you lack the necessary experience for a report of this dimension, my dear" interjected Ruth in a sugary voice. "Besides, the research should be led by a personality who is known to the public and enjoys the necessary trust. It's just easier to get past the important people and get to the interesting information that way."

"I'm well-known enough and I can't complain about lack of trust, at least in public." At the last sentence, Cyd gave her boss an accusing look.

Jenkins understood that there would be bad blood among the staff if he put Cyd at such an obvious disadvantage. He decided to compromise.

"I want the two of you to work on the case together. You have the greatest possible freedom and can do your own research. But I expect you to present yourselves to the authorities as a team. So don't bring your personal vendetta out in the open. I want to be kept informed. All important steps and decisions will be made by me personally, after consultation with you. I have negotiated with Spencer to allow you to attend the crisis team meetings. Elmore is in the process of assembling a team of interdisciplinary experts. The first expert meeting is scheduled for eight o'clock tomorrow, and you will be there. Try to get as much background material as you can before then so you have a good start. Any questions?" Those present were careful not to waste time with unnecessary questions.

"Okay, dismissed." With that military order, Jenkins dismissed his people.

## Chapter 4

The media interest was enormous and the crowd in the press room of the sheriff's department was correspondingly large. Apart from all the local reporters, the major newspapers and broadcasters from neighboring states were present. After the crowd for the best seats had died down, everyone waited impatiently for the appearance of Vasco Jimenez's PR man. The heat in the room was almost unbearable, despite the air conditioning and ceiling fans. After twenty minutes, unrest began to spread, when the side door opened and Sheriff Jimenez entered the room, accompanied by his publicist.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I'm sorry if you've had to wait, but we've been trying to get updated information until the very end. To be blunt, what we have to offer so far is meager. But you can take our word for it, we don't know any more ourselves."

"Is it true that a serial killer is active in our country?" The interjection came from Jeremy O'Connel, a sensationalist reporter for a popular tabloid.

"And is it true that there is evidence of cannibalism?" This question came from a young reporter at a dedicated, up-and-coming private station that specialized in local news.

"Let me first tell you what facts we know, then my press officer will answer your questions." There was a murmur of agreement; you could feel the tension rising.

"Body parts were discovered last night in an abandoned cabin near Coyote Creek, most probably belonging to human beings. They are, so far as we are informed, exclusively or principally internal organs, and in any case of several persons.

Most of the investigation at the site has been completed and the finds are currently being examined at North Park Hospital's forensic department. I hope to be able to tell you more at the next press conference. Please direct your questions to Mr. Marquez. Thank you for

your attention, good afternoon." Immediately, a few voices rose in protest at the paucity of the information.

"Sheriff, Sheriff," the shrill female voice pierced the room, "I have a question for you personally! Who made the finds? Is it true that there is a political component to this case?"

Jimenez left the question unanswered and walked slowly but forcefully to the side door.

"Damn vultures," he thought to himself, "no matter how tight the data lock is, there are always gravediggers digging up bodies in the right place."

As was her nature, Cyd immediately threw herself into the new case. In her office, she called her contacts on various scientific subjects and asked for the best experts on ritual killing, death cults, and burial methods. After several phone calls, Cyd subjected the list of recommendations to intuitive scoring. She made annotations, made connections, put question marks, and circled some names, crossing out others. It was a chaotic form of selection, anarchic, perhaps typically female. Finally, one name with a phone number remained, which Cyd underlined thickly.

"Unknown stranger, my intuition tells me that you are the man with whom I will solve this case," she said in a chest tone of conviction, as if trying to convince herself of the correctness of her choice.

"You will help me to fame, reputation and wealth," she continued with a slightly ironic undertone.

Well, if only this doesn't turn out to be a flop, an inner voice warned at the same time. Cyd knew that she could only trust her intuition in half of all cases.

She took a deep breath and dialed Ian Conrad's line. She was disappointed when a female voice answered. The woman with a Mexican accent, who introduced herself as Anita, the doctor's housekeeper, told her that Dr. Conrad expected to be back around 10:00 p.m. She said that she would be home by then. Cyd decided not to make any

more calls, but to drive to Conrad's house that same evening. She asked Anita for directions and wrote down the information on her notepad.

The drive to the anthropologist's house proved far more arduous than Cyd had imagined. After branching off from the main road, she laboriously picked her way along small side streets with the help of her notes. At one point she got lost and had to back the car out of a dirt road that ended in a dried-up creek bed. The last turnoff ended in a stone and sand road that was barely passable. Again, she thought she was lost. But as she was already looking for a way to turn back, she saw a whitewashed wall shining brightly in the headlights at the end of the road. As she got closer, she realized it was a larger Mexican ranch-style house. Without lighting, the building appeared unoccupied. The clock on the dashboard read twenty past ten. So Dr. Conrad should be home. She turned on the flashlight she always kept in the glove compartment, got out, and walked to the entrance. She could tell she was right by the house number and the nameplate on the gate. She operated the old-fashioned bell pull and also knocked hard on the door several times, but she received no sign of life from inside the house. Disappointed, she sat back down in her vehicle and decided to wait.

After holding out in the dark car in front of Conrad's lodge for almost three hours, she decided to drive off, and to arrange a meeting by phone the next morning. As a last ditch effort, she counted slowly to thirty-three—a superstition she had picked up from her grandfather as a child: "Don't give up prematurely Cyd," he had said, "if you think you have to abandon a project, give yourself one last chance by counting to thirty-three." Often, when something was taking her too long and the temptation to abort was great, she would employ this ritual. And with incredulous amazement, she had early on experienced that a solution was indeed repeatedly in the offing during this final waiting period.

When she reached twenty-seven, she saw the lights of an approaching vehicle appear in her rearview mirror. Shortly after, an old Mustang slowed down in front of the house and stopped in a cloud of dust. A strong appearance, she thought, and decided not to be inferior to it in any way.

Conrad wondered about the car in front of his house. At first he thought of a young couple who had chosen the parking space for intimate play, then he thought about who could possibly approach him with demands for money. Since he could think of too many possibilities, he immediately dismissed the thought and decided to let the answer to the open question come to him.

As he stepped out of his Mustang, the door of the strange car opened and his gaze fell upon an unusually attractive lady's leg. Although the view of the soft outline of the thigh was only momentary, the afterimage of it lingered in his perception. It had not escaped Conrad's notice that the slender pale thigh had the two gentle curves he so admired in women's legs. One smaller one above the knee and the second one, starting just above and getting lost under the skirt where it would end in the crotch.

As a connoisseur, he had grasped at a glance that these legs corresponded to his ideal of beauty. A significant increase in his cerebral activation and a massive release of hormones was the result. A state of heightened alertness with simultaneous alarm reaction, he used to comment when he saw the first rounding on a woman's leg. At the sight of the second rounding on the thigh - the purgatorio - it became serious. At the transition thigh - slip - Inferno or Cielo, depending on the disposition of the wearer - his free will was gone. He was still trying to get his incipient erotic impulses under control when he got to see the rest of the lady.

Now he suspected that a good spirit had guided him to say goodbye relatively early - after nine rounds of Jameson - to the merry circle of

his academic colleagues. The night was still young, after all, and promised to be most interesting.

"Are you Ian Conrad?" The throaty voice and the deep look in his eyes confirmed his vision.

"Who wants to know?" he replied, simultaneously trying to get a manly timbre into his voice strained by lectures and Irish drinking songs.

"I'm Cydney Alexander from Life Events. You were recommended to me."

"Recommended for what?" he asked, trying to deepen the eye contact even more.

"Not what you're thinking about right now," she replied with a smile in her eyes.

"Too bad, really too bad," he said, winking at her.

"Seriously, I need your help as an expert. Your expertise, so to speak. I heard you are the best expert in the field of death cults and embalming techniques."

"They do seem quite alive, not to say excitingly vital."

"You, on the other hand, look like you jumped off the gravedigger's shovel."

"Jumped off the gravedigger's shovel, I haven't been paid such a nice compliment in a long time. With you as a gravedigger, I certainly wouldn't have jumped. But now that we've gotten through the welcoming ritual and the first sniffing, we could actually go inside. It's cooler there."

After putting the key in the lock with some difficulty and opening the door, he entered to deactivate the alarm system, after which he asked Cyd to come into the anteroom.

The Mexican style of the house continued in the interior design - masonry of whitewashed bricks, solid wooden beams and paneling of dark walnut in between. On the edge of an old coat rack stood a magnificently carved stake of cedar. In front of a bay window was a beautifully crafted Melanesian dance mask of raffia and wood.

"Your sombrero for hot summer days?" the reporter asked on an impulse to provoke.

"Not bad for life events," he countered. "A New Guinea sombrero, so to speak."

Cyd was annoyed by her lack of taste. But what really infuriated her was his cool reaction in pointing out the intellectual gap between them. She didn't want to admit to herself that he might be superior to her, even though she otherwise had no trouble accepting the expertise of professionals. Conrad immediately made up for his pointy remark by giving her a bright smile as he grabbed her by the elbow to lead her into the salon. When Cyd felt the touch, it was as if electricity flooded her entire body. She felt the attraction - and the danger - emanating from him, physically. Although she would have loved to give in to her excitement, she forced herself to be disciplined and objective, and strove to regain control.

"I apologize for my silly comment. I guess today is not my day."

"No problem, maybe tonight is your night?"

"Now it's you who's being silly. It's about important research. Important in itself and especially important to me personally. My professional future at the station may depend on it."

By now they had reached the drawing room, where he invited them to take a seat. Several mighty leather club chairs stood in the center of the spacious room. A generously sized fireplace drew the eye. Massive logs of palm wood were lined up along one wall, serving as pedestals for various masks. Although not an expert in this type of art, Cyd recognized that these were rare, precious exhibits. The room seemed wonderfully enlivened as a result, without losing any of its homeliness. At the end of the room, three wide steps led to a slightly elevated further level, where all the walls were taken up by ornately crafted bookshelves.

"Is this your library?" she asked redundantly.

"My studio I would say library sounds so antiquated. I had the level raised because I like to smoke a pipe when I work. That way, smoke

can't get trapped in the parlor. As much as I like to smoke, I can't stand the smell of cold smoke."

"Aren't you a little young to be smoking a pipe?"

"What's that supposed to mean again?" he asked, amused.

"Well, you know what they say about pipe smokers," she said with a challenging smile.

"Enlighten me, I don't know what they say about pipe smokers."

"Someone once told me that pipes represented something like phallic symbols, and that such fetishes were readily appreciated by men of advanced to very advanced age as compensation for their fading virility."

The ethnologist shook his head with an indulgent look.

"Do you actually believe everything you're told?"

"I think I need to apologize again. I really don't know what's wrong with me today."

"Don't apologize. I take it as a challenge, not to say a solicitation." He stood up and took one of the exhibits from a display case in the corner of the room.

"This is the claw of a brown bear from Wallachia. The women there believe that they must use it to scratch the skin of the man they desire in order to make him their husband."

"Fascinating, these superstitions."

"No superstition, I can assure you. A ritual - and it works."

"Are you serious? How can you know that?"

"Try it!" Cyd suddenly felt that their banter had entered a new dimension. Again she felt the attractiveness of this man. And it made her angry to be so at the mercy of her feelings. So far, in relationships with men, she had always dominated the play. When she felt his hand handing her the claw, a shiver ran through her.

"Aren't you ever serious?"

"Not if it can be avoided. But why do you think I'm joking?"

Suddenly he began to laugh. It was the laughter of a boy who had just succeeded in playing a trick on someone. Cyd was disappointed

on the one hand that the magic of the moment had faded, but on the other hand she was glad to have returned to earth.

"What do you know about death cults, the evisceration of the deceased, the preservation and storage of mortal remains?" she asked, trying to seize the initiative again.

"How long do you have?" asked Conrad, and the reporter sensed it was not irony. They were now both on the factual level.

"As long as it takes to understand it."

"Why do you need this knowledge, and what do I get in return?"

"It's about the body discoveries at Coyote Creek. I'm researching the case for Life Events. But in the meantime, it's about a lot more. We're working with the sheriff and the FBI. We want the killer. And we especially want to stop any more people from falling victim to him. What do you get out of it? Publicity, payment for your expertise - and my appreciation."

"I don't know anything about any body discoveries at Coyote Creek, but I'm very tempted by your appreciation. What may I offer you. I need something to loosen my tongue and help me organize my thoughts. It may make it easier for you to understand what I am about to tell you."

"I will gladly take a glass of white wine".

Conrad got up and left the room. After a short time, he returned with a tray. A bottle of Cru des Ptolémées in a wine cooler, a bowl of ice cubes, and a bottle of single malt with the appropriate glasses were on it. He casually pointed to the label of the wine bottle.

"Egyptian, to match the occasion. I'd love to keep you company with the wine, but as a purist, I never mix personal with business or whiskey with wine as a matter of principle." He poured for her and then filled his glass with Scotch. She took a small sip of the invigorating blanc, pulled her legs under her body, and was determined to give herself uncompromisingly to what was about to come. Conrad took a hearty swig of the whiskey, closed his eyes, and leaned back in his chair.

The alcohol, the mysterious atmosphere of the room, the magic of the moment and, last but not least, the unquenched longing for tenderness and encouragement caused Cyd to enter a state of world-distractedness that made her experience everything unreal. After a short time of reflection - she already thought Conrad had fallen asleep - he began his remarks.

"In most cultures, people think of death as a transition to another form of existence. When a person dies, the period from passing to burial is the most critical phase of death for the bereaved. During this time, the dead person is in a transitional state where decomposition begins. The corporeality of this world has not yet been lost, the otherworldly form of existence has not yet been attained. The bereaved are still strongly emotionally attached to the deceased, but his place in the community has been orphaned. The physical changes reveal the full horror of death. Decomposition, effluvia, and the work of maggots disfiguring the corpse, dissolution to complete destruction. This awakens ideas and fantasies of isolation, passage without return, stay in terrible unknown places. The helplessness of the bereaved and their fears of being visited by the deceased are also characteristic of this phase. Thus, it is not surprising that funeral customs aim to shorten and control this period. In most cultures, rites of secondary burial are found, through which the dead person is transferred into an eternal form in order to be able to enter the community of ancestors.

A typical example of this is the death rites in pharaonic Egypt. By taking the fate of the corpse into one's own hands through mummification, it was possible to prevent uncontrolled development of the dead and to reduce the process of complete transition to a relatively short period.

Am I going too fast with my remarks?" Conrad bent down to fill the glasses, sending Cyd an indulgent smile.

"Keep talking, I can follow you."

"In the beliefs of the ancient Egyptians, the time of life was very short, but the existence after death was exceedingly long. Accordingly, the effort they made to equip the deceased for the afterlife was great.

The afterlife ideas of that time are depicted quite vividly in the Osiris myth. The tale describes how Osiris is slain by his brother Seth and torn to pieces. He throws the pieces into the Nile so that the river will scatter them throughout the land. The image of death as dismemberment, dissolution and disruption is vividly brought home at this point. The dead Osiris is rescued from this state by his loving sister and wife, who sets out to find the scattered body parts and reassemble them. The life is described here as linking, wholeness and unity bringing forth Beseelung. Death healing through the invigorating forces of a love relationship.

The second important concept in the afterlife image of the ancient Egyptians was the mystery of nocturnal solar regeneration. The sun god Re was seen as the giver of all life. He was the light that conquered darkness. At night, he roamed the shadowy realm as the king of the dead, redeeming the deceased from their loneliness. He shared their fate by uniting with Osiris as his corpse. The power of renewal grew out of this union, because in Osiris and Re the circle of beginning and end was closed, the opposition of death and life was abolished. The mystery of the nocturnal regeneration of the sun and the renewal of the sun-god in the shadowy realm of death was the deepest mystery that existed in Egyptian religion."

Conrad glanced briefly at Cyd and saw that she was still awake and following his remarks attentively. He refilled his glass before continuing.

"Before we come to the meaning of mummification, we should still deal with the conception of the soul in ancient Egypt. According to it, man existed in multiple forms. First as a body, as such also beyond death - therefore one put so large value on the mummification. In addition, various spiritual forces were described. The most

important soul concept was the Ka. It stood for the creative power of the gods, which kept man alive. This life force was inherited from the ancestors, shaped character and personality, and propagated in the descendants. The Ka survived the human being so that it could reunite with the deceased in the afterlife to give him life force there as well. The Ka also lives on as a second self in the statues and images of the dead, as it were as the alter ego of man.

Earlier I mentioned secondary burial, which is intended to enable the deceased to enter the community of ancestors. In Egypt, mummification represented the equivalent of this. Mummification was a process of purification aimed at overcoming the impure state of the corpse and transforming it into the perfect dead. This purification represented the transformation of the dead body into the eternal body. Through mummification, the dead became Osiris. The ceremonies that took place were a repetition of the magic rites by which Isis had restored life to her brother and husband Osiris. The mummy-like Osiris state was a permanent one. An ancient pyramid text states, 'As truly as Osiris lives, he will live; as truly as Osiris has not died, he will not die; as truly as Osiris is not destroyed, he will not be destroyed.'

Mummification was a process that not only required great skill and expertise, but was also performed according to a precisely prescribed ritual.

The first phase - also called 'crossing the lake' - was characterized by purification. From the body everything was removed which could represent a danger for his eternity form aspired as a target form. The removal of the brain was the first step. For the Egyptians the brain had no special meaning. It was removed by means of long bronze needles with hooks at the spiral ends through the nasal canal. Evisceration was the technique of removing organs. First, an incision was made extending on the left side from the end of the ribs to the upper edge of the pelvis. Through this opening, many of the internal organs were removed. It was important to remove these because they are the

first to begin decaying in the body. The liver, lungs, spleen, stomach and intestines were washed and packed in baking soda to dry them out. The intestines were then kept in four jars called canopic jars, each of which bore the head of one of the four sons of Horus as a lid. Imsety, the god with the human head, protected the liver; Hapy, the god with the baboon head, the lungs; Duamutef, the god with the jackal head, the stomach; and Qebehsenuf, the god with the hawk head, the intestines. These were supposed to protect the dead from hunger and thirst, and their seat was considered to be the intestines. The remaining soft tissues and fluids were dissolved in a soda-resin liquor and pumped out of the body rectally." Cyd felt a sudden icy chill run through her.

"That is, the entrails were kept in jars by the ancient Egyptians for ritual reasons?"

"Not all the viscera - the heart and the barely visible and difficult to access kidneys were excluded. Conrad was puzzled by her sudden interest in this particular point and gave Cyd a sharp look.

However, since she made no effort to justify her interest, he continued his remarks.

"The heart was not removed from the body because for the Egyptians it was the decisive organ as far as mental abilities were concerned. It did not belong primarily to the body as a machine, but represented a quality of its own in relation to the body.

The desiccation phase - i.e. drying and salting - lasted over forty days.

Finally, the corpse was rebuilt in the ritual of mummification. The desired final form of this laborious treatment was the mummy. It was much more than the corpse, it was the image of the god Osiris and a kind of hieroglyph of the whole man, filled with magic.

To maintain this wholeness required more than surgical interventions and chemical treatments. Much more important was the rite of linguistic treatment of the dead. In the words and texts, spoken by a

loving person, the Egyptians saw the secret of the life-giving joining together of all that was torn."

Once again, Conrad bent over to refill the glasses and to check Cyd's receptivity. He could tell from her alert, fascinated gaze that she was following his explanations with great attention. Amazed at her continued interest, he continued talking.

The performance of a ritual called 'the opening of the mouth' allowed the deceased to eat and drink again. With the opening of the mouth, the deceased received back his body, his form in which the Ba could enter.

Finally, the body was laid to rest in a large stone sarcophagus in the burial chamber. This chamber was equipped for the deceased with furniture, clothing, precious objects, food and drink.

Now the body was ready for its journey through the underworld. There his heart would be weighed to judge his good deeds on earth.

If his heart was pure, he would be allowed to live in the light realm of the dead in heaven for all eternity. By weighing his heart, the deceased received his heart back and with it his spiritual identity."

Conrad sat back and drank the rest of the whiskey from his glass. "So much for the ancient Egyptians' concept of love, death, and life." Conrad had probably intended to make this sentence sound casual and casual, but Cyd sensed that they were both caught up in the mystery surrounding the secret of life. She tried to sound matter-of-fact, but even her voice sounded strangely unnatural in her attempt to reconnect with the here and now.

"Thank you for your assistance with my research. I hope to see you again soon. I will definitely get back to you soon. But right now, I really need my beauty sleep."

"You can also here ..." Conrad said the words completely innocuously and without the slightest undertone.

"Thank you, that's very kind, but I need my own bed, besides, I have to get up early tomorrow, so I'd just be disturbing you."

He accompanied her to the door and wished her a good night. Then he stayed in front of the house until her taillights had disappeared in the darkness of the night.

The next morning Ruth and Cyd were at the local FBI office promptly at eight o'clock. The conference room had been adapted as a 'War Room'. In front was the inevitable blackboard for recording all the data that would lead to the profile of the perpetrator.

As might have been expected, chaotic conditions prevailed. Lines were laid, communication networks set up and refreshments provided.

Ramona Hayes, Elmore Spencer's assistant, told them there would be a delay of two hours, possibly more.

A computer expert from the FBI was chatting with Cyd, but soon realized that her attention was not on their conversation. Her eyes kept wandering to the other end of the conference table, where Dr. Chambers from Park Hospital was sitting, arranging his papers.

"Gillardi is said to be a tough cookie. Learned his trade as a criminal psychologist in Boston, London and Tokyo and is considered the leading specialist in serial killers," he tried to get her attention.

After staring again at Chambers, Cyd turned her gaze back to her interlocutor.

"Yes, he's considered a nonconformist, one who likes to work across disciplines and - what a happy coincidence for me - advocates working with the media to help hunt down killers."

After three endlessly stretching hours of delay, everyone was finally fully assembled and eagerly awaited the start of the proceedings. Then the door flew open and Frank Gillardi entered the room with dynamic strides. He went to his chair and opened the meeting by ordering those present to their seats.

"Okay, ladies and gentlemen, we have no time to waste, let's get started. Our group is complete for today, I believe we make a good

team in the constellation we have here. Let me briefly introduce those present before I release the hunt. I am Frank Gillardi, the task force leader.

That means I call the shots." Suppressed laughter and murmurs of agreement filled the room. Most of those present appreciated a frank word and certainly saw the need for tight leadership in such a case.

"To my left, Julio Jimenez of the Sheriff's Office and my FBI staff, Elmore Spencer and Raymona Hayes, those two will be your contacts when I am not available. I will also communicate my orders to you through them if necessary. Ruth Clark from Life Events. We need a partner that will allow us to keep the public fully informed and to our liking. Without wanting to exclude other stations, I have chosen Life Events. They have the highest ratings in the county and Austin Jenkins is a reasonable man. Of course, there are the usual press conferences besides, but Ruth Clark and Cydney Alexander of Life Events will be involved in the perpetrator search. Miss Alexander sits at the greatest possible distance from her colleague, yet I introduce her right away. Miss Clark and Miss Alexander, let's make one thing clear from the outset. You are free to publish your research and the reports of our work as you see fit after the case is closed. Until then, you will write what I approve for publication. That is our agreement. And finally, Dr. Christopher Chambers, medical examiner at North Park Hospital. He was the first to examine the organ findings and is considered the best man on the scene. Are there any questions or additions to what I have just said? All right, then we'd best get started. First, I would like to ask Dr. Chambers to present the examination results of the organ findings."

Chambers began to speak freely, although he held a sheet of his documents in his hand, possibly to emphasize the official character of his remarks. Perhaps the printed data also offered him more security in his appearance.

"We did a forensic examination of the samples, both the contents of the intact jars and the pieces that were on the floor with the pottery

shards. The body parts are from twenty-seven different women of white complexion, ranging in age from about twenty-five to thirty-five years old.

Of course, we cannot say with certainty which body parts were in which of the broken jars. However, based on the findings of the undestroyed jars and their contents, we can assume that the contents of each jar follow a certain pattern. We have identified the following internal organs or the remains of them: stomach, liver, peritoneum and lungs. These internal organs were together in one jar each. The organs were conditionally preserved in a preservation liquid. I say conditionally because some of them showed clear signs of decomposition despite the preservation liquid. This probably has to do with the extremely high temperatures of the last weeks. In itself, the chemical composition of the preservation material should have sufficiently prevented decomposition. The removal of the organs appears to have been carried out expertly without gross destruction, suggesting that the perpetrator had medical knowledge."

"How good must have been the knowledge to have removed the organs as found? Would a student of medicine in the first semesters be able to do this, or could a butcher or a taxidermist possibly also be considered as the perpetrator?" Ruth asked the questions in a deliberately factual manner so as not to be suspected of sensationalism.

"Typical Ruth," Cyd thought bitterly, "of course she has to be the first to ask questions."

"All the groups of people described are eligible," Chambers replied with an appreciative look in the reporter's direction.

"Strange that no other organs were found, such as uterus, kidney or heart," Ramona Hayes interjected. Now Cyd saw her chance to score points with Ruth and use the knowledge she had gained from Dr. Conrad the night before.

"This is not strange at all, assuming that the perpetrator selected the organs according to the pattern of the ancient Egyptian embalmers." The group's reaction surprised even Cyd. All eyes were suddenly on

her. The onlookers' expressions ranged from amazement to incredulous astonishment to undisguised skepticism. Ruth's expression in particular showed icy disapproval. It wasn't hard to read in her eyes: How could she, number two in the hierarchy, allow herself to do such a thing? Dilettante fantasies at a meeting on such a first topic and in such an illustrious round? Gillardi looked sharply at Cyd and waited for further details. Only Dr. Chambers remained without any reaction, but obviously interested. Possibly he trusted the young reporter more than the others.

"What I'm saying is that there seems to be clear similarities here with the burial rites of the ancient Egyptians, who removed individual organs - and the very ones that Dr. Chambers just listed - from the body during embalming, preserved them, and kept them separate from the dead in four types of jars called canopic jars."

"Where did you get your apparently profound knowledge of ancient Egyptian funerary rites?" Gillardi's question expressed neither irony nor disapproval, but merely interest in the authenticity of her knowledge. Cyd withstood the gaze of his glacial blue eyes unblinkingly as she answered.

"I had a conversation yesterday with Dr. Ian Conrad of the university's Department of Anthropology. He's the expert. The match struck me right away, though, and I think we should keep that point in mind."

Gillardi's nod signaled agreement. "Sounds interesting, both your conclusion and your contact. I'll take a look at the doctor; he may be an asset to our team."

"Are you saying we could be dealing with a killer who prepares his victims like an Egyptian embalmer? And if that's true, what would that mean in further consequence?" Ramona Hayes' excitement was plain to see. Such scenarios had not occurred in her special agent training.

"If such links are confirmed, it could indeed mean that the bodies of the victims are also stored in a preserved form somewhere, possibly as mummies."

Gillardi realized it was time to curb the imagination and enthusiasm of some team members. "Okay, let's not get ahead of ourselves. We don't know if the storage of the organs is actually inspired by Egyptian burial rites, nor do we know if there are any other body parts. The only thing we know for sure is that we're dealing with organ remains from twenty-seven different women.

Our first task will be to find out who these victims are. Mr. Jimenez, we need DNA from all the missing women in the area. Once we have the samples, I would like to ask Doctor Chambers to compare them to the DNA from the body parts that were found. If there are matches, we will look closely at the victim stories and also engage the public. But until we know more, I would ask you all to exercise absolute discretion.

Miss Clark and Miss Alexander, please formulate a non-binding press text, but without going into details. Submit the text to me for approval before publication.

I suggest Mr. Jimenez send his people to the families of the missing women right away, and you, Dr. Chambers, start working as soon as you get the first material. Next meeting tomorrow night, nine o'clock. Any questions?"

Since no one came forward to speak, Gillardi closed the meeting by saying, "See you tomorrow!"

## Chapter 5

The auditorium of the Anthropological Institute, where Conrad's lecture was to take place, was surprisingly small. It contained about 150 seats, arranged in ascending order, in the traditional style of European universities.

Conrad had been endorsed by Gillardi in several quarters as the leading expert in the state on the subject of death cults, and so he had decided to hear the professor out personally before contacting him. From long embarrassing experience he knew that recommendations were seldom to be trusted. He had often had to recognize that individual team members did not meet his requirements, and it was unpleasant for everyone and weakened the team when someone had to be dismissed for lack of competence.

Now his predominant problem was getting into the hall. Not only were all the seats occupied, but the students also occupied the aisles and the space in front of the lectern, some standing, others settled on the steps, still others equipped with imaginative seating such as folding chairs for anglers, perches for hunters, or inflatable stools. Thus, virtually every square foot of available space was utilized. Gillardi recalled his time in Japan, where he had to use similar hand-to-hand combat techniques when boarding Tokyo's infamous subway as he did here when entering Lecture Hall B12. Finally, he reached a spot next to a wall niche from which he had a reasonably clear view of the lecturer's desk.

In front of Gillardi, an older, sinewy, tough-looking man blocked the way. Dressed in the manner of a Mexican ranchero, tight pants and short vest in faded black so overloaded with silver hardware that the clothing added considerably to the weight of its wearer. Half-high leather boots with elaborate engravings and short spur attachments, with which one could comfortably scratch one's lower legs or kick them out backwards if necessary, and a corded hat with a wide hatband, the size of a medium wagon wheel, completed the odd

man's outfit. The old man looked as if he had already been on a voyage of discovery with Darwin himself. But when he turned around, Gillardi caught sight of a pair of piercing eyes in brilliant gray amid a furrowed tanned face. Eyes that had seen everything there was to discover in the course of a long, full human life. How much of beauty and goodness, but also of suffering and malice, they might have perceived. The fire of a strong personality still burned in them, and clearly the curiosity of the young at heart could be seen, who did not stop exploring life as long as blood still flowed through his veins.

What a wretched cynic I am, Gillardi thought to himself, who am I to presume to judge others so disparagingly. Pride is indeed my greatest evil. Instead of admiring the old man for his enthusiasm, I make fun of his physical condition. Who knows what I will look like at that age, should I even reach it. He dropped the thought of old age right away, though; he was far too vain to want to imagine a life of frailty.

After waiting fifteen minutes - Conrad was keeping exactly to the academic quarter and Gillardi was close to collapsing in this stuffy air and confinement - the professor entered the lecture hall through a separate door behind the lectern. He fought his way through the students who also occupied the space behind the lectern and, in lieu of a greeting, asked, "Say, is there anything free here?"

The merry laughter and some witty interjections showed Gillardi that Conrad was not one of the formal and conservative members of the faculty. That was also evident from his getup. Super-light trekking pants with plenty of pockets, a gaudy Hawaiian shirt worn over pants, lightweight Navaho-style moccasins, and shaggy hair, not in the fashionably styled form - artfully scrunched by the hair stylist and held in shape with hair gel - but simply unkempt. Apparently, personal hygiene was not a priority for the professor.

But Gillardi soon realized that he had judged the man prematurely. Conrad was not only a top man in his field, he was also an excellent lecturer who knew how to captivate his audience by dramatizing his

remarks like an actor through the modulation of his voice and through deliberate accentuations. Like many good speakers, he handled the attention of his auditorium carefully, wasting no time with lengthy introductions.

"When a person dies, vital functions begin to cease in the agony phase before respiratory arrest and death by cardiac arrest. The dying process may manifest itself as a death struggle, an arbitrary or vegetative 'fighting back' against the failure of vital functional circuits, or as a slow seemingly unresisting fading away. When the cardiac activity, which can still outlast the respiratory arrest for some time, finally ceases, and with it the circulatory function collapses, the death of the body's tissues and organs, which are now no longer supplied with oxygen, follows. This occurs in the order of oxygen deficiency sensitivity. The brain is irreversibly damaged after about 10 minutes, the liver and kidneys after 20 to 30 minutes. Skin, bones and muscles can survive the total organism by a few hours.

When cell death finally affects this system as well, rigor mortis sets in. Just a few minutes after the last breath, the first cells burst and release tissue-decomposing enzymes. An explosion of bacteria occurs in the intestines and travels through the veins to the other organs. The odors of the decomposing body attract various insects, which can be crucial in determining the time of death.

When the decomposition process begins in a corpse, the hair detaches from the scalp. This generally happens five to seven days after death. A carpet of hair is then found on the floor.

The effects of decay and animal grubs can cause downright horrifying disfigurements of the face, which, after being fixed by dry rigor mortis with subsequent mummification, can continue to exert corresponding psychological effects on the viewer for a long time. The slackening of the masseter muscles causes the lower jaw to drop, the mouth to stand open, and maggot infestation destroys the eyeballs and mucous membranes. This leads to widening of the nostrils and defect formation of the upper lips. In addition, there is tissue

liquefaction due to putrefaction and discoloration due to green and black breakdown products of the blood pigment. Finally, the process is interrupted by desiccation and fixed into an apparent facial expression that has nothing at all to do with the condition at the moment of death. The processes of decomposition of muscle, fat, and viscera also produce gases that can inflate the body up to three times its normal size."

With his vivid presentations, which were underpinned by appropriate visuals, Conrad quickly had the audience under his spell. Everyone hung on his lips with fascination and kept staring at the screen. It had become so quiet in the lecture hall that one could literally have heard a pin drop.

"There are classic first colonizers on dead bodies, these include the well-known gold flies or blow flies, which appear on the corpse within the first few hours or even minutes and lay their eggs. The flies lay their eggs in the palpebral fissures of the eyes, in the nose and mouth, but also in wounds, genital and anal openings, if these are accessible to the flying insects.

Maggots hatch from the eggs. The maggots go through their growth process, the first, second and third larval growth. The maggots transform to the fly stage, then they leave the body and pupate. This process takes about fourteen days. As the next picture shows, after three weeks there is not much left of the face." Again, an affected murmur went through the crowd as the picture appeared on the screen.

"After the larvae pupate and the new imagines hatch a week later, the empty reddish-brown pupal cases may remain for years and decades.

After the blowflies come the cheese flies, and later beetles such as the bacon beetle or the common gravedigger. Last is the carpet beetle, which feeds only on dry tissue.

Depending on the time of year, sooner or later, after a few days have elapsed, the corpse begins to show signs of putrefaction. Bacterial activity leads to gas formation, especially in the area of the abdomi-

nal organs, but also in the subcutaneous cell tissue, so that tightly adhering clothing can leave pseudostrangulated furrows as a result of the swelling. As part of the putrefaction symptoms, in many cases so-called inner surfaces first become softened and permeable, especially in the area of the lungs, so that blood-submerged putrefactive fluid escapes here. This accumulates in the chest cavity, but can also be expelled from the mouth and nose by the gas pressure of the abdominal cavity against the diaphragm. You can see this phenomenon in the next photograph, which shows a dead man lying in a cornfield for five days during the summer."

A picture-perfect female student involuntarily let out a scream of horror. Gallantly, Conrad asked if she needed help. The young woman blushing answered in the negative and began to fan herself with a notebook with the inimitable elegance of Spanish noblewomen. The professor acknowledged the interruption with an indulgent smile and continued his remarks.

"Undermixing with gas bubbles can produce sounds in this process, which may have provided the basis for Michael Ranft's 'Treatise on Chewing and Smacking the Dead in Graves.'

You see that gunk there? That's the fatty acids leaking from the corpse. Putrefactive gas bloating especially of the genitals can give rise to dissolute interpretations."

Some listeners forced themselves to smile half-heartedly, others seemed unable to take their eyes off the images that obviously completely overwhelmed them psychologically.

"The putrefaction phase, after the seepage of the body fluids, is followed - especially in the earth grave - by a rather dry decomposition stage, which may turn into partial or total mummification. The soft tissue remains are decimated by fungal mycelia, beetle larvae and mites, among others. On the surface, skeletonization occurs after a maximum of two years, in the soil after about seven years. Finally, the ligaments and joint capsules also soften and the bones fall out of the sockets, following gravity, when the body lies on a solid surface.

However, there are also various environmental conditions in which the body or even parts of it are naturally preserved after death and remain preserved. Examples of this are ice mummies or bog body finds. The next picture shows the body of a young woman from Peru, excellently preserved at high altitude. Here you can see a picture of a bog body from Denmark. In this case, the skin, hair and nails were preserved by the antibacterial and tanning effect of humic acids. In the bones, the apatite was dissolved out, while the elastic collagen scaffold was retained, preserving the anatomical shape.

Other examples of natural soft tissue preservation are the so-called wax corpses. They require a moist environment and are found, for example, in water corpses when the body remains in water for several months. Through a chemical transformation of the subcutaneous fatty tissue, this forms the surface of the preserved body as cadaveric lipid after the skin has rotted away. A rarer type of soft tissue preservation is documented by finds from China and is called rotting corpse preservation.

Finally, there is also a kind of natural preservation through mummification. This usually involves a loss of the epidermis. The dermis, however, remains intact, in contrast to the fat wax corpses. In many cases, the nails are also still found. Under certain climatic conditions, as in the dry air of the Peruvian Andes or the Egyptian Sahara no rarity, this phenomenon was also examined and described on the basis of some spectacular cases in Europe. Here you can see photographs of the tomb corpses of Palermo in Italy."

By now, the auditorium seemed to have become accustomed to the horrifying images. Thus, in view of the mummified monks of Palermo, there were almost entirely interested looks and hardly any signs of consternation.

"This picture shows the mummified body of the so-called Spanish Wanderer, who is exhibited in a church in Montefalco, near Assisi in Italy, and who is also called by the people the 'happy pilgrim'. Tradition has it that this pilgrim had gone to the church of S. Agostino in

Montefalco. Since it was late, he asked the monks for a hospitable welcome, which was granted. Before going to rest, he went once more to the church. There, the next morning, he was found by the sexton on the floor, leaning against the confessional. At first it seemed that he was asleep, but then it was realized that he was dead. After his papers were taken from him and put away, he was buried. The next morning he was found outside the grave and the same phenomenon was repeated the following days. So it was decided to store him in the church tower, where he remained for a hundred years without his body decomposing. The case was considered a miracle and the monks decided to keep him in a glass case in the same position in which he was found and with the same pilgrim's robe that he wore at the hour of his death.

And here the mummy of the merchant Curd Schachtrupp, which is kept in a German institute for forensic medicine. There is a somewhat macabre background to the last example. The mummy was not only displayed by the gravedigger for years for a tip. It is also said to have been abused as a 'dance corpse' in inns. It is reported that the thalers, which had to be paid by the courageous village hussies as an obolus so that they were allowed to dance with the corpse, were put into a slit on the left side of the abdomen.

With the prospect of an entertaining "Saturday Night" with original dance numbers, I would like to say goodbye to you for today."

The listeners were still completely under the spell of what they had heard and seen, when Conrad was already out.

Gillardardi struggled to make his way through the crowd. The exit behind the podium seemed the most promising for him to pursue the doctor. With the audience still behaving as if paralyzed, he managed to reach the door in a relatively short time. It led into a typical corridor found inside large old buildings.

High windows let in light from an inner courtyard, and numerous doors on the side facing away from the courtyard led into the offices of the professors and lecturers.

One of the doors was only ajar, so Gillardi tried his luck. Conrad was just reviving a glass of whiskey with water when he entered the room.

"Since I moved into this office seventeen years ago, no one has ever knocked to see me. You would have had a chance to break that cycle today. What a missed opportunity." Conrad's smile belied the bitter words, however. He had long since accepted that the good old days and the beautiful South, where well-groomed manners and obedient slaves had been valued, were gone forever.

"There must be something about them that keeps your visitors from behaving like civilized people. What could that possibly be?" There was also a defusing undertone in Gillardi's voice, as an offer of fraternization, so to speak.

"I am Frank Gillardi, Crime Scene Analyst with the FBI, currently on assignment as the head of the Special Operations Unit 'Coyote Creek.' Miss Alexander of Life Events brought up some interesting testimony of yours at our morning meeting. It involved the storage of offal in canopic jars."

"Take it easy, I'm still missing the macro structure. I don't know what your task force is about, nor to what extent canopic pitchers play a role in it. Gillardi, I tend to get disoriented, so it would be helpful for me if you explained the situation to me from the beginning. Pretend you have a complete idiot in front of you, that way I'm sure I'll understand you best."

Gillardi wasn't sure if Conrad meant what he said or was just trying to test his skills as an analyst.

He played it safe and actually told step by step how things had developed at Coyote Creek, what facts were available, and how he had gotten the assignment to lead the search party. Conrad listened inten-

tly and only when Gillardi had finished did he sit back and show the first emotion.

"This is really a wild story. Only now do I understand why Ms. Alexander was so interested in my remarks about the treatment of the offal and its preservation in the Canopic jars. What do you expect me to do, Gillardi?" The profiler had long been aware that this man would add considerably to his team.

"I would love to have you on the task force. We are a team of professionals from a wide variety of fields, but for the duration of the mission we have one thing in common, we are also members of a hunting party. A hunt to the death. If we fail, more young women are likely to die. Possibly we ourselves will become victims of the killer. It would not be the first time. There is nothing to be gained from this. The expenses are ridiculous and don't matter. It's all about success and honor."

"I don't give a damn about honor; like a mercenary, I would rather be motivated by financial prospects. On the other hand, if I understood correctly, there are also attractive hunting companions in your hunting party - like Miss Alexander. And who knows what interesting dynamics will emerge in the heat of the moment. How ridiculous are those expenses you mentioned? Oh, what the heck, I can tell by the look on your face that they don't even cover my need for tobacco and high-proof liquor. All right, Gillardi, I'm in."

Gillardi sensed that it could now be close for the hunted. He held out his hand to Conrad.

"Welcome to the team, we'll meet tonight at nine in the FBI War Room."

"Hey, not so fast, I already have plans for tonight."

"Had you, my friend, had you."

Among the most traumatic experiences a person can go through is the loss of a loved one through disappearance. In addition to the

uncertainty about the person's whereabouts and the event itself, there are a thousand unanswered questions that are significant for the relationship partner: Is the loved one still alive, is he dead? What happened to him? Did an accident happen, was he the victim of a crime, did he go into hiding voluntarily and why? What is my part in what happened? If he is alive, where is he staying, is he living alone or in a relationship? Is he happy or desperate? Does he sometimes think of me and long for me? What could I do to get the lost one back? What can I do? What could I have done? What have I failed to do? The question of one's own guilt intensifies the pain, the uncertainty, prevents the grieving process, the detachment, the finding oneself, the return to life. Thus, the bereaved are often prisoners, trapped in the pain of loss and hopelessness.

For Mr. and Ms. Fink, life had come to a halt the day their 25-year-old daughter Eva had stopped coming home from work. She had been a pretty girl, with reddish-blond hair, her skin lightly speckled with freckles. Always ready to offer a smile or a kind word to those around her, she was popular and well-liked everywhere. Shy with men despite her openness, she had taken her time with commitment and partnership. But now at twenty-five, the time had finally come. And it had paid to wait. George Taylor was a nice young man who was about to make a career at an insurance company.

The day she disappeared, she had called her mother from the sporting goods store where she worked to tell her that she was going out with George in the evening. Her parents had therefore thought nothing more when she did not come home.

They were convinced George had picked her up from the company to leave right away from there. However, when he rang the bell at twenty-one o'clock to pick up Eva, they both knew that something must have happened to her. Calls to Eva's friends revealed that there had been no contact that day, nor did they know where she was. They then called the police, only to learn that thirty-six hours must have passed before a missing person report could be filed.

They called all the hospitals in the area to ask if anyone with Eva's description had been admitted. Again, only negative responses. Finally, they spent the night talking, puzzling over what could have happened to Eva. The next morning, the mother went to the company to find out if anything unusual had happened, or if anyone had any guesses as to where Eva might be. The department manager was very helpful and showed concern. But even she could not help. The parents experienced the rest of the day and the following night as a nightmare. Every time the phone rang, they rushed to the machine full of hope for the redemptive and explanatory words of their daughter and at the same time full of fear of terrible news that could affect their beloved child.

After the thirty-six hours had passed, they drove to the S.D. , to file the missing persons report. It dismayed them with what unconcerned routine Detective Shoemaker, the officer on duty, took their data and asked the usual questions.

"Has your daughter been missing before? Have there been any fights lately? Did she have a boyfriend? Maybe a lover besides? Was she pregnant? Was she the freaky type who tended to drift around? Was there any contact with the drug scene or cults? Were there signs of a double life? Was she perhaps operating hidden prostitution?"

Finally, the officer closed the file and looked at the parents.

"Do you have any idea how many young people just disappear these days? In our county, it's several thousand every year. Most of them reappear on their own soon after. They just wanted to feel the thrill, to get a taste of the great freedom, so to speak. So just take it easy and wait, I'm sure your daughter will be back soon."

"And the rest?" Ms. Fink's voice sounded tortured and barely audible. When the officer did not immediately respond to her question, she repeated her question, this time loudly and insistently. "What about the rest, the ones who don't come back soon after? What happened to them?"

For the first time since she spoke to Shoemaker, he showed dismay. "We don't know. They remain missing."

"And how many were there this year that just disappeared?" Ms. Fink had tears in her eyes and deep pain sounded from the tortured question.

"About a thousand eight hundred since the beginning of the year. I'm sorry, ma'am." Suddenly, even the seemingly seasoned and hardened police officer was caught up in all the suffering his job entailed. "Please, Mr. Fink, go home and try to be optimistic. We'll get right back to you if anything comes up."

Ms. Fink looked deeply into the officer's eyes, grasped his hand and gave it a firm, long squeeze, as if her daughter's life or death depended on the strength of that hand. "Thank you Mr. Shoemaker, thank you very much."

There were days when Shoemaker hated being a cop. And this was one of those days.

To distract herself, and perhaps in the mistaken belief that more information would give her more control over the situation, Ms. Fink began researching the subject of missing persons on her own. It was a world of horror she entered. A hell of unimaginable inhumanities and the most deviant cruelties. Monsters in human form, organ hunters, producers of pornographic films in which the actors - mainly women and children - were slaughtered on camera, abduction and forced prostitution, personal slaves in basement dungeons, victims of all kinds of sex offenders - tortured with sadistic cruelties, humiliations, mutilations, body parts retained as trophies, disemboweled or sacrificed in black masses.

At some point, after months of searching, waiting, struggling, she had resigned herself and sunk into deep hopelessness with her husband. It was obvious, her Eva would not come back. She would be one of the hundreds that year who had simply disappeared. Quite simply, without leaving a trace, as if they had never existed. The

Fink couple withdrew more and more, went into isolation, no more contacts, no more ventures, they were at home, day after day, just in case....

When Detective Paul Lance rang the Fink family's doorbell, he first thought there was no one home. The house appeared neglected and 'strangely inanimate' as Lance thought to himself, or better inanimate, he corrected his impression. He rang the bell again, this time longer. But again there was no response. Just as he was about to turn away, the door opened a crack and he looked into the haggard face of an old woman. She wore a crumpled, no longer completely clean housecoat and stood in a stooped posture at the door, peering suspiciously out through the crack.

At first Lance thought her narrowed, inward-looking eyes were the result of severe nearsightedness, but then it came to him with horror that this woman had spent her life in darkness and had yet to become accustomed to the light of the outside world.

"What do you want?" she asked in a husky voice. Lance tried to make his voice sound very soft and gentle. He knew what his wish meant to the parents of missing children.

"Sorry to bother you ma'am, I'm Detective Paul Lance. We investigate missing persons cases, and it would be a great help to us if we could get any personal items from you that belonged to the missing person. A comb with hair on it would be best."

"They found her." It sounded more like a statement than a question. "They found my baby. How did Eva die, did she have to suffer a lot?" The old woman had opened the door and stood before him trembling and in tears.

"No ma'am, it's not. But we have found the bodies of several young women and hope to rule out the possibility that their daughter is among them.

"Of course, I understand, rule out my daughter being there." She turned and shuffled down the hall. Lance chose to wait by the door.

Just then, from the darkness of the hallway, another unreal figure came toward him with dragging steps. It was a man, wearing a similar housecoat to the woman's, he too unkempt and his eyes squinted from the aching light.

"We have visitors, Nora, do you hear, visitors are here! We have something to offer the Lord. Please do come in. Can I offer you something?" Lance was horrified at the idea of having to accept the invitation. He was about to excuse himself when he was rescued by the old woman who returned.

"It's okay, Steve, let it go. The Lord is here for Eve. They found a lot of dead women and now they need hair from her." The man shook his head uncomprehendingly and withdrew.

Ms. Fink had a hairbrush in her hand, red-gold hair shining on it in the light of the sun. "From Eva. She was my sunshine. How can people be so cruel?"

"I don't know, ma'am, I can't answer that for you."

An entire team of laboratory technicians was busy performing DNA analyses of every piece of tissue, no matter how small, from the Coyote Creek material. A second team examined the comparison samples obtained from family members of missing women.

Diane Cornell, the head of the lab, checked the results for a match. Suddenly she shouted out loud, "Eureka, bull's eye! We have an identification, Eva Fink is one of the victims."

The meeting started on time that day. In addition to the members of the existing team, Ian Conrad and Diane Cornell were present. Gillardi introduced the two and asked Ms. Cornell for her report.

"We have so far examined about seventy percent of the tissue samples and have come to the following conclusions: The number of twenty-seven different victims given by Dr. Chambers has been confirmed, also the information regarding gender, age and ethnicity, they are all women of white skin color between the ages of twenty-five

and thirty-five. For twenty-three of the victims, we were able to make a positive identification by matching DNA. For four of the women, we do not have positive laboratory results; they are also not present in the FBI DNA registry.

Either they were never put on or they were women in transit, possibly foreigners.

We can also confirm Dr. Chambers' organ specs, which are tissue from the stomach, liver, peritoneum and lungs." Gillardi thanked her and turned to Spencer.

"That means we need each woman's story. Then we'll run the CV through our computer to see if there are any similarities." Spencer confirmed by nodding that he would set that up. Gillardi then turned back to the team.

"I don't expect too much from it, though. We are undoubtedly dealing with a superbly organized perpetrator. Such killers are hard to catch with match analysis. They know our working methods and make them ineffective by constantly changing their approach. Since we do not have a crime scene analysis, but only a found object analysis, we will first deal with the unnecessary risks and then discuss possible motives and backgrounds. For this purpose, the reference to the Canopic jars raised by Ms. Alexander last time seems to me to be an important point. Dr. Conrad may be able to give us some constructive input on that." Gillardi wrote on a flipchart the heading "Avoidable Behavior" and then added individual comments: Storage, Organ Selection. Then he turned to those present.

"By keeping the body parts, the perpetrator is taking an unnecessary risk. So we can assume that this act was meaningful for him for some reason. The same applies to the selection of the organs, which were kept in a jar. Why this combination? What was the motive behind it? I have been reading up on Canopic jars and their significance since last time. This could actually be a clue to a form of ritual murder about which there is little experience. While it is very speculative to infer a ritual killing followed by mummification from the organs in

our jars, since we have no other clues, we should go through with this scenario. Dr. Conrad, what was the primary reason for the ancient Egyptians to mummify the bodies of the deceased?"

Conrad, who had been taking notes, thought for a moment before answering. "Undoubtedly, the preservation of the body as the basis for continued life in the afterlife."

"This means that one wanted to create a foundation for the deceased. But as far as I know, people were not killed specifically to be able to mummify them. Or was there a custom in Pharaonic Egypt to kill people with a serious, perhaps even disfiguring, disease in order to preserve the body intact?"

Conrad admired the way and speed with which Gillardi worked out the essentials. "I don't know of any examples like that from that time."

"What reason could a human being have today to mummify another human being, or let's say it more generally, a living being?"

"The preservation of the body as memory?" The suggestion came from Ruth Clark. "In our country, all sorts of pets are permanently preserved by embalming and placed in the home as a memorial or kept in a mausoleum."

Gillardi's objection came posthaste. "You're absolutely right, this is a million-dollar business. But we should not forget that a bandaged corpse no longer bears any resemblance to the original living creature and is therefore not really suitable as a souvenir. A dog wrapped in mummy bandages cannot serve the purpose of the embalmed animal as a real image. Perhaps it could also be said that modern embalming techniques, have overtaken those of the ancient Egyptians.

I assume that they, too, would have refrained from bandaging if they had alternative means of preservation. What is your opinion on this, Dr. Conrad?"

"It is difficult to say, because we do not know how the rites would have developed under the influence of such methods. The fact is that the preservation of the body as the basis for the Ka - the soul - was

an important goal of ancient rites. Thus, with the Sixth Dynasty, it became customary to put portrait-like plaster masks on the dead to further ensure the preservation of the Ka. An even greater importance, however, had the linguistic treatment, in which the magical spells told how the missing connection could be restored. Thus also the mummy bindings were often provided with spells and magic formulas. With the sixth dynasty also the corridors and chambers of the royal tombs were described with spells - the pyramid texts.

Another aspect of mummification is the layer-by-layer construction as a gradual preparation for the journey to the Otherworld. A kind of metamorphosis, like the pupation of the caterpillar on its way to becoming a butterfly. The mummy was for the Egyptians a hieroglyph of the whole man. Through it, the corpse became an image of the god Osiris."

"Couldn't the perpetrator have been driven by a religious delusion?" interjected Ramona Hayes. "In schizophrenics, voices that give the sufferer orders to do all sorts of deeds are said to be part of the clinical picture."

"I hope not. It is extraordinarily difficult to put oneself in the shoes of psychopathic violent offenders. The profiles turn out to be correspondingly inconclusive. But we certainly have to consider that possibility." Gillardi looked around the room, waiting for further comments. In the absence of any, he turned again to Dr. Conrad.

"The matter of the Canopic jars is still not entirely clear to me. If my sources of information are correct, the storage of certain organs in jars in pharaonic Egypt existed only during a certain period.

Why this form of organ treatment and what exactly was the function of these jars?"

Conrad did not hesitate a second with his answer. "The first phase of mummification was characterized by purification, the overcoming of the unclean state of the corpse. Everything perishable that could pose a threat to the intended eternal form of the body was removed. The removal of the organs was important because they were the first

to begin decaying in the body. In early periods, the internal organs were removed from the body, washed, dried with sodium salt, and after treatment with fragrant oils and resins, wrapped in linen bandages. They were then placed in the burial chamber separately from the body in precious decorated canopic vessels, each of which bore the head of one of the four sons of Horus as a lid.

Over the years, embalming practices changed and the internal organs, after being dried in natron, began to be returned to the body. However, canopic jars made of solid wood or stone were still buried with the mummy, as a symbolic protection for the internal organs."

Gillardi intervened. "According to this, the jars were kept together with the mummy. Has there ever been a period when the jars were kept separately, that is, outside the burial chamber?"

"No, the jars were always kept with the sarcophagus."

Gillardi shook his head doubtfully. "Then I wonder why that's not the case with our finds. And I also wonder, where are the bodies? Moreover, the jars should ensure that the organs remained intact.

In our samples, a considerable part shows signs of decomposition. And what is most important: In our finds, the organs that were kept in four different jars by the Egyptians are in a single jar. So a lot of things don't add up for me."

Now Chambers took the floor in a calm, matter-of-fact voice. "As I mentioned during my initial presentation, the unusually high temperatures may be to blame for the inadequate preservation. The composition of the preservation fluid probably would have served its purpose at normal summer levels."

As if Gillardi's doubts had awakened the others, arguments were now suddenly put forward from all sides. It almost seemed as if Conrad's statements about the mysterious death rites of the ancient Egyptians had fascinated most of those present to such an extent that they no longer wanted to give up the idea of a serial killer who disembowels and mummifies his victim.

"If there were already different variants in the handling of the canopic jars in pharaonic Egypt, then there is also nothing to be said against a new variant with our embalmer." With the last word, a term was coined by Cyd that was to go through the media of the whole world as a catchword in the next weeks. With satisfaction, Cyd noted Chambers' approving nod to her contribution.

"And maybe the jars were just temporarily stored in the lodge. For reasons of space or as an interim solution, perhaps before further processing." Now even Ruth was carried away by the assumption of an embalmer.

Gillardi observed the group processes with the distance of a professional. He knew the dynamics that regularly formed in such situations. Rivalries, animosities, sympathies, antipathies, dominance, submission, admiration, humiliation.

Especially in investigative committees and special units, all varieties of human relationships came out. It seemed as if the group was in an adventure game, doing everything to increase the tension even more. In addition, there were feelings and attractions between the team members. It was obvious to him that there was a strong attraction between Ruth Clark and Christopher Chambers. Conrad desired and admired Ms. Alexander, but she also seemed to be leaning toward Chambers, although the latter showed not the slightest sign of interest in her.

"If we assume for once that the missing bodies were indeed mummified and are stored somewhere, then the question of the perpetrator's motive still arises. Let us exclude schizophrenic behavior, religious delusion and the like in our considerations this time and concentrate on the perpetrator group of criminals without such mental illnesses. What is the benefit to the killer of not only killing young women but also disemboweling and mummifying them? What I am getting at is the large market of sexual perversions and kinky entertainments that many people are willing to pay a lot of money for. You all know the extreme porn productions where sometimes even a

victim is killed in the course of sexual acts on camera. There is a lucrative clientele for such material. I would imagine that there are also sick people who are willing to spend large sums of money in exchange for being allowed to witness the killing and mummification of a human being."

Gillardi looked around the room and then addressed Burt Foster, the local FBI station's information technology expert, directly. "Mr. Foster, perhaps between now and the next meeting you could search the Internet and the relevant databases to see if there's any truth to my reasoning."

Foster made a note on his pad and nodded in agreement. "No problem, as soon as we're done here, I'll get to work."

Gillardi suddenly seemed to have an inspiration; he thought for a moment before addressing Dr. Conrad. "Another idea occurred to me today in your lecture, when you mentioned the dancing corpse that the brave fellows used to amuse themselves with in the taverns. Perhaps it is just in certain circles to present mummies at parties as a thrill. I think we should look into that consideration as well. Ms. Alexander, Ms. Clark would you be willing to look into what's in right now in the chic or other social circles?" Cyd gave Gillardi a joyful smile and nodded eagerly. She blossomed. It had not escaped her notice how much it had affected Ruth to be spoken to only second. But her thoughts were interrupted by Conrad, who responded to Gillardi's idea.

"It's really interesting that you bring up this subject. You see, it was actually very popular in the nineteenth century in English high society to unwrap mummies at exclusive events - usually at night and by candlelight. Whoever could afford it imported an Egyptian mummy and invited his friends to such a party. Apparently, people wanted to experience a thrill. Sometimes adventurous stories were told and, of course, people hoped for surprises in the form of valuable jewelry. At these events, the linen bandages were removed until the naked corpse was exposed. If such sessions attracted so much inte-

rest then, why not today, even more so when the package includes young beautiful female figures."

"Sounds pretty sexist, what you're saying, Dr. Conrad." Ruth was still miffed because Gillardi had favored Cyd, so her tone was sharper than the occasion warranted. "I would like to see us prioritize finding the victims and, more importantly, preventing future victims in our efforts."

"The danger will be over when the perpetrator is caught." Gillardi spoke calmly and matter-of-factly.

Now the sheriff also intervened. He showed himself to be a sober pragmatist.

"Okay, guys, I find everything I've heard today most interesting and exciting. But I am also primarily interested in how I can prevent the killer from killing more women. We have a full moon and the crime statistics speak for themselves. Full moon seems to release criminal energies in many people. What I fear more than anything right now is another missing persons report. Therefore, I propose to issue a warning through the media to all women between twenty-five and thirty-five."

Gillardi could understand how Jimenez felt in this situation. He knew the feeling from his own experience. The fear of having questioned the wrong people, of having overlooked crucial clues, of having omitted important measures, was his constant companion.

"Thank you Sheriff for bringing us back to earth. To your suggestion, let me object to the following. If we put out a report like this, the perpetrator knows we're on to him. I think it is too early for a proactive strategy. Once we have a profile, we can pressure him with deliberately launched information. At this stage, we would only be giving up our element of surprise and possibly causing panic in the population. I also doubt the usefulness of such an action. Who should we warn women about? From contact with strangers? Who is to say that the perpetrator is a stranger to the victim? No, I think our first

effort must be to get more information. That's the reason we came together here."

The murmurs of agreement in the round confirmed Gillardi. Jimenez also nodded and was satisfied.

As the group left the room, Cyd tried to approach Dr. Chambers to make contact with him. But Ruth had already attached herself to the medical examiner's side and the two went outside chatting. Cyd was seething with anger inside, yet she acted extremely casual and good-humored. For her part, she joined Dr. Conrad, bumping into him as if by accident as they left the room, laughing unnaturally loudly and casually holding onto the anthropologist's elbow. In parting, she raised her voice so that Chambers and Ruth were sure to overhear.

"Thank you, Dr. Conrad, we'll be in touch. I'll be in touch with you tomorrow. See you then." Disappointed, she found that no one was taking notice of her show. But Cyd was a fighter. "It's not all over yet," she told herself. "The next round will definitely go to me."

Ruth had been well aware of Cyd's efforts to get the attention of the group and Chambers in particular. Just a few days ago, she would have savored her triumph to the fullest. Oddly enough, she no longer took satisfaction in outdoing the younger, more ambitious colleague. She wondered what the reason for her change might be. Was it her feelings for Chambers that were melting her hard core? Or did Cyd's efforts remind her of her own early days, with all the fears and insecurities?

Ruth, too, had not always been so successful. Raised in a Pietist Methodist family, where guilt, conversion and sanctification were constantly present as themes, where home meetings for Bible study and exercises in godliness characterized her daily life, she had been obsessed from an early age with the idea of making a career of herself in order to be in the public spotlight at some point. So she accep-

ted the restrictions of a strict upbringing and escaped into a dream world of glamour and narcissistic vanity. While her parents tried to shape her thinking with directives such as "Don't always put yourself in the center of attention," "You don't have to be everywhere," "Take a step back," "It's not pleasing to God," Ruth dreamed of the time when she would leave everything behind and live her own life of fame and prestige.

In school and college she had only the best grades. While her fellow students got involved with boys and had their first experiences with sex and drugs, she withdrew and worked doggedly to realize her lifelong dream.

When she graduated at the top of her class from the Academy of Journalism and Publicity and received an attractive offer at a small local broadcasting company, she thought she had achieved her goal. It wasn't the big glamorous world she had always dreamed of, but in this mid-sized eastern U.S. town, she was a big frog in a small pond. She was the station's youngest employee, with her own series of programs.

Her boss, impressed primarily by her looks and only secondarily by her exam grades, offered her a 3-year contract for the evening show 'Truth and Facts', which aired every two weeks and presented red-hot topics to viewers. She was given a staff of three assistants and a small team of moles who, with great dedication and ruthlessness, dug up topical issues for her to work on and present to the public in a media-friendly manner. The show's highlight was a live audience and celebrity guests.

Ruth suffered her first shock when, shortly before the start of her first performance, she discovered that she was suffering from stage fright and suddenly had a panic about appearing in public.

But it was too late to cancel the show, so she confided in her personal assistant. Gordon McNeil had been with her for some time and had mastered all the tricks of show business, even though he himself

worked in the background. He recognized the symptoms the moment he entered her office.

"For God's sake, Ruth, what's the matter with you, you look dreadful." Ruth could hardly get a word out in panic. She had tears in her eyes and was shaking all over.

"I can't, I'm sick, find a replacement for me, I can't hold the show." The choppy, blurted-out words were barely intelligible. But Gordon knew the phenomenon and knew what to do.

"Listen Ruth, calm down for now. A lot of people feel that way the first time. There's no need to panic. Just sit back and relax. I have something for you, it works wonders. You'll see, in ten minutes you'll feel like you're walking on air."

"No, I don't want anything, leave me alone. I just want out. I have a confession to make Gordon, I've never done anything like this before, I can't do it. I'm the wrong person for a gig like this. Please let me out. Please Gordon, I'm begging you." She burst into tears and clung to her assistant.

"Okay, all right." Gordon apparently relented.

"Here's my suggestion, sit down and take a sedative. In the meantime, I'll arrange everything and then we'll talk about an alternative." In deep gratitude, Ruth was ready for anything. Relieved, she hugged him and relaxed.

"Thank you, you are a true friend, I will never forget that." She then took the pill he handed her with a glass of cognac and settled into one of the comfortable visitor's chairs. What she was about to experience she would never forget. It was as if her mind reorganized itself. She suddenly seemed to feel every cell in her body, her senses taking in her surroundings with a depth and brilliance she had never experienced before. Her attention span expanded into the limitless, and her thinking was marked by sharpness she had never thought possible. She was completely calm and lucid.

And she saw it before her again, her life's path, with a clarity and self-evidence as never before. And she had only one wish, to go the

way, to take the first decisive step, to put on a brilliant show, to inspire her guests and viewers, to win them over. Yes, that was her life. Ruth Clark on prime time, the focus of attention. Tomorrow she would be talked about, celebrated as a new star in the media sky. Everything she had felt and said before was no longer in her memory. There was no room in her consciousness for failures and cowards. While it was still thundering in her brain, Gordon came in and stepped in front of her.

"Are you ready?" was all he said. And the satisfied smile in his eyes already made it clear that this would be so. As if it were a daily routine. Ruth stood up and quickly checked her makeup in the mirror.

"On to the fight," she casually patted Gordon on the shoulder and walked to the broadcast room to wait for her performance signal.

The show was an exhilarating success. Ruth experienced her first performance as if floating on clouds. Although she couldn't remember a single detail, she was still so over-excited after the end that Gordon had to put the brakes on her at the subsequent celebration in the station's executive office. Without his guiding influence, her behavior probably would have led to some embarrassment. After a short time, Gordon excused Miss Clark, saying that the preparations had been very stressful, and took her home. Ruth was by now so out of control that she let everything happen to her. She consisted only of good feeling.

The incomparable feeling of a grand premiere and the conviction of limitless possibilities shot their self-assessment into the stratosphere.

Gordon had long since left. With a strange look of concern, he had congratulated her once more, then wished her a good night and quickly left the apartment. Ruth did not know what to do with herself, she could not think clearly, the tension was unbrokenly high. Extreme activation, hallucinations, confused thoughts, in between absences, confusion, amnesia. With trembling hands, she poured herself a large glass of cognac, then staggered out onto the balcony

and looked out at the city glittering in the sea of lights that lay at her feet. The whole world was at her feet. Strangely, the metaphor could no longer delight her. Suddenly, deep dejection flowed through her. A feeling of emptiness, of complete loneliness, like a mountain climber who, driven by madness, had scaled the highest peak and now no longer trusted himself to make the descent. And then came the temptation to crown the victory by free falling into the infinity of being. Suddenly she became aware that she was bent over far in front actually at the border of the free fall. Then she recoiled and staggered back into the apartment. There she sank onto the soft carpet of her living room and lost consciousness.

When she awoke the next morning, she found herself in a pool of vomit on the floor. Terrible pain pounded in her head and spurts of uncontrolled tremor traveled in waves through her body. Her skin was covered in a cold sweat. With difficulty, and only after several attempts, she managed to rise and get to the bathroom. Only when she had scrubbed herself long and thoroughly in the shower did her spirits slowly return. She threw a large towel over the soiled carpet, put on coffee and swallowed four aspirin against the pain.

Then, as she sat at the kitchen table with her cup of coffee, she tried to recall the past evening from memory. It startled her how many memories were missing.

With iron discipline, Ruth threw herself back into work. At first, uncertainty was latent as a result of the experience of the first assignment, but after only a few days the bad memories began to fade. The research was fun for Ruth and took up all of her attention. She became increasingly aware that she had been too naive about the station's motives in running the show. Like the simple country girl, she had trusted that the name of the show was serious. She had been convinced it was about truth and facts. She had to take note that the station's self-righteous motives of fighting a battle for truth and against evil were nothing but bluff. On the contrary, it soon became clear that their show's main goal seemed to be to expose people and

denounce them in a spectacular way. The top priority was to increase the number of viewers. No one was interested in the means used to achieve this.

"The ratings determine the prices for advertising placements, and we live off advertising." That's how her boss once put it in a nutshell.

Ruth had prepared especially thoroughly for her second appearance. She had thought through every question and role-played all the issues in a variety of ways. She had read up on the background of the problem. So she had no reason to be anxious or insecure. Nevertheless, the experiences of her first assignment were repeated again this time and in the following assignments. Ruth could only overcome her insecurities and fears with massive use of drugs, and the consequences were disastrous each time. The side effects of the drugs increased more and more.

After three months, she was a mental and physical wreck. In addition to the anxiety during her life performances, she had panic attacks that could occur at any time - even seemingly without a trigger.

So the fear of panic became her constant companion. Stimulants, sedatives, antidepressants, testosterone preparations to increase her assertiveness. 'Crystal Clear', an amphetamine that brought alertness and readiness to act to peak levels with extremely increased motivation and attention. The drug from the poison kitchen of the former Soviet Union, originally developed to optimize the fight performance of fighter pilots, became her constant companion. Without her pills, she was no longer able to leave her house, let alone enter the office or make even the simplest decisions.

One day Ruth went to her office, wrote a few explanatory lines to her boss, cleaned out her desk, took all her personal belongings, and left the station. She would not be back. She knew she was about to go to the dogs. And she also knew that her job and position at the station were the main reason. That's why she had decided to retire from media work altogether. The first consequence of this decision was relief,

then followed deep depression with existential fears, financial problems and complete loss of her self-esteem. Ruth had to give up her apartment and everything she had dreamed of and fought for seemed lost. After paying the station's recourse, she was left with nothing. At least she was lucky enough to get a small room at a reasonable price, so at least she was spared the trip to the Salvation Army. She was at the lowest point of her life. The only certainty was that a way back to her hometown or even to her parents' house was out of the question for her.

It was a balmy late summer night when she once again wandered aimlessly through the streets. The path had led her to the park by the river. In the midst of the nocturnal noise, the green space seemed like an oasis of peace and security in a desert of concrete and glass. Every now and then, a chilly breeze brushed through the tops of the trees as a harbinger of the coming frost, and the air smelled of damp earth and snow. She had not consciously perceived this smell since childhood. Deep sadness filled her. What had become of the child of those days. Despite all the restrictions of her parents' home, she had been full of hope and had clung to life with an enthusiasm of which nothing remained now.

"You are nothing anymore," said a voice inside her, "let go of everything and get ready for the last step." Then her eyes fell on the river. Like a silver lining, it passed through the brightly lit desert of downtown - signpost, bringer of peace, Acheron. She felt as if she were being lovingly guided by gentle hands. So she walked along the wharf, up the steps to the bridge, there to the highest point, the center. Now she was in her center, knew what to do. No more doubts, no more hesitation, the time of uncertainty was finally over. She climbed onto the wall ledge and took the step forward.

When she woke up again, she was lying in the intensive care unit, arms and legs strapped down, secured against movement with Velcro

straps, tubes in her veins, and on the side of a frame with rollers a monitor whose activity indicated her vital functions. Although she was listed as indigent at the clinic, there was nothing wrong with her treatment or care. She was in a dormitory with twelve beds. The other patients were in a similar situation as she was. Part of her treatment consisted of psychotherapy sessions with an elderly Hawaiian therapist. She liked his unsparing, open manner.

"Miss Clark, I will now tell you my view of things without going easy on you. You are tolerated here, you have received the most necessary medical care, and now they are trying to stabilize you with some therapy sessions to the point where you are able to leave the hospital. But that is the end of the road as far as the hospital is concerned. Our welfare system does not provide for further services. I can listen to your personal story during the few hours of therapy and give you one or two suggestions for your life's journey. However, I do not expect therapy to be successful under these circumstances. I can, however, use the time to introduce you to a completely new way of approaching life. It is, depending on your point of view, a philosophical, religious or spiritual approach. In any case, it is a completely different way of living than you have been practicing. The meaningfulness of this variant lies in the fact that you can deepen this path with relatively little financial expenditure and expand it yourself, if you can find something to like about it. There are centers, trainers, interest groups, support groups and events of various kinds all over the country that deal with this subject. Ruth felt she was being offered an opportunity and took it.

"Thank you for your sincere words, doctor. Yes, show me this way. I don't have so many options left. If my strength is enough, I want to go it."

And in the beginning, Ruth reached the limits of her strength several times. Every step cost her an effort, every group of people had a threatening effect on her. Disoriented, she wandered the streets in

search of relief from her torment. Fear, panic, terrifying imaginings of all kinds were her constant companions. Hunger, thirst, and the question of where she would spend the next night were physically and emotionally exhausting. During this wandering, she began to reflect on her life.

It was a painful realization that she lacked the human maturity and greatness to live the life she had dreamed of. Small feelings of success gave her the strength to continue and to gain more and more new experiences.

The body-related and spiritual exercises did her good, but they were not enough. So she continued her search, in relevant bookstores, on the Internet, at lectures and in personal conversations with similarly interested people, seekers like herself. Someone told her about the effect of meditative archery for self-discovery and thus opened for Ruth a path that would decisively determine her life. Once again, she set out on her journey and, after laborious odysseys and countless setbacks, she finally found what she was looking for. In a small spiritual circle on the outskirts of the industrial district, she met an old master who initiated her into the art of archery.

Kyudo - archery with the asymmetrical longbow - is the oldest of all Japanese martial arts, dating back to the fourth century AD. What immediately captured Ruth was the slow movement and beauty of the bow and arrows. Under the patient and loving guidance of her master, she learned the secrets of complete self-absorption and purposeful concentration on the individual movements involved in handling the bow. Due to the asymmetrical shape of the bow and the guiding of the arrow without rest, it was necessary to turn the bow to the target within a fraction of a second at the moment of firing, before the arrow detached from the string. At the same time, the right hand had to be turned inward so that the glove released the string. Only when the individual steps merged into a single sequence of movements with the utmost precision did the shot succeed.

"The goal of the archer is the hit," their master emphasized, "but there is much more to Kyudo. In addition to correct technique, it requires a certain state of mind to achieve the goal over and over again."

With iron discipline, Ruth strove to learn the technique flawlessly. Thus she reached the level of shooting, where the influence of the mind is of special importance. Her next goal was Mushin, the empty mind, where at the moment of firing the concentration is so condensed that the mind becomes free of all thoughts.

The purification of the mind as the ultimate goal of Kyudo. It was an uplifting experience to find peace of heart with this antagonism of concentration and serenity.

The old master also taught you that Kyudo should always include truth, kindness and beauty. Truth as a technically correct shot with the right attitude, kindness in the form of politeness, compassion and peacefulness and beauty with the etiquette of the Kyudo ceremony.

In the course of time, the master also opened up to her the world of thought of Zen Buddhism, which reached Japan in the 12th century and influenced the thoughts and actions of the samurai. "The mystical experiences of Zen help the practitioner to overcome the permanent preoccupation with oneself and the resulting incessant flood of thoughts, which creates more and more uncertainty and new suffering. Samadhi, the complete concentration on the activity being performed while simultaneously letting go of all thoughts, experiencing silence and emptiness - timeless, selfless."

With the help of Kyudo and Zen, Ruth was finally able to overcome her fears and recognize herself and her path.

After several years, she finally ventured back into her old job, feeling strong enough to succeed in the profession she had learned.

She was now a mature woman, purified in mind and spirit. Combined with her dazzling looks, this made for an extremely attractive charismatic personality. A woman who attracted looks and attention.

And that was also the effect on Austin Jenkins when he met Ruth at an art opening.

A short time before, she had decided to resume her profession and, in this connection, had contacted an old acquaintance at the Academy of Media Studies. He had suggested that they meet at the art exhibition. She had not yet made out her acquaintance in the gallery and therefore decided to wait and take a look at the pictures.

"So to me, these works seem like anyone could blob something like this together. In situations like this, I'm never sure if I'm not the victim of a hidden camera show. I imagine it would give the producer a thieving pleasure to secretly record all the over-the-top comments of the viewers, only to reveal that the oh-so-avant-garde paintings were made by dilettante participants in a community college painting class, or a primatologist's experimental creative group." Ruth turned and recognized Jenkins, the well-known media magnate. He said it in a sympathetically ironic and not at all destructively critical way.

"Even if that were the case, I could find something to gain from it. A report on the fact that there is so much talent in many a participant in an evening class or even in a primate in the city zoo that it is able to arouse the enthusiasm of the viewers could be quite interesting. At least as fascinating as a program about influencing public opinion through targeted information transfer. Wouldn't that be a topic for your station?" Ruth also took the edge off her statement with her tone and smile.

"You know me?" Jenkins acted surprised.

"Who doesn't know you. Now you're the one going on 'Candid Camera'."

"I wonder why everyone doesn't know you too? In any case, to me you seem like a woman who should definitely be known. Unless you're not interested in women or you're not interested in interesting people." His questioning look demanded a retort.

"I'm Ruth Clark." Jenkins was entranced by this simple way of introducing himself. This simple statement left every room for specula-

tion, imagination, interpretation. It said absolutely nothing and yet was very telling.

"You say that in a way and tone as if the whole world should know you. And I feel that it would be a benefit to the world to know you. Give me a chance to discover you for the world."

This kind of small talk was not to Ruth's taste. Still, she sensed that Jenkins' awkward, bumpy conversation was the exception and not the rule. There was certainly more to this man than such trivial sayings. Either he was vastly overrated - which she didn't believe based on the information she had about him - or he was having a downright bad day, which could happen to anyone. She liked the third possibility that came to her mind best. Maybe he actually found her so gorgeous that it knocked him over. She decided to call his bluff and continue to play the game.

"Like Columbus did the islands of the Caribbean? Columbus thought the natives were cannibals. I hope you don't think I'm a femme fatale. Because I'd have to disappoint you. I'm just some woman nobody knows. This is in the essence of the matter. If it is someone's destiny to know me, it will happen. With you, that seems to be the case right now. It's all destiny."

"That may be so, the only question is who determines. For my part, I accept this destiny with pleasure. For the life of me, I cannot imagine anything more beautiful than to have met you. To whom do you think I should make an offering of gratitude for this?"

"You can choose anyone. Whoever you want to please. You could buy some paintings from the painter, after all." Jenkins laughed spontaneously. This idea would never have occurred to him himself. This lady was really good for any surprise."

"Agreed, if you choose the pictures and then determine what to do with them." With this demand he wanted to check what she really had going on. Was she just a bluffer with a beautiful body, or did Miss Clark actually have character to offer as well.

"Good can only ever be done by oneself. No one can be good or do generous deeds for another." Again, Jenkins was intrigued by the simplicity of her statement. This woman really seemed to know where she stood and what she wanted.

"You've convinced me, I'll figure out the target of my kindness myself. What do you do for a living, Miss Clark?" The change came quite suddenly, and it concerned the subject for which Ruth was prepared, but which nevertheless frightened her a little.

"Journalist?" Ruth intoned the answer as if it were a question. As it were, an invitation to Jenkins to take a stand on this fact. Which he promptly did.

"No kidding?"

"What reason would I have to joke?"

"Cruelty? You may have the desire to play with me as cats do with mice."

"And why would I want to act out my need for cruelty on you, of all people?"

"Because my enthusiasm for you makes me vulnerable. But seriously, if you are indeed a journalist, I would like to talk to you professionally. Could you make it tomorrow at nine o'clock?"

"I'll be there."

Now there was work to be done. Jenkins intended to get a complete picture of Ruth Clark's life by the next morning. He found a quiet corner on a balcony in the gallery and called Robert Lancaster, the head of his investigative division. Despite the late hour, Lancaster answered on the third ring. Jenkins was sure he had awakened the investigator, yet his voice sounded bright.

"Good day, Mister Jenkins, how can I help you?" People who have to be reachable around the clock and from a wide variety of time zones have brought the neutral phrase "Good Day" to new relevance.

"Ruth Clark, thirty-five to forty years old, journalist. Gapless curriculum vitae until eight tomorrow. Good Day." Jenkins held his chief investigator in high esteem, so his telegram style was not aimed at

distance, pressure, or even disrespect. But as a professional, he knew that the task set was on the verge of insolubility, and therefore every minute of available time counted. His form of communication was an expression of his respect in relation to the task and the man who was able to solve it.

When Ruth appeared at nine o'clock the next morning, Jenkins knew pretty much about large parts of her life. Oddly, he had received no information about the last few years. It was as if she had gone underground twelve years ago and only resurfaced a few months ago. Jenkins got right to the point.

"Miss Clark, I took the liberty of researching her life. I did not do this for voyeuristic reasons, but as a potential employer.

As you must have noticed yesterday, I am interested in you as a woman and as a person. Your appearance, your demeanor and your way of seeing things have left a strong impression on me. I have therefore decided to make you an offer. I would like you to join Life Events as an employee. Your first task would be to get a picture of the program, which has been running for three years, since the station was founded, and to come up with an innovative concept. After that, we'll discuss your role and the terms of a contract." Jenkins had deliberately worded his offer so that Ruth could grow into the role without too much pressure. He didn't know how she had coped with her breakdown because of the gap in her resume. Her demeanor the night before had been confident, and she had seemed unusually emotionally secure and steady. But he knew from long experience that first impressions in show business were often deceiving. The effects of a constant public presence on psyche and character were considerable. And the drop-out rates were correspondingly high.

"What task have you assigned me?" Objective, sober, to the point, thought Jenkins. I would have to be very wrong if this woman turned out to be a flop.

"Leading role. Unlimited upwards in the range of tasks. You determine the speed of advancement. We have no intention of burning you out. You would assume a central position at the station with a great deal of personal responsibility and little interference from superiors. To be precise, you would report only to me personally."

"How long do I have to figure it out?"

"I don't want to pressure you, so let me put it this way. You let me know when you've made a decision, and I'll let you know if the offer still stands." She had made up her mind quickly and had never regretted her decision. Jenkins had sponsored her from the start in a way that sometimes embarrassed her. But he had never asked her for anything in return outside of the work she was contracted to do for the station. And she was grateful to him for that.

"Maybe I should be more understanding of Cyd and not see her as an enemy. She is fighting her life's battle like everyone else. This is not directed at me." Ruth smiled at the thought. Yes, this was herself again, the purified Ruth at peace within herself. And suddenly she realized with discomfort how much of what she had achieved had been buried again by the daily grueling work at the station. She resolved to be more mindful of herself. She owed that to her old master.

Susan Miller celebrated her twenty-seventh birthday that day. For her, this was no occasion for exuberant merriment. Rather, she felt a sense of gateway panic spreading through her. She was rapidly approaching thirty and still had no husband. All her colleagues and friends were already in steady hands, and most of them already had children.

Susan knew that she was unusually good-looking. This was confirmed to her from all sides. Medium height, with short-cropped auburn hair, a slightly curved Roman nose, large brown eyes with prominent eyebrows, plus a full mouth with flawless teeth. She was athletically trained, yet had a wonderfully soft feminine body with long legs and

full breasts. She was witty, entertaining, personable, sophisticated and intelligent. Her interest was by no means only superficial amusement. One could also have serious conversations with her, she was passionate about going to the theater, once she had even been to the opera. She knew that men desired her. She had also had numerous experiences with men that had been quite satisfying. Her standards for sex were high, but she also had a lot to offer. Despite everything, she was alone. None of her many acquaintances had ever been a serious candidate for a real partnership or even marriage. Now, as she thought about her life on the way to work, she realized that she was actually seriously worried about becoming an old maid.

Finally, she drew a conclusion. She had to take the initiative. Up to now, she had always just waited for the right person, now she would take the active part and catch the man she was enthusiastic about. She liked the idea so much that she decided to take blue to put her plan into action right away. As an editor in a publishing house, she was flexible in her working hours, so a phone call was all it took to take time off.

"Where are the best fishing grounds for what I want to do," she pondered her approach. "Perhaps the first thing I should clarify is what kind of man I want. He should be good-looking, of course, but that's not a requirement." Susan was aware that she by no means associated her fondest memories with unusually good-looking men. "So let's forget about looks." Well groomed, erotic, interesting. Yes, interesting he had to be, that was the most important thing for her. Tender and passionate too, of course, but she would just demand that from him. After she didn't go to work, she would celebrate her birthday in a trendy cafe downtown with a feudal breakfast and a glass of champagne.

She decided on Mackies, which she knew only by hearsay and which was very popular at the moment. There she chose a strategic seat with a view of the restaurant and the front door. The young waiter was eager to serve her and took her order without taking his eyes

off her for even a second. It really was a great place. Indirect lighting, a furniture of a mixture of Art Nouveau and ultra-modern, with the decadence of an old Viennese coffee house. Soft murmur of voices, silent clinking of glasses and cups, leafing through newspapers. It was like an enchanted place in the middle of the hectic city. An oasis of calm. The ideal environment to initiate a lasting relationship. Numerous mirrors on the walls and also on the ceiling made it possible to discreetly observe the other guests. And so Susan began to test those present for their suitability. "You could write a best-seller as an alternative," she said to herself. "An instruction manual for lonely hearts. That way you'll stay alone, but you'll get rich."

Breakfast was served and she decided to temporarily interrupt the search process and just enjoy herself. The small croissants and brioches tasted fantastic and the coffee was of a quality rarely found. After she had eaten everything, she took the glass of champagne and toasted herself with a slightly implied gesture.

Just as she was about to put the glass to her lips, she saw in one of the mirrors that her toast had been returned. And although she could not see the gentleman exactly, nor locate him in the maze of tables and niches, she sensed from the playfulness and lightness of this gesture that it was he she had been looking for. She had found him. The time for searching was over.

"There are occasions that shouldn't be celebrated alone." This is exactly how she had always imagined her husband's voice. Melodic, sonorous, accented. She noticed a shiver run through her when the familiar stranger suddenly appeared beside her, leaned down to her, and with an ambiguous smile asked if he could keep her company. She looked at him briefly, not to check, but to memorize the sight unforgettably. And she liked what she saw.

"I think you're right, life is too short to spend it alone. And every birthday belongs to be celebrated in good company. What lucky coincidence brought you to me, stranger?"

"Cupid has shot one of his arrows." Again Susan realized that this voice made her vibrate. The waves were absorbed through her skin and penetrated her entire body to the core. She had never felt such desire for a man as she did for this stranger she had known for two minutes.

"Is it a good fate to be hit by Cupid's arrow?" she asked challengingly.

"It's a destiny of being chosen." Susan was entranced. She was a romantic in the depths of her heart. What else would this day bring?

What drove the perpetrator, and when would he strike again? It was the worry of overlooked details, unasked questions, or misinterpreted clues that robbed Gillardi of sleep. As he had so many times since the hunt opened, he had left his hotel room and driven to the FBI office. There, in the conference room, he stared at the sketchy diagram of the hunted man, the figure without a face, hoping for an intuition that would lead him to new leads.

Sometimes, when he stared too long at the image of the adversary, it seemed to materialize and - as a sculpture takes shape under the hands of an artist - to assume human forms, so lifelike that he seemed to perceive the breathing movements. And sometimes he felt as if the face, that blank undescribed oval, without features, without soul, looked at him with a sneering look when he stood thoughtfully before it. Lately he always felt himself being watched when he leafed through his papers, so that he then looked up quickly to find out the cause of this feeling. More than once, he was sure he had perceived a reaction in the embalmer.

"I think you're going crazy," he said to himself at such moments. And then he wondered how much longer he would be able to bear the burdens of his job and how deep the many abysses had already looked into him.

Couldn't his hunting instinct and his desire to hunt down these sick creatures be part of his own murderous urge to kill? Perhaps he was

only acting out his urge in a legal way because he was too cowardly to go against the law and society as an outlaw. If he thought carefully, he realized that he had never cared about the law as a nonconformist. It was good for others, but he was outside its scope. His status allowed him privileges of that kind.

And so he walked through another lonely night, hoping that his hunting luck and the favor of the gods would help him slay the beast.

The naked body of the lifeless young woman with the short-cropped chestnut hair lay stretched out on the embalming table. She looked as gentle and peaceful as a sleeper who would soon - rested and refreshed - rise again and turn to the things of daily life. The beauty of the woman was enhanced by the utter relaxation of her expression. Death as the brother of sleep.

But the gentleness of the scene was abruptly interrupted by a strangely dressed man who approached the dead woman. He wore a loincloth in the manner of the embalmers in Pharaonic Egypt. Joy filled him as he took in her beauty. His passionate gaze slid over her pale face, the slightly curved nose, the almond-shaped eyes with prominent eyebrows, and the full lips.

"You have the grace and dignity of a noble Roman woman. I will see to it that your beauty is preserved imperishably for all time."

Then he grasped her head with one hand, while with the other he inserted a long spiral bronze needle into the nose of the dead to remove the brain with the hook at its end. This was the first step in the ritual of purification. After removing the brain tissue completely, he took a knife and made an incision from the left end of the ribs to the top of the pelvis to remove the stomach, liver, spleen, peritoneum, kidneys and lungs. Heart, kidneys and bladder he left in their natural positions.

Finally, he washed the body with fragrant palm wine and then rinsed it with water.

After drying the body again, the embalmer began the process of dehydration. To do this, he placed the body on a mat covered with sodium bicarbonate. Then he treated the cavities in the body with cloths soaked in sodium bicarbonate, which he then placed in the chest cavity and abdomen to dehydrate the body. He looked at his work and was satisfied.

The woman still radiated the calmness of a sleeping person. He now covered the body completely with natron. The cleaning and drying would preserve this beauty forever.

## Chapter 6

The cafeteria was full at this hour and Cyd was late, as usual. She had arranged to meet Conrad here at eleven o'clock. But now she realized that had not been a good idea. She had trouble spotting him among all the people. When she finally discovered him and saw that he was talking to young women from the newsroom, she felt something like a twinge of jealousy rise up inside her.

What's the point, she said to herself, you have no claim on this man. And moreover, you've been thinking only of Chambers since the last team meeting. Your jealousy is completely misplaced. By now Conrad had spotted her and signaled. She smiled back and walked toward him.

"So, ladies," she said nonchalantly, "the most beautiful things come to an end. I'm afraid I'm going to have to kidnap this man from you." In feigned indignation, the two protested, then withdrew, laughing.

"You have just saved my innocence." He made a gesture of relief. "These young things are starving. Don't you guys have a feng shui consultant in this company to balance hedonism and productivity?"

"Now just say that you guys at the university believe such nonsense."

"We believe in everything and nothing. That's what we get paid for. Everything is possible and can be studied scientifically. But it's not exactly my field of expertise - productivity." He laughed lightheartedly and Cyd realized that she had been fooled by him once again.

"Productivity, however, is precisely what I care about. And I'm assuming that's why we agreed to meet, to move forward on the embalmer issue."

Her tone had sounded sharper than she had intended. And she realized again that she was having a hard time with the professor's casual, seemingly indifferent manner.

"Okay Ms. Alexander, let's share our ideas. What have you done and what new aspects have come up?"

"No, you first."

"Why not. I've been going over the last team meeting and have come to the following conclusion. If it is indeed true that the killer treats his victims according to ancient Egyptian rituals, he must have extensive knowledge of Egyptian mythology. In addition, he also needs medical knowledge, which cannot be acquired so easily. So there is a lot to be said for a person with an academic background. There again the indications point to the archaeological faculties. It could be interesting to ask around at the archaeological institutes in the near and middle vicinity, for unusual students, possibly dropouts under special circumstances. Of course, the faculty would also be interesting. I have also already contacted some colleagues on this matter and have come across a most interesting story.

Some forty-five years ago, there was a young lecturer at Cleveland University who was considered the expert par excellence on Pharaonic Egypt. Aidan McBride was a top expert on hieroglyphic writing, mythology, and most importantly, he was one of the first to address the medical aspects of mummification. His seminar, in which a deceased was mummified according to the rules of the Book of the Dead, is legendary.

At the age of just under thirty, he took over the scientific leadership of an expedition to the Valley of the Kings. There it became apparent that he also had the innate flair of the excavation archaeologist.

In a side valley, the expedition discovered several unopened burial chambers. The finds made McBride world famous and were another building block for his career.

However, things are said to have happened in the Valley of the Kings at that time that cannot be reconciled with the scientific career of the shooting star among archaeologists. However, these are only rumors, hearsay that may have passed through so many ears and mouths that it no longer has anything to do with the actual events. Papyrus scrolls are said to have been found in one of the burial chambers, with instructions for the spiritual treatment of the deca-

sed that were completely unknown until then. Spells that go far beyond the Egyptian Book of the Dead. As it were, instructions for the direct transformation of the deceased into the immortal state. The writing on the scrolls was a rare variant of hieroglyphic writing that had not been researched. McBride is said to have been the first to enter and view the burial chamber together with a colleague. The whole thing came out after an argument between McBride and this colleague. The latter had then claimed during the preparation of the inventory list of the finds, papyrus scrolls would be missing, which she had noticed during the first inspection of the burial chamber, but with which she had not dealt more closely. Since there had been repeated rivalries and disagreements between the two, and the feisty academic also had a reputation for scheming, the accusations were not given too much importance. At the very least, they were not taken seriously enough to prevent his professorship and later appointment as director of the Egyptian department of the Cleveland Art Museum. The fact seems to be that since the opening of that burial chamber, McBride devoted an unusual amount of time to the study of rare and unreadable hieroglyphic writings. Already in Egypt, after the daily excavation work, he is said to have spent nights until the early morning hours studying such writings.

After his return, he became one of the leading experts in the field of ancient Egyptian writings as a professor of the institute and director of the Egypt department with his mummy collection. At the same time, he turned more and more to the study of mysticism and occult practices of the dead.

This was no longer the model scientist that the university and the museum had wished for. Criticism of his lectures and the management of the museum soon grew loud in the background.

In the 1980s, negotiations began between museums around the world and countries of origin of archaeological treasures, involving the return of valuable art treasures and scientifically significant exhibits. These negotiations also involved some of the rare mummies in

the Cleveland Museum's collection. Here McBride showed himself to be a dogged opponent of the return of even a single exhibit. He took the position that the mummies had been saved from grave robbers and wild sale on the black market by the expeditions of the time. And without the scientific excavation work of the major museums and universities, there would be no Egyptology at all today. Even the Egyptian National Museum in Cairo with all its treasures is only due to the initiatives of foreign scientists.

His fanatical demeanor and inflexibility eventually led to his being replaced in his position as head of the museum's delegation. The new management decided to return the affected exhibits against his will.

And then something happened that few can explain. In a night-and-fog operation, McBride stole the mummies from the museum's premises and hid them in a cellar vault that he had rented for this purpose and equipped with elaborate air-conditioning units. When he was arrested, he broke down. He berated the museum management, professional colleagues and politicians, saying they wanted to take away his mummies and sabotage his life's work, that he was on the trail of the secret of eternal life. In short, the once celebrated star among elite academics became the laughing stock of the media. The newspapers were full of caricatures of Crazy Mac and his mummies.

The incidents were settled internally as the nervous breakdown of an overworked genius. No court case resulted. McBride was released from the Santa Anna Hospital psychiatric unit after several months. He was then sent into early retirement due to illness.

Since then he has lived as a loner on a small hacienda in New Mexico. Insiders claim that he continues his research and is probably the best expert on rare hieroglyphic scripts, hieratic scripts - cursive variants of hieroglyphic script used mainly by priests - and also on Inca knot script. He is also still active in excavations, but in a private capacity and on a very small scale. Currently, he is reportedly in the Peruvian Andes, searching for mummies."

Cyd had listened intently and was surprised at Conrad's ability to share such meaningful information so casually.

"But, this is unbelievable. How come the FBI doesn't know this story? Everything points to the fact that this McBride is our man." Cyd was highly agitated and would have liked to pick up the phone right away to notify Gillardi. My God, what journalism could be made of this story. All the big newspapers and magazines would pick up her report. Her name would go around the world.

"Now slow down." Conrad realized he had to pull the emergency brake on Cyd. "McBride could be an interesting contact. But I can't for the life of me picture him as a serial killer. And if he really is that sick, we'll have to be all the more careful. I suggest we keep what we know to ourselves for the time being. I'll try to find out more about the professor. Especially about where he was staying when the last young woman identified as a victim disappeared. I believe I owe that to my colleague. If there are any aggravating suspicions against him, we can always inform Gillardi."

Cyd realized that this path was also in her mind. She needed time to prepare the story of Crazy Mac. If he turned out to be the culprit, she would have a finished report to show. With that, she would put Ruth down for good. The thought made her smile.

"What amuses you so much about my proposal?" Conrad sounded irritated.

"No, sorry, your suggestion is fine. I also think it would be too early to bring McBride into the picture at this stage. Let's leave it as you said. We'll research this lead and go from there." With that, she rose to end the call. Conrad was perplexed.

"Wait, what do you have to offer, so far everything has come from me."

"In all seriousness, Ian, I can't compete in any way with what you've offered me. Let's leave it at that today, next time it's my turn." Delivered in a sugary sweet voice, the use of his first name and a deep look in his eyes reinforced, her words had the intended effect.

This was a man she had a handle on. Now she still had to find access to Chambers, but that was bound to be more difficult, he seemed so serious and aloof. But that was another chapter. She waved to Conrad once more, then she was gone.

Ruth had long since recognized the explosive nature of the case and decided for herself to take over the research. As she sat in her office, she thought about what steps she could take to gain an advantage over Cyd.

Her position at the broadcaster was clearly established as number one, but what no one knew or even suspected was the deep-seated insecurity that had accompanied her since that first appearance. And it was precisely Cyd, with her youthful lightheartedness, who was particularly hard on her. After all, her sentimental display of understanding for her young rival could not be allowed to go so far that she ran the risk of being outflanked by her.

It was obvious that her competitor was working toward a spectacular exposé. No use competing on this point, she would go a different way. Serious educational work, early information of the women at risk as protection against the killer. Addressing gender issues in violent crime per se - men as perpetrators, women as victims. And as a tribute to Jenkins, the importance of the media in the manhunt. This case could become exemplary of a successful alliance between authorities and the media. But there was something else on Ruth's mind. She wondered what significance Dr. Chambers had gained for her.

The doctor had made a deep impression on her from their first meeting. She could not say what constituted the fascination she felt in his presence. It was neither exclusively eroticism nor the undoubtedly superior intellect of this man. The cause had to lie deeper. Perhaps that mysterious irresistible attraction that sometimes occurs between a man and a woman, 'lightning strike', 'love at first sight', 'amour fou' - or whatever you wanted to call it. She would not have called her

feelings love, however, she lacked experience in this regard. Suddenly she realized that she had never been given the gift of true love. She had had a variety of experiences with men, but the feeling of true love had eluded her until now. Ruth felt herself flooded with ambivalent feelings, how deep inside her the emptiness was striving for fulfillment, she felt she had to go in search of the missing part, the male counterpart, the One who would bring her fulfillment. With great effort of will, she forced herself to suppress the arousal in order to be able to think clearly again.

Thinking back to their brief conversations with Chambers, she could not recall any hint in his behavior that she could take as a sign of his interest. He was always matter-of-fact and friendly toward her, and yet she sensed the crackle and spillover of electricity between them and was sure that he sensed it, too. But why did he not show his sensations? For what reason was he keeping a low profile? At the very beginning, she had thought him highly sensitive, perhaps even a bit shy. Then she had soon realized that it must be something else. Dr. Chambers was unusually confident in his dealings with people, speaking without shyness and with the natural open manner of one who is worldly, self-assured, and at ease with himself. Finally, she had decided that 'cautious' more aptly characterized the doctor. For all his friendliness and openness, he seemed prudent, questioning, inquiring, exploring. A seeker who did not enter into decisions lightly. One who examined and was only prepared to be enthusiastic about what he found to be good. Depth instead of superficiality. The thought appealed to her. And as she thought of him, a smile played around her lips. Who knows how long she had subconsciously longed for a relationship with such a man. Now she felt the desire burning inside her, and she was hell-bent on going for it with all her heart.

It had not escaped her notice that Cyd had also shown interest in Chambers. How far this observation played a role in her own behavi-

or, she did not even want to know. Female rivalries for men were something she had always rejected.

While she was still considering her next steps, a call came in on her mobile. The number in the display was unfamiliar to her. Secretly, she hoped it would be Chambers.

"Miss Clark, this is Ian Conrad."

"Oh yes, Dr. Conrad, how's the research coming along?" She was trying hard to sound interested and not let her disappointment show.

"Progressing in a wide variety of directions I would say."

"Indeed, but then you are quite a bit ahead of us. We're treading water. Or maybe I'd better just speak for myself, I'm treading water. Miss Alexander is following her own tracks."

"That's the reason I'm calling. I figured it might be beneficial to our cause if we were to short-circuit outside of the project group and coordinate our approach, or at least share the latest information. After all, our efforts serve a higher cause."

Ruth was astonished. She had assigned Conrad to Cyd. Her reference to the Canopic jars had led to this. And even during the sessions, the two had sat next to each other and maintained lively contact. Now he put out feelers in her direction. Could this be a trap set by Cyd?

"Surely this suggestion did not come from Miss Alexander, or am I wrong?"

"No, she has nothing to do with it, it is solely my idea. I am a friend of exclusivity in certain things, but an opponent of exclusion in teamwork. I would like to meet with you for a work discussion. Shall we say at three at Alta Mira?"

"I can set that up. I'll see you there."

Ruth decided to remain aloof. Ian Conrad was not familiar to her. He, like Cyd, had this casual ease of approach to things that was completely foreign to her. Discipline, thoroughness, reliability and, above all, poise were her paradigms. She kept private matters and pleasures strictly separate from her work. But as a source of informa-

tion, the anthropologist was certainly not to be despised. And if she took him up on his offer, she might have a better chance of competing with Cyd. In any case, she would keep a low profile and wait and see what would happen.

The Alta Mira was a popular in hangout near the university. The many alcoves, bay windows, terraces and seating areas with comfortable club chairs gave the place the intimacy of an English club. The crowd was mixed. In addition to students, the bar was popular with members of the press and lawyers. The possibility to have undisturbed discreet conversations was a hallmark of the establishment, along with the excellent service. The view of the mountains from the large terrace was breathtaking, but Ruth had paid no attention to it that afternoon as she traversed the establishment in search of Conrad. She found him in one of the alcoves, which was furnished with a massive table and four leather-upholstered chairs that would have looked good in the knights' hall of a medieval castle. A yellow and white awning shielded the burning sun and provided a pleasantly subdued light inside. A fan spun lazily on the ceiling, creating a light, refreshing breeze. "No wonder this bar is so popular," Ruth thought, "it was just a feel-good place."

"I see you've taken good care of us," Ruth said in lieu of a greeting, pointing to the wine cooler that held a bottle of white wine.

"You have to celebrate the festivities as they fall," Conrad replied lightly. I also took the liberty of ordering tapas for us. The chef here is a man of inexhaustible imagination. The variety and quality of his dishes are widely known. I hope you keep up with both."

This time Ruth was determined to play Ian's game.

"I'll certainly keep up with the wine; I'd like to see the tapas first. But now that you bring up the subject of food, I realize I haven't had anything since my morning coffee. I'm hungry as a wolf." A young waiter brought a tray with a second glass and a plate of tapas, along with two plates, cutlery, and various condiments.

"One look and I'm already convinced. If they taste as good as they look, this will be my regular place." Conrad showed qualities as a cavalier by pouring Ruth wine and lovingly arranging a plate of tapas and spices for her. Then he raised his glass in a toast.

"What shall we drink to?" he asked her with a smile that made Ruth's warning bells go off.

"To the chef," she rebuffed.

"Not very romantic. In a place like this, on a day like this, Ian and Ruth toast the chef."

"It's just another day at work for me, Dr. Conrad. And I hope Ian and Ruth didn't just meet for pleasure, but for a constructive conversation that will help our cause." Now she was herself again. And she realized that it did her good to be authentic. There was something about this man that could cause women to do things they later regretted. She didn't doubt that he could also be serious and do serious work, but he struck her as a person who would always give the benefit of the doubt to pleasure. And this attitude frightened her. Perhaps because she was in danger of contagion? She suspected that much of her beliefs were just anchors. Artifices for daily survival.

"Well, here's to the chef. He undoubtedly deserves it. Then let me at least suggest that we enjoy food and drink before work takes up all our senses."

"I can live with that. Chin-chin!" They ate and drank in silence for a while, taking in the atmosphere of the afternoon in this wonderful place. Only when all the tapas had been consumed and the bottle emptied did they sit back and look at each other, waiting.

"Your invitation, so you first," Ruth decided to open the game with a direct confrontation. "What do you have to offer, Dr. Conrad?"

"Ian, as a token of appreciation, so to speak, I would suggest."

"Well, Ian, what did you have in mind. How can we network our resources for the common good?"

"Well, I noticed that you seem to have a good rapport with Dr. Chambers. I'm sure the man, like all of us, has different ideas that he

doesn't want to talk about in the task force. I think we should play with our cards on the table and share whatever intuitions we have with each other." Ruth expressed interest.

"I like that idea. However, you are mistaken if you think that Dr. Chambers shared any personal assessments with me. We were just talking about general things. However, if I come across any information, I will be happy to share it with you. But how about you. With your expertise, I'm sure you've come up with one or two interesting ideas."

Ian was flattered and told Ruth in great detail the story of Crazy Mac and his mummies. Ruth listened attentively and was impressed by Ian's narrative. She asked a number of questions, but whenever he wanted to know something from her, she evaded. Conrad noticed disillusionment settling in him. Frustrated, he realized that this alliance would be a classic win-lose situation in favor of Ruth. This woman was only interested in sounding him out; she would never reveal anything about herself.

He realized it was time to end the meeting and called for the bill.

The farewell turned out to be cool and confirmed Conrad's assessment. After Ruth had left, he asked himself why he had even started the attempt to get closer to Ruth. He had to admit to himself that it was purely personal motives that had prompted him to take this step. He possessed enough self-deprecation to realize that Chambers had become his rival for the favor of the two attractive women. That had challenged him. So his bruised male ego had to take action and explore his chances with Ruth.

My dear swan, will Homo Sapiens ever succeed in emancipating themselves from the primates or will this go on forever? But he said this with indulgence and much understanding for the familiar animal in him. After forty-three years of life experience, he had learned to live with it, even to come to terms with it.

## Chapter 7

It had taken Ruth a lot of courage and a few tries before she had put her plan to call Dr. Chambers into action. When she finally managed to get through to him, she gave her name with much enthusiasm and a cheerful voice.

"Good morning, Dr. Chambers, this is Ruth Clark." His initial reaction came as a shock to her.

"I beg your pardon, who is speaking?" Ruth was deeply disappointed that he did not even remember her name.

"Ruth Clark from Life Events, we met in Frank Gillardi's project group." Ruth was distraught and hated herself for making that call. But suddenly the doctor's voice changed and became warm and cordial.

"Oh yes, Ms. Clark, excuse my absent-mindedness, but my mind has been miles away. How are you?" Ruth hoped the relief in her voice wasn't too obvious.

"Thank you, I can't complain. I wanted to talk to you about your test results and was hoping you would have some time for me."

"Of course, we are welcome to sit down to discuss your questions. Since the next team meeting is not until tomorrow evening, we are off tonight. What do you think about coming to my house around nine o'clock. I'll be at the clinic until eight, and I'd appreciate it if I didn't have to go out after that."

"I'll be very happy to come to you. Just tell me where I need to go and I'll be there on time." Ruth could barely control the excitement in her voice. She felt like a baked fish on a first date. She also had trouble following the directions. She thanked them again before hanging up.

As soon as the call ended, she jumped in the air and then did an exuberant dance of joy. But then she realized what it meant. She had only five hours left in which to fit a hair appointment, the makeup

artist, manicures and a bath. She immediately got on the phone to coordinate the appointments.

At nine o'clock on the dot, she parked her Lexus in front of the doctor's house. On the drive to the mountains on the outskirts of the city, the residential area had changed increasingly. Whereas in the beginning there were apartment buildings and then single-family homes and small villas, the distances between the houses became increasingly larger, the gardens wilder and more natural, and the architecture more progressive to extravagant. Skyline Boulevard stretched up the hillside in a boldly curving design. The breathtaking view of the city's sea of lights so captivated Ruth that she almost missed the turnoff onto Miramar Road.

In this narrow street, dense hedges or brick enclosures often blocked the view of the houses.

Number 379 had its own driveway, which led about three hundred meters away from the road into the densely overgrown slope. In front of the house was a gravel strewn area with space for several vehicles. The house was a half-timbered structure built of natural stone. High windows divided by crosses, a massive chimney and a steep gable roof with green tiles reminded of an English country house. The impression was reinforced by beds of wild roses that climbed up the walls of the house. At the transition to the garden, Ruth recognized a massive Lebanon cedar, whose crown shaded a large part of the flagstone-covered terrace during the day.

Chambers had heard her coming and opened the front door before she could even ring the bell.

"Good evening Ms. Clark and welcome." The doctor exuded a warmth Ruth had never experienced in him, though she had sensed it was part of his personality.

"Good evening, Dr. Chambers, and thank you again for inviting me." She handed him a gift-boxed bottle of red wine she had purchased at a wine boutique on the drive from the hair salon. "I hope I

have met your taste." Chambers took the bottle out of the box and read the label.

"Chambolle-Musigny, Les Amoureuses, a really great wine. Thank you Ms. Clark, but you didn't have to." Ruth was relieved; as a quasi-alcoholic, she had had to trust the shopkeeper's advice. In any case, the price of the bottle of wine had been exorbitant.

Chambers ushered her into the salon, which was furnished in the Provençal style. Light brown, solid, straight-lined furniture, without useless accessories, as functional as it was aesthetic and comfortable.

"This house reflects people," Ruth thought to herself, feeling more at ease than she had in a long time. Chambers led Ruth to a seating area near the patio door and offered her a seat. The door was closed because of the heat, but there was a lovely view of the city lights through the glass. A silent air conditioner and slowly rotating ceiling fans created a pleasantly cool indoor climate.

"What can I offer you? I have prepared iced tea, but you are welcome to have white wine or fruit juice."

"Iced tea sounds good." Ruth sat back, relaxed, and studied the room's furnishings. She spotted various sculptures placed on wall ledges and on the mantel.

"Are they collectors?" she asked Chambers when he came in with the tea. He placed the tray with a large glass teapot and two glasses on the table and poured for them.

"I wouldn't call myself a collector, that sounds so lifeless and dusty. I see myself as an admirer of beautiful things. I believe that beauty significantly enriches our lives. The phenomenon of aesthetics has already occupied people in ancient times. Among the ancient Greeks, a commander even had the idea of recruiting only good-looking soldiers for his army, because he was convinced that people with beautiful exteriors were also the better fighters. "

"The only question is, what were these beautiful men willing to fight for?" objected Ruth doubtfully. "The handsome Paris risked his life to get the incomparable Helen for a wife. Whether this general

could be sure of the obedience and loyalty of his soldiers, I dare to doubt."

"Sometimes you need a woman's grounded perspective to validate philosophical concepts," Chambers countered with a casual laugh. "I also prefer to speak of aesthetics as beauty. Aesthetics as sensory perception. Crucial to this way of looking at things are not concepts like 'beautiful' or 'ugly,' but sensuality in conjunction with an object's sign system."

"It sounds terribly lifeless and abstract." Ruth's attitude underscored her disapproval. "That's where I could get more out of the term 'beauty,' however subjective the use of the word may be."

Chambers bent down to pour them more wine and looked at Ruth with a quiet smile. "Long ago there lived a king in Cyprus whose name was Pygmalion, and he was a gifted artist. He created a statue of ivory that matched the ideal of his dream woman in every detail. He was so enamored of his work that Aphrodite, out of compassion, brought his ivory work to life."

Ruth was deeply moved by the sensitive way Chambers told the story.

She felt herself withdrawing from the reality of the room and plunging into a state of oblivion of the world. She heard the sound of his voice without consciously taking in the words, hung her gaze fascinated by the movements of his lips, recognized the enthusiasm in his eyes. In her imagination she imagined herself to be for the doctor what the statue had been for the king. She did not know how long she had spent in this state. Her host seemed to notice nothing. His voice came over her as if in waves. She perceived individual words, then lost touch with what he was saying again and turned to her reverie. Ruth was completely under his spell. At the same time, she had no doubt that he must feel something similar for her. It could not be otherwise. Suddenly she was there again and could clearly hear his voice.

"Emotionality as leading the soul to God. Renaissance masters mastered the art of leading nature to perfection through imagination and recognition of the divine inner being. The esteem of the artist, who was regarded as 'Deus in terris,' was correspondingly high."

"Deus in terris." Without meaning to, Ruth repeated the words. "And what does your ivory dream woman look like?" The moment the words had been spoken, she knew it was too early for that, there was no basis between them yet for such an intimate question, but the inner urge to send a signal had been stronger.

She was relieved to see that Chambers was not dismissive of skipping steps in the ritual of human relationships. He was merely retreating to the noncommittal meta-level of a conversation between cultured people. "Yes, if I knew that, I would create my own work of art and ask Aphrodite to breathe life into it," he replied with an indulgent smile. "Perhaps my ignorance is also the reason why I am concerned with the works of great artists."

As if seized by a sudden restlessness, he stood up abruptly. "Come, let's go out into the open air, at this time of day the view is particularly beautiful."

Ruth followed him outside to the balustrade of the marble-tiled terrace. There they stood side by side, each absorbed in his own thoughts. It was a starry night. In the pure air of the foothills, the stars shone with incredible clarity and intensity, creating a twinkling, cosmic sea of lights that stretched to the horizon.

The connection between them was physically palpable for both of them, but it was not time to give in to it. It was a process of coming into being that could not be jeopardized by thoughtless actions. So they gave themselves to the mystical experience of the night and enjoyed the moment in the knowledge that it was only granted to the chosen ones to experience such moments. Ruth wished she could stop time, preserve this hour, this night in its uniqueness forever. But finally Chambers made a sweeping motion and pointed to the lights

of the city at their feet, where the glow of civilization shone upward through a dense haze in an uneven glow and fade.

"Beauty and decay are antagonists - in great works of art, in cities, buildings, and not least in us humans."

Ruth had found what she was looking for. With this topic, she would give the investigation a new direction and prove her dominance. The task force meeting had started on time. The fact that another young woman who fit the victim profile had disappeared created an atmosphere of helplessness and dejection among those gathered. No one had the slightest doubt. The killer had struck again.

Gillardi didn't let on as he opened the meeting as usual, asking those present to give a brief report on their activities since the last meeting. It was a short opening round, almost entirely made up of routine reports with no discernible concrete value to the investigation. Only Ramona Hayes reported that she was following up on a specific lead, but that it was too early to talk about it. Astonished at this enigmatic suggestion, everyone expected Gillardi to demand more details. To their surprise, however, he did not elaborate, but asked those present if there were any other reports.

Ruth signaled and straightened up a bit as she addressed the group.

"I have already expressed my dismay at this way of fighting crime. It almost seems to me as if the manhunt is a sporting competition - a typically male competition in which the aim is to bring home the winner. It seems as if the victims - all women as we know - played no role at all. And I think it's high time to show more respect for those who have suffered. I also wonder why such an effort is being made for the murderer of twenty-eight women killed so far. We all know that we are working with false figures when we claim that about one thousand eight hundred young women have disappeared this year. Since the beginning of the year, there are actually almost five thousand and no one cares. The city of dead girls, that's what our city is called. In our catchment area, murders of women occur more

frequently than anywhere else in the world, and the authorities only take action if it is a serial killer. Everything else is apparently peanuts."

"Everything you say is known to us." In a calm controlled voice, Ramona Hayes took the floor to respond to the journalist's accusations. "The numbers are even a little higher than what you're saying. And believe me, we take every crime seriously and for us every victim is one victim too many. When this city was built, the intention was to create a living space where everyone would have the chance to lead a self-determined life and be happy according to their own ideas. The laboratory of the future, that's what they called us. My God, how naive! Today, our city is considered a textbook example of the ugly side of globalization. Development has gotten out of control. In the lawless space on the fringes of society, drug dealing, trafficking and prostitution flourish."

Jenkins, as well as Jimenez, were completely surprised by the remarks. They knew Special Agent Hayes as an aloof and dutiful agent who, if necessary, represented the law with all her might. That she was interested in the social concerns of marginalized groups was new to them.

"Look at the poor districts in the northwest, where the slums are constantly enveloped by the toxic swaths of the factories. Our city is one of the last outposts of Latin America before 'El Norte,' the promised land to the north. We have more than one and a half million inhabitants and every day there are more. They live in shantytowns around the factories or on the scree slopes of the Sierras in huts made of boards, cardboard boxes and plastic sheets. In the two thousand five hundred maquiladoras, the dumping wage factories of the American, Japanese and European multinationals that have settled here as a result of the North American Free Trade Agreement, more than a million people toil around the clock in hermetically sealed buildings, in stuffy air and artificial light. The majority of the workforce are young women because they work for low wages and put up with the

harsh working conditions and long hours. To get by, employees often turn to drugs. In this way, not only the multinationals but also organized crime earn money from the poorest of the poor.

Many of the women - mostly between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four - are assaulted in the early morning and late evening hours on their way to or from work. Some murders bear the hallmarks of the drug mafia. Victims are shot, dissolved in acid, or cemented in place. Others are abused in all ways, raped, tortured and killed. Some women are killed on camera in snuff films, others have their organs removed. The perpetrators of violence come here from everywhere - and there is clear evidence that serial offenders are among them. Numerous young women never return to their homes and remain missing. Others are kidnapped and held captive for days, sexually humiliated and tortured before being killed and their bodies buried in the sand or dumped in garbage dumps."

Gillardi had grown increasingly uneasy at the FBI agent's remarks. He shared her view of Sonora County's social and community situation. However, he did not think it was beneficial to the morale of the task force to dwell on it too much.

"Thank you for your comments, Special Agent Hayes. I agree with you that certain conditions are unacceptable and in dire need of resolution. However, we should not overlook the fact that among Sonora County's peculiarities are its limited government and lax laws. This has made the area attractive and was originally the reason people flocked here from all points of the compass. The sheriff will confirm that the handling of civil registration records here is handled as casually as reports of missing persons are handled. In many cases, reports have never been filed either. We can only guess at the reasons for this. Perhaps those affected had no confidence in the authorities, or perhaps they were turned away because no one wanted to be responsible. However, there are clear terms of reference for this task force. We are charged with tracking down and apprehending the person responsible for the Coyote Creek findings. I want to point out that we

are not in U.S. territory here. The FBI's operations in Sonora County are governed by bilateral agreements and include a clearly delineated scope of responsibilities. We are required to intervene when there is a need to protect the lives of U.S. citizens or to protect interests of U.S. facilities. The victim profile, in the violent acts you describe, does not meet these requirements. It would be neither useful nor promising to include other groups of perpetrators at the same time in the manhunt for our killer. And I will not tolerate our task force being weakened by making meaningless and unfulfillable demands. Do I make myself clear?"

The profiler had spoken the last words louder and sharper than intended. The result was an awkward silence and consternation among those present. They had never seen Gillardi so authoritarian.

Ruth was seething with anger at the rejection of her initiative, but she didn't let on. With a slight nod, she sat back to wait for the next item on the agenda.

The profiler paused to increase the impact of his words. What he had not told the task force was the fact that he had no desire to bother with hunting predators. He could only be enthusiastic about the royal class of hunting - that after the big game.

Shortly thereafter, the group had regained its footing, and Gillardi underscored his claim to leadership by announcing a new strategy. "Okay, I think now is the right time to put in a proactive manhunt. We're going to draw the wolf out of its den. We're going to reach out to the public." With that, he looked to Ruth and Cyd, indicating with a slight nod that they would be given a special task in the process.

"We will jointly develop a press release in which we will not only put our profile of the embalmer in the media. We will also include hints about progress in the investigation, which should cause the killer to panic reactions or at least to act rashly. We can talk about a concrete lead, but we should be careful not to lay it on too thick. Remember, highly organized serial killers are usually well informed about our modus operandi. The perpetrator probably expects such a

strategy from our side. So we will try to find a middle way between previously unpublished facts and fictitious clues through witness statements.

For most of them it was an exhausting working session, as they had never dealt with such tasks before. Again and again, Gillardi's professionalism, knowledge of human nature and razor-sharp analytical mind convinced with his targeted objections and suggestions.

After three hours of hard work, he was satisfied with the result.

"All right, that's it for today. Are there any other messages, requests, ideas?"

Now Ruth saw an opportunity to score points after all. "Yes, I have another topic that could be relevant to the manhunt." In eager anticipation, the eyes of those present turned to her.

"Our target obviously has professional knowledge in the field of mummification. However, as Dr. Chambers confirmed at the beginning of the manhunt, he also seems to have extensive anatomical knowledge. Therefore, it stands to reason that the relevant professionals at academic institutions should be scrutinized. I would refer in particular to the case of Professor Aidan McBride, who has a very special, not to say strange, affinity for mummies."

When Cyd heard the professor's name from Ruth's mouth, she realized all at once that Ian also shared his knowledge with Ruth. Wait, my lying friend, I'll get you back for this! she thought and gave Ian a scathing look.

Gillardi, like the others, was surprised at the unexpected turn of events. "Go ahead, tell me, what's this story about this Professor McBride?"

Ruth knew when to back off and cited Ian as a knowledgeable source.

When Ian finished his remarks, Gillardi was pissed off. Glancing sharply at Conrad, he said in a laboriously controlled voice. "I expect any information of significance to be shared first here in the group. It is not acceptable for you to withhold your personal research from us.

This is not a game about building alliances or putting yourself in front of others. People's lives depend on the success of our work. Never forget that."

Just as quickly as he had become angry, he calmed down again. Finally, he continued in a matter-of-fact tone. "I will request the records from McBride and take the appropriate steps. More details at the next meeting." He then turned to Ruth with an appreciative gesture. "Thank you Ms. Clark for raising the issue."

On leaving the room, Ruth was met by Dr. Chambers, who took her hand to congratulate her for her courageous commitment to the young women of the city. At that moment, she realized that for her, this man's recognition counted more than any other success.

Around noon, Cyd reached the limits of her endurance. Since the early morning, she had entered a wide variety of terms into the search engine, hoping to come across a hot lead. And although she considered herself a hardened professional, she was horrified by all the perversions, cruelties and sick fantasies she saw on the screen.

Whenever she thought she had reached the summit of all horror, she found other pages even more horrible and repulsive than before. There were images that she could only graze with a part of her attention, and where her instinct for self-preservation built up so much resistance and clouded her perception to such an extent that she came away reasonably unscathed from mere contemplation.

How could it be that people could take pleasure in the sight of such material? Were there actually monsters whose sexuality was stimulated by it?

But worse was to come. Cyd clicked on a link that referred to a page called "Snuff Aesthetics". She stared in disbelief at the images that appeared before her eyes. Artfully painted in soft colors, they showed stylized girl figures with exaggerated childish schemes, the heads softly drawn with big innocent eyes, contrasted with physical mutilations that no normal person's mind would be able to conceive.

Cyd tried to get out, to look away, to close her eyes, to run away. In vain, her body no longer obeyed her. She felt her field of vision narrowing, blotting out everything except the horror images. The surroundings sank into darkness and she moved as if in hypnosis through this nightmarish world of horror.

Fortunately, around eleven o'clock, Ian had joined her. Actually, she was angry with him and wanted nothing more to do with him. But at that moment she was not able to reject him.

He just listened to her and held her tightly in his arms. After some time, Cyd felt that there was also something different from the Otherworld she had traversed. At some point, they were able to address the questions at hand together.

Prostitutes offered special techniques with bandaging, in a mail-order toy shop they found Barbie dolls with a bandage set and instructions for mummification, at a local adult education center an evening course was advertised under the title 'Mummies for Dummies'. Calls for ritual killing games followed by mummification were found by the dozens. Local TV stations tried to outdo each other in offering the latest films on the subject. Ancient black-and-white films, as well as more recent productions about the mummy's awakening and the pharaoh's curse, were among the most popular main evening programs. And tour operators took the opportunity to sell vacation trips to Egypt, as study tours to the cradle of mummification culture.

Although the two felt this level of spiritual and mental aberrations as lack of level, stupidity and not seriously meant phantasties rather than as cruelty and malice, a basic mood of dejection and disappointment spread in them. They felt the desire for unspoiledness and decency and longed for a purification ritual that, like a comprehensive catharsis, would purify their minds and restore their faith and joy in life. In a tentative attempt, Ian began to tell of his life. He told of earlier examples where he had suffered similarly, where disappointments and setbacks had cast shadows over his soul.

"You know, I used to just get on my motorcycle and ride it into the desert. And when the terrain was no longer passable, I'd go on foot. So I often spent days in the Sierras until things were back on track for me. It was also a valuable experience for me, in the face of impressive nature, to experience my own significance, or better the significance of us humans, in another dimension."

Cyd felt that the recounting of these personal experiences had created a special closeness between them. And finally she plucked up the courage to speak of herself as well, her terrible experiences as a young girl, her shame, fears and distrust of men. "I was like you at that time. I too retreated into the wilderness to find myself again. But my element was water. When it all got too much for me, I'd grab my kayak and head out. And even today, I find my personal truth in the rapids of a raging river."

The mutual confessions led to their own mood of tenderness and attachment, which was finally so tangible that it covered the melancholy of the memories.

Cyd felt a warm feeling spread through her body, flooding her with life. She opened her eyes and saw Ian's face directly in front of her. His gaze penetrated her as if trying to plumb the depths of her being. She took in the warmth of his breath, smelled him, his masculinity, the tangy scent of fresh sweat, unadulterated sensuality. His lips were now very close in front of hers. In this position he remained, as if waiting for a sign, a confirmation from her side that it would be right to take this step now. She was with him and he felt it. Very tenderly the first touch of the lips, a breath almost only, as one perceives a light breeze, which meets warm naked skin. Cyd felt desire arising in her, the desire for more and intense union. She opened her lips and felt his tongue entering her, playfully, exploring, finally pushing and demanding. Now she also felt his body, muscle tension, warmth, the moisture of the skin, the more rapid breathing, held by firm hands, embraced by strong arms.

The hardness of his arousal penetrating through the clothes made her desire to surrender to him and merge their bodies overwhelming. But then the images came back and the memory. She pushed him back and turned away.

"What's wrong with you? What did I do wrong?" Ian's voice expressed all the irritation he felt.

"I'm sorry, I have to go now." Cyd struggled to add strength and firmness to her voice. She was not clear to herself what had triggered her change of mood.

"What's that supposed to be now?", Ian sounded annoyed. "I think I deserve an explanation. Why are you suddenly playing hard to get? "

"Well, if you want to be specific, I don't think such interludes have any place in an investigative team. And if you don't understand that, I'm going to have to rethink my relationship with you." With one last cold look, she turned away and hurried off.

Ian decided not to say anything more in response. He lit a cigarette and immersed himself in contemplating the rising smoke. Finally, he stood up and made his way to his car.

## Chapter 8

The rivalry between Cyd and Ruth, and even more so their struggle for the favor of Dr. Chambers, was not without influence on the manhunt and made cooperation in the task force increasingly difficult. Gillardi watched with suspicion, but also with interest, the developments of each camp and tried to assess if and where his intervention was necessary.

Because of the unusual composition of his team, he deliberately kept a low profile. On the one hand, he saw himself as the leader of a team on this case, whose task was to coordinate the resources of the individual team members in order to achieve the best possible result for the manhunt. However, he saw his more important role as the hunter who would kill the deer. He had no intention of putting the embalmer behind bars; he would track him down, rush him, and eventually give him the catch shot. He owed that to the victims. Until then, it was a matter of getting along with the others to some extent.

Ian was deeply hurt because Cyd, whom he desired more than any woman had ever desired before, was as undisguised as Ruth in her pursuit of the North Park Hospital coroner.

After the FBI's review of Professor McBride revealed no suspicions against the archaeologist, Ruth announced her intention to follow Prof. Aidan McBride, who was supposedly in Peru somewhere for excavation work, in order to 'get a feel' for him. Dr. Chambers supported Ruth's idea as a courageous and necessary initiative. All the more so, as conventional investigations seemed to have reached a dead end.

Conrad considered the trip to Peru a waste of time. With obstinacy and defiance, he had taken to dismissing every consideration or hypothesis Chambers expressed without reflecting on it, let alone subjecting it to serious examination. Instead, he obsessively tried to introduce his own ideas and present them as the better ones.

It hurt Cyd to see how much Ian suffered from her rejection. He was a great scientist and interesting as a man in many ways. Moreover, she intuitively felt that he would be an experienced and devoted lover. Reflecting on her own situation, she had to admit to herself that Ruth had a distinct advantage as an adversary, both in her position at the station and in the battle for Chambers' favor at the moment. She decided to change her strategy and fight the battle more sublimely than before. She would bury her discord with Ian to solve the case with him as an ally. Then she would have the booty right and claim Dr. Chambers for herself. "My God, what an archaic way of thinking I've become accustomed to," she thought in a fit of ironic self-awareness. "Is this scheming hussy really me? Oh well, you have to howl with the wolves, and what doesn't kill me makes me strong."

Ian was by now so taken with Cyd that he didn't want to worry about her change of heart. He enthusiastically agreed to the reconciliation and they arranged a 'working weekend' at Ian's cottage.

## Chapter 9

After twenty-one days, the embalmer checked the condition of the body. After he was satisfied with the progress of dehydration, he took the dead from the natron and removed all wet cloths. After a thorough cleaning, he washed her, then dried her with cloths.

Since the body had become stiff from the drying process caused by the sodium bicarbonate, it had to be made supple by oils. The embalmer performed five steps of oiling. First, he rubbed the head with olibanum oil. He softened the back by massaging oil there as well. Then he perfumed the whole body except the head. A second anointing of the head followed and finally the body was perfumed with fragrant oils and covered with saffron.

The body looked sunken despite the oil massage, so it had to be restored to its original shape. Stuffing it with dry materials such as leaves, fabrics and sawdust, it regained its original shape.

In order to be able to model the eyes, cheeks, mouth, nose, neck and other body parts with different filling materials, the embalmer made several incisions. He took special care for the face, where he placed two eyes made of glass, in the exact same color as when the woman was alive, in the eye sockets.

By pouring resin into the body, the cavities were protected and then the cut was sealed with a layer of wax. Finally, he folded her arms in front of her chest so that her hands touched her shoulders.

Now the corpse was ready to be wrapped in linen. The embalmer took a step back and enjoyed his work. The wondrous beauty and peaceful radiance of the woman's body triggered in him a feeling of deep connection.

Although he was still busy with this body, he felt the irresistible urge to increase his collection. His capacity in processing the victims was actually exhausted, but he could not fight it. He began to wonder if he was about to betray his high mission. But then he decided that he had to continue his work. He could not doubt himself now.

Ramona Hayes was looking forward to a relaxing weekend. The last few days had been a little too hectic for her taste. The constant on-call duty, the never-ending research, the meetings with this motley group. And finally, the frustration over the unsuccessfulness of their actions. Rarely had they received so few clues in a case; it was as if they were chasing a phantom. Added to this was the fear that another woman had been reported missing. Never before had her work taken such a personal toll on her. She had no explanation as to why she felt this way, but she felt as if it was her responsibility alone to save the women from the embalmer.

In the last few days, she had had recurring hallucinations in which she relived the victims' last minutes in great detail. They were moments of unimaginable horror in which she wondered if she was about to lose her mind. In her visions, the perspectives of the victim constantly alternated with those of the perpetrator. In the initial phases of the event, the victim's wildly wandering gaze testified to the restlessness that had gripped her. As soon as the perpetrator approached the victim, she could only witness the event through the eyes of the killer. The climax of the horror was to experience the execution of the crime from the perpetrator's point of view. To see the fear of death in the eyes of the women, to hear their screams and their pleas, and finally to witness the pain in their young faces at the moment of death.

So far, she had not spoken to anyone about her apparitions. The fear of exposing herself to ridicule or ending up as collateral damage in the white corridors of a psychiatric institution was too great.

Now, as she drove home through the outskirts of the city late in the evening, she suddenly realized that she had unconsciously slowed down. She had the eerie feeling of being confined in a corset, breathing was difficult and her senses were dulling, as if veils were settling over her consciousness. With the last of her strength, she let the car roll out to the side of the road. It was that time again. She could

physically feel the danger. Evil was in the midst of them looking for another victim. She saw the killer's gaze roaming the streets, driving in a car through the dark night.

In her vision of terror, she didn't notice that a vehicle had stopped behind hers and the driver had gotten out. It wasn't until he opened her driver's door that she realized who the victim was this time. Special Agent Hayes knew she would now have to draw her service weapon and pull the trigger until the magazine was empty, but she was paralyzed. She felt she had reached the end of her road and decided to leave without resisting.

Cyd had made herself comfortable on the leather sofa in Ian's studio. She lay curled up like a cat between the armrest and the back. Beside her within easy reach were a notebook, writing materials, and a glass of gin and tonic. Ian was sitting in one of the club chairs, reading his notes, when Cyd snapped him out of his concentration.

"I have been thinking for the longest time whether a serial killer is not necessarily a sick person. If so, wouldn't it be conceivable that he is undergoing psychiatric treatment? Perhaps there are clinical records of current or past therapies as well."

"You're right, we should definitely pursue that idea. But why do you think it's a man?"

"Since all the victims are female, I assume that a sex offender is living out his perverted fantasies here. I can also assure you as a woman that only men are capable of such kinkiness. But in the end it is completely indifferent whether man or woman. The only thing that matters is that we put a stop to the perpetrator as soon as possible." Ian had to admit that both the experience of the profiling and the available evidence clearly pointed to a male perpetrator, but he still couldn't resist contradicting him with an offended expression.

"Quite feminist, not to say anti-male, your point of view. Let's agree to look for a perpetrator. However, I find it hard to imagine such a highly organized killer going to a public clinic for treatment. So-

mehow, I have a hard time at all imagining why a killer would seek psychiatric help."

"You hear all the time, don't you, about offenders leaving trails in hopes of being caught. Why wouldn't a compulsive sex offender want to seek help to be cured?"

"Okay, you may be right, but I still think it makes sense for us to start with the therapists who are in independent practice. That way, we may also be able to keep our research a secret longer than if we officially approached the public agencies. We may also be able to bluff the Shrinks by presenting our inquiry in such a way as to give them the impression that we are acting in collusion with the police and FBI."

"But we have to be very careful about that. If Jimenez or Gillardi find out that we're cooking our own soup, they'll bust our ass."

The phrase had a strangely stimulating effect on Ian. It was clear to him that his motivation in the matter was different from that of Cyd. Her career and future depended on it. His priorities were now set differently. It became more and more clear to him that while his interest lay partly in the case for scientific reasons, his passionate involvement was with Cyd and not with an unknown sex offender. For Cyd, he could easily become a sex offender himself.

"Now that we've made significant progress, we actually deserve a reward. What do you think about a contemplative shepherding session?" He tried to give emphasis to his words by looking deeply into Cyd's eyes.

"Nothing there, my dear, first the work, then the pleasure, as my grandmother used to say. We mustn't lightly jeopardize our lead. Come, sit down at the PC. Let's formulate a persuasive request together." Knowing that he had not the slightest chance against the professionalism of a full-blooded journalist who had tasted blood, his protest was correspondingly half-hearted.

"Why do I have to pay now for your grandmother not being quite right in the head? But I'll gladly return to your 'then the pleasure' after the work is done."

Once he was sitting at the computer, he noticed how the hunting fever began to take hold of him. It was different whether one was looking for traces of the past in the form of bones or artifacts, or whether one was chasing a flesh-and-blood killer who could strike again at any time. Together they formulated the circular, which turned out to be much more difficult than they had imagined. Since they had no authorization from Gillardi for this mailing, they took pains to studiously avoid any non-factuality that might suggest that it was an official request from the authorities.

After tweaking the draft for a while longer, they were finally satisfied. The email referred to a current investigation into the Coyote Creek body dump case, with requests for understanding that more detailed information was not possible in an open case. Asking for cooperation and to be contacted should there be any indication that a client might be related to the case in any way due to his medical condition, or more broadly in that he showed tendencies toward ritual killings, sexually motivated slaughter, collecting body parts as a fetish, or preservation of body parts.

When it came to obtaining lists of addresses, Cyd had more experience than the scientist. She could draw on a wide-ranging internal network of personal contacts, favors among colleagues, or uncalled-for countertrade. Therefore, she took the place at the keyboard while he sat admiringly next to her and watched with what efficiency and speed she completed this task.

The rays of the setting sun had turned a bright orange-red when Cyd finally leaned back with a contented sigh.

"Done, the mails are out. Now all we can do is wait and see."

"What do you say we do this lying down?" he asked with an innocent undertone.

To his surprise, Cyd turned to him, looked at him inquiringly, and then asked with a sly smile, "Where is the shower and where is the couch?"

The sun had long since set when they let go of each other. Wild unrestrained embraces and kisses had turned into passionate but at the same time tender sex, accompanied by ecstatic cries and lustful moans.

Now, exhausted and drenched in sweat, they lay on the bed in the hacienda's bedroom, the doors to the terrace wide open, listening to the concert that myriads of cicadas and other insects were giving around the house. Ian knew that he was holding the woman of his heart in his arms. In this moment of closeness, Cyd, too, forgot that only a few hours ago she had been spinning longing fantasies about Dr. Chambers.

"How do you feel about a glass of wine?" she asked in a purring voice.

"Stay with me, I'll ring for the maid."

Indignantly, Cyd tried to sit up. "Don't tell me we're not here alone!" Ian held her pressed against him against her resistance.

"I'll ring for her when she comes. Tomorrow at nine." Relieved, she sank back. It surprised her how puritanical her reaction had been. What did she care if they had actually been overheard? Still, she sensed that the erotic allure had faded for the moment.

"Seriously, Ian, I want something to drink. We might as well see if there's any reaction to our broadcasts yet."

Although he could not explain it, he had to recognize that she was different from the other women he had met so far. He felt that she did not let herself be pushed and that he had to treat her with infinite care if he did not want to lose her right away. And that was the last thing he wanted.

"Tell me, what kind of woman are you that you can change your mood so abruptly. Come on, forget it. So, let's have a drink and check the mails."

Cyd looked at him in amazement. She had thought of him as a superficial cynic. Now she had the impression that he was an unusually emotional man. This unsettled her. Cynics were easier to use and to forget afterwards without conflicts of conscience.

"Don't treat me like a female spider who eats her mate after the act and then throws the shell out of the web. I really enjoyed what was between us just now, and it would be a shame to ruin it right away."

"Okay, peace. I understand. We have more important things to do right now. It was beautiful for me, too. No, not only that, it was the most beautiful, erotic experience I've ever had with a woman." Again, Cyd realized that she was embarrassed, and how difficult it was for her to deal with such strong feelings from a man. So she confined herself to giving him a tender look.

"Give me time, Ian. You know very well how much this case means to me." He nodded and turned away. Cyd sensed that all was by no means well between them. Her life would not be so smooth and self-determined from now on. She regretted that she had given herself to him.

The night with Ian had thrown Cyd completely off course. She had felt a strong desire for closeness and devotion, and at the same time she was horrified by the ease with which she had gotten involved with him. She had turned her innermost to the outside and let all protective mechanisms fall. Memories came back, of the experience she thought she had already overcome, but which kept catching up with her.

Even as a young girl she had been a tomboy, preferring to join the boys, and had attracted attention at the romps and adventures for her temperament, courage, and boldness. At fourteen, when she had thought she had acquired a secure position of respect and prestige in the gang of her comrades, she had to make the bitter experience that a wolf can never feel safe among wolves.

It was the evening after a party in the basement apartment of an empty house, most of the guests had already left when three boys attacked her. Cyd had fought back with all her strength, but Ed, the strongest and most repulsive of the three, had apparently planned the action precisely. She had drunk more than was good for her on the atmospheric evening and was completely unprepared when Ed's punch hit her full in the face. As if on cue, she was then grabbed by Bill and Jack while Ed tore her clothes off. Her resistance, screams and tears of anger and shame only seemed to make the three of them wilder. She had never felt such a sense of disgust and shame as she did in the hours that followed as she was brutally raped several times, first by Mitch, then by Jack and Bill. Most shamefully, she felt that a small crowd of classmates who had remained stood by laughing and even cheering on the perpetrators of violence. At some point she lost her senses and did not have to consciously witness what followed. For a long time she also had no memory of the moment when she woke up alone in the cellar hole, vagina, anus and thighs covered in blood, traces of sperm and feces on her skin, with excruciating pain in her abdomen, her body covered with hematomas and lacerations. Only years later, the memories of the hours had returned piecemeal.

The desperate sobs, the wails of the tortured, maltreated creature had nothing human about them. The whimpering and crying did not seem to come out of their mouths, it was as if archaic wailing women were mourning the depravity of man. She, who had felt welcomed, respected and loved in her group as if she were part of a family, had to realize how much she had been rejected, envied and hated by the others as an alpha female. Through the only friend in her class, she had learned after the fact that her unconscious body had been placed in bizarre and humiliating positions and that the hunters had photographed themselves with the hunted game in a wide variety of poses. Photos that then made the rounds at school for a while. But when this happened, she was already far away. She had told neither her parents

nor anyone else about it. That very night, she had packed her meager belongings into a battered suitcase and gone to the bus terminal. There she had bought a ticket to nowhere.

For a long time she could not recall the memories of the following five days either. She had lived through the nightmare - in close quarters with human beings who had no reason to doubt the value of the community, the images of a constantly changing peaceful landscape, no evidence of beasts in human form that one had to be on guard against if one wanted to survive - in a state of being lost in the world. She had not eaten any food during those days, nor had she been able to find rest in sleep. When she had finally arrived at the town with the unpronounceable name on the frontier of civilization in the Northwest Territories, the driver had to help her off the bus, she was so weak. Rick Wessler, who had a teenage daughter of his own, had been very concerned for her and had lovingly placed her on a bench in front of the bus station and announced he would call a doctor. But she had refused all offers of help.

"I'm okay," she had replied, "I'm just overworked and having my period." With that, she had kept the supposedly lecherous old man away and retreated back into isolation.

Nowhere was to become her retreat. Here, north of the sixtieth parallel, she wanted to bury herself in a new task and seek oblivion. On an impulse, she had applied to a small insignificant provincial newspaper as a staff writer. It was the search for human suffering and personal disasters that kept her going. Because of her dogged zeal for work and her intelligence, she soon caught the eye of the newspaper's editor, who encouraged her in her career. After only three months, she was running reports on her own, and after a little more than half a year, she had her own column. In the second year, she took over the 'Partnership and Family' section, which she successfully journalized.

The only person she could begin to trust during this time was Al Marter, the editor-in-chief. Al was sixty-three and thinking of retiring next year. When the editor asked him to take Cyd under his wing, he had never dreamed that she would be considered as a successor. She had neither suitable training nor experience in the profession. But very quickly he had realized that she had a special talent for finding the deeper background of stories. It was a quality that could not be acquired in college or through practical work. You either had it or you didn't.

"Empathy, the desire to find out the person behind a story with all its facets, passions, strengths and weaknesses, is the key to good reporting," he had told Cyd when she had submitted her first draft. "You have those qualities, and you use them. Don't get in trouble for snide remarks from colleagues because you're a lateral. The only thing that counts is the story.

During this time Cyd had also begun to explore the lakes and rivers of the surrounding area with a canoe. At first, these were trips in search of herself. But soon she discovered her passion for the danger she faced in the rapids of raging rivers. She got herself a whitewater-ready kayak and spent almost all of her free time paddling, pushing herself to the limits of her performance. As she propelled her boat through the rushing water, past sharp rocks and treacherous eddies, over waterfalls and shoals, through grueling canyons or along river courses lined with lovely forests, she was at one with herself, she knew she was about to return to life. In those moments of decision, on the borderline between life and death, her memories of that evening began to return. So she often fought her battle for survival on two fronts, against the elements of nature and against the forces within herself that threatened to destroy her. She decided both battles in her favor. Often, at the end of a trip, she would sit in her boat for a long time, crying bitter tears of remembrance. The youthful body violated, the soul ravaged. Would she ever again be able to love, to

long for a man, would she ever again be able to allow a hand to gently caress her skin without the nightmare simultaneously exploding inside her?

It took three years before Cyd was able to look a person in the eye again without fear. The friendly, interested manner of her mentor Al Marter played a decisive role in this. Al had never asked or even expected anything back from her. He had simply given because he liked her.

Cyd felt inside herself and straightened up. She needed some time off now. Like back in Canada, in the time of pain and despair, she knew what would do her good.

She packed her old kayak on the roof rack and set off. Her destination: the Rio Brazos. And as she sat in her car, traveling through the night, she knew she had made the right decision. She needed it, the white water purification ritual.

Early in the morning she arrived, completely overtired and burned out, but clear-headed and cheerful, ready to accept what the day would bring. At a lonely 24-hour combination general store, cafeteria, restaurant and gas station, she asked for access to the river.

"You're not seriously planning to go down the river after the thunderstorms of the last few days, are you?" the operator asked anxiously. He was a typical "American Remain," a rugged loner whose goal in life was to always be in action - with dignity, without selling out.

"Yes, I intend to" she replied in a tone that was meant to ensure that nothing would dissuade her. At the same time, she found the old man's care touching. His compassion did her good.

"Well, if you really want to kill yourself. But maybe leave me your data, then the effort with the identification is not so big. That is, if the river ever yields anything of yours again." His wrinkled face expressed sincere concern.

"You're a real encouragement to me. There's nothing like a positive world view." The sound of her voice and the grateful look she gave gave the lie to her words.

"It's just, I think it would be a shame for you. And I think you've been driven to take this step. Don't you want to reconsider. The river already has the highest degree of difficulty at normal water levels. But now it's outright suicide."

"My name is Cyd, that's all you need to know. And I like you too. But I know what I have to do. Your trust would do me good. Bet your last shirt on me. You won't regret it." The old man lowered his gaze into her eyes, then nodded.

"It's bad when people my age still misjudge people. I know now you can do it." Cyd quickly turned away so that the old man could not see the tears in her eyes and got into the car.

Soon she was at the entry point. As she readied her gear, she knew she needed the cleansing power of whitewater today more than ever. As she pushed the kayak into the water, she said to herself "Now is the time to show your colors. There is no way around this river."

The first part of the route led along a picturesque river course, lined with willows and alders, calm and tranquil. A little later she heard a distant rumble of thunder, at first restrained, commanding respect, no more, but soon it swelled, became more powerful and stronger. It was still time to dock at the shore, to stop the madness, to act rationally, to deal responsibly with oneself.

Then, suddenly, the deafening roar and roar of the rapids. Water walls as high as houses, murderous breakers, an interplay of bubbling rollers, looping holes and treacherous intersections. In between, obstacles like boulders, rock gardens and razor-sharp drop-offs. No more thoughts, only action, with instinctive reactions through hell. Now just don't slow down, take a deep breath and paddle, right through the rapids, don't miss the right lane, stay in the stream, past the maw, straight through the exploding water. Invisible forces are acting on the boat from all sides, beating and tearing at the hull, sha-

king it. It threatens to tip over, rears up, tips over an edge, is close to rolling over, is pulled into a maw opposite. The torrential river hammers against the boat wall, tearing at the material's resistance. A devil's ride through the boiling green-white water. A never-ending drop, gigantic cliffs whiz by, along the canyon wall.

And now the end, without bitterness, let go of everything, just let go, accept that it happens this way and not otherwise, but without giving up, fight for survival until the last breath, out of respect for life. "When your bow is broken and your last arrow shot, fight, fight with all your heart."

Suddenly silence, absolute silence, calm water, a steady drift. It was over. She let herself be carried along with the current for a while and then let the kayak run aground on a sandbank.

She did not know how long she had spent on the banks of the Rio Brazos. She didn't really regain consciousness until she was on her way back. She could not say what she felt. She only felt tiredness inside her and emptiness.

"It's time to close this case," she said to herself, "or I'll be the embalmer's next victim." With the last of her strength, she unlocked the front door of her apartment. Too tired for a shower, she ripped off her clothes and staggered into her bedroom. She sank into bed and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

## Chapter 10

Elmore Spencer hated to bother Ramona on the weekend. They all deserved a rest break. He was also concerned about her health. The changes in her appearance were unmistakable. She looked haggard and had deep circles under her eyes. They had been a well-oiled team for years, and he knew that the usual work pressures had never been a problem for her. Ramona was single, possibly in a relationship he didn't know about. But he found that hard to imagine. She had always talked to him about everything that was bothering her.

He dialed her number and waited impatiently to hear her voice. His call finally went to voicemail. Not only was this unusual, he knew she even had her mobile handy when she was in the shower. Turning it off was also against department policy. He tried a few more times, but the result was always the same.

Without further ado, he made his way to her house. Sunday morning there was almost no traffic and it took him only a few minutes to get to the outskirts where she lived. Even from a distance of a few hundred meters, he recognized her Toyota, which stood deserted on the side of the road. As he rolled out, a patrol car happened to approach him. Spencer signaled the crew to pull over and got out. The police car turned around and came to a stop next to the two vehicles. While the driver reached for his radio, his colleague got out and pulled the strap from his revolver.

"Elmore Spencer, FBI," he said, flashing his ID. The officer tapped his hat briefly with his hand and secured his revolver. "This is an emergency. The car belongs to my coworker, Special Agent Hayes. I've been trying to reach her by phone, but her cell phone appears to be disconnected. That's against regulations, so I assume she's in trouble. Did you notice when the Toyota was parked here?"

The young, sturdy officer seemed to quickly grasp the gravity of the situation. Without hesitation, he signaled to his colleague, who then leaned out the open window. "Call dispatch and ask if the night

patrol noticed a parked Toyota on Santa Rosa Avenue, at the Vallejo Street elevation." He turned back to Spencer. "We just went on duty sir, but our night patrol colleagues may know more."

"Thank you, deputy. Make sure no one gets near that car. I'll call in a forensic investigation team right away."

The young police officer looked at Spencer curiously. "Does this have anything to do with the embalmer's case?" he asked bluntly.

"I hope not, but I don't want to take any chances. Every little lead can be valuable. In this case, there is an absolute news blackout."

He dialed a number and gave his instructions in a firm voice. The next call was for Gillardi.

The profiler answered after only the second ring. "Gillardi." His voice sounded as if he had been up for a long time or had not even slept yet. It was the voice of someone who knew he had to be constantly on call. Or of a person in anticipation of bad news.

"Frank, Elmore here. Ramona is missing. She can't be reached by phone and her car is on Santa Rosa Avenue, at Vallejo Street. I have a patrol car here with me, forensics has been notified. I'm going over to her apartment right now to take a look around. But I'm afraid this is related to our case."

"Ten minutes." Before Spencer could say anything else, Gillardi had hung up.

Late in the afternoon came the call with the evaluation of the forensic team. What everyone had feared was confirmed by the results of the investigation.

All possible traces in the Toyota such as fingerprints, hair, clothing fibers and the like came from Ramona Hayes or were already older. The interior of the car had been sprayed with a chemical substance so that any DNA traces had been destroyed. Again, there were no clues to the perpetrator.

Spencer, Gillardi and Jimenez sat in the War Room and considered what the latest development would mean for the investigation. Gillardi turned to Jimenez.

"Let's go off the victim profiles for a minute. Tell me, Sheriff, how many women between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five live in the killer's catchment area from here to the Sonora County lines?"

Jimenez entered the data into his laptop. "About three hundred and seventy thousand. However, many of the young female workers are not registered and thus not demographically recorded."

Gillardardi frowned. "That means the chances of a woman from our task force, of all people, becoming his victim are three hundred and seventy thousand to one. I don't believe in coincidences. And certainly not with such low odds. The killer chose Ramona specifically. What could he be trying to accomplish?"

"He's challenging us," Jimenez suggested.

"What for?" countered Gillardi. "He challenges us with every victim, it doesn't have to be one from our group."

"He's provoking us, trying to show us he's vastly superior." Spencer spoke what he really felt. "Maybe he's looking for publicity, too. You know yourself that many serial killers can't get enough of press coverage of their atrocities. It's also possible he's trying to show the world that our announcement of concrete clues was a bluff."

"I suppose it could be, but then why didn't he choose one of the press ladies as his victim? They would have given him more media attention. And why would he take the risk of attacking an armed female FBI officer? He had to expect that she would fight back." Gillardi was arguing primarily for himself.

"But she didn't, and that's another open question: why did Ramona stop in the first place?"

Spencer shook his head doubtfully. "Either she knew and trusted the perpetrator, or he was in disguise. Maybe as a police officer."

Gillardardi nodded in agreement. "That could be the reason, although with an experienced investigator like Ramona Hayes, I'm convinced she would have recognized an attempt on her life in the offing and at least attempted to fight back. But there is not the slightest evidence

to suggest that. Do you know what she ultimately meant by her implication, which she declined to elaborate on in the group?"

Spencer seemed embarrassed by the question. "I have to confess, that was my idea. I wanted to routinely check the secrecy of our teammates. We agreed that she should give this hint to see if anyone would be particularly interested and if any hints might leak out. With two representatives of the media on the team ..."

Gillardi was familiar with such routine measures, so the answer did not surprise him.

Spencer was now visibly concerned. "You don't think that was the reason, do you?"

"After nothing was announced in the media, the killer would have to have a direct contact in the task force," Jimenez intervened.

"Or access to the interview transcripts," Gillardi mitigated.

"Our records are under lock and key," Spencer hastened to assure, "but how it relates to the personal records of team members is questionable."

Gillardi thought for a moment. "If the whole thing is to make sense, the killer would have to regularly check the records of one of our teammates. That's hard to imagine, but it's not impossible. In any case, we have an internal security problem. I've never been a fan of teams with external participants. But in this case, we couldn't pick and choose."

Gillardi addressed Spencer directly. "Elmore, as a first measure, I want our meeting room checked for bugs not only every morning, but immediately before every meeting. Then I would like all windows to be equipped with electronic vibration devices that will make eavesdropping with digital parabolic directional microphones impossible. This is unusual in such cases, but I want to be sure. For an analysis of the behavior of our teammates, I want hidden cameras installed in this room to record each one in frontal view. At the next meeting tomorrow night, I want these measures implemented."

Spencer nodded in agreement, even though he didn't really believe a serial killer could electronically monitor the FBI. "I'll take care of it."

"We're going to keep the disappearance of Ms. Hayes under wraps for the time being. On the one hand, this gives us the opportunity to check whether anything leaks out of our circle. But it could also prompt the perpetrator to go public on his or her own, leaving traces. And from now on, there will be no more initiatives without my approval. This is not meant to be an accusation. I just want to know where I stand. That will be all. I'll see you around. "

## Chapter 11

Bandaging lasted about fifteen days. First, the head and neck were wrapped with strips of fine linen. Then the fingers and toes were bandaged individually, and the arms and legs came later. Between the layers of bandages, the embalmer placed amulets to protect the body on its journey through the underworld.

He wrapped the material from the head to the feet. At the same time he impregnated the bandages with resin. To do this, he spoke spells in a loud voice that would help ward off evil spirits and facilitate the journey of the deceased into the afterlife.

Finally, he tied the arms and legs together and put a papyrus scroll with spells from the Book of the Dead between the bandaged hands.

Now he wrapped more linen bandages around the body, brushing each layer with liquid resin that glued the bandages together.

At last he wrapped cloth around the body and then a large cloth around the whole mummy, which he fastened with strips of linen running from top to bottom and around the middle. Then he placed the mummy in a wooden box.

Cyd had arrived a little early that evening for the team meeting. She hoped to meet Dr. Chambers before he was absorbed by Ruth. She did not get her wish. Ruth arrived shortly after her and surprised her with an unusually warm greeting.

"Good evening, Cyd, it seems to me that we are the first. Do you have any idea why this unscheduled meeting was called?"

"Not the slightest idea," Cyd returned curtly. Was Ruth trying to sound her out again, or had her attitude changed so fundamentally that she started a chat among colleagues on her own? Nothing could be inferred from her expression. Ruth seemed unusually cheerful and relaxed.

Can it be that she is actually in love? And apparently even happily in love?, Cyd asked herself, feeling a twinge of jealousy.

Slowly, the room filled up. Ian was one of the last to arrive, and except for Chambers and Ramona Hayes, they were fully assembled.

"Dr. Chambers sends his apologies. He is unable to attend on business," Gillardi opened the meeting.

It took some time for Conrad to ask the question. "And Ms. Hayes?"

"Ms. Hayes has been missing since yesterday morning. We assume she is another victim of the embalmer," Gillardi answered the question relentlessly.

Immediately, a wild confusion arose in the room. Incredulous horror on the faces, spontaneous comments, questions asked of Gillardi and other participants all over the place. Gillardi silently raised his hands and waited until the group had calmed down.

"Okay, I understand your agitation, but now calm down. We don't know for sure if Ms. Hayes actually fell victim to the embalmer. And if she did, it is beyond our knowledge whether she was randomly or purposefully selected." Again, unrest arose in the room, which Gillardi placated before continuing.

"Let's assume the worst-case scenario. The hunters have become the hunted. Under these circumstances, each of the external colleagues is free to terminate his or her activity in this team immediately. I'll give you five minutes to think about it. Gillardi went to his seat and began to leaf through his notes. After exactly five minutes, he stepped forward again and asked.

"Who wants to leave the group?" No one came forward.

"Very well, that means you stay on the team - on your own responsibility. From now on, consider yourself a potential victim. Avoid lonely places, be careful when dealing with strangers, but also be on your guard when dating friends or acquaintances. Anyone could be the killer. That goes for all team members, too." Outraged murmurs and grumbling among the participants. Gillardi deliberately paused for the hidden camera recordings. He would look at this part of the footage in great detail. "If you know how to use a gun and are autho-

rized to carry it, carry it at all times. And if necessary, use it. Let those around you know where you are going, to several people if possible. And most importantly, let me know any plans you have for their research or initiatives in investigating this case. I expressly warn you not to do anything on your own and not to take individual actions that have not been agreed upon with me."

Conrad gave Cyd a long look. They had kept their Internet campaign about the psychotherapists secret until now. After the latest developments, it seemed irresponsible to him to maintain this line.

Gillardi had noticed his glance and was curious to see what Ms. Alexander would do now. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see a slight shake of the head. That woman is incorrigible, he said to himself. She's plotting something again that she doesn't want me to know. If she's reasonable, she'll let Dr. Conrad have her way. If not, I will take her to task. Conrad's gestures signaled "It's either you or me." Finally, Cyd spoke up.

"I, more specifically, Dr. Conrad and I, have research going on that seems very promising. We have sent out emails to psychotherapists and psychiatrists in private practice with the profile of the embalmer, asking them to report back if any of their patients fit this profile. I should note that we used the profile that went out to the media in the last press release."

"I like the idea, although I can't imagine such a highly organized killer voluntarily seeking treatment," Gillardi used almost the same wording Conrad had used with Cyd. "The FBI, of course, has contact with the relevant clinics and state prisons, where our profiles are constantly checked for matches with mentally abnormal offenders and legally convicted criminals. There is no objection to extending the search to free practices. Please contact Burt Foster for coordination of efforts."

The computer expert waved cheerfully at Cyd, who nodded with a relieved smile, surprised to have gotten off so lightly.

The meeting ended without further announcements. And most of the participants had a thoughtful or cautious expression on their faces as they left the building.

Gillardí knew that if he wanted to catch the criminal, he had to understand what was going on in his mind, take the killer's perspective, as it was called at the FBI. Only if he managed to think like the killer, he had a chance to find out when, where and how the killer might strike again. It was Friday night and the profiler had decided to pay a visit to the city's entertainment district.

Now that the sun had set, they came out of their holes like rats. It was as if, under the cover of night, they wanted to make up for what they had been denied during the day.

The scene of the city was widely known and notorious for its licentiousness. Here you could find everything a perverted mind could think of. Especially on weekends, numerous shady birds from the neighboring regions came here to get their hands on the young Mexican girls. On Friday after work, many of the young female factory workers turned into enterprising teens and twens, eager to finally experience something after nine to ten long hours of work. The young women arriving at the terminal in bright green special buses from the maquiladoras were already awaited by suitors in old Chevys or souped-up convertibles. With engines roaring and radios blaring, the ride went from there directly to the Avenida del la Liberación, the city's entertainment mile, where countless bars, pubs and discos lined up.

Garish light fixtures cast their light on a wild scenario. Here everything revolved around drugs, salsa and sex. Lust and abandon brought the atmosphere to a boil. The noise was deafening. Screeching voices, bawling children, maniacal laughter, droning conversations.

Gillardí drove at walking pace through the heavy traffic. The gleaming metallic car glided through the streets like a submarine on

a crawl. Almost silent and inconspicuous, but at the same time radiating a deadly threat, like a predator in search of its victim. The fact that the victim here was a perpetrator played no role in the ruthlessness of the situation, where the roles of perpetrator and victim were constantly intermingled and no one was able to say who was to blame when.

In search of prey, the hunter scanned the environment for relevant features, like the seeker head of a cruise missile on its death-defying flight.

What are you doing there, secluded in the shade? Who are you waiting for? What's your business? Drugs, whores, child pornography? Or are you just killing time before you kill your fellow man?

At one of the following intersections, he turned into a small, unlit alley. A few meters ahead of him, game moved in the darkness. It was a young woman, dressed provocatively, the short skirt bobbed up and down evenly in the rhythm of the walking movement, and under the thin fabric of the bodice the soft forms of the fresh body stood out.

How to proceed now? How could he beat the prey without risking capture? First, he had to corner them and cut off all escape routes. Then the contact, without arousing suspicion. Under no circumstances should she call for help early on. And finally, the decisive blow, but without killing the victim right away. After all, he still wanted to have his fun with the little one. Enjoy her agony, feast on her agony, before it came to the climax. To the sacrificial ritual, the execution, the tearing of the young thing that had the impudence to roam around alone at night.

Seeking his fulfillment, he focused his perception on the decisive blow. While he was still pondering whether a chase or the waiting for the game would be the more favorable option in this situation, he felt a stirring deep within his self that asked which would be the crueller method and then gave preference to this one. The search for

uncharted territory. Terra incognita, doing what no man before him had ever done, dared to do, or even dared to think. Pioneer of cruelty.

The hunter felt the rage growing steadily inside him. Anger at the little girl who, defying all dangers, moved her slinky young body through the deadly jungle of the nocturnal city with a shameless insouciance. The white flesh of her thighs reflected the dim light that fell through the dirty windows. Suddenly, a hulking man steps out of a dark doorway onto the alley, staggers toward the woman, and begins to make obscene proposals to her in a loud voice.

With awkward movements, the drunk tries to grab her. But he has underestimated her readiness to defend herself. Suddenly she hits him in the face with her handbag, deftly dodges his hands and runs away smoothly through the darkness.

"Well done, little one!" Gillardi felt admiration for the young woman's action. The action had freed him from his murderous trance. And with horror he realized how far evil had already taken him under its spell.

When Dr. Karen Stafford walked into her psychiatry and psychotherapy practice that morning, she began her daily routine as she had for years. She loved arriving early in the morning because those were the only uninterrupted hours when she could read professional articles or review patient charts without interruptions.

The office was on the seventh floor of the Cohn Building, one of the few brick-built office buildings downtown. The main reason she had chosen to rent here was that the windows could be opened, despite the air conditioning. The idea of being in hermetically sealed rooms filled her with unease that sometimes reached panicky proportions. She had invested a lot of money in furnishing the rooms according to her personal taste. As a single woman, she spent a considerable amount of time in her practice, so she attached more importance than other therapists to an environment in which she could feel comfortable even outside treatment hours.

She went through the waiting room into the reception room of her receptionist to turn on the computer. Then she went to the small kitchen to prepare the first pot of coffee that day. While the coffee machine worked and the delicious aroma of freshly ground coffee beans filled the room, she read the headlines in the Morning Star, which she had picked up from the corner newsstand.

As you might expect, the first page was devoted exclusively to one subject, the embalmer and the threat he posed.

A buzz indicated that the brewing process was finished. She placed the thermos and a faded mug labeled "Seattle's Best Coffee" - for nostalgic reasons, she used to prefer drinking her coffee from this relic of her student days - on a tray and walked into the treatment room, her sanctum sanctorum. She had completely redesigned the original layout of the floor in collaboration with a young progressive architect, and the masterpiece of the remodeling had become the practice room. A heavy, leather-covered door soundproofed the room, separating it from the anteroom. From the center, where the mighty old family-owned desk and two dignified chairs for their therapeutic conversations stood, led off various side wings. To the left was an ottoman - a kind of homage to Freud's couch. However, none of the patients had yet lain on it. In addition to decorative purposes, the furniture served the regeneration of its owner. Dr. Stafford used to relax there and, when circumstances made it necessary and time permitted, take a power nap. On the walls of the side rooms were redwood bookshelves that contained a well-stocked professional library as well as some rare literary treasures. To the right of the center, in the side room, were three leather armchairs and a small table with a marble top on a cast iron frame, like those still found in coffee houses in European metropolises.

However, the room was dominated by the south-facing picture window. Every day, Dr. Stafford was thrilled anew by the view of the Sierras from here. The morning sun flooded the room and the view seemed to stretch endlessly across the landscape. Another day

of deep blue skies with no prospect of cooling, she thought. She pushed open the window to let in the spicy air. At this time of day, the light breeze of warm air was almost refreshing.

As she drank her coffee standing in front of the open window, Dr. Karen Stafford asked herself, as she had so often done recently, how much longer she was going to go on like this. She had been running her practice as an established specialist in psychiatry and psychotherapy for nine years now. She had enough patients, enjoyed their appreciation and was able to achieve good results in most cases. But in self-critical moments she had to admit to herself that her work by no means corresponded to the naive ideas she had seen as her professional ideal during her training and clinical work. In her fantasies, she had been the confidante of people seeking help, lovingly escorting them out of the maze of psychological entanglements. She had imagined the work of psychotherapy as the activity of a kind and protective spirit, full of human warmth and personal sympathy. She was enthusiastic about restoring the balance in broken relationships or giving new meaning to disappointed people as a knowledgeable guide. She soon realized that everyday life required a lot of patience and even more craftsmanship. Idealism and philanthropy tended to get in the way. What counted was perseverance and routine. At some point, she came to terms with her role and confined herself to arriving at her practice on time every day and completing her tasks in a disciplined manner.

On the plus side, she had a lot to show: professional success, social standing, financial security, the luxury of her practice and professional independence, but when she thought about the debit side, things looked very different. There were the lonely hours when she returned to her apartment in the evening, isolation and emptiness especially on weekends and holidays when the practice remained closed.

She had always seen her destiny at the side of a nice man and as the mother of a whole flock of children. But at some point she had to realize that working in the field of psychiatry offered little scope for

a regular family life. Not only was she constantly on call during her clinical apprenticeship, necessitated by difficult cases and crisis intervention services, but she also had to realize that after the long days of work treating various forms of mental and psychological illness, she could not easily put her thoughts aside. Also, over time, she had adopted various, strange behavioral patterns that sometimes made her wonder if she wasn't well on her way to going crazy herself.

Now she suddenly found herself overwhelmed in two ways. On the one hand, she had been treating a patient for some time with whom she had reached her limits. She also realized that she was much more emotionally involved in the case than the ethics of the profession allowed. She had long been unable to maintain the required therapeutic distance. She felt increasingly possessed by the man's thoughts. At the same time, she no longer had the decision-making power to break off the therapeutic process or to hand the case over to a colleague. The resulting conflict had been bothering her for several months. She was aware of the need to break this dynamic, but she was already too personally involved to make the right decisions. On the other hand, she had received an email that morning that confirmed her uncertainty. The request for cooperation regarding the Coyote Creek discovery of body parts had shaken her to the core. The moment she had suddenly realized that the profile of the person described matched that of her client in many respects. And she had also realized that the clinical picture of her patient was much more serious than she had admitted to herself so far.

For the first time in her career, she felt not only overwhelmed, but completely helpless. After sitting paralyzed at her desk for nearly an hour, she decided to call in the one person in whom she had unconditional trust. She dialed the number of Irene Brochart, an old study colleague and friend from their joint clinic practice, to whom she had already turned years ago when it came to analyzing difficult cases or breaking new ground in therapy.

"This is Karen Stafford, please connect me with Dr. Irene Brochard."

"Karen, is it really you. My God how long it's been since we've heard from each other. I'm glad. How are you?" It was good to hear the familiar voice and Stafford felt her decision was right.

"I'm glad to hear you, too. I'm glad I reached you right away. I'm sorry we lost touch for such a long time. Irene, I need your advice on an urgent matter that is completely overwhelming me. Have you heard about the Coyote Creek findings? I just received a request from the Special Branch."

"Sure, darling, I got the request too. I'm following the matter with the greatest interest, as is everyone else. It's by far the most spectacular case we've ever had here."

"Listen Irene, I think the profile applies to one of my patients that I have in therapy right now. And now I'm completely confused because I don't know how to act. I took the case as post-traumatic syndrome with obsessive guilt, sleep disturbances and anxiety dreams, but there is much more to it. He lost his wife years ago under dramatic circumstances and blames himself. In my opinion, this is an extreme manifestation of a guilt complex. In terrible nightmares he experiences every night how the face of his beloved wife turns, as it were in fast motion, into a rotting, decaying grimace. I have tried EMDR and systemic constellations in addition to the usual talk therapy. So far, however, he has proven resistant to therapy. He talks in detail about his life story, but he does not talk about his actual subject. It seems to be very important for him to continue to come to me regularly. To make matters worse, the man has an almost hypnotic influence on me. I think there is a lot of mutual transference going on, which is not good at all. I really should have given up the case long ago, but I just couldn't bring myself to give up the patient until now."

Dr. Brochard felt the fine hairs on her arms stand up as cold shivers ran down her spine. "Okay, Karen, now please listen to me carefully and do what I tell you. I need you to contact the FBI right now. For-

get everything you've heard about confidentiality and patient privacy. This is an emergency, you hear me. The way you described the case, you're in mortal danger. Such patients often respond to personal entanglements with uncontrolled outbursts of violence."

Karen felt tears coming to her eyes as she heard her old friend's words. "I was afraid you would say that, but there is no way I can do just that. If I abandon the patient at this point, I'm giving up on him forever, you know that. The damage would never be repaired."

"Darling, this is not about your personal projections, your patient is mentally ill - just like the wanted killer - and even the slightest doubt of possible perpetration must be examined."

Her voice became more urgent and it was clear to hear the fear behind the words. "Please listen to me. It doesn't do anyone any good if you become the next victim. When is your next therapy session with him?"

It was hard for Karen to lie to her trusted friend, but she just needed some time to think over what she had heard in peace. "Not until next week, so I have plenty of time to make a decision."

"I hope you also consider the implications your hesitation could have for other women. We have a full moon and you know what that means."

"Trust me, Irene, I will make all the necessary arrangements. It did me so much good to hear you. It's imperative that we meet in person in the next few days, and I'll tell you the whole story."

"I'm going to Mexico tomorrow for three weeks on vacation. But if it's any help to you, I'll postpone my trip. I don't want to be gone when you need me."

"No, don't worry about it. You've already convinced me. I'm going to turn to the FBI. That's the right thing to do in this situation. Call me when you get back and we'll talk about everything. I have to go now, my receptionist just arrived. See you soon, and enjoy your vacation."

Dr. Brochard sensed that her friend had gone into resistance, but she knew that any follow-up would only strengthen it. She briefly considered contacting the authorities on her part, but that would destroy the friendship forever, so she was left only with the hope that the personal conversation was serious. She also had no way of knowing that the patient in question had his next appointment in just a few hours.

Dr. Stafford only briefly considered canceling the appointment of the patient code-named "Howard." She was much more deeply involved personally than she could have admitted to the friend. To her, he represented the kind of man she had always dreamed of being. Only now did she realize that she had considered him her most important case for a long time. She wanted to help him and she would cure him.

With the help of her medical skill, he would regain his ability to relate and turn back to life, perhaps to a new partnership. What her consciousness did not allow was the deep dormant wish that she herself could become this new partner.

While she was still chasing her dreams, the phone rang and she forced herself to return to reality. A quick glance at the clock showed her that it wasn't even eight o'clock yet - unusually early for a call to a specialist's office. Astonished, she picked up the receiver.

"Good morning Dr. Stafford, this is Cydney Alexander with the Special Investigations Unit on the Coyote Creek Findings. We sent you an email yesterday asking for your assistance. I was wondering if you had gotten around to reading the email yet?"

"Good morning, Miss Alexander. Yes, I read your email and went through my patients in my mind. As you can imagine, such comparisons of people with severe mental disorders are very difficult. You also have to be extremely careful about possible matches."

Cyd suddenly thought she heard something like discomfort or even fear in the therapist's voice.

"Let me put it this way, I need more time before I can commit one way or the other. Let's remain that I will get back to you should I come across a match in one of my clients to their perpetrator profile."  
“

When Cyd hung up the phone, she felt very clearly that she was about to have a major breakthrough. She was sure that Dr. Stafford was hiding something. She decided to give her one day.

If the therapist did not get back to her within that time, she would take the initiative to put pressure on her.

She suddenly felt the need to share her joy with Ian. She reached him at the university between two lectures.

"I think we did it," she said in lieu of a greeting.

"Made what?", Ian was confused. He had never seen Cyd so euphoric.

"The big break in the manhunt. I just made a follow-up call to a Dr. Stafford. How do you think she responded?" Cyd's voice took on a lecturing, precocious tone. 'People with severe mental disorders are hard to match and you have to be very careful about possible matches.' What nonsense, the witch is hiding something from us after all. I gave her a day to think it over."

Ian was surprised. "What do you mean by a cooling-off period. Surely the woman doesn't owe us any account?"

"Yes, it is exactly that. The murderousness of her patients is not, after all, a private matter to be chatted about over tea and then covered with the cloak of silence." Cyd had become louder than she had intended, but Ian sometimes seemed all too restrained to her.

"Murderousness! Now you're exaggerating," he replied, amused by her choice of words. You act as if Stafford were the embalmer's therapist."

"That's what she is. If she doesn't get back to me, I'm going to light a fire under her. That's the advantage of having the media behind

you. Freelancer usually understand that it's not beneficial to mess with us."

"My God, you really mean it, don't you? Do you know who you remind me of in your crusade? There is a famous painting that depicts the outbreak of the French Revolution in the streets of Paris. In the center of it is a woman who is about to cross the barricades. In one hand she is waving a flag and one breast is hanging out of her blouson. You just reminded me of this young fighter for freedom, justice and brotherhood.

"Yes, yes, a chest hanging out, you'd like that. That's what's called selective memory, by the way. Human memory has a soft spot for such details. And if I may correct you, you philistine, it's called liberty, equality, fraternity."

"I know that, I just don't think you can be said to be a champion of equality among people. You keep claiming special rights for yourself, don't you?" Ian was relieved that by bringing in the image of the breast hanging out, he had managed to prevent an impending argument.

"Well, some are just more equal than others."

"You may be right about that. But listen, we really need to report this to Spencer. You remember what Gillardi ordered at the last meeting. Constant feedback."

"Yeah, yeah, he's big on arranging," she grumbled back, but then immediately showed her agreement. "Okay, I'm going to call Spencer. Now I've got to call it a night. Will I see you tonight?"

"Sure, nine o'clock at my place. And put on your French Revolution blouson."

"Agreed, and you get the flag."

Accustomed to getting unpleasant things over with as quickly as possible, Cyd dialed Spencer's line right after. She told him about Dr. Stafford's reaction to her call.

To her surprise, Spencer expressed skepticism. "I wouldn't overstate it," he said. "These therapists are notorious for stalling. But if it makes you feel better, I'll call her and check again."

Cyd was seething with anger. On the one hand at the friendly condescending way he had treated her, but even more so because he had taken away her enthusiasm for this success. "Constant feedback to such civil servant souls. Not with me." She decided that such a case would have to be approached like a good investigative journalist. Minimal bureaucracy with maximum efficiency.

It had been a difficult therapy session. Dr. Stafford had tried desperately to focus her attention on the conversation, but she kept thinking about the email requesting help.

As much as she resisted, she could not close her eyes to the fact that her patient matched the profile of the wanted killer in almost all points. She thought she could tell from his gaze that he noticed her irritation, saw through her, questioning, knowing eyes that magically attracted her, that knew how to awaken deep feelings and hot desire in her.

"No, this person could not harm anyone. He is good at the deepest core. It is the disease in its manifestation that clouded his thoughts."

But then, as if in waves, came the doubts again, the clear diagnostic gaze that allowed no closeness, nothing personal, clinically clear, ice-cold. Part of her nature was that she could look a patient in the eye and announce the death sentence without batting an eyelash.

"Do you find that I am making progress?" The patient had spoken the question for the second time. He had long since noticed the unusual absence from his therapist. However, as always, he remained polite and reserved in his remarks.

"I'm sorry, but I don't think I'm in a good mood today. I've had a splitting headache all day and I'd better call it a day. Yes, you are making progress, but in very small steps. But that is to be expected in

your situation. Kathy will make you an appointment for next week ..."

The crackle of the intercom and the voice of the receptionist interrupted her remarks. "Excuse me doctor, but I have an Elmore Spencer from the FBI on the line. It's about the murders at Coyote Creek. They are questioning the therapists about a patient with certain characteristics. Can you talk to him right away or would you like him to call later?"

Stafford had not missed the flare in her patient's eyes, nor the tenseness in his posture. Angry at Kathy and herself, she replied more sharply than was appropriate. "I have a patient with me and you know there is no reason whatsoever to interrupt me in a therapy session. Tell him to call me in the morning."

Even though her patient was sitting next to her seemingly motionless, she sensed that their relationship had fundamentally changed. The trust that had been painstakingly built up over many hours of therapy had been destroyed. She could physically feel the hostility emanating from him. For the first time in her career, she felt mortal fear in the presence of a patient.

"Thank you doctor, I'll see you next week then." Suddenly the threat was wiped away, the open gaze with the innocent expression of a child met the therapist and it was incomprehensible to her how she had been able to distrust this man just a moment ago, even feel threatened by him in panic.

After he left the room, she took her tension out on Kathy.

"Have you taken leave of your senses? How can you pass such a message while a patient is with me?"

Kathy, who had never seen her employer so angry, was devastated. She had tears in her eyes as she replied. "I'm so sorry, but the man wouldn't take no for an answer. It said it was a high priority case. Please forgive me."

"It's all right. What's done is done. My patient will survive and so will I. Go home already, I still have work to do."

When the receptionist had left the practice, the therapist set about the usual follow-up work. She completed the patient records and saved the data in her system. Then she opened her e-mail account. She intended to go through the mails by timeliness and priority as usual, but after only a few minutes she realized that she no longer knew what she had just read. Her eyes were magically drawn to the undeleted mail she had found this morning. The perpetrator profile of the embalmer, with a request to cooperate with the search team. She opened the mail and turned on her printer. Then she printed out the attached document and began to mark individual passages of text.

Finally, she picked up the phone and dialed Cydney Alexander's number. After the fifth dial tone, she went to voicemail.

"Ms. Alexander, this is Dr. Karen Stafford. We spoke earlier today on the Coyote Creek matter and I agreed to get back to you. I would like to talk to you in person. If it is convenient for you, I have scheduled an appointment to speak with you tomorrow at 9:30. I will expect to see you at my office. If it is not convenient for you at that time ..."

Dr. Stafford had not seen the figure approaching her from behind. Perhaps it was a subliminal sound or a slight breeze, or perhaps it was those instincts that respond when there is danger of death. In any case, she suddenly sensed that something was wrong. But before she could turn around, she was grabbed from behind and the pervasive smell of chloroform rose to her nostrils. The last conscious sensation in her life was the beep from the phone, indicating that the recording in the mailbox had ended.

The perpetrator took the telephone receiver that was lying on the floor next to the lifeless therapist and gently placed it on the fork. Then he went to the file cabinet and took out a patient folder. He sat down at the PC and systematically searched the folder system and individual files with entered search words. With each hit, he deleted the data and overwrote the empty file with a copy of meaningless

letter strings. Finally, he checked the doctor's calendar and removed several entries. When the work was done, he opened a case and took out a knife. Fascinated, he saw how the light from the floor lamp was reflected on the blade.

When Kathy came into the office the next morning, she was surprised to see the lights on everywhere. She knocked on the door of the surgery, but got no answer. Cautiously, she opened the door. At the sight of Dr. Stafford's body, her face contorted in horror and she ran screaming from the room.

Jimenez was at the morning briefing when word came in from security at the Cohn Building. When he heard it was Dr. Stafford, a psychotherapist, he realized it could be significant to the task force and immediately relayed the information to Spencer.

"Dead psychotherapist in Cohn Building!" was his terse message, as if it were natural to announce such a murder case.

"Who was she," the FBI chief asked without particular interest.

"A Dr. Stafford, does that name mean anything to you?"

"Good Lord, Karen Stafford. A contact due to Ms. Alexander's initiative. I was on the phone with her yesterday. I was supposed to call her this morning. She reportedly indicated to Ms. Alexander that our profile might fit one of her patients."

"Damn, if this gets out in the open, we're not going to look good."

"I know I should have followed up on the tip more consistently," Spencer admitted contritely. "But this teamwork with all these dilettantes is increasingly getting to me. These guys work predominantly intuitively, by instinct. It's pretty much impossible to know in advance what's going to come out of it. Sometimes they are valuable approaches, then again it is the biggest humbug. In any case, I must notify Gillardi immediately. Have everything cordoned off, and we'll send our team."

The therapist's body was grotesquely arranged. She lay sprawled on the carpet of the office, her arms crossed in front of her chest, her clothes cut from her body, and the entire corpse wrapped in continuous-feed printer paper. The FBI's response team took their time, examining every last trace. It was the nature of the environment that a wide variety of materials could be found on the therapy room visitor's chair. Hair, fibers of various clothing fabrics, skin flakes, lint from paper handkerchiefs, but also numerous fingerprints. Should the laboratory analysis show that parts of these were also found on Dr. Stafford's body or on the printer paper, this would be the first concrete trace.

After the search for clues was completed, Gillardi and Spencer went through the filing cabinets and the victim's desk. The electronic diary showed conspicuous gaps, so it could not be assumed that any clues to the perpetrator could still be found here. Meanwhile, Burt Foster was busy running an initial check on the PC before the entire computer system was taken away for detailed examination.

"As I thought, the history logs have been deleted. Such simple mistakes were not to be expected from this perpetrator either. In any case, an indication that the perpetrator had been in treatment with her. All that remains is to hope that the recovery programs bring results.

Suddenly Spencer made a surprised sound. "Who do you think is entered at nine thirty today. Our enterprising Ms. Alexander. I know about your contact with Stafford, but the fact that they were going to meet is news to me. "

Gillardi stared at him in surprise. "Wonder why she didn't show up then. Our people got here just before nine. I didn't get a report that a Ms. Alexander was coming to see Dr. Stafford."

"That sounds strange, though, although I can't imagine Ms. Alexander having anything to do with Stafford's murder," Spencer indicated.

"I didn't think so either. But it's remarkable, Ms. Alexander is always good for a surprise even on a short leash. Best to let her come here, then let her enlighten us herself."

It took forty minutes for Cyd to arrive rushed at the office. "Sorry, it's a hectic day today."

Gillard led Cyd into the surgery room, where the marked outline of the body already removed stood out clearly on the carpet. "Yes, especially for Dr. Karen Stafford," growled the profiler.

Cyd stared in disbelief at the mark on the floor. "Are you saying ..." she began stammering, but she was brusquely interrupted by Gillardi.

"I want to know why you didn't keep your appointment with Stafford at nine thirty. You don't usually treat important contacts so lightly."

Cyd looked at him in amazement. "What appointment, what are you talking about? I spoke to Dr. Stafford on the phone yesterday. She vaguely agreed to get back to me if anything came up." Her gaze swiveled to Spencer. "That's what I called you on right away."

Spencer nodded in affirmation. "I haven't been able to reach Stafford; she left word for me to call her again today. But the fact is, your name is on her schedule for nine thirty. Do you have an explanation for that?"

Cyd frowned, then reached for her mobile. "I haven't checked my voicemail since last night. Maybe she left me a message."

The second message was Stafford's. It was eerie to hear the victim's voice and when it suddenly cut off, everyone in the room knew what it meant.

"At least now we have an accurate time of death. Better than nothing." Spencer was suddenly very formal. "Ms. Alexander, your mobile is a piece of evidence. I need to take custody of it for further investigation."

"No problem, but at least let me listen to the other messages." Cyd always had a second mobile with her, so she could get over the loss of the first. She sat down at the receptionist's desk. "Would you please leave me alone for a moment to ensure my privacy."

Now she had to act quickly. A glance at the e-mail account showed her that Stafford had opened her message at 07:33 the previous day. From the phone system's call log, she could see which calls the therapist had made after opening the emails. Cyd dictated the dates of the first three phone calls into her second mobile: 09.12 / Tel. 0201 ... call duration 21 minutes, 10.05 / Tel. 0201 ..., 3 minutes, 10.23 / Tel. 0987 ..., 6 minutes. She finished just in time when a brisk knock on the door signaled that the FBI's patience was not unlimited.

"Is yours," she said with a wry smile to Spencer, handing him the mobile with Stafford's note, "See you soon."

Gillard and Spencer agreed that they had underestimated the importance of therapists working independently in this case. While it was unusual for a serial killer to voluntarily seek therapeutic help, as professionals they should have recognized that the embalmer differed in many characteristics from other killers. Gillard ordered a review of all of Dr. Stafford's contacts. Furthermore, he supplemented the killer's profile with a handwritten note on the sketch in the War Room. "Does not fit any pattern - assume all possibilities!"

Back in her office, Cyd transcribed the three recorded phone numbers from her mobile and dialed the first one. After three dial tones, she was switched to voice mail: "This is the psychotherapy practice of Dr. Irene Brochart. I will be unavailable from July 29 to August 20. In urgent cases, please contact Dr. Teresa Mijares at ...."

Cyd dialed the number of the agency and learned that Dr. Mijares was practicing that day from 3 to 7 pm. Impatiently, she searched for Mijares' mobile number from the Internet, but again she had no suc-

cess. When voicemail came on, she abandoned the call and resolved to call the practice at three.

On the way to the clinic, Cyd felt her chest tighten and her heart begin to beat faster. She was on her way to Chambers. Dr. Stafford was the first dead person on whom an investigation into the cause of death could be made. She wanted to question him about it. She parked her Lancia in the parking lot for hospital staff and walked along the path lined with shade trees toward the pathology department, where the coroner's office was also located. It was a world of its own she would enter. Human existence reduced to missing vital functions and their causes.

She had announced her visit by phone, and when she realized she was a little early, she decided to wander around the clinic grounds to soak up the atmosphere.

At random, she entered one of the buildings and suddenly found herself in the oncology department, where she wandered down the long white corridors, past countless hospital rooms where patients, their last hope placed in the hands of doctors, waited anxiously to see if treatment would kick in or if the final diagnosis was imminent. She admired the quiet, friendly manner of the nurses, who radiated efficiency, empathy and trustworthiness. Spontaneously, Cyd decided to approach one of them. Sr. Lorena Shannon was written on the name tag on her light blue blouse. The sister was about thirty-five years old, had auburn hair, from which a strand that could not be tamed fell over her forehead, forming a beautiful contrast with her white skin, which had scattered dark freckles. She radiated dignity and life experience.

"Excuse me, do you know Dr. Christopher Chambers?"

The nurse looked at her wide-eyed for a moment before answering. "Dr. Chambers from forensic medicine? Yes, I know him. He teaches an introductory course at our hospital for the nursing students."

"What kind of person is he?" With the intimate question, Cyd went to the confidential level, creating a situation of closeness between two women.

"He has everything that makes a great man. I don't mean man in the sense of biological sex, but as a person. He has a big heart for everyone. I have rarely known a person as kind and helpful as he is. No matter how busy he is and how great the pressure he is under at the moment.

You can always turn to him for help or comfort. He has a kind word for everyone. At the same time, he is alone a lot. He does not look for people, but he is there for them. Yes, I think that characterizes him best. He's just there for others."

Cyd felt the need to hug this woman, so happy was she with the picture she had drawn of Chambers. Instead, she just briefly touched the nurse's upper arm and gave her a friendly smile. "Thank you Sister, yes that is how he has been described to me by others. A remarkable man."

A glance at her watch told her it was time, so she quickened her pace so as not to be late.

Doctor Chambers welcomed her warmly and asked her to come into his office. "I am delighted to see you. Can I offer you something to drink? I can highly recommend the chilled green tea with a splash of orange juice."

Cyd was struck by how completely different he appeared here than in the War Room. More approachable and youthful. "The mix sounds interesting, thank you very much." Perhaps it was also because of Ruth and her pushy way of ingratiating herself to Chambers that he seemed rather aloof in the group.

The door opened and a young woman in a turquoise coat brought the tea. Cyd sipped from her glass and was surprised. The drink was really delicious. Chambers seemed pleased by this feedback. He leaned back and looked at her encouragingly with raised eyebrows.

"Well Ms. Alexander, what brings you to me?" Actually, Cyd just wanted to be close to him. But it seemed the doctor's time was limited. So she got straight to the point.

"You performed the autopsy on Dr. Stafford, didn't you?" The medical examiner acknowledged the question with a curt nod. "Are there any signs of ritualistic killing characteristics in the cause of death?"

Chambers smiled indulgently. "You're taking your own approach again?"

"You could call it that. We wonder ..."

"We?" "Oh, yes, Dr. Conrad and I, whether the embalmer practices only ancient Egyptian rituals or whether he uses other rituals in his work."

Chambers shook his head doubtfully. "I guess work isn't the appropriate term."

"All right, let's say activity," Cyd relented. "It would have a very different meaning, of course, if it turned out that the killer was trying out all sorts of ritual techniques, helping himself, so to speak, to the self-service market of cultural anthropology."

The doctor laughed out loud. "Where did you learn to express yourself like that. What's the name of your show? I think I really missed something there."

"Questions that move". Twice a week, Wednesdays and Saturdays from 5:00 to 7:00 pm. I would be delighted if I could present you as a guest one day."

Chambers waved it off. "I'd rather join the ranks of your spectators. I'm not telegenic."

"As the saying goes. The best only act directly."

"Well, if you say so. But to get back to your question. There is no evidence of ritual killing steps. At least not as far as I am aware of them. Of course, if you have specific ideas, I can do some additional research."

"No, no." Cyd waved it off. "My question was more general. How was she killed?"

"The killer drugged her with chloroform and then possibly put a plastic bag over her head. In any case, she suffocated. After that, he cut her clothes off and wrapped them with endless paper from a printer.

Cyd was amazed, almost disappointed, at the trivial method of killing the killer had used. "Why do you think the killer left Dr. Stafford's body behind?"

Chambers made a gesture of helplessness. "For the life of me, I can't answer that. What do Gillardi, Spencer and Dr. Conrad think about it?"

With a throwaway motion, Cyd underscored her disparaging opinion toward the FBI. "Gillardi is an analyst, and to that end he keeps a low profile. He'll consider anything that's possible.' His response was, "because the killer may not have been the embalmer at all." Dr. Conrad also has doubts about whether Stafford was actually killed by the embalmer. He thinks Stafford would not have been in the age group from which he selects his victims."

"Interesting thought, too old to die, so to speak. But it could also be that the killer felt disturbed and that's why he left the body behind," Chambers mused.

Cyd replied in the negative. "The elaborate wrapping of the dead in continuous paper speaks against it."

"I meant disturbed not in the sense of 'no time,' but in the sense of 'no clear transport route out.' There may have been people in the building who would have made the removal of the body too risky."

"Yes, that could be the reason. That means we haven't made any progress again."

Dr. Chambers stood up to indicate that the conversation was nearing its end. "I wouldn't say that, let's wait for the lab results to come back. Maybe we'll get lucky this time."

Cyd had understood the silent request. "Thank you anyway, for your patience and hospitality. See you around."

Her casual goodbye was clearly at odds with how she really felt. The idea pained her that Chambers might not feel the same way about her. On the way back to town, she felt like a baked fish.

Was it love? If so, then she was really in love for the first time in her life.

Chambers had not missed Cyd's efforts to get his attention. So now both press ladies were making eyes at him. That flattered his ego, but on the other hand he was bored of being constantly adored by women. With Ruth it was something else. He considered her a true seeker. She had nothing of a groupie who wanted to get into bed with her guru as quickly as possible. But he had no real feelings for her either. It was all in his head. He enjoyed talking to her, appreciated her education and sharp mind. She looked ravishing, was cultured and had an unusually erotic charisma. Why couldn't feelings arise from his enthusiasm? He was aware of the effect he had on other people, especially women. However, it was in no way intended by him to win anyone over. He cultivated his lifestyle out of the conviction that people should treat each other well in order to make life as easy as possible for themselves. In this way, the resources that were freed up could be used for constructive activities. That was all he wanted. He gave himself enthusiastically to his work and the subjects he was passionate about were legion. A woman, no matter how attractive, could not keep up. No, he had no intention of committing himself and allowing himself to be influenced along the way. Life was too short for that, his time too valuable.

Shortly after three, Cyd was finally connected with Dr. Mijares and tried to make her aware of the urgency of her request.

"I need to speak to Dr. Brochart on a really important matter. Can you tell me what number I can reach you at?"

The psychiatrist answered kindly but without particular interest. "I'm sorry, but Dr. Brochart didn't leave a number. She has her own ideas about quality of life on vacation. And a cell phone or contact address is not one of them. She plans to spend the next few weeks driving around Mexico with no set plan, seeing the country and its people. I'm afraid you'll have to be patient until she gets back."

Cyd had a hard time holding back. "Can you at least tell me which flight connection she took?"

"I can't help you there either. All I know is that she left this morning."

Frustrated, Cyd ended the call and dialed a number from her phone register.

"Hi, Burt, Cyd here. How's the happy hacking?"

The computer geek's voice sounded rushed yet pleased with the call "Cyd, darling, you can't imagine where I am in right now. The ultimate mega-awesome foray into the databases of the ...." He laughed out loud, then his voice took on a conspiratorial tone. "Better you don't know more about it, or you'll be complicit. Sometimes I think I'm a monster."

Cyd, who knew Burt's penchant for theatrical exaggeration, firmly objected. "But not you ...! But why am I calling, I urgently need the flight details of a certain Karen Brochart, who left here for Mexico today. Destination airport and arrival time. "

"Little something baby, but not until I finish my trip here."

"I understand about that. Be careful not to get lost in cyberspace."

Once home, Cyd realized how exhausted she was. After kicking off her shoes in the vestibule, she decided to do herself some good and recharge her batteries before taking any further steps. Her first path led her to the kitchen to the icebox, which provided her with fragments of ice that she needed for her creation. She added some freshly squeezed lemon and plenty of vodka to the ice, then filled the glass to the brim with soda. She took a sip and breathed deeply.

The liquid exploded in her stomach and she felt the fire give her strength and courage. She left the glass on her desk and stripped naked. In the shower, she set the mixer to cold and turned it on full. The low water pressure and the stale warmth of the weak shower spray reminded her of her many professional sojourns in the Third World, where she had learned early on to appreciate the comforts of home. That the American way of life was coming to an end had been seriously predicted for years. But like so many people, Cyd had lived under the delusion that bad events would mainly affect others and that she would be spared.

Now, as she dried herself with the rough bath towel, she felt refreshed and energized against all odds. She put on her favorite shirt, left all the buttons undone, and turned the fan to the highest setting, the swivel mechanism turned off, so that the warm air stream blew directly at her.

She turned on her computer and opened the e-mail account to see if Burt's message had arrived. She was not disappointed: "International Airport General Manuel Marquez de Leon in La Paz, Baja California Sur, arrival 12:47 p. m." Typical Burt, she thought, as cordial and communicative as he was in direct conversation, there was not a word of greeting or any personal remarks in written messages.

Cyd hoped that Stafford had picked up her rental car at the airport, because otherwise it would be complicated to track her down. A look at the airport's register pointed to 15 Car Rentals. Cyd copied out the data and started making calls.

"Hello, Cyd Alexander S.S.D. Taskforce C.C.F. Did Dr. Irene Brochart pick up a rental car from your company this afternoon? ... No? ... Is there perhaps a reservation? ... Thank you anyway."

Dusk had fallen and the semi-darkness of the room was flooded with the last rays of evening glow. Cyd lit a cigarette and let an espresso out of the machine. Then she sat back down at the desk with the cup, picked up the phone and began dialing again.

Finally, she found what she was looking for. "Yes, Dr. Irene Brochart. ... Which car? ... A Subaru Forrester? ... What time did she take delivery of the vehicle? Do you have any idea what route it took? "

The young operator's voice expressed genuine regret. "I'm sorry, she didn't give any information about where she was going. She only confirmed that she would not be leaving Mexico. "

"Tell me, what do you do when a customer doesn't return their car? Do you have any way of finding out where the vehicle is? "

"Yes, this is partially possible. The newer and especially the expensive models are equipped with a GPS tracking system. This allows the control center to determine where the vehicle is in an emergency. The system also sounds an alarm if someone crosses the border without having signed an additional contract. "

Cyd felt the hunting fever gripping her. "How quickly can you determine the location of Dr. Brochart? "

"I'm afraid I can't tell you that. Such inquiries are handled by the head office. But I will be happy to pass on your inquiry. My colleagues will then get back to you. "

The calls had taken more time than expected. Cyd felt her tense muscles in her neck and shoulders and her shirt was completely soaked with sweat. Now she also noticed that her stomach was growling for food. Without further ado, she dialed the number of an Indian delivery service a few blocks away and ordered a substantial meal consisting of three courses, including a rice dish with cinnamon, honey and almonds for dessert.

Cyd decided to eat the meal in style. She opened a bottle of white wine from the Cape region of South Africa and set the table with a fresh tablecloth, silverware, cloth napkin and the lead crystal glasses - she had once bought for one of her friends as a wedding gift. Nothing came of the marriage, and so she kept the glasses for herself. For daily use, she drank from her habitual glass, but now she felt she had pi-

cked up the scent. And in anticipation of the long privations during the time of the hunt, she decided to treat herself to one last festive meal.

Soon after, the front doorbell rang and their feast was delivered.

After Cyd had actually eaten all three courses, including dessert - the bottle had also been emptied in the meantime - she leaned back on the old couch, sated and satisfied. She lit a cigarette and considered her next steps. Suddenly, she was overcome by a leaden tiredness, and she noticed how her concentration was fading. In a kind of daze, she sat sunk into the cushions of the divan. All at once the whole project seemed to her an insane undertaking. As a woman with no experience in criminal work, how could she track down a serial killer? She was also overcome by a deep, unrelated fear - possibly a premonition of a complete failure of her mission - of exposing herself to ridicule, losing her job for good, and perhaps even becoming a victim herself.

Cyd forced herself to stand up. Her back was as hard as a board by now because of the tension. Her eyes burned and a dull pain made every movement of her head a torture. She stretched, massaged the muscles of her neck, and then found a comfortable position in the cushions of the divan. She wondered if she should take another shower or if it was better to go straight to sleep. Before she could make a decision, fatigue moved through her entire body like a creeping poison, paralyzing her and causing her to fall into a deep stupor. And just as all the muscles of the body remained motionless and increasingly relaxed, the mind also fell into a state of twilight, letting all thoughts pass by, letting go of everything, holding on to nothing, only soothing colors before the inner eye, steady, blind murmuring before the inner ear, and peace, deep peace and equilibrium.

The shrill of the telephone went through Cyd's spine. At first, she didn't know where she was or why she was receiving a call in the middle of the night. Finally she got hold of the phone. With the lifeless voice of someone just pulled out of a deep sleep, she answered.

"Cyd Alexander. ... Yes, that's right, I made the request. ... In San Jose del Cabo? Can you be a little more specific about the location? ... In the urban area? Well, that's better than nothing. Thank you very much for your cooperation. Bye."

Although Cyd found the fatigue physically excruciating, she dragged herself to her laptop and started searching the net for San Jose del Cabo hotels and guest houses. Then she forced herself to the phone and started making calls.

The day was dawning and the first rays of sunlight were shining into the room when she heard the voice of a receptionist as if through a cotton filter. "I'm sorry, Ms. Brochart has already checked out and left. "

Cyd sank down exhausted. But then hecticness and tension mingled in the voice of the hotel employee.

"No wait, I just see them driving away. Just a minute!" The receiver was brusquely put down and very quietly, from a distance, Cyd heard the screams of the man who was apparently running after the therapist's vehicle.

Shortly after, she heard footsteps and the phone resumed.

"Hello, I'm Irene Brochart, what's so urgent that I had to interrupt my departure? "

"I'm sorry, Cyd Alexander S.S.D. Taskforce C.C.F. You received a call yesterday morning from Dr. Karen Stafford. What was that call about? "

The angry impatience in the physician's voice had now given way to hesitant disapproval.

"The conversation was confidential. Why is the sheriff's department interested? "

"Dr. Stafford was murdered yesterday. "

Cyd had deliberately chosen the harsh confrontation with the facts in order to shatter her interlocutor. The deep pain in Dr. Brochart's voice showed that her strategy had worked.

"My God, Karen, why didn't she listen to me. I warned her strongly not to trivialize the matter. "

"I'm sorry, Dr. Brochart, what issue? "

"It was about her email request to collaborate on the Coyote Creek Findings case. Karen recognized signs of the offender profile in a client. "

"Did she say the name? "

"No, she didn't describe the details either, but it was about a case of profound guilt neurosis with fragmented personality. Karen was concerned about her patient's unstable and changeable ego experience, with schizoid episodes, delusions, and bizarre nightmares."

"Excuse my ignorance, Doctor, but could you explain this again in a somewhat simplified version?"

"Yes, of course, I must apologize. We are obviously dealing with a person who is characterized by unusually strong feelings of guilt. Such states can be so threatening to the innermost core of the personality and the self that the psyche must develop strategies to protect the person from this threat. We call this defense. If the defenses are insufficient, disintegration, splitting, or loss of ego experience can occur, which in turn can lead to the development of a split or, in extreme cases, multiple personality. Such personalities often suffer from delusions, which can also be seen as an attempt to ward off the disorder. Thus, there are sick people who are convinced they hear voices, with a mandate from God to punish other people."

Like so many laymen, Cyd did not manage to escape the fascination of psycho-pathological phenomena and mental illness.

"So what did the delusions consist of in Dr. Stafford's patients?"

"We are obviously dealing with a person who is characterized by unusually strong feelings of guilt. "

At that moment, Cyd felt deep inside that she was right on the killer's trail.

"Don't you have any evidence at all to suggest the identity of the patient?" she asked with the exasperated defiance of a defiant child who refuses to accept the fact of failure.

Another deep sigh from the therapist. "Unfortunately no, I only know what I have already told you. But the investigators should have found all the relevant documents in the practice."

"The investigation is still ongoing, but it seems that some records are missing from the filing system. It is obvious that the perpetrator removed all incriminating documents."

Cyd was disappointed to have lost the trail again so close to her goal, but on the other hand she realized that Dr. Brochart's clues offered her valuable ideas for new research, not to mention the information advantage she now had over Ruth and the others on the team.

"Thank you very much for your cooperation, Doctor. At least now we have a lead to follow. We'll be in touch."

Guilt, delusions, split personality. Cyd felt adrenaline coursing through her body. The hunt had possibly entered a decisive phase. The stalk was over, the game would not only be chased now, no, it would be hunted from now on. The hunters would no longer leave its trail until it was hunted down.

Cyd now felt a definite craving for a strong espresso. To get her lame mind going again, she decided to use the large espresso machine. Already the hissing, bubbling sound stimulated her, and when the wonderful, aromatic scent of the mocha also rose to her nose, she felt flooded with fresh energy and looked forward to being able to resume her work.

On a small tray she took the coffee, a bottle of mineral water and a glass of scotch with lots of ice with her into the studio and sat down at her laptop.

The first thing she did was enter the search terms. There was the usual flood of information, but Cyd's only intention was to get a slightly more accurate picture of what the expressions meant. Soon she was

caught up in the wealth of data, one clue leading to the next, and she didn't realize how much time had passed until she took a sip of coffee and it had cooled to room temperature. The ice in her whiskey had also melted completely. A glance at her watch showed her that it was after seven in the morning. She had been busy with her research for more than two hours. But she was sure she had invested the time well. Not only did she now have a clear idea of this type of mental disorder, but she had also found a lot of interesting background information that could be useful for the case.

The next step was a different kind of networking. She would call on all her contacts in the journalistic and scientific fields to find out who specialized in this kind of mental disorder. Since it was considered taboo even among media people to be awakened at seven in the morning, she decided to give herself some sleep so that she could continue reasonably rested.

She very briefly considered taking a shower, but dismissed this thought as quickly as it had come. Without washing or brushing her teeth, she just made it to her sofa bed, which was close to the open patio door.

With the last of her strength, she set the alarm clock for nine o'clock, then sank onto the mattress and immediately fell into a deep sleep.

She dreamed she was in a huge building with numerous spacious halls, wide staircases and endlessly long corridors. On both sides of the corridors were locked doors with nameplates and ornately crafted knockers. She wandered the rooms looking for people, knocking, calling, finding unlocked doors to cubbyholes and empty rooms, but whatever she tried, no one answered, not a soul, all her efforts were in vain. She felt as if she were the only performer on a stage of loneliness and forlornness, a cynical thought in a horrible void, a grotesque play that had only one content, the great nothingness.

Suddenly, a shrill piercing sound that went under her skin, an agonizing, never-ending sound that advanced in waves of attack like an enemy invasion against the disorientation of exhaustion. When she

finally realized where she was and that it was a call that had roused her from sleep, she rushed to the phone. She yanked the receiver from the fork so violently that the phone fell to the floor in the process.

"Yes, please?" She had a hard time coming forward with her name. No answer, just the monotonous hum of the overhead line.

In that strange no-man's land between waking and sleeping states, she didn't know what it was, dream, fantasy or hallucination? Had she been awake when she dreamed, and were her senses deceiving her now that she thought she was awake? She would not be able to clarify any of this. She was, however, sufficiently sane to know the next necessary steps that would lead her out of her lethargy. Like a blind woman on a swaying ship, she groped and propped her way to the bathroom shower.

It was a little invigorating trickle coming from the shower head, but it was water, lukewarm and refreshing at the same time, too sparse to be effective in awakening her spirits, yet full of natural energy. After a few minutes, the mists began to clear, and she was now certain that she was now awake and had been dreaming before.

The phone rang again and she rushed out of the shower. This time she reached the phone in time and answered with her name, as usual.

"Hi Cyd, what's wrong with you, I didn't hear from you all day yesterday? Are you mad at me or are you hiding something?" The tone in which Ian spoke showed that he was only joking, but Cyd felt that both accusations were true to some extent. It also stirred her conscience a little, because she had hoped it was Chambers who called. So she pretended to be conciliatory and decided to let Conrad in on the latest state of her investigation.

"Neither, my dear, but it so happens that there are people who work while others are constantly in search of pleasure."

"Speaking of pleasure, how about I come over to your place tonight to discuss our procedure?"

Cyd laughed. "Oh, that's what they call it lately! Procedure. You'll have to come up with something better than that."

"What's better than a relationship that's progressing?" he countered with a definite undertone that couldn't be ignored.

"Be serious for a moment, please, Ian, I have important information for you."

In a forceful voice, under the seal of secrecy, she told him about her conversation with Dr. Brochart and her reference to a possible guilt complex.

Ian's excitement about this lead was unmistakable. "This might actually get us somewhere. We should try to find out who is the best expert on guilt complexes. Maybe we'll be able to expand the profile of the perpetrator or even get new clues to his identity. "

"That's exactly what I plan to do. Do you have any contacts that could help us?"

"Quite possibly. The question is, what do I get in return?"

"Why don't you stop this stupid thing and grow up already? Which of your colleagues could know about it?" The fact that her resistance was only an act did not escape him.

"Precisely because I am an adult, I expect an appropriate reward for my efforts. I have been doing the daily good deed of a scout out of selflessness since my puberty. And I can tell you one thing, the stakes are not inconsiderable. My colleagues are not psychiatrists with experience in practical criminology. So if a contact is to be of any use, I have to ask around and do my own research. I suggest a dinner together, including dessert."

"Agreed, I'll decide the menu plan, including dessert. Ask around and call me when you find what you're looking for."

Cyd liked Ian and found these playful flirtations amusing, but she also felt that she wanted such conversations with Chambers, even if she knew intuitively that with him a superficial conversation full of levity and verbal eroticism would be unthinkable.

Conrad thought about who could help him in this matter. It did not make sense to call in some distant contact. Scientists have a tendency to agree to such requests lightly, only to never respond again. His source would have to be familiar with the therapist scene and, moreover, have the willingness to actually get involved.

After some thought, his choice fell on a lecturer in clinical psychology who, although not a therapist himself, was well acquainted with the various directions and their most competent representatives. "This wasn't going to be cheap," he feared. Dr. Greg Byron was known for his extravagant lifestyle. To be able to finance it, he had numerous side businesses running, for which he was well paid. Ian dialed his number at the university and reached Byron on his way to a lecture.

"Call me back in two hours," the academic said in a rushed voice.

Conrad decided to use the time to search the net. Since he was interested in a person rather than the subject, it seemed to him that the best chance for a hit was to look among authors of professional publications. He logged into the universal library and tried a series of search words. The amount of literature returned was substantial. He made a selection by year of publication, limiting himself to the last five years. The amount of data was still unmanageable. When he finally retrieved only the last year, the number of entries was reduced to a few tens of thousands. He would not get anywhere like this. These were the limits of applicability on the Superhighway of Information.

Impatiently, he glanced at his watch. The two hours had already passed. He decided to make a second attempt. This time, Byron seemed significantly calmer.

"Well, dear colleague, what's on your mind?" he pretended to be overly jovial.

"I need your expertise on the subject of guilt complexes. Who is the best expert in this field?"

"Guilt complexes, you say. How soon do you need the information?"

"In twelve hours at the latest," Ian urged impatiently, knowing that his acquaintance was only trying to drive up the price.

In fact, the latter replied with disarming candor. "That will cost a little more, say two thousand five hundred?"

"Let's say a thousand, if you give out the information right now. You have everything I need in your head anyway."

The enterprising academic saw through it and laughed. "Agreed. Are you receptive? So three years ago, I wouldn't have had the slightest doubt who the right expert would be for you - Lawrence Young, psychiatrist and drama therapist from Corpus Christi University in San Diego. He has, however, retired from professional life - I'm afraid the poor fellow has overreached himself and crashed. I mean really crashed. It's not that rare in our profession. Now he's said to be living on a small island in Lake Huron, Ontario."

"Do you have the address?"

Byron's hoarse laugh sounded like a coughing fit. "Address is good. The name of the island is supposedly Ithaca. Could be a joke, though - or part of the clinical picture."

"You said three years ago you recommended Dr. Young to me. Who is the leading expert today?"

"No one comes close to Young. He was the only top class in this field. But in principle, working with guilt complexes is part of the everyday treatment of all psychotherapists. I can name some excellent practitioners."

"Thanks, I wanted the expert, not some practitioner," Ian replied in frustration.

"Dr. Young, after all, is still alive. Ithaca in Ontario." That hoarse laugh again. "I'll email you my account number, dear friend. Until next time, then."

Ian was aware that he had just spent a thousand dollars on a dessert. "All the more reason to fix dinner with Cyd right away," he thought to himself.

Cyd didn't answer the phone when Ian's call came in. She couldn't say why, but she didn't feel like talking to him at the moment. When he spoke the results of his research into the voicemail, she was close to getting on the line, but then she let it go. She sat right down at her PC and tried to figure out what was the reason for Young's exit. It was strange, lots of information about his work, academic career and publications, but not a word about the sudden dropout. No one seemed to have any idea why Young had suddenly left everything behind to retire to the solitude of Lake Huron.

Cyd thought for a moment, then went to her boss.

Jenkins was checking the texts for the next newscast when Cyd surprised him with her request.

"What do you expect to get out of going to Canada?" he asked out of habit. Not dismissively, but questioningly. To see if the applicant really stood behind her project, or if it was just a half-hearted action.

"Dr. Young may be the key to this case. We know he's the leading man in the field of guilt complexes, and we know further that the embalmer was under psychiatric care for this disorder. It's possible Young even knows the killer."

Jenkins could accept those arguments. He had always been a fan of field work. He would have loved to set out himself.

"Approved. When are you leaving?"

"This very evening, sir," Cyd imitated his military terse style.

On the way to the airport, I really need to call Ian to let him know that our date has been postponed indefinitely, she reminded herself. I owe him that.

## Chapter 12

Ruth was in the middle of a team meeting when a call was routed to the meeting room for her. It was Linda, her personal assistant and confidante. "Important call for you on line three," she said. "You know I don't want to receive calls during project meetings," she replied hot-temperedly.

"You're going to want to take this call, believe me," Linda expressed her conviction.

"Yes, please?" asked Ruth curtly.

"This is Chambers. Is my call inconvenient?"

When Ruth heard the doctor's soft voice, shivers ran down her spine. She stood up in a panic and retreated to a far corner of the room. "No, not at all," she lied, "They never bother."

Chambers seemed genuinely pleased. "I wanted to ask you if you'd like to go out to dinner with me tonight. There's an excellent French restaurant, Coronado Avenue, corner of Myrtle Street. If it's all right with you, I'll pick you up at your house at nine o'clock."

Ruth had to pull herself together not to do a happy dance and shout out loud. In complete contrast to her feelings, she replied politely and calmly. "Thank you very much, that suits me perfectly. I'm glad."

After the meeting, she couldn't remember how she had managed to finish the meeting with her staff team. Thoughts of Chambers and the significance of this invitation completely captured her. It was the first time they would meet privately without using the task force as an excuse. And what mattered most was that he had taken the initiative. She decided to call it a night early to get ready for the big night.

The front doorbell rang promptly at nine. Ruth took one last look in the mirror, then went outside and greeted Chambers with a breathy kiss on both cheeks. She had thought long and hard about whether to risk this friendly, yet rather intimate gesture. Finally, she had concluded that she should follow up his surprising move with an approp-

riate response. Chambers accepted the endearment as if it were a long-familiar gesture. Ruth felt him place one hand on her hip and the other on her shoulder at the moment of greeting. It was a wonderful feeling that made her blood boil. He guided her tenderly by the elbow as they walked to his car.

The restaurant proved to be the right ambience for the momentous occasion. The dining room of the natural stone house, with various bay windows and alcoves, provided the ideal conditions for a discreet dinner for two. The dim indirect lighting and the glow of numerous candles created a mood of festivity and liveliness. The generous spacing between tables allowed for an undisturbed gathering and intimate conversation. The staff was attentive without being intrusive. General Manager Marc Lelord personally escorted them to their table in front of a large picture window overlooking an artfully lit garden. He satisfied himself that they were happy with his choice. Shortly after, the chef appeared and gave them some recommendations for the evening's menu. There was no menu at Les Ombres. In his estimation, the *Mâitre de Cuisine* recommended to the guests one of the evening's menus with the appropriate beverages. He described the menu to them. Chambers, who had dined at Les Ombres many times before, agreed without reservation, and Ruth joined him.

The dinner opened with a *Mourtaïrol*, a saffron soup made from a French recipe from *Périgord*. With it they drank *Côte de Fontenay*, a *Chablis Premier Cru* from *Bourgogne*. Ruth felt the wine invigorate her, and she knew she had to take care of herself. The atmosphere of the place and Chambers' company had a hypnotic effect on her. It surprised her how easy-going and entertaining he could be. They talked about this and that without committing to any particular topic.

After some time, the wine waiter appeared at their table again. He skillfully opened a bottle of *Château Belair St.-Émilion*, sniffed the cork briefly, and then poured a little of the wine into Chambers' glass. The latter checked the color of the wine against the light, swirled it a few times in the glass, and finally took in the aroma through

his nose. Then he tasted, and after a brief pause, he nodded to the garçon. "A beautiful wine." The waiter accepted the unusual verdict with a slight tilt of his head and filled their glasses.

Shortly thereafter, the main course was served. "Voilà, pintade aux morilles," the maître d'hôtel announced as he served the dish. With the guinea fowl on morels, the chef had met her taste exactly and the dish harmonized perfectly with the Bordeaux.

Chambers looked at Ruth with a grin. "The dish reminds me of a guinea fowl hunt I was once invited to with other doctors. Although our feisty hunting party fired from all guns, the hunting trip ended with not a single bird being shot. One of my physician colleagues justified the zero bag by saying that doctors are, after all, set up to save lives, not kill living creatures."

Ruth never imagined that a man like Chambers could be part of a hunting party. She found him so unique and charismatic that she could not imagine him as a simple member of a group at all. She appreciated all the more his modest manner when he took himself back, and his understatement when it came to his personality.

After the ample main course, they decided to skip the cheese and end the dinner right with dessert. Ruth chose tarte à l'envers aux abricots, a Dauphiné-style apricot tart, while Chambers preferred far breton, a raisin pudding. It was accompanied by Sauternes Château Guiraud, a sweet white dessert wine.

Ruth had not felt as comfortable as she did in this place in the company of this extraordinary man for a long time.

Chambers leaned over to her and murmured, "You know, I'm actually almost uncomfortable with all the fuss about ordering in French and the effort about the food and wine here. But every now and then I'm drawn here because it simply tastes so good. For that, I put up with being considered a snob." Ruth laughed and answered from the bottom of her heart.

"That would be the last thing I would take you for. And even if I did, for an evening like this, I'm willing to be taken for a snob, too."

"How about we have coffee and cognac by the lily pond, or is it too hot for you outside?"

I would go along with anything he asked me to do, Ruth thought to herself before answering. "No, not at all, the lily pond sounds good."

Chambers signaled to the maitre. Then they stood up and Ruth, on her way out, felt again with a shudder how Chambers' hand lightly touched her arm.

They took a seat at the edge of the stone enclosure and took in the magic of the summer night. The twinkling of the stars in the firmament, the chirping of the cicadas together with the concert of the frogs. Every now and then, the sound of a fish jumping up and down on the water could be heard, along with the bewitching scent of all kinds of plants and brackish water. It was a night like at the beginning of time.

A little later, the espresso was served in small cups. The waiter filled the cognac by eye from a carafe into the snifters. After he had satisfied himself that his guests had no further requests, he discreetly withdrew.

Ruth felt that the mood had suddenly changed. Now the time had come for her to decide what would happen to both their lives.

"Dr. Chambers, there's a question that's been bothering me for a long time." Ruth visibly struggled to voice her concern. Something inside her decided, however, that there was no way around it that evening, and so she continued. "I am always dealing with extreme manifestations of passionate states of mind in my work. A kind of obsession in the form of morbid love that leads from complete self-sacrifice to the pursuit and killing of the target. I wonder if such states are always pathological, or if healthy people can also develop such strong feelings. And if so, how do they deal with it. Perhaps you can help me further. After all, as a physician, you are familiar with the human psyche, even though your specialty is forensic medicine."

Astonished at these words, Chambers leaned in her direction before replying. "Your assumption that doctors are always confronted with

psychological issues is something I can only confirm without reservation. However, you are mistaken if you see me only as an expert in forensic medicine. I began my clinical practice as a neurologist, and on that faculty mental illness was ubiquitous."

Ruth couldn't hide her surprise. "But then how come you're a board member of the coroner's office?"

Chambers leaned back a bit, barely perceptibly distancing himself. "Well, you know how life plays out sometimes. Certain things seem to be predetermined. But let's get back to your question instead."

Ruth was not clear how life had played out in his case. Nevertheless, she decided not to probe, but simply to let him speak. Perhaps he would take up the subject again himself.

Chambers spoke in his usual calm voice, but it was evident from the passionate tone that the scientist, who seemed so controlled and sober, had obviously had profound emotional experiences in his life.

"Amour fou, passion to the point of madness, is a widespread phenomenon - the stuff of countless works of world literature. When Orpheus loves his Eurydice so unconditionally that he dares to enter the underworld after her death and wrest the deceased back from Hades, this story touches most people deep in their souls and hardly anyone asks the question whether the gifted singer acted out of a pathological state of mind. The nobility of his act covers the pathological part of the behavior. Personally, I think the question of whether such examples are physiological or pathological behaviors is not worth asking. Rather, I believe we should pursue the question of what causes the individuals to experience such extreme emotional states. Emotions - mental emergency reactions, states of confusion, disorganized excitement - there have been many attempts in psychology to explain this phenomenon. However, they are phenomena in the borderland of self-experience and self-control.

Perhaps we should change the term delusional states to intoxicated states. This could lead to a completely new view. It seems as if the history of development and later the cultural history of mankind were

characterized by the search - not to say addiction - for experiences of expansion of consciousness and escape from reality.

The development of consciousness must have been traumatic for the early hominini endowed with it. The first cognitive beginnings of reflections of their own existence in the mirror of time. The basic questions of human existence - if perhaps only in tiny rudiments - where do we come from and where does the journey go - that immense journey with no foreseeable destination, no discernible meaning, the question of being and even more frightening of no longer being when our lives come to an end. I can certainly understand the search for psychotropic substances, which is widespread in all cultures. Understandable also the power associated with the knowledge and handling of such substances. In all cultures, knowledgeable shamans and priests were given special positions. They possessed the knowledge of how intoxicated states could be produced, how pain could be relieved, and how inexplicable sensory impressions and visions could be evoked under the influence of drugs. Ecstasy, trance, earth entranced, even the gift of flying over the landscape like spirit beings under the influence of hemlock or psilocybin were attributed to them. And this concerns only earthly existence. Imagine the power that would be associated with being able to defeat death and offer eternal life. In the concept of immortality, faith and identification with a group of fellow believers, or more simply, a religion, are united.

A common characteristic of love madness - in my view better love drunkenness or love intoxication - is the identification with the object of desire. Becoming one with the beloved person, merging, being absorbed in him, discarding one's own identity and taking on a new one. The metamorphosis into a foreign life form."

Ruth had long since succumbed to the magical attraction of the doctor, who revealed his innermost thoughts to her in a soft insistent voice. Like a priest hearing confession, Chambers sat with his upper body slightly bent forward, while Ruth, with her head turned toward

him, kept her gaze fixed on his lips in anticipation of a saving message of salvation. She felt more with each sentence that he was speaking of them both. And she felt the certainty within her that it was her destiny to spend her life by this man's side. "Great lovers," she smiled at the idea and felt an indescribable feeling of happiness take hold of her and spread throughout her body. She felt more and more clearly how the desire for this man's caresses flooded through her.

Slowly, she began to open up to him and reveal personal things about herself. She experienced Chambers as an attentive, empathic listener who made her feel that everything she said was personally meaningful to him. So she spoke of her professional trauma, her fears, and her attempts to control them with archery and Zen. At some point that evening, he called her Ruth and she called him Chris, and he became the great confidant of her heart.

It was well past midnight when they got into his car for the return trip. On this drive through the deserted streets of the nocturnal city, she knew that she had finally found her center.

Cyd made a quick stop at home to pick up her preparedness suitcase, always packed with essentials, then a stop at Harrington's Bookstore, where she picked up a reference book on guilt complexes, and finally headed straight to the airport.

Since she didn't have a ticket reserved, the cab ride passed with a frantic search for the fastest flight connection. It wasn't easy to get to Toronto - she had to go through Huston, from there to Newark, and finally on to Toronto. With a lot of luck, she actually managed to get a seat on the last plane of the day.

The trip proved to be an unparalleled ordeal, all three planes were fully occupied and the planes were filled to the brim with rows of seats. The weather in Ontario was stormy, which was clearly felt by the passengers. On the approach to Toronto, the cabin crew repeated several times the indications of emergency exits and the corresponding luminous markings on the ground. Cyd did not suffer from fear

of flying in any way, on the contrary, being shaken by strong turbulence had for her the character of an enjoyable ride on a roller coaster. She was fascinated to see how the shape of the aircraft torqued around its longitudinal axis during the turbulent landing approach. She remembered reading that modern aircraft were so elastic that it was possible to bend the wings upward until the tips touched. Reassuring thought, Cyd thought, to fly in such a wonder thing, even if she wasn't sure if the article wasn't pure humbug. Anyway, the landing was hard and you could feel the pilots struggling to keep control of the jet on the rain-soaked runway. As in the pioneering days of aviation, some relieved passengers applauded the crew.

Given the weather conditions, Cyd was glad that she would continue her journey by bus. At the terminal, she stowed her on-board case in the coach's tray and took a seat in the second-to-last row by the window. The bus was not full and she was happy to have found a place without seat neighbors. Now she could switch off and sit back. She took a few deep breaths, let her head sink against the headrest and enjoyed the ride through the autumnal landscape. Here, too, strong gusts of wind repeatedly affected the vehicles, also catching the coach and briefly pushing it off course before the experienced driver compensated for the forces with slight countersteering movements.

Cyd had already decided when she got in that she could trust the driver and that she would feel comfortable in this vehicle. After spending about an hour in this state of relaxation, she began to feel the investigator's drive within her again.

At the next stop, she got a detailed map of Perry Sound in the cafeteria and a large mug of coffee with a protective cap. After she had briefly oriented herself on the map and knew where she had to go, she took the book out of her bag and made herself comfortable again. Actually, she had intended to study the book on the flight here, but

the adversities had been too great for that. All the more she was now looking forward to taking a look at the world of delusional diseases.

Cyd was surprised at how many different forms of delusional disorders there were and how familiar they were to her from her surroundings. Suddenly she thought she recognized signs of delusion in almost all her acquaintances, colleagues and also in herself.

In the reference book, delusion was described as the most complex phenomenon of mental disorders. There was also an indication that most people, unlike the specialists, thought they knew what these mental disorders were about. In the eyes of the specialists, it could be read here, delusional disorders were among the most difficult challenges in psychiatry in terms of diagnosis, doctor-patient relationship, and therapy. One definition described delusion as a pathological misjudgment of reality with a rigid tendency to hold on to it, even if it contradicted one's own life experience and the judgment of healthy fellow human beings. It was also cited as characteristic that the delusional person had no desire at all to change his delusional beliefs. "He holds steadfastly to them, while the rest of his thinking and other judgment may be unremarkable. Nevertheless, the patient is unable to escape this subjective frame of reference, to break out of his 'delusional prison' and escape the delusional symptoms. In this imprisonment, the delusional reality of the sufferer is the only existent reality. Sometimes participation in the healthy person's reality is still partially possible, but even then the delusion takes the more important part in the person's life. However, delusion and reality can also coexist without interfering with each other. The affected person then lives in two worlds."

Cyd found herself checking every new piece of information again and again. In doing so, she recognized a strong tendency to immediately discard or at least question the expertise in cases where conspicuous behavioral patterns coincided.

She resisted the temptation to use the knowledge she had acquired to make a more in-depth analysis of the environment with which she

was familiar and decided to delve only into the forms of delusion that were relevant to the case. Looking through the table of contents, she found a chapter labeled delusion of guilt or delusion of sin.

"Typical for this clinical picture is the conviction of the sick person that he has violated God, divine commandments or higher moral laws. Whether it is a delusional imagination or an intemperate over-valuation of actual transgressions, which leads to pathological feelings of guilt, is not so important. The person concerned considers himself bad and inferior, ostracized and condemned by society. Not infrequently, his offense is a guilt of omission; the affected person was not there for others at decisive moments or failed to fulfill his responsibility in an unforgivable way. In the process, real events from one's own life are incorporated into the delusional content."

"Dear travelers, we will soon reach the next station 'Georgian Bay'. Passengers getting off here are asked to prepare their luggage and get ready." The pleasantly grounded voice of the bus driver brought Cyd back to reality. She was glad to interrupt her preoccupation with mental illness.

The bus station was really homey. Old black and white photos from the area on the walls, ads of motels, guesthouses and fishing lodges on the pin board of the cafeteria. Special stamps from the bus line's founding era were for sale at the kiosk.

Cyd was now dependent on outside help. In her hasty research, she had only found out that this was the place from which the doctor's island was easiest to reach. She briefly took in the atmosphere of the surroundings and immediately felt at home. She sensed that hospitality and neighborly help were still among the basic virtues of the people here.

The operator of the cafeteria was a humorous Canadian original who wore his long gray hair in a ponytail and was dressed in the national costume of jeans and plaid wool shirt.

"Do you happen to know Doctor Young, the psychiatrist who lives on Ithaca?" asked Cyd stoutly.

"Ithaca was the home of Ulysses," replied the well-read old man with an amused smile. The best way is to fly with Olympic Airways from Toronto to Athens and from there take the ferry to the Ionian Islands. But beware, according to Homer, the journey there involves numerous adventures and it can take quite a long time. Ten years, to be exact."

"Oh God, not flying again," Cyd replied with feigned horror. "The doctor is supposed to live on a small island here in Perry Sound."

"I'm afraid I'll have to pass on that," the man returned with a grin. I don't know any island of that name here. But ask Phil Jacobi at the Angler Lodge, he knows practically everyone here. He's also in charge of boat rentals."

"And how do I get to Jacobi?"

"Wait," he reassured her, "I'll call him. Phil is an old charmer. For him, there's nothing like picking up a young, attractive woman in person."

"You're a darling, I'll freshen up a bit in the meantime." Cyd could hear the telephone conversation from the washroom.

"Phil, Warren here, customer for you. Right up your alley, wants to go to Ithaca to see a Doctor Young. I told her you'd love to pick her up from here."

Cyd did not know what Jacobi had answered him. Judging by Warren's laughter, she didn't really want to know. That was all she needed - a fishing enthusiast.

She returned to the guest room, where Warren had prepared two cups of coffee. Aging men, she thought resignedly. Maybe she should have left out the "honey" after all.

"Phil is already on his way," he assured. In the meantime, you can join me for a cup of coffee."

"I don't know what I'd rather do," she said in a saccharine voice. "You Canadian natives really are a model of hospitality."

The old man went into their game. "Just wait until you meet Phil. Then you'll know what hospitality is. He's not a native, though, he's one of the settlers - comes from Switzerland."

"Ah from Switzerland - cheese, chocolate and banking secrets," Cyd teased.

"Don't be under any illusions about that, Jacobi's secrets are of a very different kind."

"Now you've got me curious, what could that possibly be?"

"Fishing grounds," Warren said with a disarming smile, "he's only interested in capital bass besides pretty young women."

"Well, I can feel reasonably confident about that. There's no way I can keep up with a capital Huron perch."

Soon after, a loud honk signaled the arrival of the Swiss.

He was a friendly, brunette gentleman in his fifties. Unlike Warren, he wore his hair short, but he too was casually dressed in jeans and a leather blouson. After the usual greeting phrases, she found him thoroughly likeable. A bit too charming for her taste, but as nice as harmless.

"I'm all for leaving right now. We have a storm warning and when it starts, all kinds of things will be flying through the air here. We should discuss everything else back at the lodge."

They said goodbye to Warren and got into the old pickup truck, whose bed was loaded with all kinds of equipment. Inside, it smelled like fish and diesel.

The ride lasted only a few minutes. Phil had not exaggerated. The unpredictable gusts of wind whirled billboards, branches, cans and lots of trash through the air.

The lodge was a model operation, tailored precisely to the needs of fishing enthusiasts and water sports enthusiasts.

Aside from the massive stone main house, there was a whole series of comfortable lodges equipped with everything you needed to feel at home.

Jacobi escorted Cyd to her cabin. "I suggest you settle in first and then come to the lobby. We'll discuss everything over dinner and a good bottle of wine."

Cyd was grateful for the opportunity to retreat. Although she longed to be alone, she accepted Jacobi's invitation to dinner. She was aware that he could be a valuable source of information. At the same time, she cursed her job, which entailed having to put her own needs aside in favor of people with informational value.

After taking a hot shower and putting on fresh clothes, she felt ready for the next step in her research. On the short walk to the main house, she got another impressive demonstration of the weather conditions at the Great Lakes. A fine drizzle had mixed with the wind, and Cyd managed to arrive at the lobby of the main house, reasonably dry, at a run.

Jacobi had obviously been expecting them there. He spread his arms enthusiastically when she entered and conjured up a radiant smile on his lips.

"What a splendor in this humble environment," he started, not knowing that Cyd didn't have the slightest thing for such sayings. But she decided to play the game, after all, it was about her work.

"I gladly accept your compliment. But I must reject the modest environment. I can only congratulate you. You have, after all, created an impressive work here."

"Thank you, well I am frankly quite pleased with what has come out after years of work. You should have seen the plant twelve years ago when I took it over from my predecessor."

With a possessive gesture, he took Cyd by the elbow and led her into the dining room. Here, too, the ambience was captivating with its closeness to nature and solidity. Tables and chairs made of solid spruce wood, wide windows that offered a view of the lake and the trees on the shore.

One wall was dominated by a mighty stone fireplace, in which a cozy warming fire burned. On the walls were numerous photos of

successful anglers and their trophies. To the right and left of the fireplace, a few particularly large trophies were displayed as specimens.

They took a seat at a table near the fireplace and immediately a young man appeared and served dinner. When the waiter brought up the appetizer, Cyd realized how hungry she was. The appetizer was a strange pasta dish she had never tried before. Flat whole wheat pasta with spinach and potato chunks, the whole thing fused with chunks of cheese and topped with sage flavored butter. The right dish for cold, blustery weather.

"This tastes delicious, I haven't found anything like it on a menu," she commented without the slightest pretense.

"Pizzoccheri" he proudly explained, "a specialty from my old homeland. But try the wine, too. This appetizer must be accompanied by an Inferno, which is a tart red wine from northern Italy."

Then we had thick, juicy fillet steaks with herb butter and slices of crusty white bread.

Cyd was delighted with the menu and shared that with her host. "Like your resort, close to nature and everything of the highest quality".

"Well, I think a good meal is just part of it," the jovial Swiss proudly proclaimed. And in the long run, it pays to offer your guests only the best."

Cyd could only agree with him. If she ever had a fisherman for a husband and got tired of him, she would exile him here. She was all the more surprised that there were no guests in the dining room. As if the owner of the resort had read her thoughts, he brought up this fact.

"Our clientele is composed almost exclusively of anglers and also some water sports enthusiasts. Three days ago, a bad weather front was announced. You'll see for yourself what that means here on Lake Huron. The last guests left this afternoon." He raised his shoulders in resignation, but immediately defused the gesture with an understanding smile. "I think that's quite reasonable. It suits me, too. There's nothing worse than a bunch of frustrated guests constantly

bugging me for the latest weather forecast. We've learned to live with nature here."

"That seems like a healthy attitude to me. Where I come from, people are not always so reasonable."

"Let me guess," he interrupted her in a childlike manner. "New York?"

"Cold," she replied, "very cold."

"Then it can only be the West Coast, L.A., am I right?"

"Lukewarm, but still way off."

He raised his hands. "Then I'll have to pass," he said with mock frustration.

"The town in Sonora. I'm a reporter for a television station. My primary duties are research for the daily show 'Life Events.' That can be pretty hectic at times. That's because we work and broadcast in all weather conditions."

"Wow, a reporter from the South!" Jacobi slapped his hands together and Cyd could imagine the businessman in him awakening and thinking about what kind of publicity for his department he could expect from this acquaintance. "I can see a whole range of synergies that could result from our acquaintance," he also launched right in. "Just send all your annoyed colleagues and desert city dwellers to me. On a therapeutic active vacation, so to speak. To learn to let go and become humble."

Cyd smiled. "Well, most of the people I know go to the golf course for that. But all kidding aside. I like the idea. We'll have to talk about that in more detail."

The Swiss's eyes gleamed at this announcement. Jacobi really made every effort, he was a perfect host, the kindness in person.

He brought a bottle without a label and poured the slightly yellowish liquid into two glasses. "Grappa, it just goes with it. Helps digest the pizzoccheri." He toasted the glasses in his European way. Cyd sipped her drink. It was a killer drink. But she could imagine it

having a wholesome effect on the lump of pasta, potato and cheese she had in her stomach.

When Jacobi finally began to praise the wonderful location of his fishing center and to tout the unique fish stock in the lake, she knew that he, too, saw nothing in her but a valuable contact and some potential for publicity.

She decided to play the game according to her rules. So she listened attentively for a while and asked the questions she would have asked if the subject had been of interest to her or, better, to her station.

Then she steered the conversation to her target. "But what originally brought me here is quite a different issue. I'm working on an important matter for which I need to speak to a scientist who supposedly lives here. Dr. Lawrence Young. He is said to live on a small island called Ithaca. Do you happen to know him?"

Jacobi's ears perked up when she mentioned the name. He straightened up and frowned. "Dr. Lawrence is familiar to me. His island is called Shade Island, though. Well, maybe he renamed it for himself. I wouldn't put it past him. He's a strange fellow."

Jacobi led Cyd to a large map on the wall that showed the Perry Sound area in full nautical detail. "Here, this is Shade Island. It's about 25 miles from here." Cyd memorized the island's coordinates before returning to the table with her host.

"Is Dr. Young one of your clients, too? Is he an avid fisherman or does he have other reasons for living in such a lonely area?"

"Well, I can't really call him a customer in my resort. He comes by now and then. Usually he docks his boat here when he goes into town to do shopping and other things. Sometimes he comes into the bar for a drink before he leaves again."

Jacobi's voice expressed deep incomprehension for this distant behavior, at the same time Cyd heard that he too would like to know more about the strange neighbor. The Swiss had an innate need to know about his fellow human beings, possibly even to feel responsible for them.

Cyd tried to use the socially engaged man's knowledge of human nature to her advantage with a compliment. "You are a cosmopolitan man with a lot of life experience, what kind of person do you think he is?"

She recognized from his satisfied smile that she had chosen the right tone. As he lowered his voice and moved a little closer, she became aware of the inner excitement that had gripped the Swiss on this subject. In a quiet conspiratorial tone, he began to draw the picture of the mysterious neighbor.

"To the few people who have had dealings with him, he is a maverick, not to say a crank. Confidentially, I consider him a most peculiar contemporary. Always polite, there is nothing wrong with his manners, but somehow lifeless, or no, quite extremely tense, like a person who is under the greatest pressure.

Sometimes he looks to me like someone on the verge of a breakdown. Really scary, in fact I think in some ways he scares me. That's how someone who's about to go on a rampage or commit suicide might look."

"Did they ever notice any signs of violence in him? Or have you talked to him about it?"

The Swiss man squirmed, seeming embarrassed to have ventured so far with his assessment. "No, as I said, Dr. Young is always highly controlled. And our conversations have always been about trivia, but, now that you mention it. I once made a comment about a corruption case involving a regional politician, but he immediately changed the subject. It was as if the subject matter was too sordid for the doctor - or too personal to discuss with someone you know only superficially. Strangely, now I also remember the look on his face, as if he were personally affected, full of suffering and disgust."

Jacobi shook his head uncomprehendingly and then poured more of the grappa. "Yet fishing would give him so much distraction," he returned to his favorite topic. "We always have managers as guests here who recover from overwork syndromes, nervous breakdowns or

burnout while fishing. There's nothing better for exhausted, burned-out people to get back to themselves than dangling a fishing pole in the water and waiting for a capital fellow to bite."

This was a topic that Cyd certainly did not want to get involved in again. Realizing that she would not get any concrete information from her interlocutor, she prepared to leave.

"I can imagine that very well. I have seen that each cottage also has its own jetty with a boat. Does the use of the boat require any special preparation or knowledge?" she asked with a professional interview tone.

"No, not at all, the boats are fueled and quite easy to operate. A 12 hp outboard with electric starter. As soon as the weather gets better, you can see for yourself. For more challenging trips, we also have a seaworthy larger boat with a 150 hp inboard motor. It is located in the boathouse. If you wish, I would be happy to accompany you on a trip. I have not taken a lady boating since my wife passed away three years ago. It would give me extraordinary pleasure if I could be your skipper."

That men, no matter what age, always have to hit on younger women - Cyd tried not to show her disapproval. As a true newspaper professional, she answered engagingly and noncommittally.

"I appreciate your offer, I may take you up on it, but right now I need my beauty sleep. Don't count me out at breakfast. I have some catching up to do on sleep and this seems like the place to do it." To stop any further pleasantries, she stood up and withdrew.

In her cabin, her first path led to the shower. She needed this kind of cleansing to rinse off the hypocrisy that her profession entailed.

She knew it would be a short night. Weather or not, what she had in mind would not tolerate any delay. For this she would also accept the disappointment or even the anger of her host.

The cabin was indeed homey, with captivating quality and functionality. The gas fireplace in the corner could be activated at the push

of a button, and the massive bed made of leached spruce had dimensions that would have comfortably sufficed even for two-meter men. European-style quilts and down pillows provided exquisite sleeping comfort. Perhaps she would mention the resort journalistically after all. As a small compensation for her mendacity, so to speak. Cyd tilted the window to let in the spicy air and set the alarm for five o'clock. Outside, the branches of a maple tree whipped against the roof of the cabin and the wind howled in the rafters. Cyd had left the curtains open and could watch an impressive spectacle. On the lake the waves were piling up and the storm was driving white whitecaps over the water. At times the gusts were so strong that they shook the building to its foundations and the vibrations were transmitted to the walls and floor. Cyd enjoyed the coolness and freshness of the breezes that flowed through the cabin. Despite the background noise, she fell into a deep dreamless sleep shortly thereafter.

Even before the alarm clock rang, she was awake. Rested and full of energy, she turned on the coffee machine and then went to the bathroom to get ready for the day.

Rarely had a breakfast coffee tasted so good as on this stormy morning on Perry Sound. With the cup in her hand, she watched the grandiose spectacle through the window. The storm had increased in strength. The water of the huge lake seemed to boil and the treetops moved back and forth like huge fans.

After dressing warmly and packing her reporter's gear, she left the cabin. On the way to the jetty, the storm hit her with full force. Maybe Jacobi was right and it really was not possible to go out in such weather. But her hesitation lasted only a moment; she knew the conditions were favorable for them. Dr. Young would have to take her in, willy-nilly. It would be unthinkable to turn anyone away in such weather conditions.

She also dreaded the thought of spending several days in the company of Mr. Jacobi. After all, as a white-water specialist, wild waters

were familiar to her. As a concession to the more difficult conditions, she decided to borrow Mr. Jacobi's large boat. The boathouse was unlocked and the ignition key was in place. Cyd saw this as a good omen and at the same time as an invitation from her friendly host. She left a short message at the boathouse, then entered the island's data into the GPS, started the engine and set the boat off.

Many experienced mariners and circumnavigators agree that the worst storms of the oceans and the most devastating hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico cannot match the murderous weather phenomena of the Great Lakes. More wrecks lie at the bottom of these lakes than anywhere else in the world. In the fall, when the cold fronts coming from Alaska move across the lakes, the clear blue skies can suddenly close in and within minutes the first gusts of wind come, making navigation a gamble. Thunderstorms so violent that even on larger ships the foreship is no longer visible through the walls of water. Lightning in never-ending succession.

As soon as Cyd left the sheltered bay, she noticed the difference between a paddle boat and a small motorboat. The paddle boat cut through the waves, whereas her boat was wildly buffeted by wind and waves. The wind shear made it impossible to sail a certain course. The direction of the wind and waves changed so rapidly that Cyd found no way to dampen the force of the blows by purposefully cutting into the waves. She found it difficult to keep track of the GPS and the approaching breakers at the same time. The shocks were sometimes so violent that she thought the boat would have to break into pieces.

So she bravely fought her way through the early morning lake. After hours of sailing through the boiling water, she suddenly saw the island in front of her.

"Please dear God, let the mooring be in a position sheltered from the wind." She spoke the words desperately into the wind. The worst

she could imagine now was a failed mooring maneuver and a return to the fishing resort with no satisfactory result.

Her request was answered. When she had come to within about a hundred meters of the island, she recognized a deeply cut bay, where there was also the jetty and a larger boathouse at the end of the bay. She was now on the leeward side of the island and felt the lake becoming increasingly calm. She brought out fenders and moored the boat on the first try at the jetty, where she moored it securely. Then she leaned back for a moment in the comfortable boatman's chair and took a deep breath.

Through the fogged-up windshield, she looked out over the rocky island. She could make out a wooden house on a hill. Smoke was coming out of the chimney, which was immediately blown away in all directions by the wind. Otherwise, there was no sign of life.

He probably didn't even hear me arrive, she tried to reassure herself. But in view of the loneliness of this place and in the knowledge that she was completely at the doctor's mercy, a disturbing feeling came over her. She toyed with the idea of casting off again, returning home, and giving up researching the case. For the first time, it was no longer a thrill or a game. A warning instinct told her that she was in mortal danger here. Again she looked to the house. Hidden there are all the answers you need to close the case. Get it over with, said the reporter's voice inside her. She fought down the panic and slung her bag on her shoulder. Then she left the boat and made her way to Doctor Young's house.

Although Governor Cavendish shied away from open confrontation, Jimenez felt his influence. Fearing Jenkins, the politician never took an open stand. But he was excellent at spraying his poison from the underground and making life difficult for the sheriff.

In order to contain the growing unrest among the population and also for lack of other meaningful options, Jimenez decided to send search parties into the desert. It was a shrewd move on the part of the sheriff. On the one hand, it sent a signal that he was not willing to

put up with the violence against the young women; on the other hand, he hoped to come across more depots with organs. And last but not least, he included the governor in his action and forced him to cooperate with the sheriff's department by requesting from Cavenish several National Guard units to comb the desert under the S.D.'s direction.

North of the Sonora Highway, near the Arizona border in the death zone, the 'ground zero' of unlawful immigration, they kept coming across dead bodies of immigrants who had lost their lives trying to enter the U.S., victims of the coyotes, as the smuggling gangs were called, dead from exhaustion, dying of thirst, left behind, possibly murdered and robbed of their last belongings. Despite the warning signs in Spanish, "Don't go! It's not worth the suffering!", border patrols had apprehended over five hundred thousand UDA - undocumented aliens - in recent months. How many had gotten through no one knew. Dreams of job opportunities and the knowledge that millions had made it before them were a powerful incentive.

In the light of the stars, the march went over steep mountain paths or dust roads through the endless cactus desert or thorny bushes. In stretches, the landscape was littered with plastic bottles, scraps of clothing or other debris left behind by the flood of immigrants. Beyond the barbed-wire enclosure that separates Mexico from the U.S., it was necessary to dodge motion detectors, video cameras, helicopter patrols and officers with heat detectors and night-vision goggles. In the heat of the day, immigrants, often carrying nothing but a bundle of water bottles and a trash bag for sleep and camouflage, hid in the ditches and hollows, behind hills or under scraggy mesquite bushes and palo verde trees. They knew that if anything went wrong, the coyotes would settle down and leave them to their fate in the desert.

After ten days, the morale of the young National Guardsmen had sunk so low that Jenkins decided to discontinue the operation. He had expected little from it and achieved even less.

The critical civic associations and media had remained unimpressed by the measure. They had also found no further traces of the embalmer.

Cyd knocked on the door and waited with anticipation to see what was in store for her. From the depths of the house, soft piano playing penetrated outside. In the rustle of the wind, she sometimes heard the music clearly and distinctly, then the sounds disappeared again. Now she could also hear singing. It was not a trained voice accompanying the piano playing, and Cyd doubted that the composer of the song would have imagined or wished for a performer like this for his work. Yet there was a peculiar fascination in the detachment of the melody and the rough, somewhat dissonant sprechgesang that seemed like an improvisation. Cyd knocked again, but the music continued to play unchanged. So she decided to enter the house by herself.

The door was unlocked and she entered an anteroom with a coat rack. Now she could clearly hear the music and knocked on the door from the inside to announce her coming. Again, no response. The piano player seemed to be completely absorbed in what he was doing.

The vestibule expanded into a hallway from which various side wings branched off. Before she could start looking for the master of the house, Cyd's attention was caught by a fascinating object. In a bay window of the hallway was a life-size figure of a man sitting in a lotus position. What captivated her gaze was the indescribable expression of detachment and otherworldly rapture that the work of art radiated. Strangely, the sculpture seemed to be made of fresh untreated clay.

Cyd tore herself away from the sight and followed the music into the main room of the house. The walls were taken up by shelves, most of which were filled with books. On one wall was the brick fireplace and next to it a large wicker basket filled with logs. In the back third of the room stood a black concert grand piano. The lid of

the instrument was open, obscuring the view of the pianist. An eerie feeling came over Cyd. Slowly, she walked around the piano.

Cyd immediately recognized that in this person she had before her the model for the sculpture from before, in flesh and blood. The man looked up and smiled kindly at Cyd.

"Good morning." It was a greeting to a familiar person. It's how you smile at your spouse when you meet them in the morning. The doctor didn't seem to care who she was. Perhaps it no longer made any difference to him whether he lived in solitude or had people around him. So Cyd also decided not to inquire whether he was really Doctor Young.

"Good morning. What are you playing?"

The doctor answered without interrupting his play. "The words of the song came from the pen of a German poet who lost two of his six children to illness. The Austrian composer who wrote the notes to it had to witness six of his eleven siblings being buried at an early age. Both lived in the nineteenth century. Instead of going insane in their grief, they left their posterity some of the most beautiful poetry and songs."

"Perhaps through their pain, the two of them gained access to a deeper insight," Cyd tried to continue the theme.

"Do you mean the realization that death and impermanence are the basis for birth and renewal?"

Cyd was irritated by Doctor Young's condescending tone. "Yes, that's what I mean. I don't think anyone will ever be able to empathize with the pain felt by someone who loses a loved one, whether through death or other fate. Who knows, maybe the strength of the feelings and how we deal with the pain is what sets us humans apart."

The doctor dropped his hands on the keys, creating a wild dissonance.

"You're right. " He now looked her straight in the eye. "Who can know?" Suddenly a slight smile played around his lips and his gaze seemed rapt, as if he were reciting verses.

"There's a young woman fighting her way through the worst storm in a long time at the risk of her life to educate me about the meaningfulness of dying and the comfort the bereaved find in grieving with dignity. What have I done to deserve this?"

Cyd was sympathetic to the sarcastic words, suspecting that a personal tragedy of immense proportions was the cause of his loneliness. She decided to confront Young directly with her concern.

"Why I am here is indeed related to death and despair. Not on a philosophical level, though. The task is to catch a serial killer who has been murdering young women and preserving their bodies for months, maybe even years. I am involved in the investigation as a representative of the media. We have sent a profile of the perpetrator to psychiatrists and psychotherapists. In one case, we received a promising lead on a sick person suffering from delusions of guilt. Dr. Stafford, a psychotherapist from the city in Sonora, suggested that her patient might fit the profile. Shortly thereafter, she was murdered."

Dr. Young's expression had changed increasingly during Cyd's remarks. His body tensed and his eyes took on a blank expression.

"Poor Karen, victim of her devoted work."

To the journalist's ears, it sounded almost like a taunt. "You knew Dr. Stafford?" asked Cyd in surprise.

"We did our clinical year together in San Diego. She was an excellent therapist. But why are you coming to me with this?" The doctor's expression was one of incomprehension and rejection.

"Doctor, you are considered the best specialist in delusional disorders. If the killer is indeed suffering from delusions of guilt, you could help us understand him better."

The doctor now seemed to finally lose his patience.

"How do you imagine it? Delusional disorders are among the most complex mental illnesses. You don't seriously expect me to give an

expert opinion on a patient I don't know personally. I find it outrageous that you want to intrude on me here and involve me in your shenanigans." The doctor's voice had become increasingly fierce and had taken on a cutting tone.

"I need to rest now. I was taken by the news of Karen's death. I'll show you the guest room. As soon as weather conditions permit, leave again."

He stood up and led Cyd into a small room on the other side of the hallway. Then he withdrew without further comment.

Cyd was so frustrated that she would have preferred to go back right away. She lay down on the narrow bed in the sparsely furnished chamber and thought about how to proceed. Based on her years of experience, she knew that a first rejection didn't mean too much in her line of work. On the other hand, she had put so much hope into this venture that she couldn't put defeat away so easily.

What an arrogant snob, she thought with tears in her eyes. I'll show him yet. Now the efforts of the last few days were making themselves felt. She decided to catch up on some sleep. Unsettled by the eerie atmosphere in this house, it seemed better to her to play it safe. Since the door had no lock, she slid a chair under the doorknob, undressed and lay down on the hard bed. Cyd was still wondering why the doctor had reacted so violently, but she couldn't pursue the thought any further, because shortly afterwards she fell into a deep, exhausted sleep.

She did not know what had woken her up. However, she was sure that the reason was not that she was no longer tired. In fact, she felt wiped out. A glance at her travel alarm clock told her that she had slept for about two hours. A strange tension that she couldn't place was in the air. Was it signs of impending danger, or was the breakthrough in the embalmer's case imminent? Cyd hoped it was the latter, of course. Perhaps she could persuade Doctor Young to reveal his knowledge after all. She sensed quite clearly that there was some-

thing he didn't want to talk about. Cyd decided to freshen up and then make a second attempt.

In the hallway, the first thing that caught her eye was the sculpture of Young's double. It was strange. There was nothing left of the celestial serenity that had fascinated her when she first arrived. The man's posture was more erect and radiated tension. And although no details seemed changed, the statue's face was also altered in expression. Uncertainty, rejection possibly even fear seemed to express the basic mood of the sculpture. Cyd wondered if she should ask the doctor about the meaning of his counter-image.

Maybe I'd better leave it to him to bring up this subject, she reflected. It could be assumed that this statue had a special meaning for Young, perhaps the artistic work on the figure of the double even represented a form of self-therapy, and she certainly didn't want to offend the doctor even more.

On the way from the bathroom she heard someone working in the kitchen. The master of the house was standing at the stove, busy preparing a dish that gave off a delicious smell.

"Sorry to just barge in here, but I heard noises coming from the kitchen and wanted to offer my help."

"Hi Cyd, did you get any sleep? You looked awfully tired!" Dr. Young seemed in good spirits and smiled at her in a friendly, if somewhat uncertain, manner. He was obviously not used to having guests.

"Yes, doctor, I slept soundly. Now I feel better."

"Oh, never mind that doctor," Young said with a dismissive wave of his hand, "my name is Lawrence."

For some reason, Cyd found it difficult to address this man by his first name. But she knew that if she wanted to reach him with her request, she had to establish a good relationship with him.

"Fine, Lawrence, divide me up. What smells so delicious?"

"A Cajun-style fish stew. Ate it when I was a student, when I could afford it, on the docks in San Diego." He looked around for a mo-

ment. "I baked us a baguette to go with it, you can cut that up, and then we need white wine. There in the fridge, the bottle opener is already there."

It became a meal like among old friends, with superficial chit-chat and much laughter. Then, as they sat having coffee, Lawrence's mood suddenly changed. He stared at Cyd and asked straight out.

"What do you want to know from me?" Surprised by the sudden turn, she searched for the right words.

"In what connection could the motive of the murderer be with his illness. Dr. Stafford spoke of delusions of guilt or sin in connection with religious delusions with a salvation mission."

"Religious delusion with a salvation mission," Dr. Young shook his head defensively. "How many times have I made that diagnosis myself. Today I ask myself, is there really a delusional disorder when a person's behavior, measured against the mediocrity of his environment, has taken on pathological features? Does not every individual have the right to live his convictions in the way that suits his own personality? Is the need to heal in the face of suffering and pain, to do good to one's fellow human beings, necessarily a delusion of salvation or a religious delusion with a mission to save, a special form of megalomania? Does not the striving for renewal correspond to the basic characteristics of man? When a person believes that he or she is to blame for events for which he or she cannot really be blamed - for hunger and poverty in the world, for example - this is called delusion of guilt. And when this is done in the belief that they have sinned, or violated divine or moral principles, this is called delusion of sin. Now what if a person actually sins against others in an unforgivable way, is the natural feeling of guilt and the desire for atonement part of his pathological behavior and an expression of his psychological instability?"

In my work, I have made the experience that delusions of guilt develop especially in situations where someone feels guilt as a natural reaction to supposedly most serious violations of moral or ethical-

moral values, even if the legal values do not indicate guilt. Thus, abandonment of a spouse, marital fraud, mental cruelty and social coldness of all kinds are often seen as petty offenses. In a reversal of this view, the fact that a mother abandons her child in order to find fulfillment in the arms of a new partner could likewise be described as insanity.

For people with delusions of guilt, there is no atonement or reparation. According to their 'sick' subjective sense, their guilt may run so deep that more atonement is necessary than by the standards of the environment."

Cyd had become increasingly restless. She increasingly came to the conclusion that the doctor was protecting his patients instead of investigating the interface between their illness and homicidal tendencies.

"Our murderer kills young women and preserves their dead bodies," she interjected in a quivering voice, "why does he do it? Surely not out of atonement."

"They confuse symptoms with the cause of the disease. The perpetrator may find nothing wrong with killing other people because of his clinical picture, but he may also want to take revenge on a certain group of people. He may target an institution with his deeds; it would be just as conceivable that his hatred is directed against the contented middle classes, the establishment, or women. The question arises, what are the causes of these motives? If Dr. Stafford was right in her diagnosis, the killer has deep guilt at some point in his life. That is what you should be looking for.

"I'm sorry doctor, I can't do much with that. I just can't see the connections. For the life of me, I can't imagine what guilt could be strong enough to make a person a serial killer."

"Dear Cyd, I will tell you a story, maybe then you will understand what I am talking about."

Dr. Young took a sip of his cold coffee, then straightened up in his chair and sat down so that he could show off his body language like a storyteller.

"Once upon a time, there was a doctor who had a beautiful wife who, as a young physician, had taken a position with him at High Sierra Hospital. While he had taken a residency in the psychiatric department, she was doing her specialization as an internist. The young academic succeeded in publishing several professional articles in important medical journals, and before long he had become the star of the hospital. His wife rejoiced with him and supported him wherever she could. But with success, arrogance entered the doctor's soul. He neglected his wife, preferring to spend his time with famous professional colleagues at congresses. Judith, his wife, hoped that he would change if they had a child, and so she endeavored to become pregnant by her husband. When she joyfully broke the news to her husband, he became furious. He insulted his wife, accusing her of betraying his trust and trying to destroy his career. Furious, he left the house and went to the nearest bar, where he got senselessly drunk. Finally, he got involved with a prostitute who persuaded him to come to her house. On the way to her place, he caused an accident in which a young woman and her nine-year-old daughter were seriously injured. As a result, he lost his employment and was sentenced to five months in prison. His house and all his reserves went for legal fees and court costs. Judith moved into her mother's house and did everything she could to provide support for him. She defended him in court, declared her everlasting love for him. He, on the other hand, refused any contact with her and indulged in wild accusations against her.

The months in prison began to change the young man for good. The violence and meanness of everyday prison life made him sensitive and vulnerable. It was only when his best friend visited him and opened his eyes to the dedication and desperation Judith had shown for him that he finally realized what he had done to her. He had only one

goal left, to ask Judith for forgiveness and to start completely new with her and the child in another place.

On the day of his release, his first trip led him to Judith's mother's house. There he learned that she had been missing for a week. He drove to the sheriff's office, who told him that all the necessary measures had been taken, but since there was no evidence of a violent crime, the authorities' options were limited. After all, he said, it was understandable that Judith, with all he had done to her, had withdrawn after his release. The man was not satisfied with that. With his last remaining friends, he organized search parties to scour the woods in the area. He himself joined a group with tracking dogs.

In those hours, as he struggled through the undergrowth, he literally went through hell. He begged God to give him back his wife. An image accompanied him in his search. He could not forget the look of despair on Judith's face during her last visit to the prison, when he had rejected her with a particularly spiteful remark.

His prayers were not answered. In a small clearing between the bushes they found the body of his wife. The body was already decomposing and had been gnawed by wild animals. Between the woman's legs was a balloon-like structure and in front of it the decomposed body of a fetus. With horror, the physician realized that the corpse gases had driven out the uterus of his wife, which had also pushed the unborn child outward.

In his pain, he desperately banged his head against the trunk of a tree over and over again until the men of the search party finally held him down and immobilized him.

Since that moment, no one had heard him say a word, and after a few days he had disappeared from the place." Dr. Young sat back as if glad the story was over. "Now do you see what I mean?"

Cyd could not prevent tears from running down her cheeks as she told the story. She was not ashamed of her compassion. It was hard for her to ask the question, but she had to. "Were you the doctor?"

The transformation that took place in Dr. Young's face was so gruesome that Cyd had to avert her gaze. First, his gaze took on a helpless, disbelieving expression, then the veins at his temples swelled, and finally his face began to contort into a hateful grimace. In a gasping, hoarse voice, he snapped at her.

"You dare to invade my realm and question me. You have undone years of work. What about your guilt, Ms. Alexander? You use people for your profane purposes and you do not care in the least what a trail of devastation you leave behind. You will not escape your punishment either!"

Abruptly he stood up and left the house, disappearing into the half-light of the stormy evening.

Cyd was shocked by the doctor's outburst. The man was deeply disturbed and dangerous. When she first became aware of the last threat the doctor had made, it sent a chill down her spine. She had to get off the island as soon as possible. In view of Dr. Young's condition, she did not dare leave the house. She could only wait until the doctor calmed down. Later, she would try to get to the boat secretly.

She pushed the chair under the doorknob again and curled up on the bed, wrapped in the blanket, as if to protect herself against some unseen danger.

After some time, she heard footsteps and the slamming of the front door. Over the next two hours, she could hear various sounds coming from the hallway and the main room. Cyd decided to wait and see how things would develop. If the doctor wanted to relent, he would contact her on his own. If not, she would attempt to escape during the night.

A thunderstorm had joined the storm. Bright lightning repeatedly illuminated the barren room through the window.

She must have dozed off. The sound of piano music and singing came through the closed door. There was nothing relaxed or transfigured about this song. A wild hammered staccato was accompanied by the doctor's pressed voice.

Cyd decided to make her escape as long as the doctor indulged in his music. Carefully, she opened the door and slipped into the hallway. There was no light burning, but the fire in the living room fireplace cast its flickering light outside so that she could look around. With horror, her eyes fell on the doctor's alter ego. The statue resembled a wild animal, its distorted grimace distorted, in a crouching position, hands propped up between its legs, ready to pounce. Cyd had to force herself not to cry out loud. Bright flashes and explosive thunderclaps kept piercing the darkness of the house. The music could be heard loud and clear, with scattered thunderclaps mixed in. Her senses strained to the utmost, Cyd tried to reach the door silently. Then something unbelievable happened. Lightning struck the house and when the thunderclap died away, Cyd thought her senses were playing tricks on her. Playing and singing distorted into a grotesque, drawn out sound that finally died out altogether, growing deeper and deeper. Cyd was familiar with these sounds. This is what it sounded like when you turned a tape recorder with your hands, or when the recorder ran out of power during a blackout. All at once the full significance of her perception became clear to her. The doctor had not played and sung himself, he had staged the music with a tape recording to make her feel safe.

Fear flooded through her, such intense fear that she was almost paralyzed. Where was Young? Cyd continued to move toward the door, her head constantly turning in all directions so as not to miss any vital information. As she stood with her back to the statue, a sense of danger caused her to turn her head. Incredulous, she noticed out of the corner of her eye how the bent figure began to straighten up, arms reaching out in her direction to grab her. She jumped back, slamming with all her might into the tall bookshelf that served as a sort of room divider separating the main room from the hallway. The shelf crashed to the floor and the books fell to the floor. Now her eyes fell on the fire hook hanging from a wrought iron fixture, at the

same time she noticed that the psychiatrist had seen her look and also the gun.

Without taking their eyes off the other, they both made an effort to get to the gun.

Suddenly, Young set off on a leap that would take him toward the fireplace. However, as he jumped, he stepped on one of the books lying around, causing him to lose control of his movement. His impact on the ground was terrifying. He hit his head on the fireplace surround and remained senseless.

Cyd's first impulse was to help him. But then she remembered the expression on his face and decided to take flight.

As if in a flash of light, the image - the room in the glow of the fire, the doctor's figure among the scattered books on the floor, the grand piano behind - imprinted itself on Cyd's consciousness, then she was out of the house. She rushed down the path to the dock and jumped into the boat. Everywhere she supposed she saw shadows and the murderous look of the madman. She started the engine and undid the ropes. While she pushed the throttle forward and accelerated the boat through the roaring waves, she glanced back.

"Find the culprit's guilt, then you have his motive". This sentence was their whole yield.

Gillardid hated anonymous messages. In most cases, they came from busybodies, crackpots, or lunatics. Sometimes from saboteurs or the perpetrators themselves. In the flood of hundreds of messages and tips that came in every day, they accounted for about three percent. Many of his colleagues had taken to ignoring anonymous tips and disposing of them unread. Gillardi's maxim was to take every tip seriously and document it. Always with the caveat that sources of unknown origin were to be treated with special caution.

That morning in the mail was a handwritten letter without a return address. The letter was written in a firm, even handwriting in midnight blue ink on high-quality paper.

"Dear Mr. Gillardi, you do not know me and I would like to leave it at that. What you should know about me is my special disposition. I have had the ability of clairvoyance since childhood and have used this gift many times for the benefit of my fellow man. I do not seek attention or fame, nor do I have any financial interests. The reason why I am contacting you is as follows: two days ago, during a séance, I came into contact with a deceased relative of a client. He shared a message with me that I should pass on to you.

The message is: You have already met the perpetrator. I hope you can do something with it. My blessing and white light against the forces of darkness."

Once again, Gillardi wished he could throw the letter in the trash and not have to worry about it. His decades of experience as an investigator told him that there was more than a ninety-nine percent chance this was a bad joke or a hoax. But he also knew that with the less than one percent, anything was possible. He had experienced parapsychological phenomena so incredible that he never talked to anyone about them. So this experience became a burden to him. In the coming hours and days, his subconscious would sift through all the details of the last time in search of a possible target. Of course, he was also immediately endeavoring to find clues with the help of conscious memories. But the details were so vague that he got nowhere with them. With iron discipline, he concentrated on the rest of the mail.

The next morning Gillardi woke up in a cold sweat. In his dream, the strange old man from Conrad's lecture had appeared to him. He had nodded at him and grinned mockingly at him. Now he also remembered the piercing look of the gray eyes that had looked at him appraisingly, as if to find out who he was dealing with. Gillardi wondered what the old man, dressed up so conspicuously, had been doing in the lecture. Interest in the subject, a hint of the FBI's presen-

ce, or a search for potential victims? This could be a hot lead. He had to look into it.

Ten days had passed since Cyd's return. She had still had to deal with the angry Jacobi in Canada.

With a lot of patience and tact, she managed to calm the Swiss down again to such an extent that he was no longer angry with her and they could part in 'friendship'.

Their report was noted with grim disappointment by Jenkins and later by the task force. Apparently, no one had placed too many expectations on the project. Cyd felt a peculiar frustration at this attitude. She herself had never had the slightest doubt about the importance of her trip. She was surprised that it was Ruth, of all people, who appeased her and tried to give her comfort.

"Don't worry about it, Cyd. You know as well as I do that such actions are rarely directly effective. Successful police work consists of consistent, meticulous detail work. I have also given up on the Andean project. I don't think we'll get anywhere in this case by traveling to exotic countries." Cyd was moved by the words of her previous opponent.

"Thank you for your understanding, Ruth. It's a nice experience to see you on my side." Then she abruptly changed her tone, was all reporter again. "Does this mean the position for the Peru trip is vacant?"

Ruth laughed out. "You really are incorrigible. I don't think anything can get you down that easily. Yes, if you want to take over the trip, you have my blessing. Whether you'll get Jenkins' blessing as easily, though, I'd like to doubt."

Her boss was indeed proving to be a tough nut to crack in this matter. All attempts to convince him of the necessity of this trip had so far been unsuccessful. But Cyd felt that after what had happened, she would not be able to reintegrate into the team so easily. She had distanced herself too far from the others through her initiative to still

belong to it. She was also firmly convinced that the team rejected her after her unauthorized action. But at the same time, especially now, after the traumatic experiences in Canada, she could not simply give up her involvement in the case. So she had no choice but to continue the investigation in her own way, detached from the association of the others, at the greatest possible distance and completely on her own.

At the end of the week - Jenkins was usually a little less charged on Fridays - Cyd made another attempt to push the Andes project through with her boss. Combatively, she argued that the investigative team's work was stagnating and that there were no new clues and no leads worth investigating.

"It's an opportunity, the one thing we haven't tried yet, nothing more, nothing less," she said defiantly. "I don't think we should dismiss this opportunity lightly, and before I sit around here, I might as well interview Prof. McBride."

The media magnate looked up in annoyance. "There's no question of sitting around at all, there are plenty of routine tasks that have to be done."

"I know, but they might as well have our volunteers do it. Taking me off this case now, or even tying up my attention with paperwork, is what I would call an intemperate waste of resources."

"Could it be," Jenkins said, shaking his head, "that you're taking yourself too seriously? It sounds like the FBI is depending on your special skills or knowledge to work this case. Or are you holding something back that I don't know about?"

"No, not at all," Cyd hastened to assure. "It's just that I've invested so much time, energy and commitment in this case that it's taken on a very special meaning for me. And I would also like to remind you that I have been given the chance by you to rehabilitate myself. I feel very strongly about that as well."

"That's all right, I certainly appreciate your input, and you have also made remarkable contributions so far. If you feel so strongly that we

should take a hard look at McBride, do so. But treat the man with tact. He may be considered an eccentric and psychologically outlandish in many circles, but he is still scientifically a great authority in his field who should be treated with respect. And consult with the investigative team. I don't want any secrecy with the FBI."

"Thanks, boss," Cyd said, "I knew I could count on you."

When Cyd announced her intention to travel to Chile to interview Professor McBride at the next meeting, she had expected rejection and opposition from various quarters. Surprisingly, she received support from the very people she least expected.

Gillardi, however, was predictably skeptical. "How do you come up with Chile? Ms. Clark wanted to go to Peru and now suddenly Chile. We have already tried several times to contact McBride to question him on the matter. However, no one seems to know where he is at present. According to the emigration office, he has not left the country. However, this does not mean anything. We know that during his excavation trips he repeatedly crosses the border into Mexico in his all-terrain vehicle and stays there for days at a time. As it seems, the professor does not take it with the border formalities very exactly. But it could just as well be that he is somewhere in the desert of Texas or New Mexico. The man doesn't fit any pattern. He's often out in the field for months at a time for digs. So how are you going to track him down, and where do you even intend to look for him?"

Cyd pointed to her papers as she cautiously answered. "He could be in Chile. Anyway, I intend to start my search in the Atacama Desert."

Surprised remarks were made by the other team members.

"What the hell makes you think he's in the Atacama?" asked Spencer between them.

"I talked to the Mexican woman who takes care of the house. She tipped me off after I drilled long enough."

"The woman will have some explaining to do," Spencer interjected bitterly. "To us, she stiffly claimed that she had no idea where the professor was staying."

"I think they're doing her an injustice," Cyd hastened to remark. "She said the same thing to me. Only after asking several times did she tell me the Atacama. Probably it was nothing more than intuition on her part. In any case, it would be a first step."

"I think Miss Alexander is right," Conrad intervened, "after all, we have nothing to lose. At the moment, we're only working with speculation anyway. And I think this only strengthens suspicions about McBride. What reason could he have to leave the country illegally if he has nothing to hide? To me, he is our prime suspect. In fact, I would like to go a step further. Maybe it would be a good idea to check where McBride was staying when the victims disappeared."

The sudden consternation of those present after this unequivocal call showed how daring the idea was for most that the world-famous academic might be the wanted killer.

Then Dr. Chambers spoke up and broke the silence. "Frankly, I find your suggestion shocking, Dr. Conrad, all the more so because you have made us aware that the professor does indeed fit the profile of the perpetrator in many respects. I believe we should give Miss Alexander every assistance in her endeavor."

"All right," Gillardi turned to Cyd, "since you are not a representative of a government agency, you can probably accomplish the most in this matter with the least amount of bureaucracy. I will provide you with a letter of authentication proving that you are conducting your research with our knowledge. This is not an official request for legal assistance, but as support for your journalistic work, it might be helpful."

Cyd could not believe the way things were suddenly developing; both Ian's reaction and Chambers' words had caught her completely off guard. Ian had indeed brought McBride into the picture, but more as an example of possible motives of a confused mind and not as a

concrete suspicion or even an accusation. The opinion of the usually cautious and reserved medical examiner also surprised her.

What surprised her most was that Ruth had not taken a stand at all at this meeting. After all, she had taken over the project from her, as it were.

Suddenly the old mistrust was awake again. Did the others want to get rid of them? Was the team up to something? Were the others following a trail she wasn't supposed to know about? This excess of approval and agreement was deeply suspicious to her. I think you're starting to develop paranoia, she said to herself. When things finally go your way, you'll suddenly feel persecuted. The desert will do you good. Maybe you'll find more clarity there.

The members of the task force had left the War Room, except for Jimenez and Gillardi, who were always last, and Conrad, whom the profiler had asked to be available for a talk. Ian wondered what else there was to talk about. As soon as they were among themselves, Gillardi handed them a description of the person with a sketch and got straight to the point.

"There are vague circumstantial leads to a person who may be able to help us. It is an anonymous tip from the public. I don't know anything more than that myself."

Conrad shook his head doubtfully. "I wouldn't have taken you for a man who follows up anonymous leads. Is that standard practice at the FBI?"

Gillardi avoided responding to the personal innuendo and answered emphatically matter-of-factly. "In our company, each employee decides for himself what importance he attaches to his sources of information. I take the position that every piece of information can be decisive. Therefore, I also follow up on every lead." He then turned to the sheriff. "I want your deputies to look around unobtrusively for the old man. And when I say unobtrusively, I mean it. Tempers are boiling in the poor sections of town. People are angry because they

believe the police are ignoring the murders of women among the Mexican population. The wealthy citizens feel threatened. The victims of the embalmer come from this population group, besides they fear the potential for violence in the slums and suburbs. The drug mafia and organized crime have always been sensitive to police presence in the streets. They have recently suffered considerable losses in their business and want to sort out the problem in their own way. And as if that were not enough, armed brigades have been patrolling the streets for weeks, calling themselves 'vigilantes' and presumably having a high potential for violence. Add to that the heat. One spark can cause the situation to explode. An open manhunt for a suspect would almost certainly lead to a manhunt with lynchings." Again, Gillardi looked urgently at the sheriff. "Have your men get the description of the person and the sketch, but impress upon them that this is a sting operation. The man is wanted for a witness interview and not as a suspect."

Then the profiler turned to Conrad and pointed to the sketch. "The old man caught my eye in your lecture. He's easily recognizable both from his appearance and his striking getup. Have you seen him before?"

Conrad shook his head regretfully. "My lectures are attended by so many weird birds that I have long since given up worrying about their motives or idiosyncrasies. But in three days you will have the opportunity to observe my audience again. Friday night I'm giving a talk on rotting corpse preservation in ancient China. Maybe their strange little man will show up."

Gillardi couldn't resist a little side-swipe as punishment for Conrad's remark earlier. "rotting corpse preservation ...! Do you actually determine the titles of your courses yourself? Well, anyway, thanks for pointing that out. I'll take another look at your community. Only, this time, I'm not coming alone."

## Chapter 13

The view from the airplane over the endless expanse of the desert area that stretches from Chile far into Peru suddenly caused doubts to arise in Cyd about the feasibility of her undertaking. How was she going to find a single person in this vast area? She tried to encourage herself by telling herself that it was far easier to track down a person in a sparsely populated area than in a major city like New York or Los Angeles. Still, her optimism had diminished considerably by the time the plane touched down in Arica.

After Cyd had gathered her luggage, she patiently went through the formalities of the rental car company. She had reserved an off-road vehicle suitable for the desert. Apparently, the vehicles of this type were all rented out or the company did not have any available at all. In any case, the employee - presumably a student who was assigned as a temp - persistently tried to talk her into a sporty station wagon with differential lock instead. When Cyd finally identified herself as a Life Events reporter and threatened to run a negative piece on the company, the now-unsettled young man called his boss for instructions. Cyd heard an angry, loud voice that reached her and immediately the employee handed her the phone with an apologetic gesture.

"I apologize very much for the incompetence of my employee," said an oily voice. Cyd could well imagine the man - small, fat, black hair coiffed back, shiny with brillantine, a real suck-up. She was sure that he had instructed the young employee to refuse the customers' requests in order to rent the cheapest models at inflated prices.

"Of course we have the vehicle of your choice available. It is a Jeep Cherokee with special equipment - additional headlights, sand plates and engine-driven winch. The car is not new, but in the best condition, it will not let you down even in the toughest conditions. The satisfaction of our customers is my personal concern. I would be happy to take you out to dinner after you have finished your tour. I'm sure

you'll have lots of interesting stories to tell. And I could take this opportunity to show you our beautiful city."

Well, that's all I need for my happiness, Cyd thought, a romantic dinner with a personal sightseeing tour alongside a local Don Juan. However, she decided on a polite retort. "Thank you, but I don't think I'll have time for that. In any case, thank you for resolving the matter of the car so quickly."

As she handed the young man the receiver, she briefly turned her eyes upward to show him that she had seen through the machinations of his superior and did not regard the inconvenient delay as his fault. As another conciliatory gesture, she turned to the young man with confidence, "Tell me, where is a professional outdoor outfitter around here? I want to spend a few days in the desert, but I didn't bring any equipment."

The student was obviously relieved to be helpful as well and reached for a map. "There is a well-known store here for sporting goods, camping and hunting. I'd best draw the location on the map for you."

A little later, Cyd parked her jeep in the customer parking lot of the sports outfitter 'sin límites'. From the outside, the store did not present too much. However, after Cyd had spent some time walking along the long rows of shelves in search of the necessary equipment, she realized that she was dealing with a highly professional company for equipping unusual and demanding outdoor ventures. The diversity of the offer surprised her, but at the same time she realized that she had not the slightest idea what was needed to survive in this desert.

Finally, she managed to attract the attention of a sales clerk, who kindly approached her. "Good morning, miss, how can I be of service to you?" The young man's quiet unassuming manner was immediately appealing to Cyd. It turned out that she was looking at Manolo Guerra Costilero, the owner of the store. As an extreme mountai-

neer and expedition outfitter, he not only had extensive expertise, but also the practical experience in the outdoor sector. "Please just call me Manolo," he encouraged Cyd in his informal manner.

She realized with relief that she was in the right place and introduced herself as a journalist who wanted to do a report on Professor McBride's fieldwork in the Atacama. "The professor doesn't know yet that I want to interview him. It's part of this kind of reportage that we want to make the audience aware of the peculiarities of each area through our search for the target." It wasn't easy for Cyd to fib to Manolo and at the same time withstand his open honest gaze.

He nodded only slightly when she had finished. In any case, if he doubted what she had said, he didn't let on. "I know Aidan McBride quite well. When he started his excavation work here, I was a guide for him the first few times. Now he usually drops in when he's in the area. You've got your work cut out for you there, Cyd. Aidan is an old desert fox. Hard to judge and experienced enough to venture into the most remote places. There are very few people I would have no qualms about outfitting for a solo trip to the Atacama. Aidan is definitely one of them. Do you have any information on where he is currently staying?"

Cyd furrowed her brow and pretended to be helpless. "I was hoping you could help me."

She could tell from the scout's doubtful look that he didn't buy her story about the report. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to disappoint you. I have no idea where the professor is. Nor would I advise you to drive around the desert alone. If you wish, I can arrange an escort for you."

"Would you also be willing to take on this task yourself?"

Slowly, as if he still had to think about the answer, Manolo shook his head. "I can't leave right now, but I can refer you to an experienced and trustworthy scout."

Cyd sensed that Manolo had become suspicious and therefore did not want to work for her. She also knew that she would not get any

more information from him about Professor McBride, even if he had any. She couldn't blame him, he was a thoroughly open person who disliked any kind of pretense and insincerity. So she tried to make up for the lost trust with a warm smile.

"Thank you for your offer, but I'd rather try it on my own after all. However, I will take your advice into consideration and not venture too far into the wilderness."

The store owner nodded slightly and Cyd thought she detected the beginnings of a smile in his eyes. She wished she could see something of approval and understanding in them as well. "The way I see you, you will spare no risk to get your report. I think you're a woman who not only knows what she wants, but also how to get it. Very well, then, I will see to it that you are at least properly equipped in your enterprise."

After a few hours of selecting and explaining the equipment, the purchases were safely stowed in the jeep, the water and fuel canisters were filled, and supplies for a few days were stashed.

The next way led Cyd to the police headquarters of Arica. After several attempts to fend her off, she was finally led to the office of Teniente Estevan Saenz. The officer was not very cooperative and was not at all impressed by the letter from the FBI.

According to his statements, there was no accumulation of missing persons reports or body discoveries. Cyd doubted, however, that Teniente Saenz would notice if there was an accumulation. But she found it pointless to share this consideration with him. She had expected little from this measure from the beginning.

By now it was late afternoon and the palm trees next to the Comisaría parking lot cast long shadows on the blazing hot asphalt.

Cyd didn't have the slightest idea where to start, but she was excited to finally begin her search for the professor.

After fighting her way through the heavy downtown traffic, she took the exit road toward the Azapa Valley. After a few kilometers, Cyd parked her jeep in the parking lot of the Museo Arqueológico San Miguel de Azapa. Since the museum was about to close, it took a brief discussion with the young man at the ticket office, who tried to make her understand that viewing the art treasures on display here would require several hours.

Cyd introduced herself and affirmed that she just wanted to take a look at the famous Chinchorro mummies.

To her disappointment, she learned that these exhibits were no longer open to the public after the intervention of a population group that considered themselves descendants of the Chinchorro. When the helpful cashier noticed her disappointment, he called the museum management.

A few minutes later, a friendly older gentleman with thick white hair and a full beard arrived, introducing himself as Ordoño Manzanillo. "It is my pleasure to make an exception for you as a representative of the press and offer you a private tour." Cyd appreciated the archaeologist's polite unobtrusive manner and she thanked him with a friendly nod.

"Thank you very much Señor Manzanillo, I appreciate your courtesy. Your museum was recommended to me by Professor McBride, so I was particularly interested in seeing the mummies."

"You know Aidan?" Manzanillo was delighted to do a favor for an acquaintance of his colleague.

"Yes, I have known him for many years and hold him in high esteem," she fibbed, once again feeling ashamed of her profession. All the lies and half-truths. Would she ever again be able to communicate with people openly and unconcealed, without ulterior motives of journalistic usability of the contents of the conversation? How nice it must have been to talk honestly and without pretense with people like Manzanillo or Manolo. To exchange opinions without fear of committing professional indiscretions or revealing too much about

oneself personally. At home, she had no problems with pretense and role taking. But here in the wilderness, where people were more dependent on each other, they also seemed to be much more straightforward with each other.

They went directly to the locked mummy room, where the museum's showpieces were kept. And she was not disappointed.

Although Cyd had never been particularly interested in dead bodies, she was deeply moved at the sight of the mummified children. What had moved the grieving parents over seven thousand years ago - still two thousand years before the Egyptian pharaohs - to bury their deceased children in this way? Was their pain so great that they could not let go of the little bodies, or was it to give those who died too soon a second chance at life? The flat painted faces with the black clay masks had a strange effect on Cyd. They almost seemed to be beings from another star.

"I'm afraid we'll have to end our tour. The museum will be closing shortly and then the alarm system will be automatically activated in all the showrooms." Her companion seemed embarrassed to have to cut the tour short.

But Cyd was glad that the archaeologist's voice had jolted her out of her self-consciousness. There was something oppressive about these exhibits. Perhaps it was her conviction that people, after such great efforts for an existence in posterity, should not end up in the display case of a museum.

Cyd thanked Manzanillo for his kindness and said goodbye with a hearty handshake. She did not have the heart to ask the archaeologist about the possible whereabouts of Professor McBride. She was too frightened by the idea that she would have to see the disappointment in his eyes, too, if he saw through the deception.

The rays of the evening sun that greeted Cyd as she left the building were pleasant and healing. After her impressions in the museum, she found the orange-red light of the evening soothing and familiar. She

started the car and, with the setting sun behind her, drove into the desert.

After an hour, the darkness had completely taken possession of the landscape. In the cones of light from their headlights, only the strip of roadway could be seen. In her mind, Cyd returned to the museum, seeing again the flat black faces of the mummified children before her. Once again, the search for Professor McBride and her involvement in the embalmer's case seemed absurd to her. She did not bring the slightest qualifications to the hunt for a serial killer, had never set up camp for the night in the desert, nor had she the slightest clue where to look for McBride. As the night took possession of the desert with darkness and cold, the loneliness of the Atacama and the doubts about the mission enveloped her heart and mind. Cyd felt a deep panic take hold of her and a sense of futility spread through her innermost self. The idea of stopping somewhere in the dark of night and setting up camp was suddenly unthinkable. She would rather drive until the rays of the rising sun relieved her of her fears.

Just as she had settled in her mind for a long night's drive, the landscape behind a hill was illuminated by a small group of houses. One of the buildings was a simple posada in the vernacular style. A dim lamp shone above the entrance, inviting the traveler to linger. An incredible sense of relief flooded through her at the sight of this hostel. Deep inside, she pleaded that she could stay here and not all the rooms would be occupied. The gate was locked.

She tapped the iron ring, eaten away by the desert air, against the weathered wood of the door. For a seemingly endless period of time, no sound was heard from inside. Then, finally, footsteps and the sound of the latch opening in the old lock.

The door was opened a crack and Cyd looked into the face of an ancient man with the typical features of a highland Indian.

"Buenas tardes, senora, would you like a room?" Never before had a greeting given her more pleasure.

"Buenas tardes, señor. Yes, I would really like a room for the night."

The accommodations were simple but clean, and Cyd had seldom felt so comfortable anywhere as in this whitewashed little room with its creaky bed and rickety table, on which stood a cracked porcelain bowl and a bright water pitcher with a pale blue pattern. A fresh towel of white linen lay carefully folded beside it, creating an atmosphere of hospitable security. On one wall hung an old hand-woven carpet with stylized figures.

The next morning, Cyd was awakened by the sun's rays, which fell into the room through the stained glass panes of the half-open window and drew a bizarre pattern on the wall around the carpet. She stood up and looked out into the light-filled landscape. A glance at the clock showed her that it was still early in the morning. Nevertheless, the power of the sun could already be clearly felt.

The posada was part of a small hamlet. A handful of simple thatched stone houses and a small church lay slightly off the road. The houses were surrounded by rows of laid-up stones, whose function Cyd was unclear. As walls they were too low, possibly serving the purpose of keeping out windblown sand, or perhaps their owners just wanted to define where their personal space began. The church was also built of stones and covered with straw. It consisted of a ground-level building and a slightly higher annex with two semicircular window openings, where bells could be seen. The white plastered walls and the pale blue painted doors gave the building a picturesque touch. The vegetation of the stony landscape, furrowed by erosion, was sparse and characterized by large candelabra cacti.

Cyd felt her entrepreneurial spirit returning and the desire stirring in her to go in search of the professor. She quickly packed her bag and then went to the guest room, where the innkeeper's wife was busy preparing for the new day.

The old woman greeted them with a warm "Buenas dias" and smiled at them.

"Buenas dias, senora. How fortunate for me to have found lodging here with you. I have rarely slept as well as I did last night."

The old woman accepted the compliment with pleasure and served breakfast, which consisted of a dish of lentils with fried eggs and a dark drink, possibly some kind of thin coffee.

Cyd enjoyed breakfast and chatted with her hostess at the same time. She also tried to bring the conversation to Professor McBride, but it turned out that the hostess had never heard of the professor.

The reporter felt that she had completely overcome the depression of the previous day. Strengthened by breakfast and the warming morning sun, she was eager to begin the search for McBride. She quickly stowed her travel bag safely in the jeep, filled her water bottle at the well, and after a hearty goodbye to the old woman, drove off.

Gillardardi wanted to play it safe. He had the area around the institute widely secured by police and FBI. Every visitor was filmed with hidden cameras.

Investigators in vehicles were on standby at all access roads to pursue suspects. For the first time, a questionnaire was handed out to the listeners, which had to be filled out before entering the lecture hall - as an admission ticket, so to speak. On this occasion, photographs were taken of the visitors, who were marked with the code of the form. The paper was specially prepared for fingerprints and DNA. More and more visitors poured into the auditorium. Since most of the listeners arrived only at the last moment, the surveillance measures soon created a tremendous chaos and could not be controlled within a very short time. The participants in the lecture pressed the crumpled questionnaires, some of which had been folded several times, into the hands of the officials and pressed on. The latter were frantically scanning the bar code while monitoring access to the lecture hall.

Gillardi, Spencer, Foster, and Special Agents Kirby and Martin sat in a specially equipped side room monitoring the monitors.

"Okay, that's the man." Gillardi's voice sounded sharper than he had intended. "Zoom in on him."

The technician zoomed in so that details were visible. "No doubt about it, it's him. Today, though, he left his Mexican outfit at home."

The picture showed the old man in faded jeans and a tattered, fawn-colored leather jacket. His white hair was held together by a dark bandana.

Gillardi relayed the message. "Okay men, target in sector eleven. Light colored jeans, brown jacket, bandana. Gonzales, Faretta and Pilon, you stay on him and don't let this man out of your sight until the mobile task force takes over."

After the lecture, it was not easy for the tailing team to stay on the old man's trail without being seen themselves. The crowd was so big that they kept losing sight of him. Several times, trying to get closer to the target, they got into scuffles with the students, which they actually wanted to avoid at all costs so as not to cause a stir. The three agents were relieved when they realized which way the old man was going to go, so that they could pass on the message to the responsible squad car.

Deputy García Costilero and Police Officers Luca Varetto and Nuola Shane were sitting in a neutral surveillance van and saw the old man coming. Costilero started the engine to be ready for the pursuit. The target walked leisurely along the rows of parking lots and continued on the access road that led out of the campus to the main street. There, after a few steps, he stopped at the bus stop.

"Car Five to Operations." Officer Varetto looked slightly irritated. "Subject is at the bus stop in front of the entrance. Appears to be waiting for bus. Request direction."

Gillardi sounded annoyed. He had not thought of that. He should have provided individual officers for such purposes, who could also

follow a suspect onto a bus. The tail had released the target too soon. A car following a public transport vehicle was conspicuous and easy to spot.

"Hang on, but keep your distance. I'll send you two more cars. Then you can take turns until the old man gets off. As soon as he leaves the bus, you follow him on foot. The other two vehicles will stay in contact with you."

The patience of the tail was severely tested. Only at the final stop did the suspect leave the bus. During the long ride, the old man had probably spotted them, even though they had taken turns tailing each other several times. Now he got off and went to a snack bar next to the bus stop.

Stunned, the pursuers observed that he went past the entrance to a small parking lot next to the pub. There he unlocked a motorcycle, started the machine and roared off.

Now it was getting tight for the tail. "Car five to dispatch. Ranchero just started a motorcycle and took off. We don't have too much traffic out here. Difficult to go undetected."

Gillardi sounded tense. "What kind of motorcycle is that?"

"A light off-road machine, I couldn't tell the make, no license plate."

"An off-road machine without a license plate, that doesn't sound good. In any case, stay on it. If he notices you, there's nothing we can do about it. The important thing is that you don't lose him. I'll try to mobilize a police patrol. Have them stop him and take his particulars."

Costilero pressed down on the gas pedal and clung to the machine. After about three miles, the old man braked and turned onto a sandy road into the desert. Varetto cursed. No one had expected this. They followed the machine, but after only a few meters they realized that their vehicle was not suitable for this terrain. The driver had to use his full concentration to avoid going off the track or getting stuck in the sandy depressions. For a while they could still make out the dust

trail that the motorcycle was kicking up, but then this trail also disappeared in the falling darkness.

Gillard was seething with anger when the news came through. They had been so close. The old man had outsmarted them. All the more reason to intensify the search in this direction.

When evaluating the questionnaires, the investigators realized that the students had obviously seen through the point of the survey. They had made a joke out of complicating the work of the authorities.

Under name and address, numerous details from Egyptian mythology were found, most frequently Ramses the Great or Akhenaten were named with residence in Thebes or Achet-Aton. For occupation, the favorites of the jokers were embalmer, ripper or serial killer. Some of the forms were artistically prepared with ketchup stains, painted traces of blood from red nail polish.

When Gillardi looked at the old man's questionnaire, a shiver ran down his spine. The personal information was written in a spidery script that he could not decipher. Under occupation, however, it clearly read taxidermist. From the piercing look directly into the hidden camera, the profiler concluded that his target was also aware of the purpose of the measures. Finally, they had a prime suspect.

Gillard ordered a covert manhunt to be conducted in a 110-degree sector of a hundred-mile radius, starting from the spot where the old man had disappeared into the desert, in all the localities of the county. Anyone who looked reasonably like the old man was to be recorded and observed. Mug shots were to be taken that showed the suspect in various getups. The picturesque styling could have been camouflage, after all. It was late at night when the FBI people dispersed. The instructions to the search teams had been sent out, and tomorrow at daybreak the search was to begin.

## Chapter 14

Her original plan had been to drive the parts of the desert with known archaeological sites first. But given the vast expanse of the area and the largely lack of developed and mapped transportation routes, Cyd decided to change her strategy. Intuitively, she also sensed that Professor McBride was not the type of scientist who would try his luck in an area rich in archaeological finds. He was a frontiersman, doing pioneering work far from his colleagues in untouched wilderness. So, starting from the known finding areas in the border region between Peru and Chile, she decided to orient her search southward, combing the landscape in west-east sectors, if the roads and tracks would allow it. It soon became clear to her that this strategy was also unrealistic. The distances were enormous and the areas that were impassable or difficult to navigate were simply too large. Without a good portion of luck the enterprise was hopeless. Since she couldn't think of anything better, she still stuck to her plan in broad strokes.

Wherever she encountered people, she asked about the professor, gave a description of his mannerisms, showed photographs, inquired about unusual people or occurrences. She stopped at numerous elevated places to scan the area with binoculars for human activity.

Again and again, she left the roads and the paved driveways, penetrating deep into the desert until it was no longer possible to make any progress, even with the vehicle that was suitable for the desert. Countless times she only managed to get the jeep going again with the help of the sand plates or by laboriously digging and underlaying it with bushes. Once it was necessary to use the winch, which was attached to the front of the vehicle and powered by the engine, to get the jeep out of a sandy depression where she had become stranded in a moment of carelessness. Fortunately for her, she found a boulder at the edge of the ditch that was suitable for attaching the steel cable to it. She consciously avoided the idea of what would happen once her

resources were no longer sufficient. But the fear was subliminally present all the time. Especially in the cold, lonely nights, she was often overcome by despondency and dejection. But usually the rays of the rising sun gave her courage again the next morning, and so she continued her search undeterred for two weeks.

The further she got away from the country roads, the rarer the contacts with the rural population became. Every now and then she met a lonely horseman or hikers who had chosen the path through the wilderness for reasons unknown to her. Again and again she came across lonely huts made of clay and cactus wood, in which farmers lived with their families, who managed to wring the most basic necessities of survival from the stony, barren soil.

Cyd felt a strange mixture of joy and fear in such moments of surprising encounter. The initial reaction of joyful relief at encountering a specimen of the same species in the wasteland was almost always followed by a guarded assessment of possible danger. Once concerns were dispelled, relationships often resulted that were characterized by sincere cordiality. Exchanging small attentions, sharing water and food, and sharing personal experience and knowledge necessary for survival were new to Cyd. She had often been in the wilderness on her kayak trips, but always on her own.

She became aware that after her traumatic experience she had developed into a loner who perceived her fellow human beings as enemies or at least as a threat. When she was alone in her night camp, strange thoughts and old memories often came up. Sometimes she wondered what the reason might be that she had pushed the journey so hard, although she was not at all convinced of its usefulness. Was it to get away from the case, the team, or Ian? Or to get closer to herself again?

She wasn't sure about Ian. On the one hand, she felt an unusually strong attraction emanating from him. Then again, she recognized qualities in him that almost repelled her, but in any case activated her sensors for danger. When the loneliness was particularly strong, she

wished he were with her, taking her in his arms, holding her, reassuring her there was no need to be afraid. She wished he would reassure her with the simple, clear language of a child that everything would be all right.

One night, when the fire had burned down and she lay lonely in her sleeping bag, watching in amazement how brightly the stars shone above her, old memories came back, of her time in New York and the liaison with Rod, a bar pianist she had met in a bar in Brooklyn. He had dropped out of the music conservatory, even though he had been predicted a great future.

Rod had been the star of the piano master class. His technique was considered unique by experts. When he sat down at the piano, everyone could sense that a gifted artist was at work. Technique and feeling, every keystroke full of questions, doubts, search for perfection and yet at the same time the certainty and confirmation, this speed, this intensity, the tiny delays and accelerations were the only valid interpretation at that moment. He had never spoken to her about his motivations. What she thought she understood in the course of their time together was that he was obsessed with the search for simplicity and the perfect symbiosis of text and song. He was a convinced purist in artistic terms.

Once he had played her a song from which she could take no special meaning. A simple, pleasing melody, almost like a lullaby with which one sang children to sleep.

Rod was not a great singer. His voice was rough and brittle from countless hours in dingy bars and burned by high-proof alcohol. But when he sang this song to her, it sent chills down her spine. His quiet yet expressive voice was more of a recitative than a chant, accompanying the melody he coaxed from the piano in a way that was unsurpassable for precision and clarity.

Cyd noticed his emotion at the last bars of the song in his voice and expression. When the last note had faded away, she asked him about the meaning of these words.

It took him quite a while to answer. "The text says, " The sky up there, how it is so wide."

He, who had never left New York and had spent most of his time in the smoke haze and neon of dim bars, could draw inspiration for a great vision from this simple sentence. Of boundless expanse, a pure, infinite sky of cosmic dimensions, of freedom without fetters.

At the time, she had mocked his enthusiasm. Now she was overcome by an idea of what he might have imagined. Of a sky like the one above the Western Cordillera, made of velvety night blue, twinkling with stars.

How aptly the writer of the song's lyrics had managed to express the beauty of the wonders surrounding us in these simple words. "The sky up there, how it is so wide". She tried to remember the melody, the simple clear sequence of notes, thought she remembered the song, but then it was gone again. She wished at that moment for nothing more than to hear Rod sing that song, in the same way as he had done it in New York, unspectacular, reserved, heartfelt, close to life. And she wished she could tell him, "Yes, I understand what you mean."

On the second day they had found what they were looking for. In the grocery store of a small settlement they had received the clue. The old man's house stood isolated a few miles away on the edge of a small canyon. It was a wildly jumbled construction of unhewn rocks, crooked branches and beams with windows of varying sizes in the masonry. An old rusted flue pipe protruded from the roof as a chimney. Behind the house, on a hill, stood an iron frame with a water tank made of galvanized sheet metal. The path leading to it showed numerous tire tracks. Apparently, the old man used to bring the water with his all-terrain machine and fill it into the tank. This was also indicated by two large canisters with holding devices, which were parked under a primitive sun roof next to the motorcycle. To the side of the house, at the edge of the canyon, was the toilet in

the form of a small outhouse. It was a surprisingly modern ecological design with a drying and incinerating device for the solid excreta.

On the other side, at some distance from the house, was a depot for collected wood and other fuel, which, judging from the tracks in the sand, had been dragged in by motorcycle. There was also a log for splitting wood, in which a heavy axe was stuck.

They had been keeping the property under surveillance for more than sixteen hours when the first sign of life of its inhabitant appeared. Late in the morning the door opened and the old man came out. Over his shoulder he carried a rifle, and at his side dangled a cloth bag. His head this time was covered by a suede hat with a wide brim. Without looking back, he got on his motorcycle and roared away. The machine had by now been identified as a Honda 250 cc Military, a rugged military dirt bike for use in rough terrain.

Special Agent Ben Kirby called the observation post that was monitoring the access road. "The target is headed in your direction. Do you have him in sight?"

"Affirmative, we see the machine. It just left the road and is heading southeast into the desert."

"All right, we'll take a look at his lair. Keep an eye out and let us know if he comes back. The man may be a killer, and we don't want any unpleasant surprises." Kirby had spoken forcefully on purpose. He knew that after hours of surveillance, attention would wane all on its own. It happens even to a professional. With the half-grown armed auxiliaries they had on their team, this effect usually occurred after a short time.

He instructed Logan Dillen, who had been assigned to them as a Qualified Armed Person, to monitor the area and also listen for any engine noise. Then he took a case of special tools and signaled Mael Lopez, a trainee from the Bureau. Together they walked to the cabin. The front door gave him no particular difficulty. He had it open in a few seconds without leaving any traces. The door swung open with a creak. They walked directly into a large room that was at once living

space, cooking area, and workshop. The work area took up most of the space. A large table with a stone top had all sorts of tools spread out on it, shelves with various plastic containers, bottles, and all sorts of racks made of wire. Next to it was an old-fashioned secretary with a roll-top top and numerous drawers. Stuffed animals were everywhere. In the woodwork, on the walls, on shelves and some larger specimens on the floor.

Kirby looked at the labels on the containers and bottles. "Chemicals for taxidermy."

"Also suitable for embalming human bodies?" ask Lopez with a lurking undertone.

"I don't know, I'm not a medical doctor. But maybe we can find more clues in this furniture."

The special agent picked the lock on the secretary and quickly flipped through the papers stored in eight narrow wooden compartments under the roll-top lid. "An invoice for eight canisters of formaldehyde. The amount should be enough to embalm some corpses. Here is a receipt for the delivery of arsenic."

Kirby's gaze fell on a colorful piece of paper. He picked it up and skimmed the contents. "A flyer from a hunting store in San Antonio with a photo of our suspect. They offer custom made trophies and taxidermy as a special service. So this fellow is indeed a taxidermist. Seems to make a living off the orders from this store." Kirby kept turning the pages. Suddenly he paused in surprise and let out a low whistle.

"What do we have here? You won't believe it, our friend was a Black Beret, Captain of the US Rangers. His name is Callum Malcolmson. Was in Grenada in 1983 during Operation Urgent Fury. Awarded the Silver Star for extraordinary bravery during the operation." Kirby suddenly sensed the danger they were in. "Okay, let's get this thing over with. The captain could be back at any moment."

While Lopez photographed the receipts and special tools, Kirby took fingerprints from various parts of the room.

Suddenly, the two heard a creak at the entrance. Before they could react, the door swung open and the barrel of a gun became visible. Immediately, the old man emerged and took aim at the officers. His gruff voice left no doubt about his willingness to pull the trigger if necessary. "And now gentlemen, very slowly extend your arms forward and walk toward the wall." The old man stared at them from his gray eyes with an ice-cold stare.

The FBI officials followed his instructions without hesitation.

"That's good, and now lean forward and support yourself with your hands on the wall. Now take a step backward. That's it. I'm going to search you now. At the slightest movement, I'll pull the trigger." He expertly patted down the two agents, took their weapons, radios and badges, and handcuffed them with their own. Then he leaned his rifle against the table. After glancing at the IDs, he raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"Why is the FBI snooping on me?"

Kirby wasn't sure how much he was allowed to reveal, so he tried to stall the old man. "Just routine," he said in a dry voice. "We check all isolated houses to see if they're suitable for drug depots."

The old man frowned in disbelief. "Routine? Drug dumps? You don't believe that yourself. You've been after me since Friday night. In your clumsy manner, you were already hard to miss at the university. And here in the desert, you stick out like a sore thumb." He walked threateningly toward the agents and stood wide-legged in front of them. "So out with it. And don't try to play me for a fool. By the way, you can forget about your kindergarten on the edge of the canyon. I've temporarily decommissioned it. And the rookie in front of the house is taking a nap induced by me."

Kirby realized that they had only one chance to get out of this situation in one piece. If the old man was the embalmer, they were done for anyway. If not, they could probably appease him by playing an open game of cards. "Okay, if you want to know the truth, you are suspected of being the embalmer."

"Bullshit, who thought up this idiocy?" The old man seemed more outraged by the absurdity of the notion than by the grave suspicion. "What's the name of the head bully in your club?"

Without thinking and to the horror of his colleague, Lopez replied "We have two. Spencer is the head of the bureau in Sonora, Gillardi is a profiler, he leads the manhunt".

The old man picked up a radio. Impatiently, he started at the agent. "What frequency? Well, tell me, how do I reach Gillardi?"

Kirby knew it didn't matter now. "Channel three will take you to the main office."

The call sign sounded clearly through the ether. "Yes?"

"Gillardi?"

"Who the hell is talking, make a decent report, man, when you call me." All the frustration of the last few weeks sounded from the anger in the profiler's voice.

"I'm Callum Malcomson. Your people broke into my house on your instructions because you suspect me of being the embalmer. You can pick up your sad troop at my place. It would be best if you brought a couple of lawyers with you, so that from now on everything will be done legally. You know how to get here."

The longer the fruitless search lasted, the more Cyd became aware that she was about to undergo a metamorphosis. With each day she spent in the sweltering Atacama, another part of that dynamic and purposeful young woman was lost. Instead, she felt herself about to adopt the lethargy of a primeval rhythm of life, characterized by a sleepy indifference. It might be the heat or the landscape, perhaps it was the unreality of the situation, the fact that a human being was trying to track down another being unknown to him in an area with the extent of more than 260,000 square kilometers, without being clear beyond that for what purpose this should be done.

She had long since given up on proceeding systematically. People she could question were increasingly rare. There was not the slightest

indication that the area might be archaeologically significant. What might McBride be looking for here? Was he on the run? The answer to these questions interested her only moderately; it was what it was, and what was to come would come. Cyd enjoyed the feeling of drifting. Letting go, entrusting herself to a higher power, accepting what life would bring.

On her now haphazard journeys through the desert, she moved further and further away from the traffic routes marked on the maps. Who knows how many times she might have crossed the border into Peru. That afternoon, she had headed east toward the Altiplano. On the horizon, the almost surreal backdrop of the snow-capped Cordillera seemed within reach. The afternoon heat burned mercilessly on the parched landscape and Cyd decided to take a rest. She set up camp in the shade of a crumbling rock face with a breathtaking view of two snow-capped volcanic cones. She just managed to set up the cot, then sank down exhausted and fell into a deep dreamless sleep.

When she awoke, dawn had broken. Awakened by the evening chill, she opened her eyes and was suddenly wide awake. Directly above her, she saw a bearded man's face with windswept hair, leather-tanned skin, crisscrossed with deep wrinkles, and the bluest eyes she had ever seen, fixed on her with a penetrating gaze. With the expression of a predator sizing up its prey, he seemed to stare at her. Suppressing her panic, she addressed him in a brittle voice. "Professor McBride, I presume?"

Suddenly the old man's weathered face twisted into a smile of such kindness and warmth that a stone fell from her heart.

"You are alive, and I thought I had discovered the best-preserved mummy of all time! " He extended his hand to her in greeting and at the same time straightened up so that she could sit up. "Yes, I'm McBride. And you must be Miss Stanley," he said with a smirk.

Relieved, she grabbed his hand and rose from her cot. "I'm Cyd Alexander, not from the New York Herald, but from Life Events in Sonora. I've been looking for you for days. I can't tell you how happy

I am to have found you." Even as she uttered this sentence, she realized the irony of her statement. "Or rather, let's say that you found me."

McBride didn't seem the least bit interested in learning why she had been looking for him. "I was halfway to your rest area looking for artifacts when I noticed the reflection of the sun on your windshield. And so I went to see if you needed any help. I prefer walking in the desert to driving. What do you say to a cup of tea, Miss Alexander? My camp is about two miles from here. We could take your car and make a community camp there."

Cyd understood the need to act immediately, as darkness was now falling rapidly. Under his guidance, they soon arrived at his campsite, where the professor's Landrover was also parked. By the layout of the camp, she immediately realized that the archaeologist had by far more experience in setting up desert camps than she did. The site was protected on two sides by rock walls, the campsite was cleared of debris and functionally prepared with a fireplace and awnings.

McBride lit a fire with just a few moves and brought water to a boil in a dented kettle. Soon they were sitting in comfortable folding chairs and drinking strong black tea from tin mugs. A little later, the last rays of the sun went out and the desert disappeared into darkness.

Gillardi, like the others, had reached a dead end in the investigation, even if he would never have shown this to the outside world. The embarrassing incident with Captain Malcomson was not mentioned again with a word in the special department. Shortly after the old man's call, he had had a helicopter take him to the house. There, there was a long personal conversation in which he duly apologized and asked for understanding. After a respectful handshake, he left the captain in the hands of his lawyers, who were to negotiate appropriate compensation with him for the invasion of his privacy.

Now he was at the end of his patience, ready to take the ultimate step, the last measure that was rightly considered frowned upon and irresponsible in police circles. He decided to use bait in his hunt to lure the perpetrator. Gillardi was aware that the likelihood of apprehending the perpetrator with one or a few well-monitored decoys was extremely low. He would have to take a blanket approach. That meant high risk. The more attractive female officers set up as decoys, the fewer qualified personnel would be available to back up each of the women. Also, the task force staff could not be privy to the plan. Aside from his suspicion that there might be a leak on the team, the repercussions would be catastrophic for the FBI and for all the entities involved with the case should the operation backfire. And even if successful, there would certainly be know-it-alls among colleagues and in the press who found such actions reprehensible on ethical grounds. It was not a strategy to consider in the presence of the media.

He had to open a second front. Under the utmost secrecy. If it went wrong, he would take sole responsibility. He didn't care about his career anyway. This was no longer about justice or doing one's duty. All that mattered now was to eliminate the killer.

McBride took a much-used pipe from his pocket and stuffed it with tobacco from a leather pouch. With a burning branch, he gave himself a light. A moment later, he squeezed the swelling tobacco tightly with the end of the branch. When he was satisfied with the puff, he leaned back and looked at Cyd.

"Well, Miss Alexander, what brings you here?"

Cyd had thought of all sorts of strategies for dealing with the professor, but as she sat across from him by the fire and looked into the old oddball's honest eyes, she knew she had to play her cards close to her chest if she wanted to get anywhere with him.

"You are suspected of being the embalmer."

Just as she was about to follow up to defuse this outrageous accusation, the scientist's face contorted into a grimace. He raised his eyebrows, puffed out his cheeks and laughed out loud.

"Well, I've been accused of a lot of things, but this is the pinnacle of my career. Me, a serial killer? Who came up with this crazy idea?"

The tension of the last weeks began to dissolve in Cyd when she saw his reaction. This wasn't an act. McBride was genuinely amused. And so she told him all the details of the hunt for the killer, describing how she had accidentally slipped into the case as a witness to the police action at the distillery cabin, and all she had experienced since then. She held nothing back, neither the secret team meetings nor the various hypotheses, she also admitted the helplessness and frustration that had gripped the investigation team. The professor listened intently without interrupting her even once. Only now and then did he lean forward to add firewood or to ensure the puff of his pipe. And even when she had finished, he let what he had heard sink in for a while without saying anything in reply.

Finally, he began to speak in a low voice.

"Now I'm going to tell you a story, Miss Alexander. This story began here, about nine thousand years ago. At that time, there was a people on the coast called Chinchorro by archaeologists. The people lived in villages by the sea in reed- or fur-covered huts, fished and hunted sea lions with elaborate harpoons made of bone. So far nothing special, an early Andean culture like numerous others.

In 1980, however, ninety-six artfully mummified bodies of unique beauty were discovered at one site, which, unlike the Egyptian mummies, were covered with clay rather than linen. All were facing the sea and wore sculpted masks, possibly modeled after their faces when alive. It gave the impression that the deceased had not been buried, but simply laid down, some close together, others scattered until the sand covered them.

The evaluation of the finds revealed that the bodies of small children were most carefully prepared with body covers made of clay, and the tiny face masks were particularly elaborately made.

The production of a mummy probably took several weeks. First, the skin was carefully peeled off the corpse. Then the body was dissected and the flesh was removed from the bones. This means that about eighty percent of the original organic material was not preserved. The skeleton was then reassembled and stabilized with sticks. The removed tissue was replaced by padding with vegetable material or clay, and then a thick, ash-colored paste was applied to model the body shapes and facial features. The mouth and eyes were rendered open. Then the skin was spread over the body - sometimes the skin of animals was used for this purpose - and painted with a blue-black or red color. Finally, a wig was put on the mummy and the body was wrapped in reed mats.

The reasons for the elaborate treatment of the dead and the origin of the ritual are not known. Possibly they had the purpose to help over the pain of the loss. What is certain is that the Chinchorro practiced this form of treatment of the dead for more than 3,000 years, and over time extended it to all persons in the community, regardless of age or status."

The old man raised his head slightly and looked Cyd in the eyes with a questioning look. Cyd did not know what she could say in reply, so she remained silent. McBride leaned back again and began to speak again.

"Around 800 AD, a warrior people called Chachapoya migrated from the Amazon to the higher regions in the north of what is now Peru. Their name comes from the Inca term 'sacha puya', which means 'cloud people'. In fact, in their settlement area in the high ranges of the Andes, the rainforest is usually shrouded in a blanket of fog. Since the Chachapoya have left no written records, little is known about them. In any case, they left behind impressive structures.

The Chachapoya were different from their neighbors both physically and in art and culture. Ancient Spanish historical writings described them as fair-skinned, sometimes blond or red-haired, and of significantly larger stature than the other inhabitants of the Andean region. Some archaeologists hold that the Chachapoya may have descended from an ancient Mediterranean seafaring people such as the Phoenicians or Carthaginians, who found their way across the Atlantic and the Amazon to the mountainous region of the Andes.

This would fit the art and architecture of this warrior people. They are strongly reminiscent of the culture of the ancient Carthaginians. Round stone houses, for example, are a special feature in South America, found only among the Chachapoya. This people also used the rite of mummifying their deceased. The dead mountain warriors were buried in inaccessible rock tombs, often hundreds of meters above the ground.

The Spaniards enslaved the Chachapoya just as they had the Incas, and in the second half of the 16th century the culture finally ceased to exist altogether."

Again the professor looked deeply into Cyd's eyes, as if he wanted to invite her to make a statement. And again the reporter preferred to remain silent and follow the explanations that were obviously to come. McBride tapped out his pipe and stuffed it with fresh tobacco. After he had completed the ritual of lighting it and had assured himself that it drew well, he continued.

"We are here in the land of the Incas. Their empire stretched more than 4200 km over the present-day territories of Ecuador, Peru, Colombia and Chile. The ruler at the head of the state was revered as the son of the sun. When Francisco Pizarro and his 168-strong Spanish garrison came ashore on the coast of what is now Peru in 1526, the empire was weakened on the one hand by a dispute between the half-brothers Atahualpa and Huascar over succession to the throne, and on the other by battles with rebellious peoples. In addition to the unscrupulousness of the conquistadors and their possession of new

types of firearms, the political situation and the devastating effect of introduced diseases, which spread epidemically among the Andean inhabitants, provided the explanation of how the Spanish conquistadors were able to bring down the huge Inca empire after barely a hundred years of existence.

The idea of life after death played an important role among the Incas, as it did among most peoples of the Andean region. Throughout the Inca Empire, one of the rites of death was to mummify corpses - even ordinary dead bodies. The deceased were not only venerated as part of an ancestor cult, they were visited regularly, their clothes were kept in order and they were provided with food, corn beer and coca leaves.

Particularly here in the Atacama Desert and its outlying areas, ideas of the afterlife emerged that viewed the death of man not as the end, but as the beginning of a new phase of existence.

Among the Incas, the mummified rulers had their own palaces with their families and court, and during ceremonies they were carried through the streets on palanquins.

When Pizarro entered the Temple of the Sun after the subjugation of the Inca Empire, he ordered the destruction of the mummies. At the horror of the Incas, who secretly tried to bring the mummies to safety on the land, the Spaniards recognized the importance of mummy worship. As a result, the clergy began an organized campaign against this cult of the dead. The whole empire was searched for mummies, which were then burned on funeral pyres in Lima. In this way, the Indians were to be deprived of their deeply rooted faith and the basis for forced Catholicization was to be created.

What I want to say to you, Miss Alexander, is that this is my world. Ever since I can remember, the question of living on in the afterlife has been the center of my life.

I remember waking up one night to a terrible nightmare when I was about three years old. I dreamed that with death everything would be over for us humans. A never-ending night, perpetual darkness, the

great nothingness. I remember this experience as if it were yesterday. Since that night I have been on the trail of life after death. My craft is not killing, I am in search of eternal life in another world."

Cyd understood that the professor's work went far beyond scientific interest. No, this man was not a murderer.

Following a sudden impulse, she moved to the scholar and put her hand on his arm to show him how strongly she felt connected to him at that moment.

"I thank you, Professor, for explaining yourself to me. From the first moment of our meeting, it was clear to me that you could not be the man I was looking for. But your narrative has shown me how little I have been concerned with these questions. And somehow I envy you your exciting life. This free, untethered wandering, without deadlines and bosses telling you what to do." McBride, smirking, agreed with her with a nod.

"There's actually something to be said for that. Always assuming you appreciate the simple life. And after a few weeks or months in the wilderness, a shower or a warm bath can be an incredible experience." Cyd knew he was right. She would certainly enjoy her shower at home.

"Do you actually believe that those mountain warriors you mentioned earlier came from the Mediterranean across the Atlantic to the Andean region? I have a hard time imagining how they could have done that."

The old man smiled knowingly. "These objections of laymen are familiar to me. We admire structures such as the pyramids of Ghiza, the palace of Knossos and other architectural marvels of antiquity, but we do not credit the creators of these wonders with having sailed across the oceans and thus passed on their knowledge.

The comparison of different advanced civilizations shows such striking similarities in essential questions that it is difficult to believe that this could have come about by chance. These include the view that death does not mean the end of the individual, but is only the

beginning of another existence in the afterlife. For the Egyptians, death was nothing more than a simple continuation of life on earth. Their culture has so large correspondences with individual cultures of Near East and above all of old America that coincidence-conditioned parallel developments are only with difficulty conceivable. A common opinion in the sciences concerned with it explains the phenomenon that China, India, Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Aegean, Etruria and old America show almost identical bases of the mental life, with cultural migrations. However, there are also scientists who suppose the origin of this belief in a sunken culture at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean."

Cyd was suddenly attentively tense. "You're not talking about that mysterious Atlantis referred to in so many myths and legends, are you?"

McBride weighed his head thoughtfully and smiled mildly. "And who knows, there are even several serious sources that agree that in Atlantean times people were initiated into the mysteries of their existence via messengers of the gods."

Cyd shook her head vigorously. "I just can't believe you take statements like that seriously. You're testing me, Professor, am I right?"

"Sometimes it gets you further if you believe the things that all the others don't believe in. I made this experience quite early in my scientific career.

But what difference does it make if I believe in something that is absurd to others. Does that change the fact that we are spending the night together here in the desert? Does that diminish the mutual appreciation we should have for each other?

Why do people find differences in personal beliefs so threatening? Who knows the origin of individual beliefs, preferences and interests. What I believe in for sure is the need for more tolerance and mutual trust."

Although the professor had by no means spoken these words in a lecturing manner, but as a very personal statement and with a

friendly attention to his interlocutor, Cyd still felt ashamed. What had possessed her to question the scientist, who could look back on a life so rich in research, experience and knowledge, with her remark?

"I think you've hit one of my sore points there. I am professionally conditioned to represent positions that achieve a high level of approval among the population. But I received your message. And I thank you for making me aware of my ignorance in such a loving way."

The look on the professor's face showed her that the dissonance between them had been removed.

"Who could possibly be interested in drawing attention to me in the case of the embalmer?" It was as if the old man was speaking to himself. Then he wished her a good night and withdrew.

The next morning was cold and unseasonably foggy and damp. McBride made coffee, which they drank together by the warming fire. The farewell was short but heartfelt. Cyd hugged the old man, then got into the car and drove off.

The urge to find a new victim became overwhelming for the embalmer. He felt his suffering pressure growing stronger every day and reaching the limits of what he could bear. Desperately, he wondered how much longer he would be able to resist. The creation of transitional forms of beautiful young women's bodies had become second nature to him, stronger still, his purpose in life. Without this invigorating ritual, how would he survive the next period? He clearly felt his life energy diminishing.

Since the publication of his preferences in the media and even more so after the targeted educational work by the authorities, who urged the women at risk to observe certain rules of conduct, potential victims were practically no longer to be found alone. The women had organized themselves, were traveling in larger groups, had male companions with them or were under the protection of security guards. And when, after a long search, he finally discovered a woman to

his liking who was traveling unaccompanied, an instinct warned him not to strike, because he sensed a trap.

That evening, he had again wandered the streets for hours in search of prey. Finally, he had come across a well-groomed young woman walking confidently through the dimly lit street on the outskirts of town. He followed her at a safe distance, watching her again and again with a strong night glass. Now she stopped briefly to light a cigarette. Then she continued on her way, walking with elastic, springy steps toward the park. The embalmer carefully searched the surroundings in all directions. There was not the slightest indication that this woman would be a decoy for the FBI. Nevertheless, there was that warning instinct again.

He knew from long experience that he should listen to his inner voice. He had always been able to rely on it. But in view of his mental anguish, he became uncertain. Was he getting old? Was the reference to his inner warning system just an excuse for his timidity? Was he too cowardly for his task? Didn't his hesitation mean betrayal of his divine mission? She was an ideal candidate. He would cut her off and ambush her at the park's exit. There he would take her into his custody. He felt the relief that followed the decision he had made.

Suddenly she stopped and looked around. He knew she couldn't see him from that distance. He, however, could see every detail of her face through the binoculars. Her posture had changed and her lips were making precise articulation movements. The witch was passing a message. She spoke into a hidden microphone.

Even though it didn't improve his mood, he knew his instincts hadn't deceived him. Trembling with rage and desire, he retreated into the darkness of the night and made his way to his cave. It was time to come up with something.

Gillardi had recognized the symptoms of mental disintegration in himself for some time. But in the last few days the process had taken on alarming proportions. The war on two fronts was about to ruin

him. All the more so, as he had to pay unusual attention during his official investigations not to reveal anything about his hidden underground army to the team. So he thought over every sentence, every hint, was constantly on guard not to make any rash statements.

He was also troubled by the separate team meetings. He represented two completely different strategies. One official and one covert, the illegality of which could break his neck at any time.

On top of that, the third front was his personal battle against the embalmer. How would his comrades-in-arms react when it came to the final showdown? Could he trust that they would retreat at the decisive moment to leave the final decision to him? The subject had never been broached. His personal fighting force had neither any legitimacy nor any official mandate for its activities. It was a motley crew of former police officers, privately hired security guards and a number of amateurs who had been fast-tracked by Gillardi himself. What they all had in common was a penchant for adventure and a willingness to break the law if it served their own advantage. Mercenaries in search of thrills and quick money. They were consistently daring men and women who appreciated alcohol and, in many cases, had drug experience. How long would it be before someone from their secret hunting party spilled the beans?

He was aware that he had long since passed the point of no return. The case had turned him into an outlaw fighting his own private war.

His opponent was omnipresent. While the official search party had run itself dead, disturbing reports came from the second front. Not a night went by that the decoys and their monitors did not report strange things. The feeling of being watched, shadows in the darkness that rose only to suddenly disappear again, and on several occasions, watchers were found unconscious. Their adversary was like a phantom that appeared, only to disappear again immediately without leaving the slightest trace.

Gillardi found himself in a strange state of indifference. He had reached his limits, had found his master. The only thing that remain-

ned was the certainty that he would never give up the fight. Yes, he would keep fighting until one of them both fell by the wayside. He was so far gone now that he didn't care who it would be. Very well, it was a fight with an uncertain outcome. But he still felt the willingness and burning desire within him to finish this feud before he was found out.

## Chapter 15

Cyd had taken off from Chile early that morning. Below her, she could see the endless expanse of the Amazon. Trees and water wherever the eye looked. She felt quite clearly that she was close to finding the solution to the embalmer's case. Everything she needed was in her mind. It was only a matter of drawing the right conclusions.

"Who could be interested in drawing attention to me in the case of the embalmer?" She couldn't get the professor's sentence out of her mind. That was the key. It was Ian, Chambers, and Ruth, but ultimately Gillardi, who had encouraged her in her enterprise. She racked her brain, but felt she was too involved. The closeness to the people involved was causing the blockage. Cyd tried to relax and leave it to her intuition to find the answer. But again and again her analytical thinking intervened and disturbed the process of unconscious processing. She tried to concentrate on the green of the rainforest, took a look out the window, and then leaned back in relaxation to let the afterimage take effect on her.

"Who could be interested in drawing attention to me in the case of the embalmer?" She only felt the sentence more, no longer thought about it. Again she looked out of the window. Below them, a tributary branch of the Amazon shone in the sunlight. She called up the image of the steadily flowing mass of water in her mind and let it sink in.

She finally managed to turn off her conscious thoughts and fall into a state of trance. She felt thoughts come and go, didn't hold on to anything, just let everything pass her by. And then individual scenes of the past experiences began to pass her by like a movie: The passing police cars in the mountains - the first evening with Ian - Chambers presenting the investigation results - Gillardi with his words "think straightforward" - Ramona Hayes claiming to be following a lead - Ian telling the story of McBride but ruling him out as a suspect

- the voice of Dr. Stafford on the answering machine - the marking of her body in the office - Dr. Young and his alter ego - Ian bringing 'Crazy Mac' into play again - his and Chambers' suspicions about the archaeologist - and McBride again with his question.

When Cyd woke up, she felt her body on high alert. All at once, the answer was clear in her mind. And she realized that she had to act quickly if she wanted to prevent further murders. Struggling to suppress the feeling of rising panic, she turned to a flight attendant.

"My name is Cyd Alexander. This is an emergency. I am a member of a special unit of the FBI and I need to send an urgent message. Please speak to the captain so I can use the communications system."

The flight attendant looked at her calmly, "Do you have any identification, Miss Alexander?"

Cyd handed her the passport and waited impatiently for the stewardess to stop leafing through it.

"Can you also provide documentation of your position with the FBI?" Either the cabin crew of this airline was extremely well trained or the woman had elephant skin. Cyd did not pursue the question any further. She could feel herself losing patience.

"Look, like I said, this is an emergency. I have important information that can prevent a violent crime. Please report this to the flight captain. If he has any doubts, have him verify my statement with Frank Gillardi, the head of my task force. Now, please do as I say."

The young woman in the fancy Trans American Air uniform gave her a doubtful look before walking forward and speaking something into a phone on the wall next to the entrance to the pilot's cockpit. A moment later, the door opened and a burly, tanned, uniformed man came out. The stewardess spoke to him and then looked to the reporter, whereupon he nodded and went to Cyd.

"I am Shapiro de Remba, the first officer. Miss Manzanillo has informed me that there is an emergency."

Cyd looked into the gray eyes of the dark-haired, handsome officer and repeated her request. To her relief, de Remba showed more willingness to listen to her than the flight attendant. He signaled to a young man in one of the back rows, who then rose and joined them. Cyd guessed that he was an airline security officer traveling in civilian clothes. Together they went to the front of the cockpit.

The flight captain turned briefly and nodded to the journalist in greeting. Then he turned back to his duties. De Remba handed Cyd over to the flight engineer, who asked her for the desired number for the telephone connection. After a few moments, the connection was made. He handed her the receiver and then discreetly turned away to check any data on his instruments.

The dial tone from Ruth's mobile sounded crystal clear through the ether. Pick up, Ruth! For God's sake, pick up the phone. I know you can hear me.

Frustrated, she handed the phone back, thanked them, and returned to her seat. She knew she should notify the FBI.

But suddenly she was unsettled. The idea of having to explain her theories to the skeptics from the FBI in the presence of the cockpit crew was embarrassing to her. She would make all further calls after landing.

Ruth had left the station earlier than usual. She had arranged to meet Chambers for dinner at his home. But before she would begin her preparations, she wanted to make a side trip to their kyudo center in town, an education and training facility for Japanese longbow archery. The range was deserted at this hour and in such temperatures, which didn't surprise Ruth. No one but she seemed to have the willingness and toughness to devote herself to kyudo under the scorching rays of the afternoon heat. She had to do it because she wanted certainty as to whether or not her relationship with Dr. Chambers would be successful.

The ritual with the asymmetrical longbow had long become an important decision-making authority for Ruth - her personal oracle, as it were - in essential questions of life. If she succeeded in reaching the state of emptiness and silence - the peace of the heart - after a decision question, this indicated approval and success. If she did not succeed, this would mean danger, failure and, as a consequence, it would be better to leave a project alone.

Ruth had trained the correct technique of precise slow movements to perfection with iron discipline. The crucial issue, however, was the influence of the mind. Only when, when releasing the arrow, the concentration was so condensed that she freed herself from all thoughts, she reached the state of empty purified mind. *Mushin* - the confirmation of her project.

After enjoying the beauty of the bow, she attuned herself to the surroundings and began immersion in herself. The goal was *Samadhi*, complete concentration on the activity while letting go of all thoughts.

After some time, she took an arrow and placed it on her thumb at the far right edge of the bow. Then she pulled the string back. What Ruth had succeeded in doing hundreds of times before would not happen today. Whenever her concentration reached a certain level of compaction, thoughts shot through her head like bolts of lightning out of the blue, or feelings overwhelmed her like a force of nature. After some time, she broke off. She had not fired a single shot.

The highest good of the archer is the hit, it was said. *Toteki* - the arrow hits the target, *Kanteki* - the arrow pierces the target, *Zaiteki* - the arrow exists in the target. Ruth knew only one thing, she existed in Chambers. Without him, she was nothing.

As she sat back in her car, she felt frustrated and unsettled. No wonder in this heat, she tried to reassure herself. Besides, none of this means anything. Our love is so strong, it needs no reassurance. Deep inside, however, she sensed that her words sounded hollow and empty. A sense of impending doom frightened her.

Angry at herself and her superstition, she started the car and drove off. At that moment, her mobile began to buzz. She was not in the mood to answer calls now. Impatiently, she glanced at the display to see who was on the line. The display said: unknown subscriber. "That won't be so important," she said aloud and put the phone on the passenger seat.

They had an appointment for five o'clock. Ruth had been looking forward all day to the moment when he would take her in his arms and she would experience the dawn and the falling night in his presence. The longing she felt threatened to suffocate her. On the way to his house, she had stopped at a wine shop to pick up two bottles of red wine. Only a few weeks ago she would have thought it unthinkable to accept the price that good wines had. But now it seemed to her the most natural thing in the world to honor a special hour of her life with a great wine.

To be sure not to disappoint him, she had chosen a Montepulciano. She knew that he loved the velvety dry taste of this wine from Tuscany. She had also picked up some pecorino and fresh rosette at an Italian deli. She was usually a level-headed driver, but that afternoon, driven by an inner restlessness, she drove like a wild woman across the wide streets toward Skyline Boulevard.

When she parked her Lexus in front of the house, she was disappointed to find that Chris's car was not in front of the house. Convinced that her lover was about to arrive, she decided to wait for him inside the house. She took the key from the beam above the entrance and unlocked the front door.

As soon as she entered the anteroom, the anticipation was wiped away and she felt a cold shiver run down her spine. She noticed how the fine hairs of her skin stood up, her breathing became shallow and her whole body was put into a state of alarm. It was as if an archaic

sensory system was warning her of impending danger. Her mind, on the other hand, was determined not to let the evening be spoiled.

Don't be hysterical, it's just the disappointment of him not being there before you, she tried to reassure herself. But deep in her heart she felt that the evening would be different than she longed for.

The familiar rooms with the lowered blinds suddenly seemed strange and threatening to her in the twilight of the setting sun. The absolute silence that surrounded her made her aware of how isolated the doctor's estate was. Why is he suddenly the doctor to me and no longer Chris? she asked herself in wonder. She put her groceries on the kitchen sideboard and wanted to take a seat in the living room.

But suddenly she felt the urge to explore the house, and as if guided by a higher power, she began to roam the rooms. The familiar surroundings now seemed strange and cold to her, a hostile deadly threat seemed to emanate from every known element.

"Please! Come, beloved, take me in your arms, tell me that everything is all right," she said in a monotone voice to herself.

The more the twilight surrounded the inanimate rooms, the more the familiar memories faded and the feeling of abandonment and strangeness increased. She arrived at a door she had never noticed before. Stone steps led down into an ancient vault that was apparently part of an old foundation and cellar system that the builders of the house had adopted. Ruth felt the cool stale air brush over her body and make her nauseous. Deeper and deeper the steps led down. In the half-light of the dim illumination, memories came to her of catacombs and Etruscan necropolises. She felt as if she were about to descend into the realm of Hades. At the bottom, the corridor widened into a kind of basement room, from which various corridors branched off again. Ruth decided to take the first corridor, which after a few meters expanded into a spacious vault.

It was a dungeon of horror. In narrow niches on the walls, vertically placed open wooden sarcophagi containing bandaged bodies were

found at regular intervals. Each mummy had a small wooden plaque with hieroglyphic writing. The last body bore no records.

Ruth hesitantly stepped closer. This corpse seemed to have been bandaged only recently. Horror spread through her, but she could not help herself. She looked for the end of the strip of cloth and carefully began to undo the bandages. She acted as if controlled by a stranger. What was happening here had nothing to do with reality. It was as if she were an actor in a surreal play. In the area of the head, the bandages became narrower and finer. With each strip she unrolled, the physiognomy of the face emerged more clearly. When she finally looked into the dead woman's face, it was as if the icy cold of a tomb surrounded her. Tears welled up in her eyes and she heaved a sob. She had not expected to see Ramona Hayes ever again. Now she looked into her pale lifeless face. She looked so peaceful and yet so sad.

Suddenly Ruth felt that she was no longer alone, but she did not dare to turn around.

## Chapter 16

Ian had come to North Park Hospital hoping to run into Dr. Chambers to talk to him about McBride. Since he was in the area anyway, he hadn't called in. Since there was nothing urgent involved, he was just going to take his chances. Chambers' assistant had left a note on her door that she would be gone for about twenty minutes. Since she hadn't listed a time, Ian didn't know if the twenty minutes had just begun or were about to end. He knocked on Chambers' office, but there was no sign of life there either. A call to his mobile took him straight to voicemail. He shrugged indifferently and decided to stretch his legs a bit and then try Chambers' secretary again.

As he passed the beverage machine, he noticed a middle-aged nurse staring at him. The white costume suited her well and showed off her figure. She was a good-looking woman with a certain something, who now smiled at him and nodded.

He stopped and turned to her. "Do we know each other?" he asked kindly, letting his eyes glide over her body with interest.

"I apologize if I offended you. I'm Nurse Helen from the surgical unit. I'm from Phoenix and I've only been here three months. You don't know me, but I know you. I recently attended your lecture on death rituals at the university. I think it's great how you manage to captivate the listeners with your lecture."

Ian nodded proudly and thanked her. "Yes, this is a subject that gets under your skin. I get the impression part of the auditorium comes just for the thrill."

The nurse looked at him challengingly. "Well, I could certainly imagine that part of the female auditorium is coming just for you."

Ian raised his eyebrows questioningly. "And for what reason were you there?"

"I'm not sure I should tell you this. After all, we've only known each other for a few minutes. It might be too soon for intimate confessions."

Conrad was entranced. "Then I suggest we get to know each other a little better. I'm just waiting for Dr. Chambers, and after that I'm free."

It was strange how suddenly her expression changed. "Do you mean Christopher Chambers, the neurologist?" she asked curiously.

"Well, Christopher is his name, but he's head of forensics. Why do you ask?"

"I was mentored during my training by Dr. Esther Chambers, who was married to a Dr. Christopher Chambers. He was the star of our clinic in Phoenix. It was such a sad story."

Ian had become curious. He took her by the arm and led her to an alcove off the hallway. "I can't imagine this is our Dr. Chambers, but tell me anyway. What happened that was so sad?"

Sister Helen suddenly seemed uncertain. "I don't know if I should talk about the matter, since it contains very intimate details of the Chambers couple's lives. But since this seems to be about another Chambers, there's probably nothing wrong with my telling you. It was at the very beginning of my nursing training that I attended a seminar on general medicine given by Esther Chambers. She was an excellent lecturer and physician, well-liked by patients as well as students. Then suddenly she began to change. She seemed nervous and was no longer resilient. Sometimes she came to lecture with teary eyes. Everyone could see that something was bothering her badly. There were numerous rumors circulating. They all boiled down to the fact that her husband was keeping a mistress and that he was making his wife's life hell by being mentally cruel. Then, one Sunday, I remembered because I was off work and watching TV at home, I learned on the news that she had taken her own life. Her husband then completely broke down. He blamed himself for her death, set fire to her house with all her personal belongings inside, and then wandered around the hospital completely confused, telling anyone who would listen that he had murdered his wife.

He lost his job at the clinic and was committed to a psychiatric hospital. I haven't heard from him since."

Ian had listened to the narration in disbelief. His uneasiness increased with each sentence. "Tell me, Helen, have you ever met our Dr. Chambers?"

The nurse sensed from his voice that she had gotten into something with her story that had quite different dimensions than the suicide of a general practitioner. "No, I have virtually nothing to do with forensic medicine. But I have to confess that I've only glimpsed Dr. Chambers in Phoenix a couple of times, too. I don't know if I would recognize him anymore." She was now greatly unsettled. "I'm not going to get in trouble for telling you this, am I?"

Conrad reassured her as best he could. "Don't worry about that. It's perfectly all right for you to have told me about these incidents in Phoenix. I'll just have to ask you to excuse me now, and I'll get back to you."

He hurried away, while Sister Helen remained behind, unhappy and irritated.

Ian dialed the headquarters number from a house phone. "Dr. Conrad here, human resources department please." He hoped it didn't occur to the employee to check if he was authorized to use the internal phone system.

"Administration." His concerns were moot; shortly thereafter, he had a human resources employee on the line. He tried the academic title trick again. "This is Dr. Conrad, I'm about to close a file, but I'm missing some information. Please see what Dr. Christopher Chambers' last duty station was before he joined us."

From the cool tone, Ian could tell right away that he would have no luck this time. "What was your name again?"

"Dr. Conrad," he said with sharpness in his voice, "the matter is urgent."

"Are you an employee of Park Hospital, Dr. Conrad?" Ian knew when he had lost. Gently, he hung up the phone.

He dialed Gillardi's number, but then hesitated and did not send the call. He was completely confused. Suddenly they had a new profile. And one that was a hundred percent match. It was incomprehensible. Dr. Chambers, of all people. No, that wasn't possible. They had to be two different people. And if not ...

Driven by an evil premonition, he decided to drive to the coroner's house.

Gillardi was in the process of going through the perpetrator's profile all over again. To avoid mental fixations, he made an effort to rebuild the profile each time based on the available data. His maxim was to leave no possibility out of consideration. Even the most improbable and absurd variants were considered, reconsidered, documented.

The possibility that a task force employee could be the perpetrator had, in his estimation, had a relatively high degree of probability for some time. He did not even rule himself out as the perpetrator. Gillardi was very familiar with the phenomena of the mind leading double lives and then protecting the conscious mind from the ego-threatening consequences by shifting them to the subconscious. Defenses, schizophrenia, multiple personalities. He himself had once solved a case in which the investigating police officer was the perpetrator. The captain suffered from advanced schizophrenia. The existence of the police officer was one of his personalities, that of the murderer another. The two knew nothing about each other. When he was arrested, he cried out desperately for them to let him go, because he had an important job to do and had to catch a murderer.

After the murder of Ramona Hayes, he had DNA samples taken from all team members. The results were in the employee files. A few days earlier, he had started to lay his traps. A beep indicated the receipt of an e-mail. It was the evaluation of a request to the lab that

was part of his ruse. Reading the message, his eyes narrowed and he felt adrenaline flood his entire body.

Gillardardi was now ice cold and completely controlled. The time for fantasies and passion was over. He reached for the phone and dialed Jimenez's number. "It's time, we're going into the final round. We need a SWAT team with helicopter support for the operation. Please make all the arrangements. Urgency level red." He then dialed Spencer's number to tell him the killer had been identified.

While waiting for the SWAT team to arrive, which would be composed of special tactical units from the sheriff's department and a nearby Army base, he checked his weapon and prepared spare ammunition and a Kevlar bulletproof vest. It was almost surreal. The long search, all the research and endless checks of known criminals, unusual occurrences, events with the slightest deviations from common patterns. And then such a trivial routine measure led to the result. He felt a kind of clinical disgust for the perpetrator. The wolf in sheep's clothing. Since the beginning of the investigation he had been in their midst, had fed off the mutual trust of the group. Had he acted out of wickedness or was he simply sick? Others had to rack their brains over that. His task was to catch him and bring him to justice. The hunt was coming to an end. What would he do after that? Maybe it was time to get out and return his hunting license. But he could also take some time off and move on to more enjoyable things for a while. Gillardardi had always dreamed of spending a few days in Paris and seeing the roses in the autumnal Jardin de Bagatelle. The season would suit.

"I see you have already introduced yourself to my little community." This was no longer the gentle, understanding voice of the beloved speaking. It was the language of a fanatic with the lurking undertone of the homicidal psychopath. "Immortality, Ruth, eternal life. Remember? The Egyptians considered the time of life to be short, but

the time in the afterlife to be very long. All these women had the choice of bribing a few years in this world by beauty, and then being inevitably given over to physical and spiritual decay. Or, in the prime of their lives, to prepare themselves with a fresh young body for life in the hereafter, and there to lead a never-ending existence with the charm of youth."

Ruth turned slowly and forced herself to look Chambers in the eye. "You never gave them any choice," she replied in a trembling voice.

"I chose for them." The doctor seemed strangely unconcerned and absent. "That is the paradox of life. At the time of physical flowering, man does not yet possess the maturity to make far-reaching decisions. So others must decide for him."

"Others who are more mature?" She squeezed out the words.

"Knowing, Ruth." Chambers gazed at her with the appraising look of a collector unsure whether an object would enhance his collection. "Actually, you're already too old for youth-preserving conservation. But because my heart beats for you, I want to make an exception."

"Please Chris, don't do it. Aren't our hours together worth anything to you?" Ruth backed away from him, her eyes wide.

"Yes, I have enjoyed the time with you very much. You know, here in this world everything we experience - as beautiful as it may be - is subject to the merciless restriction of time. But wait, my dear, in the hereafter everything will be different. You will start your journey as a beautiful and interesting woman. There you will have nothing to fear." Chambers followed Ruth's every move with slow steps, never taking his eyes off her for a second.

Ruth took heart and launched one last desperate attempt. "Then, as a mature woman, I choose to age gracefully here in earthly life and spend the afterlife in old age and infirmity."

Chambers shook his head slowly and stared at her with a lifeless smile on his lips. "Too late, Ruth. By the time you got into these rooms, you'd already made up your mind."

Ruth closed her eyes and began to focus all her perception, as she had learned in Zen, on this one last thing - her death. She felt her mind become free of all thoughts. The disappointment of her wasted feelings faded away and her fear dissolved into nothingness. In the state of empty purified mind, she expected her destiny to be fulfilled.

As soon as the machine reached its parking position, Cyd switched on her mobile and dialed Ruth's number. But as before, her call went straight to voicemail. On the way to the cab stand, she tried again and again. The result remained the same. She knew what to do. There was a small residual risk that she was wrong. But she would have thought it irresponsible not to take action now. Without further ado, she dialed Gillardi's number.

The profiler seemed to have been expecting her call, as he answered after the first ring.

"Cyd Alexander here, Mr. Gillardi, I got some crucial information from Professor McBride, I think I now know who our man is." She waited anxiously for the FBI man's reaction. To her surprise, Gillardi seemed neither surprised nor particularly interested. He replied frantically with short blurted out words.

"Yes, yes, we know it now, too. Our special team is just finishing the final preparations and we are on our way out. The operation should be completed in 45 minutes at the latest. If you want to witness the finale of this case, come to the doctor's house in about an hour. Our security will let you through as soon as it is safe to do so. But for now, I must be on my way. See you then."

Cyd decided to take a cab directly from the airport to the scene. She didn't want to miss the final scene of the drama that had kept her in suspense for so long. She gave the cab driver the address and then leaned back impatiently.

Gillardardi was finalizing details of the operation with Commander Lewis, the SWAT team leader. "I want to finish this case without complications if possible. So for now, stay discreetly in the background on standby. I'll pull up to the house with my guys and ring the bell. When Dr. Chambers opens the door, we'll arrest him. If he resists, we will break him. If he barricades himself, we will break down the door and storm the house. If there are people held hostage by the doctor, I'll give the code word and we'll storm from all sides. They take over the terraces and rooms on the upper floor from the helicopters and also secure the property. It's a pretty big old house and a difficult property to navigate. There may be secret escape routes. And we can't afford to let him get away. As of now, if there is the slightest resistance, shoot to kill! I repeat, shoot to kill orders for all involved in the operation. I expect that we will be able to begin the operation at point seven."

Gillardardi then turned to the FBI team. "We're going to go without sirens and emergency lights and maintain radio silence until we get to the doctor's house. We don't want to drive the fox out of its den."

All of Cyd's attempts to get the cab driver to speed up failed due to the phlegm and indifference of the gray-bearded Ukrainian. When they finally arrived near Conrad's lodge, hectic activity awaited them. But the house and its surroundings were completely deserted. It was obvious, there would be no operation here today. And suddenly the scales fell from her eyes as to whom Gillardardi must have meant when he spoke of the doctor.

A deep sense of shame came over her as she thought of Ian, with whom she had shared so many intimate and familiar moments. Why had it been so easy for her to consider him a serial killer? With Chambers, to whom she was merely strongly attracted but with whom she otherwise had no connection, this would have been unthinkable to her. What was it about this man, I wondered, that she was so taken with him? Even now, faced with the facts and the great

disappointment, she felt neither disgust nor disgust for him. For reasons that were hidden from herself, she simply did not manage to condemn him or to distance herself from him.

What remained was sadness and melancholy. It was like when her faith in comradeship and humanity had been taken from her that night. Today she had to bury her dream of true, pure love. It was no less painful. Could feelings be so wrong? First Ian and then Chris?

She leaned over to the motionless cab driver and gave him new instructions. Now she had all the time in the world, nothing more was at stake. She just wanted to get home.

Ian had committed just about every traffic violation that could be committed on his wild ride to Chambers' house. He even wished he was being followed by a police patrol. For by now he had realized what he was up to. He was about to go to the home of a possibly psychopathic serial killer to confront him about his actions. But until it was determined that Chambers and his namesake in Phoenix were the same person, he couldn't turn the case over to Gillardi. Chambers was, after all, a colleague, both in the project group and in the academic society.

"But when you suspected McBride, you didn't care much about the academic code of honor," the memory of his actions came painfully to his mind. The realization hit him hard. What might have been his motives in prompting Cyd to search for the archaeologist. Selfish motives having to do with him and Cyd, but perhaps also with his interest in Ruth, were the most likely variant.

"Now that the moment of self-knowledge has apparently arrived, might as well answer the question of what you're really up to by going to Chambers alone? " He suddenly felt a strange distance to himself and his actions. Did he think he could bring the case to a close on his own? Was it the hope of fame and recognition that came with it? Did he want to be the shining knight who prepared to slay the dangerous dragon in order to win the favor of the damsel - in his

case the favor of the two ladies? Was it a death wish, vanity or simply his way of having to solve the tasks set for him, even if he broke all the rules of reason and community? As hard as he tried, he could not find an answer for his behavior. It was like a process that - once set in motion - could not be stopped. To turn back now and leave the further procedure to Gillardi was simply unthinkable for him.

He had reduced speed in search of Miramar Road and now steered the Mustang slowly down the small street. On the driveway to Chambers' house, he let the car coast to a stop. He recognized Ruth's Lexus parked next to Chambers' car.

Either he would make a terrible fool of himself in the next few minutes or he would enter the lion's den. He briefly considered whether he could use anything as a weapon, but then decided against confronting Chambers with an umbrella or the lever of the jack.

On his way to the front door, he became uncomfortably aware of the loud sound his footsteps were making on the gravel of the path.

Arriving at the entrance, he instinctively turned the iron knob without pressing the bell. The gate was not locked and opened silently. He stepped through the vestibule and went into the drawing room. There he looked around. The blinds were down and adjusted so that the last rays of the setting sun fell mutedly into the room. On a secretary lay several books that seemed strangely familiar to him. Technical literature on the ancient Egyptians, mummification, death cults, and afterlife rites. Next to them, as if in contrast, was a volume on the wines of the ancient world.

Ian moved slowly through the semi-dark room, his attention completely focused on movements and sounds. For the first few minutes, he could perceive nothing unusual. Only when his hearing had adjusted to the total silence in the house and his sensory cells were tuned to detect the finest sounds, he could hear a human voice from somewhere in the house. It was a strangely lyered chant that was now coming to him more and more clearly. He tried to locate the

source of the sound by walking through the various rooms. As he left the drawing room and entered a corridor leading away from the entrance area to the back, the voice grew louder.

He walked down the hallway, ignoring the doors. The sounds were clearly coming from the front. After a few meters, the corridor made a bend to the right and ran out into a dark alcove. At first glance, it appeared to be a dead end. It wasn't until Ian continued to follow the voice that he discovered a door set into the paneling that was only ajar. He hoped the hinges were well oiled and slowly pushed it open. The stone floor led down in irregular steps. Ian felt his way along the stairs in the semi-darkness until he arrived in the basement vault of the house. A faint glow of light could be seen at the end of the high room.

Carefully, he crept up to the edge of the wall and peered into the next room. What he saw there made his blood run cold. Chambers, dressed as an ancient Egyptian embalmer, was busy with the body of a lifeless woman. Leaning forward a bit, he revealed the woman's face, and Ian realized that the dead woman was Ruth. Chambers was just setting about removing the brain through the nose with a hook when Conrad's cry of horror interrupted him. Slowly, he turned his head and looked at the intruder in amazement.

"Dr. Conrad, I am amazed to see you here. I don't recall inviting you. Do you realize that by your presence, you are sensitively disrupting an important religious ritual?"

Ian stepped into the torch-lit embalming room and snapped at the coroner in a sharp voice. "You maniac, are you out of your mind? Do you actually realize what you are doing?"

He approached the embalmer, grabbed him with both hands and shook him as if to wake him up. Chambers freed himself from the grasp and took a step back, casually picking up the knife he had prepared to remove the entrails. He raised his hands placatingly.

"Calm down. I also apologize for the rude greeting."

"This is not about formality." Conrad was furious at the trivializing words. But he also sensed the danger of death and knew he had to be very careful with the madman.

"Yes, you're right, it's much more than formality." The soft unctuous voice sounded as if in a trance. "It's about the mystery of life, the afterlife, immortality. You call me a madman. What would you call the millions of your fellow citizens who let their dearly departed rot or be cremated, thus depriving them of any possibility of living on after death? The 'bad conscience' must be overcome in order to be able to create beauty, soul, ideals." With these words chanting, Chambers stepped up close to Conrad and looked at him with burning eyes. "Don't you understand? This is my destiny. To create beauty, soul, ideals. To create possibilities for the afterlife, in beauty and dignity."

Chambers felt his words being ineffective. He saw the room and the beautiful female figure fade away. Darkness settled over his consciousness like a shadow. Then it was there again, his dream vision. The lovely face of the young woman in the prime of her life. He knew what would come next and let out a piercing scream.

Ian had only one wish, to escape the horror of this chamber of horrors. In wild panic, he took flight. On the stairs, he heard the sound of leather boots on the stone floor. Suddenly, he saw himself bathed in glaring spotlights.

Various voices shouted at him. "Hands on the wall!" "Don't move!". He could do nothing with the commands, was completely overwhelmed by the situation, instinctively froze in immobility. Then he felt himself being grabbed by strong hands that bent his arms backwards. Finally his hands were tied behind his back and he was pushed upwards.

When his vision had cleared, he could make out Gillardi, who was coordinating the operation. The profiler had his handcuffs removed and shook his head in resignation. "I guess you never learn. Why

don't you leave such tasks to the professionals? That's what we're here for, after all."

Conrad still saw Chambers being carried out, strapped to a stretcher, then he went into the saloon. With unerring instinct, he found the bar. He filled a water glass with scotch and retreated to the terrace.

After three weeks, the hard core of the task force reconvened. Dr. Atkinson, the head of the psychiatric hospital's closed unit, was to give an initial clinical assessment so the case could be closed by the sheriff's department. He welcomed the group into the conference room. On the table in front of him was an extensive medical record. In contrast, the records he held in his hand during the presentation consisted of only a few pages.

"Dr. Chambers has been on our ward for nearly three weeks, and during that time we have taken every possible measure to get an idea of his physical and mental condition. Unfortunately, I would like to preface this by saying that the patient has been in a state of catatonia since his admission, which makes it impossible for us to reach him or even make contact with him. The members of the task force have seen for themselves how Dr. Chambers fell into this state of torpor when he was arrested. He has remained in this state since he was admitted to us. We call this a catatonic state of lockdown. The patient is frozen motionless, does not answer any question, does not follow any instruction and lives completely withdrawn from the environment. At the same time he is wide awake from the point of view of his cerebral activation.

The symptoms of catatonia encompass three different areas. The motor features of the disease are particularly striking. Patients may remain in their posture for days or weeks, sometimes holding their arms, legs, or neck in a position against gravity. This can result in bizarre positions. In Dr. Chambers' case, the abnormality consists of a rigid, upright posture.

Furthermore, the disease is characterized by strong, intense and uncontrollable emotions. There can be extreme anxiety, but also aggression, lability or emotional ambivalence. The strong inner states of agitation sometimes manifest themselves in features such as grimacing or staring. On this point Chambers is difficult to assess, since he shows no emotion at all. This in no way means, however, that an affective state that is life-threatening to himself or those around him cannot occur at any time.

Third, in addition to the motor and emotional features, characteristic behavioral symptoms also appear. Some of the patients show bizarre behavioral anomalies. Thus, behavioral instructions are sometimes followed unquestioningly or the opposite is carried out. The patients withdraw autistically and break off all contact with the environment. The latter is the case with Chambers. And since he does not show the slightest reaction to any measures from our side, it is extremely difficult to assess him. The catatonic stupor, the patient's seclusion, may, as I have said, change at any time into raptus, a catatonic state of excitement, with wild flailing to the point of collapse, during which self-injury or attacks on others may occur. The episodes of illness can last for days to months and may be life-threatening.

Catatonia occurs mainly in schizophrenia, but also in brain tumors or endogenous depression. A brain tumor could be excluded in Chambers by the clinical examinations. Catatonia was also classified as a subtype of schizophrenia. Thus, this psychomotor clinical picture acquired an intermediate position between schizophrenia and depression. Chambers shows signs of both disorders.

Possibly the unresolved experiences in connection with the tragic death of his wife - you can read the details in the 'Curriculum' - first led to a deep depression, which then developed into schizophrenia. According to all indications Chambers tried to compensate his pain by increased devotion to his fellow men. He is said to have thrown himself into work after the reported events, was available to everyone, and in any case dealt with his patients and colleagues better than

with himself. In turn, he could only get through this by constantly pumping himself up with medication. This also fits into the medical history. We know that chronic and high-dose substance abuse can produce productive psychotic states characterized by persecutory ideas, delusions, hallucinations, and irrational behavior.

It is also not really possible to determine the form of catatonia in Chambers. On the one hand, he shows signs of the mannered form with the stilted, stylized behavior of persistent silence and standing in a certain place; at the same time, there are signs of the pernicious form of catatonia, an acute, often fatal form in which extreme psychomotor agitation can increase to the point of self-destruction. In a later phase, this often leads to a transition into rigidity of movement with the expression of the highest inner tension. And just the last point seems to me to apply to Chambers. So it could be that he had suffered from this form for a long time and that his excessive use of work was attributable to the psychomotor phase. According to this view, only the uncovering of his actions led to the transition into the torpor. If this is true, Chambers is in acute danger of death.

Typical symptoms of schizophrenia that could be observed in Chambers concern perception - the inability to distinguish between real and unreal experiences as well as hallucinations. Chambers' nightmares with real waking character, which he reported in his therapy sessions, are examples of this. But also thought disorders in the form of irrational religious-cult fixations and the increasing development of delusions are typical features of a schizophrenic disorder.

To understand the medical history, it is necessary to know the background of Chambers' development. Most of the information available to us comes from the doctor's personal life history, stored by Dr. Karen Stafford, under the name "Curriculum Dr. Christopher Chambers." Fortunately, the FBI's computer experts were able to recover the deleted data. Without these records, we would be missing important data for understanding the Doctor's behavior. This curriculum presents in narrative form Chambers' life story and, according to

Dr. Stafford's notes, is the result of treatment using the technique of 'therapeutic writing.' In this method, important periods of the patient's life are reviewed in therapy and then written down by the patient as a story. In this way, relevant events can be made conscious, defensive patterns can be broken through, and repressed contents can be worked through. Of course, we do not know what actually happened and what - possibly under the suggestive influence of the therapist - originated in the patient's imagination. The fact is that Dr. Stafford has done unusually careful research in order to be able to provide her patient with plot details. To do this, she contacted numerous people in the Chambers family's former circle of friends in Phoenix and recorded their statements. In addition, there are transcripts from police, railroad personnel, and firefighters, testimony regarding the suicide of Esther Chambers, and clinical records of Dr. Chambers' acute treatment after his collapse in Phoenix. That the story was actually written by Chambers himself is shown by the treatment protocols, which indicate which passages were easily managed by the patient and where resistance was great. Especially with the last section of the curriculum, Stafford had to use numerous different therapeutic approaches to get the patient to continue working on the issue.

Dr. Stafford's diagnosis is based on the assumption that Dr. Chambers' psychological problem lies in unresolved guilt for having driven his wife to her death.

The therapist attributed her patient's nightmares and the fact that no therapeutic success occurred despite individual progress to a fixation on the experience of guilt. We should not forget that she knew as little about her patient's preoccupation with the beliefs of the ancient Egyptians as she did about his acts of violence. Accordingly, her possibilities to make a diagnosis were limited.

Perhaps the fact that there was neither an intact corpse of Esther Chambers nor any images that would have allowed her soul to live on after death was the patient's real problem. But we don't know that

for sure either. And as long as he cannot be reached, the case will probably remain a mystery.

Gillard and Jimenez thanked Dr. Atkinson and officially declared the task force disbanded.

Leaving the psychiatric hospital, Ian bumped into Gillardi, who was on his way to the hospital's management to complete paperwork. "Tell me, how did you actually come up with Chambers as the perpetrator? After all, you took action without getting any clues from Cyd or me."

The profiler smirked as he replied. "Stinking normal police work, my friend. I set a trap for the professor. We sent his lab a DNA sample that supposedly came from Ramona Hayes' car and didn't fit any known pattern. The test result was 'result unknown'. ' We then had the sample retested and lo and behold, our DNA had been swapped out for another."

Ian was confused. "Yeah, so?"

Gillard smiled cryptically. "We had sent Chambers his own DNA. Who else but the perpetrator could be interested in making that disappear?"

"I'm glad we're on the same page". With an admiring grin, Ian nodded at the profiler.

"No problem, after all, your reaction was unremarkable."

Conrad looked up in irritation. "Does that mean ...?"

Gillard's look was now distant. "Of course, what did you think? So long, doctor, enjoyed working with you."

## Chapter 17

Ian had been handed Chambers Curriculum by Gillardi, because of its scientific relevance and as a thank you for his involvement in the investigation. He read it carefully and was deeply affected. He passed the chart to Cyd with the note that the text was for her eyes only.

Cyd had taken the printout home with her. It was unimaginable for her to read such an intimate document in the hectic environment of her office.

It was a hot, muggy evening. She sat down on the terrace, blanked out the thunderous sound cloud of the big city, and began to read.

### Curriculum Dr. Christopher Chambers

#### Part 1 - Origin

"Chambers came from humble beginnings; his grandparents were immigrants who - escaping the poverty of their homeland in southeastern Europe - were determined to build a new existence in the States. His grandfather Jurin was a realist and knew that few jobs would be open to an unskilled immigrant. So he inquired among those around him about the most unpopular jobs. Almost unanimously, butchers' work was named as the nightmare job. Jurin decided to make a career in this very field. He was so imbued with the will to succeed that he was convinced he could achieve the American dream for himself if only he was given the chance. He stood outside the slaughterhouse for hours waiting for the shift change. It was impossible to miss that most of the slaughterers, like him, were immigrants from the old world who had not yet managed to integrate socially. As soon as a work crew left the building, he became active. It was a man of his own age whom he approached; from his appearance, he could have been a neighbor in his village of origin.

"I just arrived here and I don't have a job, tell me my friend, what does it take to become a butcher?"

Astonished at the naïve way of making contact, the worker stopped and asked him.

"Why do you want to become a butcher, of all things? There are so many professions that are well regarded in society. Look at me, the traces of blood are always on my skin, the smell of the entrails clings to me no matter how often I wash. And at night I often wake up with the roar of the animals in my ears. My wife distances herself from me as if I were a violent person, for my children I am someone who kills the poor animals. Find an honorable profession, go to garbage collection, at least there you have to deal with inanimate things."

"Everything you say doesn't scare me. I've made inquiries, I've been told there's always a need for butchers."

"That's right, precisely because the work is so hard, no one wants to take it on. Believe me, the job is not for you."

"And believe me, I've decided to make a career at the slaughterhouse. If you want to help me, you'll instruct me in the most important skills a slaughterer must have."

That's how Jurin came to work at the slaughterhouse. The noise made by the suffering animals was indeed horrific. A deafening cacophony of roars, grunts, squeals, bleats, whimpers. A macabre symphony of the death sounds of thousands of tortured creatures. Added to this was the pungent stench that was constantly present and the thousands of rats that populated the slaughterhouse. The work was not only stressful and exhausting, but also dangerous. Yuri's hands showed numerous cut scars.

Many of his colleagues were characterized by severe mutilations, had lost fingers at work. Even the smallest injuries often resulted in serious infections, which not infrequently led to death. There was no sick leave; those who were injured and could no longer work had to leave and see where they stayed. There were neither labor laws nor effective trade unions. The masses of European immigrants, who

were willing to work for the lowest wages, meant that the time for piecework was constantly shortened in order to squeeze even more work out of the workers.

But Jurin did his job well and was well-liked and well-respected by his superiors, all the more so because he was willing to take on the most unpleasant assignments without ever grumbling. He had overlooked only one thing. There was no career plan at the slaughterhouse. So he became a bitter old man chasing an unattainable dream.

Only one of his four children survived childhood. Georgi was a tender, sickly boy who suffered from tuberculosis from childhood. When his parents died, they had not left him much. A small, poorly furnished apartment in the slums of the immigrant neighborhood. But his parents had recognized the importance of education and used what little they could spare to send Georgi to school. While most kids his age were hanging around trying to supplement the family budget with small handyman jobs, Georgi's parents insisted that he go to school regularly. The decision suited the slight boy, who did not have the right qualifications for the daily struggle for survival on the streets. So he threw himself into the world of books and did his best not to disgrace his parents. Despite all his efforts, he did not manage to really gain a foothold. He was not able to work under pressure and was absent too often due to illness to meet the demands of the free labor market.

So he got by with various jobs more poorly than well. At the age of twenty-three, he met his wife Anna. It was not the great love, but the two came from similar backgrounds and had one thing in common: poverty and the will to survive. Together, they decided, they would have a better chance of taking a step forward.

Anna took any job to contribute something to the household budget. She cleaned in cheap restaurants, cleaned the marketplace in the evening from all the garbage and garbage that people carelessly threw away. At home she tried to be a good wife to Gregor. After three years of marriage, she became pregnant. In the joy of finally

having a child, she worked even harder during the pregnancy than before, thus depleting her health.

The breakdown came in the eighth month of pregnancy. On a bitterly cold winter night, she gave birth to her son on the open road as she was on her way home. As usual, she wanted to walk the seven-kilometer distance to save money. She lugged her cleaning kit on a back stretcher. A doctor who happened to be passing by arranged for her to be admitted to a clinic. She herself would never have thought of claiming so much luxury for herself. Like his mother, the little boy fought for his life for days. Finally, modern medicine prevailed. The attending physician told the mother that the boy might have suffered permanent damage. She herself would not be able to have any more children.

This was not how she had imagined her new happiness. And at that moment, she wished her parents had never left the old country. Gregor scolded her for being an ungrateful woman who would sin against God. The mere fact that she had received medical care would be proof that they had made the right decision. But the experience surrounding Christopher's birth had permanently changed Anna.

She knew that from now on she would no longer have a confidant in Georgi and would have to look after Chris's well-being alone. She had never felt so alone. Little Chris was her only purpose in life from that point on. There was nothing she would not have been willing to do for him. Her most secret wish was that he should have the opportunity to attend a university to study medicine. He should one day appear to other people like a god, just as she herself had experienced the doctor on duty in the hospital in the hour of mortal danger.

Thus, little Chris grew up with a mother who read his every wish from his eyes, but at the same time constantly encouraged him to further his development into a successful person. His bitter father, who felt neglected by his wife, was his constant competitor and the living example of a failure who did not deserve attention. At some point he left home and never came back.

The little boy had a serious deficiency, he lacked the quality of empathy. He could only take, not give. He suffered terribly from the discrepancy of his god status in the eyes of his mother and the rejection of other children who could do nothing with him, experiencing him as selfish and spoiled. Often, when they made fun of his parents' work, he was ashamed of his family and denied his origins. At school he was a nerd who tried to ingratiate himself with his teachers in order to gain their special attention. He graduated from compulsory school with good grades, but it was obvious to everyone that these grades concerned his dedication, not the person behind it.

When he came home on graduation day, his mother was dying. On her deathbed, Anna told him about her plans.

"... and so I saved every penny for your education. But God didn't give me enough time. The money is only enough for you to graduate. I enrolled you in the Jesuit college and paid the fees until you graduated. For that, I also took the money that was meant for my funeral. But that means nothing to me. Only your future is important. You have the opportunity to make something of your life. You should be better off than we are. Make an effort and do your best! Try to get a scholarship to the university. And you'll become a doctor and get to the top."

The spoiled boy could not do much with the passing of his mother. For the first time, he realized that he had no feelings whatsoever connected with his parents. What did give him a pleasant feeling was the idea that as a doctor he could lead the life of prestige and prosperity that his parents had always dreamed of.

## Part 2 - Training

So he took his chance and finished high school in college at the top of his class. In the strict faith of the Padres, his conformity and discipline were very much qualities that led to recognition and acceptance. Although his main interest was still his studies, Chris had also developed into an athletically gifted young man. Endowed by nature with an athletic body and good looks, he became a valuable asset on the university rowing team, and he found that he was especially popular with the public during competitions.

With the favorable evaluation and personal support of his class leader, it was not difficult for him to obtain a scholarship to one of the leading universities.

## Part 3 - Interests, Relationships

At the age of nineteen, his new life began, which from then on was characterized by two passions, that for medicine and that for women. Chris passed through medical school in record time, although he was courted by numerous fellow students and did not miss out on any erotic adventure.

Just before he graduated, he had a profound experience that completely threw him for a short time. It was a beautiful late summer day as he sat on a bench on campus going over the list of questions for the final exam. The leaves of the blood beech tree behind his bench were colored deep red and rustled with every breeze. He felt the sun soothing on his skin and felt removed from the world. The script lay unused next to him on the bench and he felt life pulsating within him.

"May I?" The young woman's simple question blended in perfectly. He had never seen her before. But at that moment, he realized she was special.

"Of course," he stammered, entranced by her natural manner. It was not, as usual, erotic charisma that lured him, it was simply attraction. Now he suddenly understood the meaning of the word lightning strike, which he had come across several times in conversations with fellow students or in literature, and with which he had never been able to do anything. It had to be love. How often had he heard it spoken of, experienced it glorified in the verses of medieval literature as high minne, without the slightest idea of what was meant by it. He felt the consuming glow of this new sensation burning within him, had the desire to selflessly give everything and give his love free rein. At the same moment a deep fear seized him, the creature could rise and disappear again like a dream figure. But the girl just sat there and smiled at him.

"I'm Chris." That was all he could produce.

"I am Esther."

And so they sat for quite a while, caressing each other with tender looks, two people who would now no longer have to search because they had found the most important thing in life.

It wasn't until much later, when the sun was already changing color and a cool wind was brushing through her hair and the top of the tree, that she asked, "Shall we go?"

Chris dropped the whole burden of the speechless, who could not pronounce the redeeming question, from his soul. In deep gratitude that she had found the right words, he said, "Yes, let's go."

She took him to her place. The following night, everything revolved around her. Graduation, career, future were forgotten. Their night of love was like a silent agreement, there was not the slightest doubt, this would be the beginning of a life together, nothing and no one would be able to stop the two. It was the fulfillment of a higher destiny, fate would take everything else in hand.

The next day, they both graduated with honors. Instead of celebrating exuberantly as usual, Esther took him to a village two hours away by car. It was a hamlet on the edge of the desert, inhabited by

old simple people who did not shrink from the meager life in solitude. On a hill behind the village stood a plain little church. Esther took his hand and led him inside. In a bay window to the left of the entrance was a black Madonna perched on a worn stone.

"When two lovers touch this stone at the beginning of their union, there is no evil that can befall them." From her voice sounded such a convinced archaic faith that he was deeply touched.

Together they laid their hands on the stone. And they felt that their union was pleasing to God. Thus began the life of Esther and Chris together.

#### Part 4 - Career

After graduating from college with an excellent degree, Chambers received offers from several attractive hospitals that offered him opportunities to specialize under the best conditions. After the hard years of service, it seemed, a life of interesting challenges, prestige, and financial prosperity was about to begin. Nor did it bother Esther that Christopher received by far the better offers, even though she was his equal with her degree. She also accepted without bitterness that he put his own career first in all the considerations they discussed together. The first months were paradise on earth for the young couple. They had decided to accept offers at a university clinic in Phoenix. The choice fell on this clinic because Christopher was offered there one of the few training places for the specialization in neurology, with simultaneous employment as a lecturer of the university. Esther had to be content with a position as a general practitioner, with an insignificant teaching assignment at the nursing school. Nevertheless, she agreed. She did not want to stand in the way of her husband's career.

## Part 5 - Family and home

Although the hospital provided them with a serviced apartment, which was quite generously sized and equipped for married couples, the dream of the young lovers was a small house with a garden. It should be not far from the city, but at the same time in the seclusion in which their young love would be able to develop. So they used their free time to drive around the area in Christopher's old SUV, looking for properties - small farmhouses, lodges, single-family homes and the like. They asked countless farmers, gas station operators and store owners, inquired at municipal offices and with private residents. After three months, they thought they had already failed with their project. After so many hours of effort, they had become discouraged and lost faith in the feasibility of their project.

During a break from surgery, Esther summed it up for a colleague friend. "You know, Cindy, we looked at so many properties, but there was always something that made it impossible for us to buy. It wasn't just details that would have limited the quality of life, but real impediments, noisy neighbors, environmental issues in the area, too far away from work, or the like. There are simply certain criteria where we cannot cut corners without betraying our dream. And we don't want that, then rather the service apartment. At least it's cheap and practical."

"Describe your dream house to me, and I can ask my uncle, who runs a semi-professional realtor service on the side."

Esther frowned when she heard realtors. Christopher and she had decided to look around for themselves. One trait they both attributed to realtors was that, despite precise wish lists, they would offer their clients properties for viewing that deviated completely from them, and then be pushy in their efforts to close. But since she did not want to offend her friend and also felt the desire to relive her dream, she began her description.

"Our taste is quite simple and that is probably why it is so difficult to realize. We want a plot of land in the open countryside. It doesn't have to be too big. However, it is important that there are no neighbors within earshot, sight or smell. I would like to plant a vegetable and herb garden to always have fresh ingredients for my kitchen creations. A few old shade plants would be my dream, but are not a requirement. The house itself, if available, should have a large enough living area, three bedrooms, two bathrooms and the appropriate adjoining rooms. And of course the kitchen. I want a spacious kitchen with a dining area and enough room for all the stuff a good cook needs. You know, after five years of fast food and cafeteria food, I want to make my mark as a master cook. Plus, we're big on healthy eating - healthy and tasty. Yes, and Chris needs a wine cellar with an earth floor. He has decided that he wants to invest part of his salary in good wines. Ever since we were invited to an Italian gourmet restaurant, he has been raving about Italian wines. If we find a suitable plot of land, we are also ready to build the house ourselves. Yes, I think that's it. What do you have to offer? " With her warm smile, she defused the last demand made.

"I'm afraid you've just infected me with your idea of country life. Only now do I know under what miserable living conditions I eke out my existence. I think I'll look at my uncle's offers first. And if there's anything like that, I'll take it myself. But for now, to celebrate, I'll buy you a glass of wine in the canteen - real California." hilariously, they laughed at the idea of drinking wine in the cafeteria between surgeries. And yet they both sensed a desire within themselves for a life that required more spontaneous exuberance and less responsibility and constant callability. To compensate, if the uncle had something to offer, they agreed to visit that property together. And they sealed their pact with a glass of Perrier.

After two days, Esther received a call late in the evening from Cindy, who sounded unusually excited.

"You, I think I've found what we are looking for. My uncle actually seems to have something for you. He told me about a 'crazy' writer who has owned a house nearby for almost thirty years, which he has set up as a hideaway for writing. But it seems he rarely gets to use it, since he's really a real big city guy and spends most of his time in New York or Miami. If you want, we can visit it tomorrow morning."

Esther couldn't believe her ears. Should her dream house really exist? "Cindy, that sounds fantastic. Only, Chris is still in the hospital and I don't know if he's free tomorrow morning."

The girlfriend sounded miffed. "What do you need Chris for? We agreed that you and I would do the first viewing, didn't we?"

Esther knew her friend didn't mean it, but the ritual of exploring together seemed to mean a lot to her. "You're right, that was our agreement. Then I'd best not tell him anything. If it's a flop, he won't be disappointed, and if not, I can surprise him with it."

"So it's a deal, I'll let my uncle know right away. But listen, I've been meaning to tell you this. I know how much you love Chris, and I know he loves you, but the way you're holding back for him seems excessive. It seems to me like you don't count at all in your relationship. Why don't you think of yourself first for once?"

"It's, I love him so much. He is my everything. I just can't imagine my life without him. Can you understand that?"

"You know how much I appreciate you and how fond I am of you. That's why I take the liberty of interfering in your private life. No, I can't understand that. And if this is what love looks like, I'm glad I've been spared it so far." Her liberated laugh put her words into perspective. "Don't hold it against me. I'm probably just a frustrated spinster jealous of your happiness. Well then, I'll see you in the morning."

As soon as they hung up, Esther began to think about what she had heard. Cindy was right on some points. She had the quality of being one hundred percent committed to her husband. That was something

she could not expect from Chris. It had always been natural for him to think of himself first. His being favored had never been an issue for him in their partnership. Nor had she ever felt it as a restriction until now. So despite the electrifying idea of having found what she was looking for, there was still an unpleasant aftertaste that clouded her joy.

But the very next morning everything was back to normal. Chris had left the apartment early in the morning. He was on call and would not be home until the evening. Esther was sitting with a cup of coffee and reading the morning paper when the phone rang.

"It's getting serious, I'll be with you in ten minutes" and the line went dead.

Esther finished her drink, put on old jeans, and tied her hair up with a ribbon. "Quite the Wilderness girl," she thought. And indeed, right on time, the bell rang.

"Do we need a shotgun, bushwhackers, or heavy equipment for the viewing?" joked Esther as she let her friend into the apartment.

"It's all in my car, honey. I suggest we leave right away. The sooner we get this thing wrapped up, the sooner you'll be a homeowner."

"Easy, easy, you're acting like the realtors in my worst nightmares." Esther laughed and hugged her friend, "But if you don't want coffee, I'm ready to go."

"Who wants coffee when there's land and houses to buy, land to reclaim, lives to turn upside down!" joked Cindy. Esther was glad to see her friend in such a good mood. She had secretly feared that the reservations of the previous day might have clouded their relationship. But now, it seemed to her, everything was back to normal.

The road to the promising house was surprisingly straightforward. They had driven south on the interstate about twelve miles when Cindy turned down a small side road. Esther was disappointed, how could there be a piece of land so close to the big city that met her

expectations. But she was wrong, it was a small piece of the Garden of Eden they would find.

After another three miles, a small dirt road branched off from the side road and led through the rugged foothills at the edge of the desert. There, between two hills, a small canyon opened up that soon widened into a valley floor about two acres in size. Toward the desert, the landscape contracted somewhat. Everywhere there were gigantic boulders, erratic blocks, scattered as if by giant hands. From watery rock depressions that stored the spring rains, underground springs fed a narrow stream oasis surrounded by trees with broad leaves. The valley shone in rich green. Near the valley's mouth, the huge crown of an ancient Arizona oak tree provided ample shade. The valley opening revealed a desert landscape sparsely overgrown with shrubbery. In the distance, parched mountains rose.

Near the oak tree stood the house. It was a building that seemed archaic and modern at the same time, a mixture between Bauhaus and Pueblo, made entirely of baked bricks, captivating through its simplicity. As simple as the house appeared from the outside, as generous it presented itself on the inside. The builder of the house had truly not spared with money. The mix of style, quality, functionality, technology and futuristic building design could be summed up simply - quality of living. Cindy went from one burst of enthusiasm to the next.

"Good Lord, Esther, just look at this studio! Chris will be thrilled." Esther was pleased that her friend was also able to include Chris in her enthusiasm.

Cindy's uncle proved to be an extremely accommodating, patient, older gentleman who informally introduced himself as Jack and graciously answered every question without, of his own accord, pointing out the merits of the property for sale or pressuring her in any way. Moreover, there was something about him that simply endeared him to Esther.

"Now this is really a house to my taste," she deflected when asked about the specific purchase. "I'm just afraid that such a property is far beyond our financial means." With a regretful smile, she looked questioningly at the realtor. Jack remained calmly friendly and answered in a quiet voice.

"Well I don't know about your financial situation, of course, but I can assure you that the owner expects a ridiculously low sale proceeds. On the one hand, he is convinced, in his own words, that there is only a tiny group of interested parties for such an object, dropouts, artists, 'weird birds', mostly with limited means. On the other hand, it is his concern to find interested parties who also know how to appreciate the object. And finally, for him as a well-earning writer, all investments were tax-deductible, so that he does not have to accept financial losses in any case.

Not to keep you in suspense any longer, the purchase price is \$370,000. I suggest you take time to talk to your husband about it and do a second viewing with him. I'll leave the keys with Cindy, you can then make arrangements with her. When you have come to a decision, please let me know."

What followed was to become the most beautiful time of her life for her and Chris. Like Esther, Chris was enraptured by the property. No sooner had the purchase contract been signed than they began to create a home for themselves - personalizing the rooms, designing the garden and the surroundings according to their ideas. Esther planted her long-awaited vegetable beds, Chris created his ideal work and retreat area with the studio. He also took it upon himself to design his own wine cellar and, during the remodeling work, to get on the craftsmen's nerves terribly by supervising them personally. When they had worked late into the night at the clinic, then proudly contemplated the progress of their efforts and sank exhausted into bed, they were as close as a husband and wife can be. A couple determined to

create a life together, ready to face all adversities and obstacles. To be there for each other, to be absorbed in each other.

The housewarming party was a huge success, and yet Esther felt a certain unease as she proudly showed off her home and escorted guests through the rooms. She felt as if presenting her home as a prestige object was a betrayal of the wonderful time they had growing up together. Chris was quite different; he was obviously proud of the outbursts of enthusiasm from the guests, who felt right at home and uninhibitedly claimed the entire infrastructure of the facility for themselves.

When they were finally alone again, Esther wanted to confide in Chris, but she could tell by his overexcited state that he would not be able to understand her feelings.

He listed all the reciprocal invitations they had received and enthusiastically announced that the time was now ripe for an intense social life, with a large circle of friends, reciprocal invitations and 'high life' on a grand scale. Esther dreaded the idea of her beloved home now being opened to the public, but preferred not to act on it, hoping that Chris would return to the values of her family life.

## Part 6 - Crisis development

But things turned out quite differently. It was as if they had incurred a curse with the advantageous acquisition. Admired by some, envied by others, courted, appropriated, cut, isolated, it seemed as if the possession of the property had made all the natural relationships and uncomplicated friendships that had provided them with a secure social network impossible all at once. Chris had also changed. He pursued an intensive but selective social life with constant reciprocal invitations within a select circle of friends, whereby for Esther, it was no longer sympathy values that seemed to be decisive, but calcu-

lation in terms of status and career. As a result of this, but perhaps also because of the intense professional commitment - Chris spent more and more time in the hospital, took on more and more responsibilities, and almost only came home earlier when he brought guests - his position in the hospital became more important. It was unmistakable how much he enjoyed this prestige. Of most concern to Esther was the fact that he was beginning to build a following in the female camp. Esther was still too deeply attached to her husband to admit to herself that he had become a vain fop who increasingly repelled his old friends and people of character.

The real downfall began with a convention in Chicago. Esther had joyfully embraced Chris before he left and announced to him that soon they would no longer be two. She wasn't prepared for his reaction. "Don't tell me you're pregnant!" With disgust in his voice and expression, he pushed her back. "How could you do this to me. I trusted you and now this. I don't want a child, and certainly not yours."

Esther had never felt so humiliated as she did that evening before he left. She had locked herself in her room and cried without restraint. It was said that tears were healing. This was not true for her that night. She had been deprived of her livelihood. What was left for her?

Chris had prolonged his absence again and again with flimsy arguments. One evening Esther could no longer stand the loneliness in the big empty house, and she called him shortly before midnight. He was noticeably rattled and tried to put her off until the next day by saying that she had woken him up and he was dead tired. "Who's that, darling? Come back to bed! " The shrill, vulgar female voice could be heard clearly in the background.

Esther's eyes went black. "Aren't you alone, Chris?" she asked desperately, hoping it could all still be cleared up and her senses had

played tricks on her." "We'll talk tomorrow!" he retorted angrily, hanging up.

Since that evening, things were no longer the same between the two of them. Esther suspected that she had been driven out of paradise. She sought to talk, but Chris only accused her of morbid jealousy and oppression. "How am I supposed to perform at my best in my job if you're constantly putting pressure on me. I need outside contacts. I need to be among intelligent and interesting people, as intellectual stimulation. After all, you're not exactly a bright light intellectually." Esther put up with any meanness - for old times' sake.

She swallowed all the hurt and tried to continue to be gentle with him, even though she knew her dream was over. Knowing more deeply that nothing ever lasted, she renamed her property 'paradise lost'. And she tried to let go of her lost dreams so as not to burden her husband even more.

They had learned to come to terms with each other. It was a jaded coexistence. Esther tried to avoid everything that could have incurred his wrath, and Chris noticed her less and less. She was only inventory for him. Sometimes he felt ashamed in his circle of friends because of her simple modest manner, and he wondered how he could have been so stupid as to marry such an ignorant woman.

One day, as Esther was sorting through his clothes, she found a letter full of intimate innuendo in which a colleague from Chicago shared her anticipation of seeing him again soon at a workshop in Salt Lake City. When she confronted Chris, he became furious.

"So that's how far things have come between us. You are spying on me. Such spying methods fit better in your old country than in our free country."

Esther was deeply affected by the hatred in his eyes. She never thought he would go so far as to use her provenance against her.

"If ever a word between us was honest and a tenderness undisguised and genuine, I ask one thing of you, don't go to Salt Lake City."

Esther could not explain to herself why she made this request. Perhaps she just wanted a small token, if not of love, then at least of respect.

To her surprise, he agreed, nurturing the hope that their relationship was not doomed after all. But just a few days later, he came home in the evening and firmly told her that he had to go to the workshop in Salt Lake.

"When are you leaving?" She struggled to keep her voice clear of accusation and resignation.

"Tomorrow morning," he replied defiantly, furious that she was so easily accepting of his breach of promise.

"Have a good trip, my love." With these words she withdrew.

## Part 7 - Collapse

The next day he set out early. With the considerate excuse of not wanting to wake his wife, he refrained from saying goodbye to her. He drove to the university hospital and parked his car in the underground garage. From there he took a cab to the train station.

About twenty miles past Phoenix, the railroad makes a slight right turn, which the train usually negotiates at great speed, but which is notorious among passengers because of the centrifugal forces it produces.

Just before the curve, Lockführer Tim Brailey sounded the horn. He felt the heavy diesel locomotive being pushed outward by the incipient curvature of the rails and now gave even more thrust to fully accelerate the machine out of the curve.

At the end of the turn, he was presented with the image that is every train driver's nightmare, and which he had always hoped he would be spared. He knew that at that moment his worst fears had become reality. This sight would remain in his memory as long as he lived. Shortly after the curve, where the long straightaway began, a young

woman lay in the middle of the tracks. Tim could not tell if she was unconscious or just deeply relaxed. What he perceived at that moment was the white dress with the ruffles and the completely defenseless innocent expression on the woman's face, whose neck rested on the right track so that her head hung backwards.

The scene brought back memories of a painting in the art gallery that he had once gazed at in wonder as a child, showing a young woman about to be sacrificed on an altar. As all these thoughts flashed through his mind, he automatically applied the emergency brake. He knew that this was only a formal act. The train would need at least three hundred meters to come to a stop. Tim's perception had long since adjusted to the exceptional situation. What he now experienced was a sequence of individual images, each one indelibly burned into his memory. As if in slow motion, the seventy-eight-ton steel monster moved toward the delicate figure.

For some inexplicable reason, at the last moment, he tried to detect a sign of life from the one now already almost under the locomotive. A look that said, "That's my story, you're not to blame." Then they were over it. Tim knew what was going on between the tracks under the wheels. He had also had to deal with such scenarios as part of his training. He also knew what to expect when the train came to a stop. The head would be severed, either flung to the side as a whole or shredded into tiny pieces by the following wagons, as would the rest of the body. Despite the severe state of shock that was spreading through him, he reached for his radio telephone and made a report.

Chris was sitting in the dining car having breakfast. He, too, knew the spot where the train took a right turn at high speed, so he poured himself only a little coffee to avoid spilling. As he spread butter on his toast, he thought in horny anticipation of Beatrice waiting for him at the hotel in Salt Lake City. The convention was just an excuse. This woman was simply in his blood. It had nothing to do with love or feelings, she was like a force of nature that you couldn't escape. The only downer was that Esther knew what he was up to.

She knew there was no convention and she knew he would spend the next five days in bed in the arms of another woman. And what bothered him the most was that he was aware of her knowledge. It was not his conscience that was stirring, rather he felt something like indignation that it was not his place to indulge in a little fling without his wife blaming him. Carefully he placed his knife against the shell of the soft boiled egg to lift off the 'cap' and as he gently pulled the blade through the egg, he felt from the effect of the centrifugal force that the train was racing into the curve. He tilted his body slightly against the forces at work as a jolt went through the carriages.

The emergency braking caused the passengers to be catapulted forward abruptly and unsecured pieces of luggage flew through the compartments. Chris, who was sitting in the direction of travel, was thrown forward with great force and then caught by the table, breaking several ribs. Only after several hundred meters did the train come to a stop. From the window of the dining car, Chris saw the engineer running to the rear. At the sight of him, he knew he would never get rid of the look of horror on this man's face.

Driven by a vague hunch, Chris left the train and followed the engineer. The embankment was littered with mangled body parts and the further Chris walked, the more the smallest perceived details pieced together in his mind to form a complete picture. Patterns on pieces of clothing, a single shoe, buttons on a piece of cloth, even before he stood before the completely intact severed head of his wife, he had long since identified her as the victim, his victim. Not a suicide - one who had been driven to her death.

And suddenly their time together played out before him like a movie. The first meeting, her question "May I?", her naïve belief in their shared happiness, when she could only see the stone in the chapel, the joy in her eyes when she showed him the house and presented him 'his' studio, the desperate look when she confronted him, the hopeful and at the same time pleading look when she asked him not to leave, finally the expressionless face where thick veils covered the

access to the soul. At that moment he felt the pain she might have felt, amplified a thousandfold, and he knew he deserved it. An unbearable burning pierced his chest, constricting him, stealing his breath and his mind.

He wandered over the railroad embankment, thought he could make out tiny pieces of the unborn fruit among the torn remains, was aware of what he had done, but was no longer able to use his senses. Even before the first rescue workers arrived, he had made his way to the nearby road.

How he had gotten home, he could not say. In any case, he somehow made it to the garage, took the car there and drove home. Under the delusion that he could ease his pain by destroying all external memories, he set fire to the house. It was an oppressively hot day with winds coming up from the desert. Within no time, the entire property was ablaze. The wind further fanned the embers. The fire spread throughout the valley with ever new showers of sparks. At last, the old Arizona oak was in flames. The destruction was complete. When the fire department arrived and Chris desperately tried to stop the men from doing their work, he was forcibly removed from the scene of the fire and admitted to the psychiatric ward of the hospital.

## Part 8 - Departure

It was a long period of convalescence that never led to full recovery. Chambers turned his back on Phoenix and moved to the young desert town in Sonora. He also ended his tenure at Neurology and moved to Forensic Medicine. Death became his constant companion from then on. For the first time in his life, he turned his thoughts to the essential questions of life and decided it was time to go in search of his God.

Cyd was deeply moved. First McBride and now Chambers. Why had she never felt the need to go in search of her God. Why had she always avoided the question of the afterlife. Was it her shallowness or fear of the answer? As long as she could remember, she had only ever strived for influence, recognition, and professional success. To what end? What had it brought her? Was this the right time to take the decisive step? To set out, to go on her way? Cyd did not know. She was confused, off balance, off course. All she felt was emptiness, nothing else.

As Cyd took a seat at her desk in the newsroom with Ian, she became painfully aware that the story she had been working on, indeed living for, for the past few months was coming to an end. The experiences had left such a deep mark on her that she found it unbearable to think about going back to the usual topics and routine work at the station. The room with the various workstations, where hectic activity prevailed everywhere, the clattering of keyboards, the sounds of various electronic devices and the air conditioning, the atmosphere of dedicated activity suddenly seemed to her empty of content and alienated from meaning. She couldn't help thinking of Ruth, of the blank look on Chambers' face after his arrest. Then her eyes fell on Ian. He, too, seemed far away with his thoughts.

Will we ever understand all the incomprehensible things we have experienced? she thought. In an effort not to show Ian her confusion, she took on the role of hostess.

"What can I get you?" she asked in a playfully casual voice, opening the small refrigerator under her desk. "Whiskey and buttermilk I have here. For other requests, we'll have to go to the canteen."

She noticed from Ian's absent look that his mind was somewhere else. She sensed that this was not the moment for pretended nonchalance and became serious again.

"What has happened to us? What has happened at all? Why and what for? Are we still part of it? Tell me, Ian."

Ian pulled up and smiled absentmindedly at her. "I don't know, Cyd. I do not know anything anymore at the moment. But - his gaze grounded again - I'll have a drink."

Cyd filled two glasses and leaned back in her chair. "You know, I think the worst thing for Chambers was the idea that his wife's beauty should be irretrievably lost. After all, he didn't even have a picture of her anymore. And even when he remembered her in his dreams, he was plagued by gruesome visions of death and decay."

She could not prevent her eyes from moistening at the idea of what a lover must feel when he did not have any likeness of his beloved, deceased wife.

"I would so love to help him." Her voice sounded childishly defiant now. "I think I need that for myself, too, to be able to work through the story. There must be a picture of her somewhere, maybe in some government office."

"That's not the point" Ian said in a calm, forceful voice. "It's not about any image. Chambers is obsessed with the ancient Egyptians' notion that survival after death requires an intact body, the image of the body as part of the soul, so to speak.

For the ancient Egyptians, Ka was much more than just the image of a human being, it was spirit, personality, astral body, indeed the breath of life that survives man even in death and gives him vitality even in the afterlife. A portrait photograph from an application form for a passport is not suitable for this."

Cyd looked at him helplessly and at the same time trustingly, as if she wanted to say "You are an expert for such questions, show me the solution.

Ian sensed the anticipation in her gaze and at the same time an inner voice warned him not to engage further in the subject. But in the end, his desire to please her was greater than his misgivings.

"However, there is an anthropological method of recreating the appearance of a face based on the skull. Gerasimov, a Russian, was the first to develop a scientific method for plastic reconstruction of

the human head. Since those times, there has been tremendous progress. It is actually possible to recreate a countenance with the help of modern, digital techniques."

"Do you mean that the skull of a person is enough to be able to make a lifelike replica of a head?" An incredulous undertone sounded in Cyd's question.

"That's exactly what it means" Ian said with conviction. "I've seen amazing results myself."

"That means we have to take the skull of Chambers' wife out of the grave." Cyd's voice did not show a moment of hesitation.

"You can't be serious," Conrad replied incredulously, shaking his head.

"I've never been more serious in my life," she said, and he could tell by her tone and determined look that she was obviously ready for Chambers to embark on the mad adventure of desecrating a grave.

At that moment he realized how much she meant to him. "Please listen to me, Cyd, your plan is absolute madness. We don't live in the Middle Ages anymore, where quacks and ghouls got their material from the graveyards. Do you have any idea what awaits us when we open this tomb?" But Cyd had already made her decision.

"I'm sorry, Ian, I have to do it. If you want to stand by me, I'll gladly accept your help. If you don't want to have anything to do with it, I can understand that, but then please don't turn on me."

Ian realized how deep the bond between him and this woman was, how important she was to him, how much he desired her. He had never met a person who was so contradictory, so strong-willed and so vulnerable at the same time. The idea that she could disappear again as suddenly and unexpectedly as she had entered his life was unbearable to him. He thought of the long lonely evenings when he returned to his empty house, of all the meaningless affairs with charming but unloved women, of the stale aftertaste that lingered each time they parted the morning after. He knew what he was risking, but he also felt the potential prize was worth that risk. "Okay,

I'll go along with it. But I'm not doing it for Chambers, I'm doing it for you."

Painfully, Cyd realized how carelessly she had always treated this man's deep and genuine feelings. And she was not comfortable with the idea of accepting his help.

The San Sabata Cemetery was located a few miles outside of town on the way into the mountains. Secluded on the border of the Sonoran Desert, its rich vegetation and diverse plant life, fed by underground springs and artificial irrigation, immediately caught the eye. The administration building, the blessing hall and the chapel, as well as some outbuildings with equipment for the maintenance of the plant, were located on the site of an abandoned monastery. The building had been placed in the middle of the barren landscape centuries ago by Spanish Jesuits. The friars must have sensed that it was a place of special spiritual power when they settled there. They later discovered that they had taken possession of an area that had been in use as 'Burial Grounds' by the local Indians before them. After the monastery had been repeatedly attacked by the tribe, the Padres built it into a defensible structure. It was a place that had seen many battles, the ground soaked with the blood of both sides. What the Indians had failed to accomplish, a drought of several years in the second half of the nineteenth century finally did. Dried wells, conflagrations, increasing desertification, and loss of usable land. This was compounded by renewed, severe Indian uprisings and raids by marauding desperadoes in the shadow of the American Civil War.

When the town was laid out in its present form at the beginning of the 21st century, a funeral home had acquired the site cheaply and developed it as a cemetery for the wealthy townspeople. The monastery complex was partly ground down, partly converted into modern buildings. The only building in its original state was the old church, which was restored - out of respect for the dead, but perhaps also for

publicity reasons. In any case, the cemetery developed into a coveted final resting place for the upper ten thousand. Chambers had also acquired a tomb here and had his wife's sarcophagus transferred.

Ian and Cyd had climbed over the cemetery wall. They were carrying a crowbar, a flat iron bar, and a backpack with other tools. Ian held a flashlight in his hand.

It was a stormy night, and the moon gave just enough light to find one's way without flashlights. The willows and cypresses moved in the wind like a dance party at its last feast. Dark clouds chased across the night sky, providing a macabre interplay of pale light and demonic shadow. The storm caught in the crypts and tombstones with howling and whistling sounds. The haunting atmosphere triggered strange sensations in Ian and Cyd, and both believed they were being haunted on several occasions.

"Shh, take it easy, there's someone coming up behind us." Cyd stopped and grabbed Ian by the arm.

"It's just imagination, there's no one here." Ian tried to give his voice a firm tone. In fact, he too had the impression that shadowy figures were following them. Since the intrusion into the realm of the dead, he felt he was being watched. He looked at the map he had gotten days before and tried to orient himself. "We need to take the next left." Again he glanced over his shoulder and thought he saw a figure suddenly freeze. They quickened their steps now, desiring to finish the action quickly. The path was right, now it should be the thirteenth crypt on the right.

"To my beloved wife Esther Chambers, unforgotten in eternal attachment" was written on a stone slab next to the ornately wrought entrance to the crypt. A terrible howl sounded behind them. They flinched and turned at the same time. On a crypt opposite them sat a huge eagle owl, looking at them out of large, shining eyes. Then the bird opened its wings and, like a soul leaving the body of a deceased, flew away with a gentle, almost silent beat of its wings.

"My God, what a horrible place. Come now!", Cyd didn't know how long she could keep her fear under control. Ian, too, had reached the limit of his endurance. And yet the worst was yet to come.

The barred gate was fitted with an old-fashioned lock for a traditional large beard key. Ian had no trouble unlocking it with a bent piece of wire.

They entered the tomb. It was a generously sized room made of white marble without the slightest ornamentation or further inscriptions. They had entered the innermost realm of a dead person, and it seemed as if any trace of human hands was unwanted in this place. In the center of the room stood the stone sarcophagus, closed by a massive stone slab. Ian wondered, as he looked at it, if their tools would be enough to move a slab of this size. Only now did he really realize what they were about to do. They would break into a person's last home, disturb their resting place, steal their bones, and likely leave a trail of devastation in their wake. That was decidedly different from doing archaeological excavations on behalf of a government. He would have preferred to abandon the whole operation.

"Do you really want to do it?" he asked doubtfully, though he knew her answer.

Cyd's determined look underscored her answer. "I don't care if it's the last thing I do. That's why we came here."

He knew himself that they had already gone too far to be able to turn back. So he placed the crowbar at the point between the sarcophagus and the top plate and drove it in with powerful hammer blows. He had now cast aside all misgivings and inhibitions, and no longer allowed himself to be held back by the pieces of marble splintering in all directions. Finally the rod was deep enough under the slab to dare to try to pry it up. He had to use all his strength to move the cover of the sarcophagus.

"Give me the lamp," he called to Cyd in a gasping voice. The weak cone of light from the nearly burned-out lamp struggled against the inky blackness of the stone resting place.

"Oh My God, look at that!" Cyd's voice trembled with sympathetic excitement. "Look at what she's become. "

Ian was also shocked at first and did not immediately know how to explain this sight. The huge sarcophagus was almost empty. Except for the almost completely intact skull, there were only small skeletal fragments, bone splinters and deformed bone mass. He tried to give his voice a firm tone, but his horror was clearly evident in the words he hastily spouted out. "I've never seen anything like this before. It's as if the whole body has been torn apart except for the head."

"We also just need the head." Cyd, as always, was the more pragmatic of the two. She bent down and carefully lifted the skull out of the grave by its base. "Give me the bag."

Ian was riveted by the sight of the ivory bone structure when Cyd's words snapped him out of his contemplation. Carefully, he slid the skull into the padded bag, then stowed it in his backpack.

With some effort, he managed to straighten the slab to some extent, then removed the roughest traces with a dense branch he had broken from the cypress tree at the entrance to the tomb.

"Okay, that will have to do, let's go." They were now both at their wits' end and had to summon all their strength to fight down the rising panic.

On the way back, the lamp finally went out with a final flare and the world sank into complete darkness.

When they arrived at the pickup truck, Ian had trouble unlocking the car, so much were his hands shaking. Cyd was slumped in the passenger seat, crying silently to herself. Ian retrieved a bottle of whiskey from the side compartment and held it out to his companion. "Take a sip, it'll do you good."

Duprès slowly stood up, walked to the window and looked out over the ocean. "All my life I have wondered why I spent so much time and effort developing this rare form of art and refining it to the point of obsession. I myself was not aware of any reasons that justified all the effort. Now I have finally found the answer."

## **Chapter 18**

After carefully studying the extensive documentation he had received from Cyd, Duprès retired to his studio. There were no pictures of the face he was to model, but there was a wealth of information he would use to recreate the countenance and thus the personality of this woman, various descriptions of people who had known her and, last but not least, the psychotherapeutic protocols in which Chambers himself provided crucial personal clues. In addition, hair samples and even a retinal image of an iris diagnosis were available. Moreover, the skull was in pristine condition. This would make his work easier. Nevertheless, it remained a demanding task that would require all his skills. Even though it had always been his secret wish, he had never before been commissioned to bring a face de facto to life.

In order to recognize the features in a skull that make it so unique, a trained diagnostic eye and a great deal of experience are necessary. In addition to extensive anatomical, physiological and pathological knowledge, the ability to imagine the nature and position of the soft tissues, on which the expression of the face depends, is of the greatest importance.

Duprès had all these qualities. In addition, there was a personal database with tens of thousands of stored entries that would provide him with helpful clues in case of doubt. He had begun almost three decades ago to expand this data with psychological and biographical parameters by recording all available details of the personal biographies of the persons concerned in addition to the stored morphometric entries.

It soon became apparent that between the truly individual facial features - wrinkles, distortions in expression, color and consistency of the various facial hair, and also in the expression of the gaze and facial expressions - there were interesting correlations with personal life history. It was obvious that certain life experiences are expressed in corresponding facial features.

The basis for any facial reconstruction is the bone characteristics of the skull. Each skull shows individual muscle marks that define the origin and attachment of each muscle. The roughness, surface texture and attachment points indicate how the muscles are located in the face. These facial expression points form the basis for the work. The structure of each muscle affects the other muscles in the region. Here, too, the quality of the result depends crucially on the scope of the available data sets and personal experience.

Some parts of the face are relatively easy to reconstruct. This applies to the distance between the eyes and the expression of the eye region, which can be derived from the bony bases. The width of the mouth is derived from the dentition; in most cases, the corners of the mouth are at the level of the canines. The profile of the nose can be

inferred from the lateral contour of the nasal opening. Where the bones of the skull cannot be consulted, experience, intuition and imagination are called for. Thus, there is not the slightest bony basis for the shape of the lips and mouth and their influence on facial expression. The same applies to the shape of the ears.

The first step of Duprès' work was to produce an exact copy of the bony skull, as it could not be used for reconstruction for reasons of reverence. Using the rapid prototyping method, he converted the CT data of the skull into a virtual 3D model, from which he then used stereolithography to make an accurate plastic model. This model was the 'skull' he used for his work and onto which he could model the facial features.

Although the manual-artistic work has been replaced by computers in most reconstruction centers for reasons of time and cost, Duprès still used the method of three-dimensional plastic reconstruction. In this elaborate and artistic form of reconstruction, muscles made of a special plasticine or clay are attached to the skull and modeled in three dimensions. The greatest challenge is to recognize the thickness of the applied soft facial tissue of the skin areas that are superimposed on the muscles. The most difficult to estimate are the concentrated depths of the tissue around the mouth and between the eyes. But Duprès had a clear idea of Esther's facial features based on his experience and the descriptions provided to him.

As indicators of the depth of the face, he used to use holding pencils. Then he placed strips of clay at the same height between each holding pin. Finally, he pulled off the pins and filled the gaps with modeling clay.

Now he began to work out the subtleties of physiognomy - eyes, ears, nose and mouth. At last the artist formed the overall expression of the face, which was shaped by personality traits, life experiences and state of mind.

When Duprès had the finished head in front of him, he let it work on him, and compared it with the idea of the woman he had formed

of her on the basis of the descriptions. This was not an analytical review of the work, but a comparison of two designs worked out in their entirety. The artistic one on the workbench and the mental one in the imagination.

Artistically and as a forensic reconstruction quite good. Duprès looked at his work with a critical eye. But something was not coherent. He began again with the analytical part of his work. What did not fit? Which features or which individual detail disturbed the picture?

He removed individual layers and began the artistic work anew. The feature found was integrated into the overall picture.

In days of work, he repeated this procedure again and again. Finally, he thought he was ready. Yes, this was her, the woman as she had been described by her husband and those around her. The next day he would get down to the cosmetic details and finish his work.

The inner agitation of his restless mind deprived the artist of sleep the following night. He tossed and turned restlessly and kept waking up from his half-sleep. Finally, in the early hours of the morning, he went to the studio and looked the stranger in the face. A perfect reconstruction, but he had overlooked one small detail. The fine wrinkles in the corners of the eyes, consequence of the injuries suffered from her husband. Only the finest corrections were necessary. It was fascinating how the barely perceptible delicate lines changed the overall picture. She was still a beautiful woman, vital, life-affirming, optimistic, loving. But over all these qualities now lay the shadow of the realization that everything was transient and in the process of dissolution.

The next morning, he made a model of the clay head from modeling clay and silicone rubber. This he colored with a special process he had developed. Then he added the eyes, with the exact coloring as when he was alive, to the eye sockets. In the next step, brows,

eyelashes and head hair were inserted individually in painstaking detail. Finally, he applied a light makeup to the face.

Duprès sat in front of his creation for some time looking at it. Yes, no doubt about it, that was Esther Chambers.

As always when he had completed a great work, he felt a sense of melancholy and farewell.

## Epilog

It was a quiet reunion. Cyd had once again made the long trip to Oregon. The work was ready to be picked up.

As if by unspoken agreement, Duprès made no effort to present his work, nor did Cyd express any desire to do so.

He handed her the carefully wrapped work without comment. She knew that now it was up to her to finish the story.

Cyd was waiting in the treatment room. Dr. Polland, Dr. Chambers' attending physician, was not comfortable with the thought of what she was about to do.

"You know that your visit is against all the rules of this institution. I am risking my job for this action. But I got involved, so I'm going through with it. I will leave you alone with Chambers, as you asked. Please note that he is in a state of catatonia. We have not been able to reach him since his arrest. That is, he does not respond to any attempt to contact him. No one knows what is going on inside him, and what potential grief, hatred, or violence may be waiting to be released. So don't blame me if something goes wrong."

"Thank you from the bottom of my heart for giving me the opportunity to finish this story. I can't explain to myself what I'm doing here and why it has to be. I only know that I have to do it. Don't worry about me. Whatever happens, I'll be ready for anything."

Shaking his head, Polland walked out.

The room, decorated in light gray and white, created a feeling of remoteness in Cyd. She took a deep breath and felt a sense of tense anticipation building up inside her. Then she heard footsteps and the door was opened from the outside. A guard ushered Chambers in, looked around uncertainly, and withdrew again. Cyd still heard the latch of the security door click into place, then the surroundings sank into absolute silence. The afternoon sun, which had already lost

much of its power, cast its reddish-yellow rays into the room, intensifying the atmosphere of rapture from everything earthly. Chambers remained motionless in the place where the guard had left him. Like an ancient statue, witness of another existence, of another time, without signs of life, the chest motionless, without breathing movements, the gaze empty and fixed forward, unreachable, a being not of this world.

"Dr. Chambers, I am so sorry for what happened to your wife. I can understand you so well. Look, I brought you something."

With sure movements, she removed the tape, opened the box, carefully took out the contents and placed it on the desk.

In the light of the sun's rays, Esther's red hair glowed like a fiery ember, surrounding the image of the one brought back to life with an aura of immortality.

Although she had not noticed any movement on Chambers, he suddenly stood facing his wife. And although not the slightest reaction was noticeable, Cyd sensed that this was the moment when the two found each other again.

The look in the seemingly inanimate eyes could mean anything, joy, melancholy, longing, resignation, sadness, love, devotion, passion. Eternal search and wandering of a driven man, finding again and rest.

Ian leaned against his Mustang, eyes closed and face turned toward the warming rays of the evening sun.

Cyd came out of the clinic and was taking the path that led down to the street when she noticed him. Astonished, she walked toward him. He sensed her coming, turned his head and looked at her.

"Was it a dream?" He could barely understand her words.

He looked at her for a long time, letting his gaze roam lovingly over her face before he forced himself to answer. "Yes."

Then he straightened up. "Shall we go?"