

Section One: Summer

Chapter One

Larry drove fast; he had to. He was being chased by lightning. He saw a red crack in the sky and a flicker of iridescence in the earth—lightning before it struck. Larry saw the future. It was normal for him. What wasn't normal was lightning chasing him, personally.

A filament of blood twisted in the air. It danced in the middle of the road, directly in the path of Larry's van. Fear congealed in his stomach, and he hugged the steering wheel tighter. He knew he had maybe six seconds to put distance between it and him.

First second: Larry spun the wheel clockwise. It slipped in his sweaty hands. He went onto the shoulder.

Next second: he floored the accelerator.

Third and fourth seconds: his '65 Econoline van fishtailed; it made an 'S' in the sand, and sent a fountain of dust into the air.

Fifth second: back onto the road. The tires slipped, squealed, then grabbed.

Sixth second: Lightning. Brilliance fell from the sky, one hundred million volts, traveling fifty-five thousand miles per hour. When it was sixty feet above the road,

Nylund

another discharge erupted from the ground, a second fork of current that embraced the first. The air heated to fifty thousand degrees. It exploded.

Larry swerved on the asphalt. The light reflected in the rearview mirror. He closed his eyes, but it still dazzled him. His hair stood on end.

Anticipating it didn't help. It was gun fire, and cannons, and steel drums knocked over like bowling pins. And loud. So loud it tore through his skin. A wave of high pressure rolled through the van and wrinkled its metal shell. The back windows shattered; the front windshield and the side mirrors cracked. The engine stopped.

Larry stomped on the clutch, jammed the gear shift on the steering column into second, then popped the pedal. The motor coughed. The van lurched and the engine turned over.

He knew you stayed in your car if power lines had blown down. You waited for help. The tires were excellent insulation. At least, that's what he remembered reading. He wasn't about to bet his life on it though.

The purple pinpricks in his eyes faded, and he spied in his future three more bolts of lightning, serpentine and scarlet in front of him. They were in the right, left, and right lanes of the road, equally spaced—about as far as his van could swerve back and forth. And while Larry knew it was impossible, he got the feeling that someone up there was aiming at him.

His second sight usually didn't predict the weather. It was fickle when it came to rain and hail. He hoped it kept working. Sometimes he saw when people were about to die, from massive coronaries or a faulty navigational computer in an airplane, and he always knew when the milk had gone bad without looking at the date. That drove his ex-fiancée, Linda, nuts. Like most people, she never believed Larry; she had to smell the milk to make sure—and it was always sour, just like their relationship.

Larry spun the wheel left, right, and left. The van staggered, back and forth and back, teetered on two wheels, then slammed back onto all four. His possessions slobbered

to the rear, boxes toppled over, papers scattered, and books spilled. He heard the clink of glass. Larry prayed it wasn't his computer monitor.

The lightning fell precisely where he wasn't, but it was close. Thunder ripped through him and left his ears ringing. Fear grabbed his mind. It cut straight to the animal part of his brain, making him want to hide in a cave. He peed his pants.

The van raced past a sign, "Dry Water 3 miles," then a billboard, "Silver Bullet Bed & Breakfast. Sleep in the same bed Matt Carlson was shot in!" Larry saw the town on the horizon, eclipsed by a towering thunderhead of boiling black ink and veils of gray silk beneath. The clouds were solid, so dark they looked impenetrable, a place where the sky ended. But higher, over his head, it was cloudless and sunny, full of the crystalline luminosity that made the New Mexican sky famous. Crows circled there, black specks on turquoise.

Larry scowled at the shade of blue and wondered where the damn lightning was coming from. He should turn back; it was safer the further away he was from the storm. Should he turn all the way back? Go back to Linda? His boss had offered him a raise if he stayed. The money would come in handy.

"I can't go back," he said.

When Larry spoke to himself, that drove Linda nuts, too. She said it was neurotic.

"Linda can go to hell," he said. "I'm not staying. I'm not selling my soul for a paycheck and an IRA. And I'm not getting trapped into marriage."

Two bolts coming, further up the road. They blocked both lanes, and it was too far to try and make a run through. Larry slammed on the brakes, down shifted, and screeched to a stop. His tool box slid to the front along with a styrofoam ice chest, and a crate of newspaper wrappings and china fragments. He jammed the van in reverse.

Nylund

Lightning filled the road with white splinters of electricity. Thunder blew the windshield in. Pebbles of green safety glass sprayed into the cockpit and into his face. Larry smelled ozone and ammonia and urine.

He screamed out the shattered window, "You're just a storm. You can't be after me." Lightning came from clouds, and there wasn't even a jet's vapor trail overhead. Lightning didn't *try* to hit you. It hit TV antennas. It hit golfers with their clubs raised high into the air on flat grassy fields. It hit electrical lines, but it didn't try to hit Econoline vans with rubber tires.

Larry set his hand on the passenger's seat where Linda's knee would have been. It was a silly habit. Linda wasn't there, only a road map of New Mexico folded incorrectly and a plastic commuter cup.

Linda panicked in storms. She kept an umbrella and coat in her trunk, and if a drop touched her, she'd go home and fill herself with chicken soup. She'd still get sick. Larry was always going out of his way to comfort her; he wanted to, and she, naturally, wanted that as well.

But he had seen what it would cost him. Like he knew when people would die, which cars were destined for head-on collisions, and who had lung cancer, Larry had seen his own death. Two months ago he looked in the mirror and saw it. It was a slow death. Forty years he figured. He'd marry Linda, get promoted to middle manager, and get stuck there until retirement. Slow death watching computer codes crawl by on his monitor. Slow death as Linda dragged him down with shopping lists, and stupid home improvements, and her cold feet, and lukewarm sex, and two children who would require braces because they'd inherit her teeth. He knew, gazing at himself, and gazing at his future self, that he would take it too. He'd take it all with a smile, happy to be there for her, happy to give up his writing, and happy to waste his life.

Motion on the side of the road: a man waved Larry down.

Larry scrutinized the sky. There were no red lances waiting to fill with a million volts. He slowed the van. He saw it wasn't a man, but a child, maybe eight years old, Hispanic or Indian, big smile, and wearing a shirt tie-dyed red and black.

Larry put on his right blinker and slowed to a crawl. He was a sitting duck if he stopped, but so was the kid. He had to stop.

The van overshot the kid, then halted. It did so because Larry became distracted when he saw that it wasn't a tie-dyed shirt the kid wore; it was pajamas. They were soaked with blood.

He was still standing, though, and smiling even. How hurt could he be? Larry reached over and threw open the passenger door. "Come on, kid," he yelled. "Get in. I'll get you to a hospital." Larry stayed inside. There was no need to get out. No need to forfeit the protection of those insulating rubber tires.

Larry glanced at his shattered side mirror and saw a hundred images of the kid reflected in a starburst pattern, motionless behind his van, his hair matted with blood, smiling at him like he was his long lost uncle.

He opened his door and stepped out onto shaking legs. As soon as he touched the pavement, Larry knew the lightning would be back. He couldn't see it, but he felt it, a static charge building, the wind dying, adrenaline in his stomach. He couldn't just leave the kid here, hurt, in the middle of nowhere.

The sky was clear, free of any angry red or blinding light, brilliantly blue, and deceptive as hell.

Larry ran to the back of his van. Chunks of blasted asphalt had peppered both back doors. And the kid wasn't there.

A giggle came from the front of the van. Larry wasn't in the mood for games. Maybe the kid had a concussion and didn't realize what kind of danger they were both in. He dashed to the front. No kid.

Nylund

He dropped on all fours and looked under the van. Nothing. With his nose in the red soil, Larry saw the imprints of his sneakers...but only his.

Another laugh, this one from a cluster of creosote bushes along the road. Larry saw red. A blob, translucent and hardly noticeable, took shape directly overhead. Static itched his scalp. The lightning would be here soon.

He hesitated, then tore into the bushes, afraid that the kid might run away, deranged, or hallucinating from that knock on his head. Then they'd both be caught out in the open when the lightning came. They'd both be fried.

Resinous creosote leaves stuck to Larry and scented the air with their medicine odor. In the center of the clump, he heard a rustle, maybe the kid. He pulled himself through a tangle of branches, ripped his turtleneck, and stumbled into a clear patch. The kid wasn't there, but it wasn't empty either; there was a cross.

It was three feet tall, and stapled to the whitewashed wood were plastic daisies, fading roses, and ivy that twined halfway up, but had come loose and hung limply, pendulating in the wind. At the base was a tiny statue of the Virgin Mary, knocked over. And where the cross-piece met the four by four center post, a plastic frame had been nailed. Inside was a photograph of the kid, same smile on his face, and the words: Niyol Rodreigiez. May God protect his soul.

Lightning could have struck Larry then and he wouldn't have noticed. His skin crawled and his hair stood on end. The wind picked up and he heard the kid's laughter on it. Then it was gone. And so was Larry.

He sprinted back to the van, and didn't even close the door before he sped off.

Larry resisted the urge to look in the rearview mirror for five seconds. He glanced and saw the lightning strike. He saw the child standing in the middle of it. He saw him cast a thousand shadows. Then he saw only the shadows. Then he saw only a blurry purple afterimage.

Knowing who's going to die, Larry could handle that. He willed his hands to stop shaking and failed. But playing tag with a dead kid....

The van rushed past the Dry Water city limits sign.

Overhead, the sky faded from turquoise to silver to onyx. Rain drops the size of half dollars fell. Lightning lanced from cloud to cloud. It fell miles away. It struck the mountains. But it no longer was after him.

He turned on his windshield wipers. The blades flopped back and forth over glass that wasn't there. Larry watched the sky so closely, he didn't care.

* * *

Larry had begun his journey to Dry Water fifteen hours ago. From San Francisco, he took highway 40 into New Mexico. He stopped in Grants to gas up, then doubled back and got on the 605, north into the Cibola National Forest. He turned right onto the 509, pointed himself straight toward Mount Taylor, went five miles, then got on Agua de Viva Road, and wound through aspen groves, into the honey mesquite and creosote covered hills of Seco County.

Of course, there was a thunder storm that tried to murder him, and a ghost along the way, but that was nothing out of the ordinary for Seco County.

Most people don't bother with that part of New Mexico. The only certified tourist attraction is Chaco Canyon, and only by the wildest stretch of the imagination does the route curve through the town of Dry Water. Decades ago, there were hot springs said to heal the sick, but no one comes for the water anymore. There are plenty of hot springs with fancier accommodations north of Santa Fe in Ojo Caliente.

There are attractions in Dry Water however, for the brave, for the curious, and for the foolish. In 1964, Hoover James wrote his thesis, *The Natural and Recent History of Seco County*. He had it published by a small vanity press, paid for it himself, and sold

Nylund

only sixteen copies. His thesis told of canyons with wandering ghosts, unidentified flying objects in the desert, secret societies that practiced ritual sacrifice, and Spanish silver tucked away in secret caverns. No one believed him. The University of Southern California politely asked him to leave.

Two authors read the thesis. Intrigued, or wondering if Hoover James was insane, they took a vacation to Seco County to see if there was enough material to write a short story. One wrote a horror novel, *The Cave Dweller*, the other a science fiction trilogy, *The Riemann Cycle*. Both were best sellers. Both were set in Seco County. Both used sexual innuendo to prop up their cardboard characters. And both blatantly plagiarized Hoover James.

The New Yorker ran a two-part article about the authors and Seco County. They printed that D.H. Lawrence had passed through Dry Water during his travels, and called it a "writer's haven." Scores of artists and writers immediately moved to Dry Water, not liking the snow of Northern New Mexico, and not being able to afford the rising price of the land in Santa Fe or Taos.

So Dry Water has artists and authors. It has a reputation for being an oasis of haunted places, unusual occurrences, and inexplicable phenomenon. Some of it is true. And it is getting truer everyday.

* * *

The gas station sat on the unofficial edge of Dry Water. Its florescent lights cut through the sheets of rain. Aluminum awnings offered shelter and gave the storm a metal drum-roll voice. There was a three-bay garage and an attached gift shop. The sign in the window read: *Spencer's Gas. Authentic Indian blankets, pottery, and dolls. Cheap smokes.* Larry pulled in.

From one side of town, Larry could see the other. Dry Water was a single thoroughfare, five blocks long, with a few side roads that ran up into hills and cottonwood groves, and others that snaked down into Lost Silver Canyon, full of spiny lechugilla, prickly pears, and purple sage.

The stores along the main boulevard were blurred in the rain, but Larry could make out the glowing neon of a tavern, and an adobe church with a bell tower. Atop the church was a filigree cross of black iron. It reminded Larry of the little white cross in the creosote bushes. Goosebumps crept along his back. He wanted to forget Niyol Rodreigiez and his bloody pajamas.

One thing was certain: Dry Water was not the sophisticated artist's colony he read of in *The New Yorker*. "This is what I left San Francisco for? What I left my job for? A town where the social high points are a visit to the saloon and a chat with the priest on Sunday?" No. There had to be more. There had to be writers and all night coffee houses. There had to be bookstores and art galleries and a theater. There had to be. Maybe the town would look better after he got some sleep. He'd just been driving too long, fifteen hours on the road, and before that up all night arguing with Linda.

Thinking of her and how he left her crying made Larry forget the lightning, the ghosts, and the rustic charms of Dry Water. He indulged himself in an acid bath of self-loathing and guilt. Had he done the right thing?

There were two pumps, regular and supreme; Larry grabbed one, not caring which.

Before he squeezed the handle, an old man in coveralls ran out of the gift shop. "Hang on there a second. I can't let you do that."

"I was just—"

The old man took the nozzle from Larry, set it back in the cradle, then took it out and pumped the gas for him. "No self serve here. Never has been, and never will be." He smiled a set of yellow teeth at Larry. *Spencer* was stitched on his crisp blue coveralls.

Nylund

The fabric looked new, except for the worn patches around his pockets, which was more than Larry could say about Spencer himself. His tanned skin was wrinkled: smile lines, and laugh lines, and frown lines, and crow's feet, and an ancient roadmap of lines beneath those. He smelled of tobacco and grease, and his stomach bulged.

Larry knew Spencer was going to die.

It was his liver, bloated and ulcerated so badly that Larry felt a twinge inside his own abdominal cavity. Thirteen more drinks, he knew, thirteen more beers at the tavern down the street, thirteen more shots of the bourbon he had tucked away in the flask in his back pocket, and he'd drop. There wasn't a thing he could tell Spencer to make him stop. Larry knew that too.

"Thanks," Larry said.

"Restrooms are through the gift shop," Spencer told Larry and graciously did not stare at his torn sweater and soiled pants.

"Uh, thanks," Larry repeated. He opened his van, grabbed a pair of dry pants, and went inside the shop. Rows of kachina dolls danced and stared at Larry from the shelves, turquoise and silver jewelry glittered in a display case, and an antique soda machine held glass bottles in a refrigerated compartment. The bathroom was spotless. Larry washed the urine out of his old pants, then slipped into the dry ones. It took him a few minutes to stop shaking.

He returned to Spencer, tried to act casual, and remarked, "Strange storms you get around here. Lightning and...."

Spencer nodded, but his attention was focused on Larry's windshield. "I can fix that for you, if you want. The back windows, too. I got an old Ford just like this sitting in my back yard. I'll throw in the mirrors too. Save you fourteen years bad luck. What do you say?"

Larry wanted to ask the old man if the lightning in Dry Water normally chased tourists, and if ghosts were a common occurrence on the Agua de Viva Road. But he couldn't think of a way to ask and not sound insane. "How much?"

"Them old windows ain't doing no good sitting around. I'll charge you for the labor—that's twenty an hour. So I figure forty, maybe fifty bucks tops...and you'd owe me a beer or two." He smiled his ivory teeth again. "Unless you're in a hurry. Going up to Chaco Canyon? Or you taking the long way to Santa Fe?"

Larry sighed. "I thought I might stay in town a few days. See what it's like."

Spencer's left eye narrowed. "You ain't no painter, or no new-age minister, are you? I had enough deadbeat artists come through here. And if you're a priest you can fix your own damn windows. I ain't working for anyone who tells me what I can and can't do. Telling me I'm going to hell." The nozzle shut off automatically. Spencer set it roughly back in the cradle.

"I'm a systems operator," Larry explained, "for a computer network."

Spencer shook his head. "Ain't no computer guy come up to Dry Water to 'see what it's like.'"

Larry didn't like to admit he was a writer. His friends gave him strange looks when he told them—not because he was a writer, that was OK, but because he was a writer of science fiction, which was an inexcusable lapse of sanity in their opinions.

"I...I'm a writer too."

Spencer nodded. "Writers are OK. At least you folks know you can't make a decent living, and get a good day job." He circled to the back of the van. "The seal on the front window looks fine. I won't have to replace it. These back ones though, they're kinda torn up. I'll have to order new ones. Takes three days to ship here. And it's gonna cost you an extra twenty bucks." He fished a screwdriver out of his coveralls and poked at the rubber around the safety glass. "You put a new window without good rubber to hold it in, and the first jolt the thing pops out. You gotta have...."

Nylund

Spencer's screwdriver twisted in his hand. He looked at it and chewed his lower lip, then let the tip drop towards the rear bumper. He knelt down and let go of his screwdriver. It fell; twisted in midair, then stuck to the bumper.

"Magnetized," Spencer declared. "You got close to some lightning, didn't you?"

"When I came into town," Larry replied. "It was strange. There was no storm. There were clouds, but they weren't close. They—"

"Lightning does a lot of strange things in Dry Water, mister. We got lightning that strikes itself, and lightning that spins round and round into a tight balls, then disappears. We got lightning that leaves a green tail in the sky; we call that one 'The Devil's Tail.' We got sheet lighting, and bead lightning, and ribbon lightning." Spencer grabbed his screwdriver and stood. His knees cracked. "And we got lightning that falls from the top of thunderheads. That stuff can land miles from a storm. The old timers called them 'bolts from the blue,' because there weren't a cloud in the sky. Still kill you though."

The rain slowed. The afternoon sun appeared. "Bolts out of the blue," Larry echoed, and he watched the sky. He saw no lightning. Maybe he had just been driving too long, gone too long without sleep. Maybe he had only imagined the lightning. Sleep deprivation. Hallucinations. But his shattered windows were no hallucination.

If the lightning was real, and if it did come after him, then why did it stop?

"Now," Spencer said, "if you're staying in Dry Water for a spell, go down the street two blocks, then head left one. That'll put you at the Silver Bullet Bed & Breakfast. You tell them Spencer is working on your van, and they'll give you a good deal. They got a triple-A discount too, if you're a member. But tell 'em that after you get the first discount." He winked at Larry.

Larry smiled back, then watched with dread as the old man pulled a silver flask from his coveralls. Bourbon. With a smooth motion he spun the cap off, took a slug, then back into his hip pocket it went. Larry felt the liquor going down Spencer's throat.

It burned, then became a pleasant warmth in his chest—as it ate his liver. Make that an even dozen snorts left, Larry thought. Twelve more toasts and you're gone. Enjoy them old man. I've got the feeling you've earned them.

He hoped he didn't have to see Spencer after he died.

Chapter Two

Nick watched the lightning, his lightning, from the tower's balcony. He inspected the thunderhead squatting over the town: a bouquet of iron gray, held tight at the bottom, overflowing at the top, and full of static. Shadows gathered underneath, unnaturally dense as if attracted to the gloom.

The storm waited for his enemy, a prophet.

He checked his pocket watch again: 4:35. He should be here by now. Nick had never known a prophet who wasn't punctual. And good timing always helped in a murder.

Nick ran his thumb over the gold watch cover, tracing the design: a fiddler and a cow jumping over a crescent moon. When the watch was flipped open it played a phrase from Beethoven's, *Moonlight Sonata*. It was a century old, and one of the few antiques he indulged in. Old things reminded Nick of his past—and there were too many things in his past. It was a seduction; he could so easily lie with his memories and forget his purpose. Some days he felt like an arrow traveling through time, the seasons passing with a frightening velocity, mounting to the zenith of his trajectory, and falling to the earth.

He stroked the warm metal again, then stuffed it back in his jeans.

A chill gust of wind blew. Behind him, the doors to his study banged open and closed. His windbreaker fluttered against the body he had chosen for this task. The body was muscular, in its forties, Italian, and not, he believed, entirely unattractive.

This prophet would be different; Nick knew because his divination had been unusually vague. The materials he had gathered were of the highest quality—a saint's profanity, a pair of whispered 'I love yous' torn from new lovers, a metacarpal from a six-fingered man, and a salamander's tear—all boiled together and frozen with a scream. Certainly he had made no mistake with the incantation, so it must be the prophet.

Nick's portent showed the man riding a white horse dappled with red blotches. He left a city by the sea and a woman in tears. He wore silver armor that was not metal, and mist clung to him and obscured his face. He sought a water that could not be drunk. And in his vision, Nick saw the city limits sign for Dry Water, New Mexico.

The sun hid behind a wall of nimbus. Gray light settled over the land. Nick saw every detail though. Three miles, past the slopes of cottonwood and creosote, ran a ribbon of asphalt, the Agua de Viva Road through Dry Water. There was the glare of Spencer's Gas florescent lights, an island of illumination in the rain, and the pink neon of the Three of Diamonds bookstore and coffee shop. His gaze lingered on the adobe church with its cross and bell tower, admiring the fiery colors of the clay, warm even in the shadow of the storm.

There was lightning too—impossible to ignore—flashes inside the thunderhead, luminescence trapped in smoky quartz. A bolt flickered south of town, then another, then a third. Blurry afterimages peppered Nick's vision. The prophet had come at last. And he had certainly been struck.

No.

More lightning came, three in a row, silver cracks in the sky, then a pair—one on top of the other—close to the last. Sheet lightning flashed in the thunderhead, made it

Nylund

black on white, and white on black for a full minute. Then a single blast, the entire charge sent at once.

Something was wrong. Either the lightning failed to kill or it missed. Both options were equally improbable. Nick waited. No more discharges.

He whispered: "Dempsey, come to me."

A ripple in the storm and the clouds calmed. They remained murky, lightning still fell, but the thunderhead no longer seethed; it no longer cast abnormally dark shadows. The magic had vanished.

Inside the tempest a new light, like a candle just lit, appeared. It faltered, then flared solid and pale blue. It was not lightning, for it continued to shine rather than discharge. It was ball lightning, rare, and inexplicable. It fell from the sky, arced over Dry Water (avoiding the church by a wide stretch), then curved up Seven Horseshoe Ridge and paused. There, it blurred, divided into three smaller orbs that circled about one another twice, then they rejoined and raced up to the tower.

The hair on Nick's arm bristled when the ball came close. It made the fillings in his molars buzz. His tower had been constructed from blocks of volcanic rock and reinforced with steel bars that ran deep into the earth. It was very well grounded. He took comfort in that. He touched the warm copper band on his pinky, and took comfort in that as well.

"Speak, Dempsey," he commanded.

The globe of lightning opened: petals unfolded, two arms, one with clipboard in hand, legs, a head capped with hard-hat, and a black beard shot with white sparks.

"Great one," Dempsey's voice crackled with static. "I have failed."

Nick crossed his arms, and waited for his excuse.

"It was as you described," Dempsey said, "a man upon a white horse with red spots came. He drove a white van, rusted. I saw it."

"But you did not obey my wishes. You missed. You who were expert in all things electrical. You who installed the first wires in New York. Was not the taste of the hundred thousand volts that charred your body enough? Do you require more to become one with the lightning?"

Dempsey looked at his clipboard as if he would find something there to appease his master.

Nick exhaled through clenched teeth, then, "I am...disappointed."

"It was not my fault, Great One. I was blocked. There were fluctuations in the air, and a cascade fluctuation in the dielectric breakdown—"

"Silence."

Dempsey dimmed.

"Your excuses mean nothing." He turned his back on the ball of light. "I gave you energy, *my* life energy, which you wasted. Thirteen days I must now rest. Meanwhile, our enemy is here, growing stronger." He added in a whisper, "There are many dead men who would serve me better. Fail me again and I shall banish you to the Paradox Coil for a century."

Dempsey sank to the stone floor of the balcony. Sparks arced through the steel reinforcements. "I have more to tell you," he pleaded.

"Speak."

"Someone...something approaches from the hills. It has an aura of yellow and green, wild like grass aflame. I tried to get a better look, but it hid. I think it saw my true form."

A new threat? Nick wondered. One he had not foreseen? Or perhaps this prophet had more power than he suspected.

"I shall decide your fate later," he said, "after I discover if it was your negligence or another who prevented the lightning from finding its target. Go."

A flash, electricity writhed across the volcanic stones, and Dempsey vanished.

Nylund

Nick shut the balcony doors. He wanted neither the light nor the warmth from the study to distract him. It would be easy to dismiss Dempsey's claim of a power in the hills as an excuse. It would be easy to go inside and sleep, replenish the energy he had wasted to control the ghost. He was exhausted. But the lightning had missed—something that had never happened. And there was too much at stake not to investigate why.

He sat upon the cold stone floor of the balcony, crossed his legs, and zipped his windbreaker all the way up. A chill crept into his chest as if he had guzzled liquid ice. It oozed into his arms and his abdomen. His heart stopped. His lungs collapsed. A last breath squeezed out.

He peeled himself away from the flesh he only temporarily inhabited. First came the hands, slipped off as if they were mittens. Then he squirmed out of the head and chest, wriggling free. Finally he pulled the last of his essence from the legs. He observed his Italian body from the outside. It was strong. It had served its original owner well breaking legs and fingers for the Mafia. The face was a bit disappointing—narrow features and a Neanderthal brow—but after the hair had been bleached, the skin closely shaved, it was almost civilized.

Calling lightning was a tricky thing, but this, this he knew, this space in-between realities, the netherrealms. This was the power he trusted.

In the netherrealms, life and death mingled. There were layers. On the surface both living and dead coexisted, spirits and mortals, ghosts and humans, but deeper there was only death, and beyond that, things even Nick dared not explore.

In this in-between state he could expand his consciousness across the hills and beyond. He perceived the spirits that wandered the world, no longer invisible, and they, in turn, saw him. He perceived his own aura, deep purple, near ultraviolet blackness.

He hunted ghosts here, binding them as his slaves, banishing the deranged ones, or occasionally, setting free those who had trapped themselves with rage, or self-pity, or those who were simply lost. It exhilarated him; yet, there was a danger. He could not linger. The tides of death that washed through the netherrealms affected his soul as well. Already they tugged at him, trying to pull him deeper. If he let them, if he lost his concentration, he would be pulled away from the world of light. He would lose his way forever.

Off the tower he leapt and soared over the hills. Below, a cluster of cottonwood trees shimmered. The faces of seven men twisted in their bark, men who had died there and had their essence absorbed by the plants. Nick heard the echoes of the echoes of their long spent pistols.

There were animal spirits too. A coyote in Lost Silver Canyon barked questions to the moon, asking it what it saw so high up; a hummingbird, blur of electric blue, darted home, and left a trail of northern lights behind; wind devils soared through the thunderhead, poking it with sticks, trying to rouse it from its torpor; and a one-eyed crow crouched on a tangle of mesquite watching him. It called, "Fall, fall, fall."

He made a note that Najavo shamans were active in this region.

South on Agua de Viva Road, he spotted an afterimage of lightning, but shattered as if viewed through a mirror of cracked glass. A small figure ran away, a boy, a shadow of a boy, then the shadow was gone too. While Nick's curiosity was piqued, this was not the ghost Dempsey had seen, the ghost with the aura of green and yellow.

He saw it ahead, the color of burning grass, green with fingers of orange and yellow. It was just the outline of a human body, but had no body to go with it. It sat on a flat rock, in the open, burning. It was not a complete aura either. It was translucent, barely visible to Nick. He risked descending a level into the netherrealms. Perhaps there was more to it, deeper.

Nylund

His own aura dimmed as he sank closer to death.

The animal spirits grew silent. In Lost Silver Canyon a ghost army of Spanish Conquistadors rode four hundred years ago. They charged fifty men on foot. Rifles discharged, horses trampled men, lances impaled, and blood clouded the stream. Screams of victory filled the canyon, followed by the wails of the dead.

The aura of green and fire had vanished, however. It was only on the surface, so it was not a true ghost. He left the lower region of the netherrealms, and rose high above the hills. There was a second aura like the first by the setting sun, and there, north, was a third. They made a precise equilateral triangle about his tower.

It was too uniform. The beginnings of an incantation?

The auras undulated with identical patterns and rhythm. They vanished.

Uncertain what these triple auras were, and if they meant him harm or not, Nick flashed back into his body.

A quick inhale of air; his heart beat again, eyes opened, and warmth spread back into his extremities. He felt clumsy and slow; he always did upon returning to flesh and blood. He flexed his hands and stretched.

Those auras were the same. They were not ghosts. They were reflections of something, three reflections in a mirror. They were auras, but more mirage than real power. They must have been—

The balcony doors were ajar. A woman stood there. She finished his thought, "Illusions? Shadows cast by me? Or am I a shadow too?"

She had long auburn hair, and eyes that were twin green mirrors, dark. Her skin was tanned and made sleek from the oil of palms gathered on the banks of the Nile. She wore a short jacket lined with crushed gold velvet. The outer shell was all leather leaves, blowing in the wind, frozen: amber, emerald, and olive sewn together. She wore faded jeans and suede boots, and she carried a stake of alder wood in her right hand. Its

point was chiseled and on the shaft were etched seven runes. Nick did not have to be in the netherrealms to see they bristled with magic.

He shifted uneasily, both from the malevolent witchcraft directed at him, and at seeing her unexpectedly after two hundred years. "Hello, Raja," he said. "It has been too long."

"Much too long, Judzyas."

"I no longer wear that name." The sound of his birth name gave life to dead memories...memories of the Aegean Sea, a rocky coast, the endless surf, and a cottage where they had lived together for three seasons, drank sweet plum wine, ate barrels of olives, and made love. He remembered the odor of sea salt always in the air, and the smell of her musk always on his skin.

He had loved her then, but he never told her. He never got the chance. The Napoleonic wars came, and he left. He had to. Another prophet came. Another prophet had to be killed.

He held open his arms and stepped closer.

She raised the point of the stake, aimed for his chest. A calligraphy rune of *Confinement* flared opalescent and made the wood smoke. "You *are* Judzyas. I see your colors clearly enough. What name do you wear now?"

He took a step back. "Nikolos."

"A Greek name, at least," she said. "Nikolos...no, I think I like Nick better. I shall call you Nick."

"With that pointed at me, you may call me whatever you desire. And you? Are you still my Raja?"

"No." She lowered the stake. "I have not been anyone's Raja for two centuries. It took me decades and the broken hearts of six men to get over you." She tossed her head back, and gazed hard at the face he wore, past the flesh to see what was inside. Nick let her.

Nylund

He remembered how he held her, how she felt beneath the weight of his body, and how they had watched the summer stars wheel over them.

She set the stake down on the floor, then turned her back to him and went inside. "You may call me Raja."

Inside, one wall held paperbacks and science textbooks on pine shelves. A large desk occupied the corner, atop which sat an Underwood typewriter, a mound of yellow paper, a cup of pens, and dust. Two logs blazed in a Franklin stove. And close to the fire was a couch and a La-Z-Boy covered with plaid fabric. A spiral staircase came up through the floor. Above, the ceiling crested to a point; stained glass birds, stars, and bats flew there.

Nick followed, but he didn't touch the alder wood stake. It still fumed with enchantments. Her magic was unfathomable to him. She was a witch; she knew of life and cycles and growth. He was a necromancer; he knew of death and decay and endings. For a time he thought he had understood how both worked. When they lived together they were the Sun and his consort Moon, Osiris and Isis, the Corn King and the Goddess, Judzyas and Raja.

Now the only thing he knew, and trusted, was death.

She studied the books on the shelf, and pulled out a copy of Heinlein's *Time Enough for Love*. "I haven't read this in years."

"Had I known you would pay me a visit this evening, I would have procured your favorites. But you didn't come to borrow books."

She nodded, but nevertheless secreted the volume inside her jacket. "This tower belonged to a friend of mine, a writer. He wrote stories about ghosts and vampires, witches and warlocks. He died of a heart attack this spring." She sat on the couch and drew her legs close to her chest. "You didn't have anything to do with it, did you, Nick?"

"I know of no such thing," he said. "I arrived three days ago. This tower was on the market, overpriced, but it appealed to me. I bought it. Simple. Fair. And no murder."

She narrowed her eyes. "Not that you would have thought twice about it if you had to...or if it would have been more convenient."

"Had I wanted the gentleman killed, he would be dead. But I did not." He sighed. "Shall I conjure his spirit to tell you the truth? Show me which room he died in."

She let her legs uncurl and set them firmly on the floor. "No, let him rest in peace."

He sat close to her on the arm of the La-Z-Boy. "Is this why you came? To see if I killed your pet?"

"I saw power up here: lightning and ghosts. This is my territory, Nick, and I won't stand for you killing my people." She made a fist. "They're not pets. They're friends."

Her aura was muted in the mundane world, but he sensed her power simmering just below the surface. It made his skin flush, and it was not heat. She cast three shadows of herself, and with no preparation. It was a mere five weeks past the summer solstice. Her magic was still potent. It would be foolish to fight her.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"This is not your land. You may not impose your will as law."

She leaned forward. "Seco County and the people here *are* mine...unless you want it for yourself. Then you may challenge me. I promise you a fair fight." She smiled—cold. "Otherwise you may stay as my guest, my special guest. But I will not tolerate the murder of my friends, or raising the dead, or whatever it is you have planned."

"And the stake? You brought that to expunge my presence?"

Nylund

She shrugged. "I did not know what I would find up here. If it was you...you could have been after me this time. It was a precaution."

"I would never hurt you. I come for another, a man who must die. After, if you desire, I shall withdraw. Or, if you desire, I shall stay."

She edged closer to him, then caught herself and moved back. "Is it a debt of blood?"

"No. It is not what the man has done, it is what he shall do." Nick stood and warmed his hands over the stove. "I will not be stopped in this matter. Allow me to stay and take this one life from your domain. Please. Then we can decide what we shall do with one another."

"Kill who you have to then" she whispered, "but just one life. No more." She got up and came to him, close, and breathed, "As for the rest, let us begin where we left. Do you remember?" She touched his chest, ran her fingers up and across his cheek. "You wear a different face, but there is more to us than flesh, more to our love than bodies...although that too can be pleasant."

He forgot his weariness, and took her hand. "I remember."

The jacket fell from her shoulders. Nick shouldn't trust her, but he drew her to him nonetheless, and kissed her. She entwined her body around his. He sensed her aura; it flared, brilliant and hot, and it also wrapped about him.

He lowered her to the hardwood floor. She moved beneath him exactly as he remembered. Her skin was warm against his cold flesh, hotter than the stove, full of life.

She undid his trousers, ripped his shirt apart, sucked his nipples, bit him. Nick let her rub over his body. He let his hands wander down her sides, stroking the curves of her scalding, sweaty skin. Her jeans and T-shirt were already off.

Strands of their spirits merged. Fingers of flame grappled with one another, his dark light, and her glowing jade.

He rolled over, and she straddled him, playfully pinning both arms over his head, letting her breasts dangle in his face. He caressed them.

They moved together, bodies sliding in unison—fast, animal motions. Nick forgot the prophet, the illusions, and the ghosts. He let passion flood his thoughts. The outer fringes of the light that surrounded them blurred, overlapped, and turned pure white.

Then they slowed their grinding, not wanting to exhaust each other, waiting to make it last, wanting to touch forever. She rocked slowly atop him. He wiped the drenched locks of her hair from her face.

“Why must this man die?” she asked and traced the ridges on his stomach.

“You seduce me to pry my secrets loose....”

“Tell me anyway.”

“Tell me why *you* are here? You prefer Paris for art, and Tibetan glaciers where the spirits are familiar to you. Why this desert?”

She bent closer to him, starting again, and whispered, “I too seek something. Now answer my question.”

This, they continued for a time, slow unified rocking, savoring the intimacy, bathing in each other’s light. Then Nick replied, “The man I seek, I saw in a prophecy. He comes on a white horse spotted with red. He comes to find a water that cannot be drunk.”

She paused. Her skin and aura grew slightly cool to Nick’s touch.

Raja then rocked hard, reached back with her hands and raked her nails along his thigh. He grabbed her waist, slid his fingers across the small of her back, and pushed her harder onto him. Nick touched her deeper, her essence: she was a torrent of verdant flame, passion and life; he was shadows and purple, cool whirlpools of silent power.

Nylund

In his peripheral vision he noticed a glow under the desk. On the floor, her enchanted alder wood stake lay. It was a long way to roll from the balcony door, but he dismissed it. Nick had other things to occupy him.

His appetite swelled, peaked. Gold and shadow and lavender blended. Silver passion scorched the shadows; green fire did seethe and blister, grow, and bloom. Their colors bleached together, burned away—left only dazzling luminescence, a moment of pleasure that stretched forever...then faded, throbbing to their rhythmic pulses.

He lay exhausted beneath her. She quivered, arched her back, and collapsed backwards upon his legs.

Nick saw another alder wood stake, this one by the La-Z-Boy. He glanced at the balcony doors. A third stake lay there. He connected the lines between them: an equilateral triangle, him in the center. Three illusions like before. And the real one?

Raja sat up, and brought her knee down hard into his stomach. The real alder wood stake blazed in her right hand. She thrust it through his ribcage with all her weight upon it. The wood found his heart and pierced it.

Nick shuddered under her once and cried out. He lay rigid, pinned, his eyes open. Blood foamed on his lips. Where the wood touched his body, the flesh smoldered.

She removed herself from him. His blood smeared her torso, and trickled down her legs. "I seek the same water as your damn prophet. If he knows where it is, then I can't let you kill him, my sweet Nick, my Judzyas, my love."

She leaned over him, shoved the stake deeper. "The magic woven into the grain of the alder wood pins your soul to this body. You will not find another. No astral travel. And no ghosts will come to haunt me or my dreams."

Raja pulled on her jeans and donned her jacket with a flourish, then headed down the spiral stairs, and paused. "Death is the only thing you ever trusted, Nick. Maybe it's the only thing you ever loved. Now you can get as close as you want to death. You can finally die."

Chapter Three

No ghosts came for Larry that evening, not the kid on the road, not Spencer, not even Matt Carlson whose bed he slept in.

He rolled over into horizontal lines of light. The slats on the shutters hadn't been closed last night, and the morning sun poured through. It was warm on his skin. That was good. He was still alive. No thunder. No lightning.

Still...he opened his eyes cautiously, afraid of what might be lying next to him. There was nothing but wrinkled sheets and the night stand with a brass plaque. The sunlight made the burnished surface of the plaque hard to read, but Larry knew what was on it. He'd seen it last night. That's why he had slept with the lights on.

It read:

In this bed, the infamous outlaw, Matt Carlson, (1866-1887) met his demise. His band of cutthroats rode the Santa Fe trail robbing, raping, and murdering settlers headed for California.

On November 11, 1887, Texas Rangers found him here (then called the Silver Star Saloon). The lawmen waited until he was drunk, followed him upstairs, and shot him thirteen times while he slept.

Nylund

The upper portion of the bed frame was repaired by the owner of the Silver Star in 1891; however, if you examine the underside you can still see where those fatal bullets splintered the oak.

Larry rubbed his chest: heartburn. It was from his dream. There was a stake shoved into his heart, a stone tower, and lightning, all in black and white; there was a woman in his dream too. Sex on a hardwood floor, he remembered that distinctly. Her skin was liquid fire in his hands. Larry rolled to the shady side of the bed, tried to go back to sleep and find this dream woman.

He couldn't.

Instead, his thoughts were filled the ghost of that kid, and Spencer's liver, and another woman, Paloma.

He met her when he checked in last night. She worked behind the front desk, twenty-two, he guessed. She had large brown eyes and a tall athletic figure.

She examined the registration card he had filled out, then remarked, "Your surname is unusual, Mister Ngitis. Asian, isn't it?"

Larry wanted to be charming. He wanted to say she might have seen his name on the cover his books...then what? Invite her up for a drink? It would have been easier for him to dance on water.

"Chinese," he muttered. "I'm one-quarter Asian." He handed over his credit card and avoided her eyes. He didn't have the nerve to ask *her* name. The only way he knew was from the tag on her blouse.

After the drive out here—who could be charming? It was also too soon after leaving Linda. In a perfect fantasy world, if he had invited Paloma upstairs, and if she had come, then Linda would have driven to New Mexico that evening. She would have burst into his room and found them in a fleshy knot. She'd have shot him in the same bed Matt Carlson died in.

It wasn't his precognition that told him this; it was his guilt speaking.

He should give Linda a call to let her know he made it safely and see if she was OK too. He reached for the black rotary phone. No. It was too soon. She'd be hysterical. She'd make him feel like a jerk. And he might be tempted to go back.

He forgot to ask for the discount last night too. His savings were low. This was the only unoccupied room, and it had cost a fortune. Aside from Matt Carlson's death bed there was a white pine floor, thick Navajo rugs, and an adobe fireplace built into the corner of the room. There was split oak and tinder stacked beside it. Smoke stains curled up the wall to the ceiling.

Larry got up, pulled his computer out of his overnight bag, and reviewed last night's journal entry to see if it made sense. All the details were there: his physical reactions, the smells, fragments of dialogue, how people moved. He compulsively jotted notes in his journal. It was how he wrote his novels.

He would change the names, alter Econoline vans and gas stations to galactic cruisers and exotic space ports. The people and places were almost real. That's why his first three books sold well. At least, that's what his editor told him.

But the ghost wouldn't fit. Not in a science fiction novel. The lightning? That could be weather control used as a weapon or terraforming gone awry. And Spencer would make a great bartender in the pub on the space station in chapter four. But a ghost? That verged on horror, or worse, fantasy.

Larry wanted the ghost. He was certain he had seen it. There was too much detail for him to have made it up: the blood matted in the kid's hair, and his smile. It was all very fresh, all very creepy. The image of the kid waving good-bye wouldn't leave him. He re-read the part when he stumbled upon the cross, and when he saw the kid's picture nailed on there.

Larry sensed someone reading along with him, peering over his shoulder.

Nylund

He turned and saw only motes of dust in the slated sunlight. But there were swirls and eddies as if someone had passed through the space. The motes settled into random floating patterns.

The feeling vanished.

Larry returned to his journal. The ghost wouldn't fit. His publisher had been specific about what they wanted in this fourth book: the same thing as in the first three.

He hated his protagonist, Captain Kelvin, and he hated the Space Empire he worked for. His fans loved it. They had bought 200,000 books, and showed no signs of letting up. But the characters were unbelievably stereotyped. The setting had no technological authenticity. Larry wanted to write about real people with real problems: alcoholism, divorce, depression, maybe a few murders, and maybe a ghost.

Instead, he was stuck on chapter two with seventeen more to go, and only six months to deliver the manuscript. His agent thought he was halfway done. His editor thought he was three quarters. Larry didn't need precognitive powers to know there were late nights and gallons of boiled coffee in his immediate future.

The low battery icon flashed. Larry rifled through the overnight bag for the AC adapter. It must be in the back of the van. He'd have to go get it if he wanted to work today.

He showered and dabbed on the some cologne, *Royale Knights*, then recalled it was a Valentine's day from Linda. He washed it off, but the odor lingered; it reminded him that she liked to stay up late and sleep till noon. He got up with the sun. They hardly ever saw each other.

"Breakfast first," he told his reflection in the mirror, "then you can indulge your self-pity." He stuffed his loneliness deep inside, and shoved his questions about the ghosts and lightning next to that, then marched down to the Silver Bullet's dining room.

Halfway down the stairs the smells of sautéing onions and garlic caught him. Five more steps and there was the odor of sweet peppers and sausage, and when he reached the main floor, the aromas of bacon and baking bread.

There were five tables in the Silver Bullet's dining room, two empty and three with tourist couples. They brought their cameras to breakfast. One couple snapped pictures of the pine beams overhead and the Anasazi petroglyphs carved into them.

Paloma was there too. She flitted from table to table, asking the guests what their plans were. Her voice was the same smooth, friendly music Larry remembered from last night. To the older couple with Brooklyn accents, she suggested they tour the old Moon Lady mining museum in town, or visit the Chaco Canyon ruins for the afternoon. She wore a loose denim skirt, a white lace shirt, and a bead choker. Her nose was slightly crooked (he hadn't noticed that last night). To Larry she looked liked an Indian princess. She glowed with vitality.

He skulked to the empty table farthest from her, and looked for a menu to bury his face in. If he could have been suave, he would have invited her to sit with him, and maybe share a cup of coffee. His stomach twisted into a knot just thinking about it. There was a vase of black-eyed Susans, a red cloth napkin folded in his water glass, but nothing to hide behind.

Paloma spotted him and came over. She moved so gracefully Larry imagined that she skated over the Spanish clay tiles. She smiled at him and said, "Are you hungry this morning, Mister Ngitis?"

"Starved," Larry lied. His appetite had vanished. His pulse pounded in his throat. What if he said the wrong thing? What if he made a fool of himself? Better to say nothing at all.

"Then I'll load up a plate for you," she said. "I'll be right back." A whirl of her skirt, and she ducked into the kitchen, singing to herself.

Nylund

Larry wanted to leave. He wanted to stay. He couldn't stop thinking about Linda, but he couldn't stop thinking about Paloma either. This is stupid, he thought. He was thirty-five, slightly overweight, with a cheap haircut. He still got pimples when he ate chocolate. The girl wasn't flirting with him. It was her job to be friendly with the guests. That's all.

Paloma returned with a silver platter filled with biscuits and sausage gravy, lean bacon with ground pepper on its edges, crisp chili rellenos, an omelet stuffed with cheese and tomatoes, a bowl of plump strawberries, a glass of orange juice, and a pot of coffee. "You're the last to eat this morning," she said, "so you get leftovers. I hope you don't mind."

She set three plates out for Larry, then sat down in the chair opposite him. She poured him a cup of coffee. "Cream?" Her smile was lovely.

"Please." Larry couldn't help smiling back, despite the lump in his throat. To be polite, he took a bite of chili relleno. Delicious. He sipped his juice, took a gulp of his coffee, and stared at her. It wasn't that she was beautiful (she was); it was her hair. There were red highlights in her black mane, highlights that rippled, tangles of light, barely visible, like the shadow of a flame on a sunny day. It had to be a trick of the light.

"I knew I had seen your name somewhere before." She looked down, embarrassed. Then, "At the bookstore this morning, I found your trilogy. It's really quite good. At least, what I've read so far."

The highlights in her hair glowed a rosy pink, and filled the air. To Larry it looked like a halo. Its heat warmed his skin. It was hypnotic to watch; it was fire; it was alive.

It was not a precognition.

Larry had gut feelings, empathetic burnings in his liver, flashes of insight, but never sustained hallucinations like this. Ghosts last night and auras this morning—had he lost his mind?

“Uh, thanks,” he said.

He glanced at the other guests. The old man from Brooklyn coughed. A violet cloud condensed over his head, then evaporated just as fast. Larry felt a twinge of pain in his rectum. Prostate cancer, he knew, seven months to live.

Larry then remembered how the lightning had appeared to him: red filaments that filled with electric white. Perhaps these hallucinations were part of his powers after all. It was distracting. He wished it would go away.

“Did you say, ‘bookstore?’”

“The Three of Diamonds Bookstore on Agua de Viva. If you’d like I can show you it after breakfast.”

Larry picked at his omelet. Half his thoughts were on him seeing things he’d never seen before, half were on Linda, and half were on Paloma and her hopeful smile, her burning hair. The melted cheese and grease suddenly didn’t look so appetizing. “Maybe some other time. I probably won’t be in town that long, so I...”

“Oh,” she said softly. Her smile vanished. The flames about her head shrank and cooled to navy blue. “Well, I’ll wish you a fine meal then, Mister Ngitis. I hope you enjoy the remainder of your stay in Dry Water. If I can be of any assistance, please let me know.”

She got up.

Larry stood—a gentlemanly gesture he had never offered to Linda—and said, “Uh, thanks again for the food.” But she had already turned her back to him and was marching out of the dining room.

* * *

Nylund

It was sunny outside. The only clouds were high, innocent puffs of cotton, pure white and incapable of any electrical discharge. Larry breathed deep. The air was crisp and clean and cold.

He should have taken Paloma up on her offer. He hadn't intended to offend her. And as impossible as it seemed to Larry, she apparently *was* interested in him. She had even bought his novels. She said she enjoyed them. But there were too many things on his mind: writing, ghosts, and guilt.

He walked by himself along the raised wooden sidewalk of Agua De Viva Road. From a block away he saw a refurbished barn, painted with a weathered brick pattern, and twin panes of glass that filled the front and stared at him like a myopic giant. Three pink neon diamonds flickered in the right window. Beneath them in glowing calligraphy was: *Three of Diamonds Bookstore*.

On the other side of the glass, fliers advertised future book signings. There were writers of mystery, science fiction, fantasy, westerns, and romance, names Larry recognized; some were legends, authors he had read as a child. Inside, the barn had two levels, and stairs descending into a basement. Shelves held books stacked to the ceiling: old cracked leather bindings, glossy hardbacks, and paperbacks, both pristine and unopened and ones with used yellowed pages. Light spilled in from skylights, and in one square of illumination, Larry spied the brass eagle of an espresso machine, and a counter of thick green glass. The odors of roasted coffee beans, steamed milk, and chocolate were in the air. And among a dozen tables sat people reading, sipping cappuccino, and eating cheesecake. Others wrote furiously in notebooks, while some sketched or spoke to friends in whispers.

Larry wanted to go in. He wanted to spend the day reading and writing. But he didn't even have a notebook. Everything was in his van. Larry had to go to Spencer's first, get his computer recharged, then bring it here, relax, and write.

Maybe Dry Water wasn't the hick town he had thought it was. Maybe *The New Yorker* had been right when they called it the next Taos. Maybe he hadn't made such a big mistake in coming here. He must have walked right past the Three of Diamonds yesterday...only he had been thinking of lightning and a gas station attendant he had predicted would die.

When Larry was three years old his talent for prediction surfaced. He knew his father was leaving. He knew when he drove off he wouldn't come back. It was *black ice*. The words meant nothing to a three year old, but Larry knew it was on the road, slick to the touch, and invisible. He knew that it would kill his father.

The car spun out of control and hit a telephone pole. His father went through the windshield—Larry felt it like an ice pick slammed through his skull. He cried until the police came and told his mother.

Since then he had known things, mostly when people were about to die. That was the strongest and clearest of his precognitive powers. But there were other things that popped up, not as often, and not as precise, like glass that was about to break, checks that would bounce, and white shirts that were fated to turn pink in the laundry.

Across the street, another building caught his attention, a real estate office. It was wishful thinking, but perhaps he could buy a house and settle down. It was too soon; he should rent a place first before he committed to living here. But...it was on the way to Spencer's, so he crossed Agua de Viva.

On a bulletin board outside the office were pictures of the local properties, each with a brief description, and the asking price. At the bottom were cabins described as "fixer-up-ers." Those were in his price range, if he got the second half of his advance, and if Linda was decent about splitting up their joint savings account. Half of the cabins listed had electricity and indoor plumbing. Some did not, and Larry took that as a good sign. There were writers and artist here, successful and struggling. He'd fit right in.

Nylund

Slightly over his budget was an A-frame with an enormous fireplace; he'd have to get a loan to swing that one. There were many far out of his financial reach: chateaus with two kitchens, three story mansions with fifty foot timbers...and a tower of black volcanic stone. It was the tower he dreamed of last night. The tower where he had sex, where he had a stake impaled into his chest. Larry's heartburn came back. The listing said it had been sold. Maybe he saw it on the way up here and incorporated it into his dream. Coincidence, that's all. It still gave him the creeps to see it in the daylight, in reality.

Before he bought anything, cabin or mansion or haunted tower, he'd have to make progress on his writing—or there would be no advance money.

Two blocks of small restaurants, and souvenir shops with turquoise jewelry, and quartz crystals, incense, and T-shirts, then Larry was back at Spencer's Gas station. His van wasn't parked where he left it. It wasn't in the garage either.

He stepped into Spencer's gift shop, worried what the old man had done with his van. Maybe he died working on it.

Shelves of kachina dolls stared at him behind ceremonial masks with glittering onyx eyes. Each wore of a crown of flames atop its head, tiny rainbows of translucent color. Larry heard the whispers of chanting from them too.

They weren't alive, they couldn't be; they didn't move, yet Larry sensed there was something in each one, something not alive...but not dead either. He stared into their masks, and with a shaking hand he reached for their burning manes.

A 'ding' sounded as a car pulled up to the pumps. The dolls fell silent and their auras extinguished. Larry heard Spencer's voice behind him: "Get on out there, boy. There's a customer waiting. Don't you dare let her pump that gas!"

A teenager with greasy hair to match his greasy coveralls brushed past Larry. He muttered something about a raise.

Larry turned and saw Spencer, alive, or at least he looked like he was alive.

"Morning," Spencer said and adjusted his coveralls so he had more room for his extended stomach. A green gas flowed from his mouth. It was a heavy vapor Larry smelled across the store: bourbon. The old man was four shots closer to death. Larry took another look at the kachina dolls. They were normal, no flickering colors, and not a peep out of them. Larry squeezed his eyes shut and turned back to Spencer. He opened them. The vapors still lingered in Spencer's mouth, moving like seaweed in water, back and forth with his breath.

He had to tell him...what? That he was about to die of an ulcerated liver? That he was drinking himself to death? He probably had been told that. How could Larry convince him that he *knew*?

"You OK? You gotta problem with your eyes? I know a good doctor in town. He'll fix you up even if you got no insurance."

"Yeah, my eyes," Larry said. "Maybe I need new contacts." Or a good shrink. "What happened to my van?"

"It's out back. I was clearing all that glass out, and didn't want to get any on my driveway. Besides, you left a bunch of your stuff there. I didn't want people poking around in your business. Come on, I'll show what I got done." He led Larry out back. Parked behind his garage was a fin-backed powder blue Cadillac, a cherry red 1958 Chevy truck, and a bulldozer with a new coat of safety orange paint on it. The Econoline van was there too. Only it was different.

"What happened to my van?"

"Just a little primer. Don't you worry about that. When I pulled the glass out, I saw you had all these pieces of asphalt stuck into the body panels. Like shrapnel. I dug 'em out, sanded, and primed her. While I had my tools out I took care of all that rust you had by the wheel wells."

"Look, I never said you could—"

Nylund

“Don’t you worry. I ain’t gonna charge you for it. I just hate to see things get rusted, that’s all. Now if you want to paint her over, then that’s a different story. I have a cousin that can get her done real cheap. Any color you want.”

Spencer still breathed death, but the vapors were thinner. Larry got a hot flash in his abdomen, deep, where his liver was. With the heartburn he had, his insides felt as if they were on fire.

“I ordered them seals too,” Spencer said. “Express. The warehouse told me they’d be here in three days, OK?”

“Great. I just dropped by to get a few things out of my van.”

“Don’t let me stop you.” Spencer pulled his silver flask out. He spun the top off, then held it out to Larry. “Want a snoot first?”

Green vapors fumed out. They formed skeletal hands and reached for the old man’s mouth.

“No, thanks,” —Larry changed his mind and grabbed it. “On second thought, since you offered.” He’d pretend to take a swig, then cough it out, spill the rest on the ground. That would buy Spencer time. It would give Larry time to figure out how to stop him, time to save his life.

Larry pressed it to his lips. He hadn’t intended to drink the stuff, but the liquid grabbed him, flowed into his mouth by itself, tried to claw its way down his windpipe. It tasted like hot razors. It was acid that dissolved his tongue. Larry gagged. He coughed the bourbon out his mouth and nose.

Larry dropped the flask (not quite as planned). Spencer lunged for it, and missed. Brown liquid glugged onto the oily earth.

“Dang it all,” Spencer cried. “That was...aw, never mind.” He whacked Larry on the back three times. “You’ll be all right. Maybe we should buy a couple of beers to wash that down with.”

“Sorry...,” Larry hacked out between coughs.

"Don't you worry about it. Got plenty more."

Larry wiped his eyes, and suppressed the urge to puke. He took a minute to catch his breath. "What was that?"

"Just bourbon." He winked. "And a little something special that I brew myself."

Larry shook his head to clear it, then rummaged through piles of clothes and books in the van for his power supply. "There was a cross on the side of the road on the way up here," he told Spencer, pausing to swallow and soothe his sore throat. "It was stuck in the middle of no where."

"They're put up for the folk who died on the road—drunk driving accidents most of 'em. Usually for kids." He shrugged. "If the whole family gets wiped out, the priests up the road go and put one up for them. About the only good they do anyone." He spat. "Hey, you need help rooting around in there?"

Larry found the power supply buried under a box of overturned manuscripts. "No, got it." He stepped out of the van, got dizzy.

Spencer grabbed his arm. "You don't look so great. Why don't you sit a spell, and have a soda. On the house."

"No...." Larry saw the spot where the booze soaked the ground; he smelled it; he felt breakfast heavy in his gut, twisting. "I feel fine. I have to get some work done this morning. I'll drop by tomorrow."

"They treating you right at the Silver Bullet? They better be."

"Yeah, just fine."

"You want me to talk to my cousin? About that paint job?"

"I'll have to think about it."

"No rush. I'll be here."

Maybe you will and maybe you won't, Larry thought. Depends if you refill that flask.

Nylund

* * *

Larry stood on the raised wooden sidewalk downtown. The air was hazy. He didn't remember leaving Spencer's. A blackout? Or was Spencer's home brew part Sterno and LSD?

The adobe church was half a block down the road. Larry lurched forward. He wanted to lie down and sleep. It wasn't only his head that spun, but his stomach too, his liver, everything, and in different directions. In his left hand he clutched the AC adapter like his life depended on it.

The buildings in Dry Water were on fire. Ruby flames with emerald tips, sapphire fires that burned in road and twisted like sidewinders. Napalm exploded in the air. Everything solid shimmered translucent, and where there should have been nothing...things appeared. People from Spaghetti Westerns, with boots, and cowboy hats, materialized on the street; they overlapped the tourists in their Patagonia jackets, jeans, and sneakers. Horses trotted down Agua de Viva through parked Jeeps and minivans.

Larry blinked back tears. Everything spun, his insides, the buildings, the air. He reached for a hitching post and it slipped through his fingers like sand. He couldn't tell if he stood, or had fallen in the street. The fringes of his vision blackened, and he closed his eyes, squeezed the panic out of his mind.

He opened them. Nothing had changed: chaos and vertigo.

The church appeared solid enough though. Larry staggered to it. He touched the adobe. It was real, solid. Everything else danced and distorted.

He threw up chili relleno on the sidewalk.

The cowboys and tourists got out of his way. They gave him looks of disgust. He heard the word "drunk" whispered.

It was both day *and* night. Three suns floated overhead, one of them glowing black, and a dozen moons in various phases sped past, blue, and red, and yellow Swiss cheese. The church's bells rang. They tolled wedding choruses and funeral dirges and fire alarms, and they all rang together. Larry cupped his hands over his ears.

By the double door entrance to the church was a message board, black felt with removable white letters. It read:

Death comes for Pastor Woberty

Larry blinked and read it again:

Pastor Woberty is death. He comes for you!

And again:

Pastor Woberty speaks on: God is Light.

Come join our watercolor classes, Wednesdays at 7 p.m.

Seminar: The healing properties of crystals. Saturday at 3 p.m.

Larry ran, coughing, and stumbling up Agua De Viva. He ran through people that weren't there. He pushed over the ones that were there and got in his way. He ran dreamlike, moving fast, but not getting very far, trying to keep his eyes closed until he got to the Silver Bullet Bed and Breakfast. He swung open the door so hard the frosted glass cracked.

Paloma stared at him from behind the receptionist desk.

Nylund

He ignored her—bolted up the stairs, three at a time. When he got to his room, he slammed and locked the door behind him, then slumped to the floor and cried. He was insane. He knew it.

A man sat on his bed. He had boots on, but only wore white flannel underwear. He reached over and put on his hat, wide brimmed and dusty, with a rattlesnake skin headband. The stranger twisted his handlebar mustache and said, “Yer in a heap of trouble, son. Ya been goin’ places ya got no business bein’...not yet no how.”

“Who the hell are you? And what are you doing in my room?”

“First of all, it ain’t yer room. It’s mine. I’m Matt Carlson.”