

Chapter 1

Ask most people to point at the moon, and they'll lift their gaze skyward, trying to locate it. Ask the same of a weremyste like me, and we don't have to search for it. We know where it is. Always, and precisely. As it waxes full, we can feel it robbing us of our sanity and enhancing the strength of our magic. Like ocean tides, our minds and our runecraft are subject to its pull.

I was on the interstate cutting across the outskirts of Phoenix, and already I could feel the moon tugging at my thoughts, subtle and light, but as insistent as a curious child. Three hours before today's moonrise, nearly a week before it would wax full, and its touch was as real to me as the leather steering wheel against my palms, the rush of the morning desert air on my face and neck.

I sensed the reservoir of power within me responding to its caress, like water to gravity. And I felt as well the madman lurking inside my head, coaxing the moon toward full, desperate to be free again.

I had five days.

And in the meantime, I had work to do.

Work for me means investigating. Once it meant being a detective for the Phoenix Police Department, but those days are gone. I was on the job for six years and eight months. The day I turned in my badge was, next to the day twenty years ago when my mother died, the worst of my life. Still, when I look in the mirror, I see a cop, a detective. I've heard it said among cops that once you're on the job, you're never really off. Some things are like that, they'll tell you. Some things get in your blood and that's it. You're never the same.

But being an ex-cop doesn't pay a lot of bills and after wallowing in self-pity for a while, I realized that wasn't much of a living either. So I hung out my shingle, went the ex-cop-becomes-private-investigator route. It's been done before, more often than not by ex-cops who are smarter than I am. But I have certain skills that paying customers find useful.

For the past year I've been owner, president, and principal investigator for Justis Fearsson Investigations, Incorporated, a one man operation here in Phoenix. I've even got an ad in the phone book with my picture on it. I was going to make up a logo, but a friend -- my old partner -- said that I should use the photo instead.

"You're not unattractive for a white guy," she told me at the time. "That could work to your advantage."

So there I am in the yellow pages, smiling out from a quarter page ad. My hair is sticking up all over the place, and the beard and mustache give me an unseemly look, but overall the picture isn't terrible. I have a website, too, but I haven't done much with it. I keep meaning to, but I don't get a whole lot of free time.

I had a rough go of it at first, trying to figure out how to run a business, how to know which cases to take. I turned to other former cops for advice, but soon learned that a good number of them didn't have any more sense of what they were doing than I did. Most of them were just scraping by -- many were getting drunk before noon and staying that way until quitting time, which is likely why they had to leave the force in the first place. I read a couple of books and visited a bunch websites, scanning articles for tips, but they weren't too helpful either. So, in the end I chose to teach myself.

Television shows about PIs make the profession out to be glamorous. It's not. In a lot of

ways it's similar to being a cop. Cleaning up other people's messes. That's what Kona Shaw, my partner on the force, used to call what we did. And that's what I still do now. Except instead of working crime scenes, I work on the quieter cases, the ones people don't read about in newspapers or see on the late news. Early on I tried to stick to investigating insurance claims, and helping corporate clients identify employees who were spying for competitors or stealing inventory off of delivery trucks. It wasn't exciting work, but it got me started, paid off most of my debts, and allowed me to move the operation out of my home and into that office I mentioned.

From the start, I tried to avoid the peeking-through-the-bedroom-window stuff. But PIs can't avoid the messier cases entirely, no matter how much we hate them. After following a cheating husband for several nights, or tracking down a runaway kid, or having to show a guy pictures of his wife and his best friend as they check into a motel on the outskirts of town, that work gets old. It's depressing as hell. It pays well, and God knows there's plenty of it, but it doesn't take long to figure out that the kid ran away because the parents were a nightmare, or the woman was cheating because her husband was a jerk. Most of the time, there are no good guys. I don't like that.

But the corporate cases have been few and far between, and working for the insurance companies isn't exactly a picnic. In the end, I had little choice but to go back to the personal cases. Which is how I found myself steering the Z-ster, my silver 1977 280Z, into a part of Phoenix's South Mountain precinct I never should have taken her to in the first place.

Two weeks ago I had been hired by Michael and Sissy Tyler to track down their teenage daughter, Jessie, who ran away from home. Tyler was one of the city's better known

businessmen. He had made a killing in the tech sector a few years back and wound up on the covers of magazines. He and his family lived in the Pinnacle Peak section of North Scottsdale, in a house that I might have been able to afford in twenty years if I scrimped and saved and gave up a few luxuries -- you know, like food and shelter. Teenage runaways from homes of the rich and powerful are like private investigator cliches; we see them a lot. More often than not the kid winds up spending a night or two at a friend's house before returning to Mom and Dad.

Jessie's case was different. First, none of her friends knew where she'd gone. Second, she'd taken her wallet and had, within four or five days of her disappearance, used her ATM card to clean out the checking account her parents had set up for her: to the tune of about six thousand dollars. A couple of thousand of it went in cash and another three grand in purchases at stores all over the Phoenix/Scottsdale area. Nearly one thousand dollars had vanished without explanation, which made me wonder if she had hooked up with a myste. But all of it was gone. And third, according to her friends, her younger sister, and her parents, Jessie had been showing signs of what most folks in law enforcement and social services would call "self-destructive behavior." She was breaking rules at home and at school; she had gone from being a solid "B" student to flunking half her classes; and, though Mom and Dad were still in denial about this, the evidence I'd found suggested that she was experimenting with a variety of drugs. All she needed to complete the picture was the manipulative, perhaps-even-abusive boyfriend.

Early on in the case, I would have bet every dollar in my pocket that she had found him, and that he was the reason she'd left home.

It took me longer than usual to track her down, but eventually I found an addict who used to do some informing for me when I was with the PPD and who thought he had seen her near

Esteban Park. I went to check out that lead, and found a second guy, another ex-cop as it happens, who had heard someone talking about a strung-out rich girl throwing money around in that part of town. I traced her to an abandoned building about a mile south of the Phoenix airport, in the growling shadows of Interstate Ten. The building -- an old service station garage -- had become a den for users of Spark, a powerful and addictive hallucinogenic grown in the desert, which has become a Phoenix specialty for drug dealers and their clientele. I think it's nice when a local industry can expand and prosper.

By the time I pulled up to the garage, I was pretty sure she was inside. But "pretty sure" isn't positive, and since I don't have a badge anymore, it's not as easy as it once was for me to barge into places. The few windows on the front of the building were so filthy as to be opaque, at least those that were still glass. Several of the panes had been replaced with rough squares of plywood. A corrugated metal door blocked the mouth of the shop, its grooves covered with spray-painted gang symbols and names. Beside it was a smaller, windowless door that had a rusted padlock on it. Whoever was inside hadn't entered from the front.

Leaving the Z-ster at what was left of the curb, I tucked my Glock into my shoulder holster and started around toward the back of the building. I didn't want to have to use the weapon, but in this neighborhood there was no way I was going to leave it behind. As I walked I also began to recite a warding spell in my head, a simple one that would protect me from most anything some drug-crazed kid might throw my way.

As a weremyste, I could do such things.

Everyone's heard of werewolves. Weremystes work much the same way. We're mystes all the time, meaning that we can cast spells and feel magic when it's used by others of our kind.

But for three nights in every moon cycle -- the night of the full moon, and the nights immediately before and after -- we lose control of our magic and ourselves. Our magical abilities strengthen, but our minds weaken. Some of us descend into a kind of quiet psychosis; others become violent. And many of us, myself included, fall in between those extremes.

I was born a weremyste; I didn't have to be bitten by one -- that would be weird -- and I didn't have a curse put on me, or anything like that. My dad was a myste, too. I've known I'd be one since I was fourteen. That was also when I learned the true reason why my father went off the deep end every four weeks.

I'm more powerful than some; less so than others. And I'll be the first to admit that I'm not as skilled with my runecraft as I should be. But I can manage a good number of spells, particularly wardings. In the hands of a master, they could be more effective than a ballistic vest, without the bulk or weight. Of course, I'm not a master.

With the reassuring weight of the Glock tugging on my shoulder, and the power for my spell gathering inside me, I crept along the side of the building, past piles of rusted scrap metal and shards of broken bottles. I figured that most of the people inside would be stoned beyond consciousness, but still I placed my feet with care, in case someone was listening for cops. Or inquisitive PIs.

I found no door along this side, but upon reaching the rear corner of the building and peering around to the back, I spotted a steel door. It was closed, but had no lock.

A cold prickling on the back of my neck -- premonition, or instinct honed by years on the force -- made me pull out my weapon. I eased toward the door, holding the pistol in front of me. I also released the spell, felt the warding settle over me like a blanket. I reached the door, stepped

past it so that I could swing it open and enter the garage in one quick motion. That was the plan, anyway.

I had forgotten about that vanishing money from Jessie's account and the possibility that she was with a myste. Stupid of me. And nearly fatal.

As soon as I flung the door open, I sensed the spell. It wasn't particularly strong, but it was an assailing spell -- an attack -- and whoever cast it had aimed it at me. I braced myself, hoped the warding would hold. It did, but the spell -- it felt like an impact attack, meant, no doubt, to seem like I had been hit with a two-by-four -- was strong enough to stagger me and to make the doorway shake. By the time I was moving forward again, I could hear footsteps retreating toward the front of the garage.

I followed, Glock ready, the power for a second spell already building inside me. This time I planned to cast an assailing spell of my own. I hate it when people use magic against me; makes me want to get even.

I hadn't taken five steps, before I slowed, then halted. The smell would have been enough to get my attention -- feces, urine, vomit, sweat, fear, desperation; there could have been a body rotting in here. It was hard to tell.

But what I saw was every bit as bad. Worse, really. At least twenty college-age kids lay sprawled over the filthy cement floor, most of them unconscious. At least half of them were emaciated, their cheeks sunken, as if they'd been prisoners in this hell-hole for months. Others -- the newcomers, most likely -- might have been marginally healthier. But all of them wore stained, tattered clothing; all of them looked like they hadn't bathed in weeks, or longer.

I spotted Jessie Tyler right away, but I couldn't help wondering how many of these other

kids didn't have anyone searching for them.

I heard a loud crash at the front of the shop. Another glance at Jessie convinced me she wasn't going anywhere. I eased forward, gripping my weapon with both hands, considering what spell I ought to use. Assailing spells worked best with a precise target. I didn't have one, at least not yet, and I didn't want to hurt one of those kids.

Unfortunately, the myste I was stalking didn't have my scruples. Again, I felt the spell as soon as he cast it -- the air was electric with magic. I sensed the heat before I saw the wave of flame rolling toward me. I backpedaled, scared, but also unwilling to ward myself and leave the kids to roast. Fire spells are rudimentary magic, but this myste, whoever he was, had poured serious power into this one. The temperature in the garage jumped twenty degrees. The skin on my face and hands flushed, like I'd been sitting way too close to a campfire.

The flames were almost on top of me when I cast my spell. Three elements, because that was how spells worked: the kids and myself, the fire, and a wall of magic in between. I recited the elements to myself three times, allowing the magic to build inside me. On the third repetition, I released it, the way I would a held breath.

The barrier winked into view and then shuddered as the attack hit it. But like my earlier warding, it held. That wall of flame passed over without burning any of us. There was nothing I could do, though, to keep the guy's magic from setting everything else in the garage on fire.

I started shouting for the kids to get out of the building. For the moment we still had a clear path to the door I'd used, but I didn't think that would last long. A couple of the kids managed to get themselves upright and stumble toward the daylight. Several more sat up and appeared to notice the flames. But they couldn't do more than that. Most of them didn't stir.

The air grew thick with dark smoke. I didn't think the building would come down on top of us; the walls were cinder block and the roof was metal. But it felt like we were in a giant oven.

Another pulse of magic shook the garage. I spun toward the front of the building, expecting to see more flames, but nothing came at me. The bastard had blown his way through that metal door, leaving the rest of us to broil.

I ran to the kids and started shaking as many of them awake as I could. Those who I could hoist onto their feet I helped to the door, two at a time. After that it became a matter of carrying the unconscious ones. They were filthy and rank; several of them had open sores on their arms and legs, faces and necks. When all of this was over I was going to bathe in a tub of hand sanitizer.

The smoke -- black, choking, probably toxic as hell -- continued to thicken, and the heat became nearly unbearable. But to my amazement, I managed to get all of them out without killing myself. Equally amazing, Jessie didn't run away while I was helping the others. She appeared dazed, her eyes wide but empty, her skin pink from the heat.

I heard the fire engines arrive a few minutes after I carried the last unconscious girl to safety. Moments later a trio of firefighters came running around the corner to the back of the building. Seeing the kids and me, they stopped.

"Good God," one of them muttered.

"Yeah," I said. "We're going to need a few ambulances."

"Spark den?" another guy asked, as the first radioed for help.

I nodded.

"And who are you?"

I pulled out my investigator's license. "Jay Fearsson," I said, holding it up for them to see. "I'm a PI." I pointed at Jessie. "Her parents hired me."

Jessie's eyes widened just a little, and her eyebrows went up, but she said nothing.

"You hurt?" the first guy asked.

"No."

"How'd the fire start?"

"There was another guy here -- their supplier, I'm guessing. He started it when I showed up, and got away while I was carrying them out."

I didn't say more than that. Most people know that magic exists, but that doesn't make them comfortable with it, or with the people who cast spells. Filling in the details would have raised questions that I didn't feel like answering just then.

I heard more sirens in the distance, and figured at least a few of them were Phoenix Police. I'd be there a while answering questions. I walked to where Jessie sat and squatted down in front of her. It took a moment for her gaze to slide up to mine, and another for her eyes to gain focus.

"Jessie Tyler, right?"

She nodded. I thought I'd have to explain again who I was, but she was more cogent than I expected. "My parents really hire you?" she asked.

"Yeah. Does that surprise you?"

Jessie shrugged, stared past me.

"Who's your supplier, Jessie? Who was keeping you here?"

She didn't answer.

A couple of uniformed cops turned the corner. I saw them stop, take in the condition of the kids, and then speak to the firefighters, one of whom pointed my way.

The cops' questions were pretty standard. I hadn't done anything wrong, and they knew it. The fact that I had once been on the job helped too. They took Jessie and the others into custody, which I should have expected. Almost all of them would spend more time at the hospital than in jail, but still Jessie's parents weren't going to be pleased. Then again, they had hired me to find her, not to be her lawyer, so in the end they would have little choice but to pay me.

Once I was done giving my statement, the cops said I was free to go. I walked to the open door I had used to enter the garage, and examined it. The first spell that myste had thrown at me had rattled the door; there should have been some residue of magic on the door frame. All spells leave behind traces of power in the form of glowing luminance that clings to those things the magic has touched. And the magic of every myste manifests itself in a unique color. Thing is, only another myste can see it. I was hoping that Jessie's supplier had left behind the equivalent of a magical calling card.

But the Phoenix sun was bearing down on us at this point, bleaching colors, making it hard to see anything other than the sun's reflection on the dull steel. I thought I saw the faintest suggestion of beige or tan, like the color of dried grass, but I couldn't be certain.

"What're you looking for?" one of the cops asked from behind me.

I glanced back, then eyed the doorway again. The cop walked to where I stood.

"The guy who started the fire did other weird stuff, too," I said "I think he used some kind of mojo on me. The first time he did it, I was right here by the door."

The cop stared at me for a moment, no doubt to see if I was joking. When I didn't smile

or even glance his way, he began to study doorframe too. "I don't see anything," he said. "Do you?"

"No," I said. "Not a thing."

I walked away, heading back to my car. As I turned the corner, I saw that the cop was still scrutinizing the doorway. His partner, though, was watching me.

Chapter 2

I drove out to Pinnacle Peak, battling traffic the entire way. It was midday -- nowhere near what used to pass for rush hour. But these days in Phoenix, rush hour started at dawn and lasted until way past dusk. I had called ahead to let the Tylers know that I had good news about their daughter, but I didn't want to explain the particulars over the phone. Especially because those particulars were not going to make them happy, and I wanted to get paid. It's a lot easier to ignore a bill than it is a guy standing in front of you.

By the time I got there, the police had called to say that Jessie was in custody. As I expected, Michael Tyler didn't take the news well, even if for now being in custody merely meant that Phoenix cops were keeping an eye on her while she was treated at Saint Luke's Hospital.

"How could you let this happen?" he demanded of me as he yanked open the front door. "I hired you to find her, not to get her arrested."

"I did find her, sir. She was in a Spark den--"

"Oh, God," Missus Tyler said, voice trembling, a hand raised to her mouth. She sank into a chair in the front foyer.

"She was in a Spark den," I started again, staring hard at Mister Tyler, "along with about twenty other kids. When I arrived, the guy who was supplying their drugs and taking their money, lit the place on fire. I got your daughter out, and everyone else, too. But the fire department showed up, and so did the police. There was really nothing I could do."

"I want to see her," Sissy Tyler said. She stood again. "Right now, Michael."

Mister Tyler glanced at his wife and nodded. Facing me once more, he started to speak, stopped himself, then started again. “I suppose I ought to be thanking you. It sounds like you saved her life.”

“I did,” I said. “And you’re welcome.”

“What do I owe you?”

“Two hundred and fifty dollars a day, comes to . . .” I did the math in my head. “Thirty-five hundred, plus expenses. Let’s call it an even four thousand, minus the five hundred you paid me when I started.”

He nodded, cut me a check on the spot, and led me back to my car.

Holding out his hand, Tyler said, “I really am grateful, Mister Fearsson. Both of us are.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, gripping his hand. “I’m glad I was able to find her.”

I climbed into the Z-ster and started the slow drive back to Chandler, where I have both my house and my business. Along the way I stopped to deposit my check, relieved to know that I wouldn’t have to rely on overdraft protection to keep my rent check from bouncing.

As soon as I reached the office I tossed the newspaper and mail onto my desk, scrubbed my hands and arms up to my biceps, and washed down a couple of aspirin. Then I fired up the espresso machine.

My office isn’t much to speak of. It’s a single room on the top floor of one of those new sidewalk shopping developments that have grown up everywhere in recent years. It’s well lit, with a bank of windows overlooking the street. It was originally intended for a local lawyer, who insisted on oak floors. He took a job with a big firm in downtown Phoenix a couple of months after the place was built and I happened to luck into it. I have a desk, a computer and printer, a

pair of file cabinets, a small john off the main room, a couple of chairs for clients, one of those mini refrigerators, and my coffee maker, some Italian brand, which I remember costing more than all the other furniture in the place. I like coffee. Sumatran mostly, the stronger the better.

The computer doesn't see a whole lot of action. Mostly I use it for billing and writing up reports for the insurance companies. I'm not much for technology. Where most PIs these days rely on computers and cell phones and fax machines, I tend to do things the old fashioned way, face to face, notepad in hand. It's not that I'm afraid of the fancier stuff or anything like that. I carry a cell phone, and use it when I have to. But I'll choose a handshake and a personal conversation over cell phones and social media any day of the week. I'm a purist at heart.

Of course, that begs the question, what is a purist doing with a seven hundred dollar espresso machine? I have no answer. My personal philosophy remains a work in progress.

My coffee was still brewing when the figure began to materialize in the corner by my doorway. It was insubstantial at first, a faint glimmering, like reflections of moonlight on a mountain stream. Gradually it grew more distinct, taking the form of a man, tall, broadly built. But always he kept that rippled, glowing appearance, as if he were composed entirely of luminous waters. If others had been there with me, they would have thought that a ghost had come to my office. And they wouldn't have been too far off.

To be precise, he was a runemyste, one of thirty-nine ancient weremystes who had been sacrificed by the Runeclave centuries ago, their spirits granted eternal life, so that they could be guardians of magic in our world. It's easier to call him a ghost, but he gets touchy about that. This particular runemyste -- my runemyste, I guess you could say -- was named Namid'skemu. I called him Namid. He was once a shaman, what most people would call a medicine man, of the

K'ya'na-Kwe clan of the A'shiwi, or Zuni nation. The K'ya'na-Kwe were known as the water people, and they were, in their day, a powerful clan, steeped in the spiritual realm of their people. Today their line is extinct. Unless you count Namid.

I saw only a small fraction of what Namid did to guard against those who would use magic for dark purposes, and I understood even less. But one of his duties was to instruct me in the ways of runecrafting.

I can't say why Namid took an interest in me. As I've already admitted, I'm not the most powerful myste in the world; not even close. But I know that he was once my father's instructor and I think that on some level he held himself responsible for my father's descent into madness. I also know that he answers to a spirit council made up of his fellow runemystes, and from what I gather, they don't allow members of their council to engage in magical charity or indulge their guilt. So apparently, like my dad before me, I'm weremyste enough to have earned Namid's attention. I know for a fact that the magic is strong enough in me to have cost me my job. Namid would probably say that you couldn't measure sorcery by degrees, that you either were a weremyste -- a runecrafter, as he called those who used magic -- or you weren't. And he'd have been right. Being a weremyste was a lot like being a cop: once it was in your blood, that was it.

I nodded to the glowing figure. "Hey, Namid. What's up?"

"Ohanko," he answered, his voice fluid and resonant, like the rush of deep currents over stone. Ohanko was what he usually called me, although he had other names for me as well. All of them were in his language, and most of them he saved for those times when I'd really ticked him off. I only understood one or two of the others, but Ohanko I knew. It meant, roughly, "reckless one," and I knew that I had earned it over the years.

He stood there, staring at me. His eyes shone from his face, like bright, cold flames reflected from the surface of a wind-swept lake. I'd never actually touched Namid -- not to shake his hand, or pat him on the shoulder, or sock him in the mouth, which I often wanted to do. I wasn't even certain that it was possible. But I would have loved to try it, just once, just to feel what it was like. I imagined it would be like plunging my hand into an icy creek.

"Well?" I asked, uncomfortable under his gaze. "What do you want?"

"You need to practice your runecrafting."

"Not today, Namid. I have a headache." I grinned hoping to soften the refusal, and also to indicate that I was kidding. Namid's expression didn't change. He understood few of my jokes. He never found them funny. "Another time," I said, knowing this wouldn't satisfy him. My stomach had started to feel tight and hollow. I wasn't sure why; I knew only that I got this feeling whenever Namid demanded that I work on my craft. "Later," I said. "I promise. I'm wiped right now. I had an encounter with a myste this morning."

"You will tell me about that when we are finished. Now, we work. You have much to learn."

"Yeah, well, you're not going to teach me all of it in one day. It can wait."

The runemyste stepped to the middle of the room and lowered himself to the floor, his movements liquid and graceful. He eyed me expectantly. This was where he always sat when instructing me in the use of magic.

"No," I said, sounding like a whiny kid. "I'm not doing this right now." We'd had this argument too many times before. There was still a part of me that feared the powers I possessed. Though I had been casting spells for years, I understood little about the Runeclave and even less

about Namid himself. And it was possible -- likely, even -- that I avoided these sessions because I'd seen what this same magic did to my father.

The phasings, those periods of each moon cycle when magic takes over our minds and bodies, turning us into crazed animals, are no picnic. The line between sanity and insanity, which much of the sane world takes for granted and thinks of as clear cut, feels disturbingly insubstantial to weremystes like me. Because while I consider myself sane most of the time, I also know what it's like to be insane. I've been tipping over into madness every month for half my life. And as bad as the phasings are, the long-term effects are worse. Turns out -- big surprise here -- putting one's mind through a psychic meat grinder every month takes a heavy toll. Most weremystes wind up permanently insane; a good number of them take their own lives before the descent into irreversible madness makes even that single act of will impossible. So, for good reason, I saw my magical powers as the source of my greatest weakness.

Whatever the root of my reluctance to train, I knew that sooner or later Namid would get his way. He always did.

"Is your scrying stone here or at your home?" he asked.

"It's at the house." Maybe there was a way out of this after all.

I should be so lucky.

"You can scry without the stone. Bring out the mirror from in there." He pointed toward the john.

"Namid . . ." I stopped, shaking my head. Then I got the mirror from the bathroom

I hate scrying. People think of magic, and one of the first things that comes to mind is gazing into a crystal ball. That's scrying -- or rather, that's Hollywood's take on scrying.

Except that scrying doesn't require a crystal ball, or even clear quartz. All you need is a smooth, lustrous surface. I use a piece of polished sea green agate, about the size of my hand, with a small crystalline opening at the center that's surrounded by thin, sinuous bands of blue and white. I didn't choose it because there's anything inherently magical about that piece of agate; I found it several years ago in a gem store at a Phoenix mall. I happen to think it's a beautiful stone, and I know its patterns and colors as well as I do the lines on my father's face.

Namid was right, though. In the absence of my stone, the mirror would work just as well. I sat cross-legged on the floor in front of him and laid the mirror across my lap.

"Look. Tell me what you see."

I gazed down at the mirror. "Is there really a crack in my ceiling?" I asked, peering up at the sheet rock above me.

The runemyste let out a low rumble, like the distant roar of flood waters.

"Sorry." I stared at the mirror again, concentrating on the surface of the glass, trying to ignore the inverted reflection of my office. For a while I saw nothing, and I let out a loud sigh, glancing up at Namid, hoping he'd agree that this was pointless. But the runemyste sat as motionless as ice, his eyes closed. I turned my attention back to the mirror, trying once more to ignore the reflections and see only the glass itself.

"Clear yourself," Namid whispered.

I nodded, and closed my eyes. Clearing was a technique the runemyste had taught me several years before, when he first started training me. It was a focusing mechanism that combined what many practitioners of magic call centering, with meditation, and we had worked on it enough that I could clear myself in mere moments. Once, early on, Namid had me visualize

a time from my childhood when I remembered being happiest. I fixed on a camping trip with my parents in the Superstition Wilderness, east of the city. The runemyste made me describe for him every detail of the trip -- what we ate, where we slept, what we did and saw. Gradually he steered me toward a single memory: a hike we took in the high country. My parents and I ate a late lunch on a crag that offered amazing views of the Sonoran Desert, stayed there for the sunset, and then returned to our campsite in the dim twilight, my father carrying me on his shoulders on the hike back down.

I remembered watching an eagle from that overlook. It was the first I'd ever seen, and it circled above the desert in front of us, the late afternoon sun lighting the golden feathers on its neck, the tips of its enormous wings splayed, its tail twisting one way and another as it rode the warm desert air.

"Whenever you need to clear yourself, I want you summon the vision of that eagle," Namid told me. "When you hold that image in your mind, it should remind you of that day, of that feeling of peace. It should drive away all distractions."

And it did. At first, as I was still learning what Namid meant when he spoke of being clear, it could take five or ten minutes. But by now I could call the eagle to mind, and within a minute or two I was centered, my mind focused. As impatient as Namid was with me -- as impatient as I often was with myself -- I couldn't deny that I was learning.

"When you are clear," the runemyste whispered, "open your eyes again and tell me what you see in the mirror."

For a few seconds longer I kept my mind fixed on the vision of the great bird. Opening my eyes at last, I stared at the surface of the glass again. It felt as if I was alone with the mirror,

that Namid had vanished, or rather, that I'd left him behind, along with my office, and Jessie Tyler, and everything else.

The vision began as a thin gray swirl, like a wisp of smoke embedded in the glass. Another appeared, and a third. Soon there were at least a dozen of them chasing one another across the mirror, reminding me of children skating on a frozen pond. The center of the image began to glow, faintly at first, then brighter, until I could make out the oranges and blacks and pale yellows of embers in a dying fire. And then a hand emerged from the cinders. It might have been dark red, the color of blood, but it was silhouetted against that burning glow. It wasn't taloned or deformed. It appeared to be a normal hand, long-fingered perhaps, but ordinary except for its color. Still, I knew immediately that it was . . . wrong; that it didn't belong here. For one thing, those wisps of gray smoke acted as though they were afraid of it. They kept as far from the hand as possible; when it moved, they did as well, matching its motion so as to keep their distance.

This continued for a while, the threads of smoke and the hand gliding over the embers, until suddenly the hand seized the strands of gray, capturing all of them in one lightning quick sweep across the mirror. The hand gripped them, the wisps of smoke appearing to writhe in its grasp. When at last the dark fingers opened again, what was left of the gray strands scattered like ash. And when those remnants touched the embers, they flared so brilliantly that I had to shield my eyes. By the time I looked at the mirror again, the image was gone. All that was left was the inverted reflection of my office.

The runemyste was watching me.

“What the hell was that, Namid?”

“What did you see?”

“You know perfectly well what I saw. You always know. What did it mean?”

“What do you think it meant?”

I shoved the mirror off my lap and stood too quickly; my vision swimming.

“Damn you, Namid! Can’t you answer a simple question? Just once?”

“This is as much a part of your training as the summoning of that image. Scrying is more than seeing. Scrying is understanding what you see.”

I hated it when he was right.

This was what made scrying so frustrating. The images came to me easily. Even Namid, who was a miser when it came to compliments, had once told me that the visions I summoned from my scrying stone were unusually vivid. Interpreting them, though, was another matter. Scryings were never clear or unambiguous. Rather they were shadows, portents, hints at the future. Frankly, they were a pain in the butt.

“I don’t know,” I said, beginning to pace the room. “That hand bothered me.”

“It should.”

I halted, surprised by the response. This was as close to a hint as he was ever likely to offer.

“Why, Namid? What does the hand mean?”

Before he could answer, the phone rang. Neither of us moved, and it rang again.

I kept my eyes on the runemyste, hoping he’d tell me more. The phone rang a third time.

“Someone wishes to speak with you.”

A fourth ring and the machine would pick up. I strode across the office and grabbed the

phone.

“Fearsson,” I said, facing the runemyste.

“Justis.”

I would have known that voice anywhere. Kona Shaw. But why would Namid care about a call from Kona? She called all the time.

“What’s up partner?”

“If you have to ask,” she said, “you haven’t read the paper yet.”

Namid stared at me, those cold, impenetrable eyes locked on mine. I felt my gut begin to tighten again.

“Tell me.” But even as I said it, my gaze flicked toward the calendar, and I knew. We were two days past the first quarter moon; five days until the full.

“We’ve found another body.”

“Where?”

“South Mountain Park.”

“Same guy?”

“Officially, I don’t know yet,” she said. “But yeah, it’s our guy.” I could hear the shudder in her voice. Kona was as tough as any cop I’d ever met. In all our years of working together I’d seen little that fazed her, including having a weremyste as a partner. But the Blind Angel murders would have made Jack the Ripper squeamish.

“Listen, partner,” Kona said, “we’re going to need your help on this one. Just to make sure it’s him, you know?” Her voice was nearly drowned out by background noise -- car engines, shouting, and at least one siren.

“You still at the scene?” I asked.

“No, I’m . . . I’m in Paradise Valley.”

“What?”

“Read the paper, Justis. Or go online. This’ll all make sense when you do.”

“You’ve got to give me more than that.”

No answer, though I could still hear the commotion behind her.

“Kona?”

“Yeah,” she said. “This victim isn’t like the others. It’s . . . it’s Claudia Deegan.”

I would have done just about anything in the world for Kona, and I won’t deny that I still lay awake at night thinking about the Blind Angel murders, even though I hadn’t been on the job for a year and a half. But getting involved in an ongoing police investigation was dangerous enough for an ex-cop; getting involved in one that promised to be a media circus was more than I cared to deal with.

I would have told Kona as much, but abruptly I wasn’t paying attention to our conversation. Namid had crossed the room to where I stood, and was staring at me. His color had changed. He had been translucent, his waters as clear as a quiet stream. But now he was clouded, roiled, like a river after a hard rain. His eyes were the same, though: intense and bright. He’d never shown much interest in any of my cases, but it seemed this one had caught his attention.

I put my hand over the mouthpiece. “What is it?” I asked.

He said nothing.

“Damn you, Namid! Would you tell me?”

He turned with deliberate grace and stared down at the mirror that still lay on my floor.

After a moment he faced me again.

It wasn't much, but as I say, Namid wasn't one for giving hints. This was more than the runemyste had ever done before.

"Justis?" Kona said.

I removed my hand from the phone. "I'm here."

"I'm going to be tied up here for a while longer, and Margarite's got my car today. Can you meet me at the Deegan place? We can go downtown from there."

"All right," I said.

"Great. One hour."

I hung up and glared back at the runemyste, who was still watching me.

"Would you please tell me what this is about?"

You'd think by now I'd know better than to expect an answer.

Namid began to fade from view. "Tread like the fox, Ohanko. Be wary."

"Thanks a lot," I said, watching as he vanished. "Damn ghost!"

But he was gone.

I went to my desk and retrieved this morning's paper, which was folded beneath the day's mail. The story was right there on the front page. Top headline.

"Claudia Deegan Found Dead. Senator's daughter may be latest 'Angel' Victim."

I almost called Kona back then and there. I had just gotten through tracking down a runaway and dealing with the life crises of the rich and famous. Involving myself with the Deegans would be ten times worse. I didn't want any part of this case.

Or did I?

The PPD had been trying to solve the so-called Blind Angel murders for just shy of three years now. So had the Feds. The FBI came in with a lot of fanfare and press after the third or fourth murder and did their best to take over the investigation. After a while, though -- after months stretching to years of being unable to find the killer -- they began to lose interest. They cut the size of their task force in half, and then did so again and a third time, until they had basically ceded the investigation back to the Phoenix police.

If Claudia Deegan was this wack-job's latest victim, she would be number thirty-one, that we knew of. I had worked the case when I was on the job, and Kona and her new partner, Kevin Glass, were still part of the investigative team. Being a weremyste, I had realized from the very beginning that magic was involved: I could see the residue of power on the bodies. And it didn't take me long to figure out that every killing occurred around the same time in the moon cycle. I was convinced that our killer had taken a life every month for the last three years at least, and that there were still bodies out there as yet unfound.

Of all the cases I'd been working at the time I left the force, this was the one I most regretted not seeing through to the end. The idea of having another crack at it had definite appeal. On the other hand, as much as I missed being a cop, I didn't miss the jerks who had forced me off the job, who had assumed that my descents into psychosis each month were signs that I was a drunk, or an addict, or both. Even now, there were people in the department -- men and women in positions of power -- who would have loved to humiliate me all over again, to pay me back for disgracing the force.

In the end, I think that if Namid hadn't shown so much interest in my conversation with Kona, I might have called her back and told her I wasn't coming. As much as I wanted to find the

Blind Angel killer, I didn't need the kind of heat this case was going to generate. But for whatever reason, the runemyste had made it clear that this was a job I had to take. I remembered my scrying, and that evil red hand. Namid seemed to think it was all related, and who was I to argue?

Yes, I had been a cop, and that would always be in my blood. But I'm still a weremyste, and I will be until the day I die. And for better or worse this was where my magic was leading me. I could tell that much from one glance in a mirror, be it a looking glass or a scrying surface.

Chapter 3

I read the rest of the article about Claudia Deegan, my insides winding themselves into knots as the details of the “Angel Murders” investigation flooded back into my mind.

Murder cases are never a picnic, but trying to chase down a serial murderer is about the worst part of a homicide detective’s job. You feel that the killer is mocking you with every clue he leaves behind, and you feel responsible for each new murder he commits after you’ve taken on the investigation. But bad as that is, the worst part is the time in between killings, when you know another one is coming and that there isn’t a damn thing you can do to stop it. It’s no wonder that cops who investigate serial killings become obsessed with their victims and suspects, and that they’re even more prone to drinking, drug use and emotional problems than their colleagues.

Kona and I worked the case from the beginning. We were the first detectives on the scene when Gracia Rosado was found in Red Mountain Park three years ago. It didn’t take either of us long to realize that this murder was unlike any we had seen before. Gracia herself was all too typical of murder victims in the Phoenix area. Young, pretty, poor, Latino. She’d been involved with drugs for a couple of years and in the months leading up to her murder had started turning tricks to pay for her habit.

But in every other way, Gracia’s killing was chillingly unique. Her body was found by a jogger in a small ravine deep in the park. She was fully clothed and there was no sign that she’d been sexually assaulted, which is pretty much the first thing you check for in a case like this. There were bruises on her neck, but I knew right away that her killer hadn’t strangled her to

death. Red magic shone like fresh blood on her face and chest, though I was the only cop working the scene who could see it. On the other hand, every cop and reporter there could see that her eyes had been burned out of her skull.

“Looks like we’ve got ourselves a new freak to track down,” Kona said at the time, staring down at Gracia’s body and shaking her head. “Just what Phoenix needs at the start of the damn summer.”

“It’s worse than you know,” I said, keeping my voice low.

“What do you mean--?” She stopped and stared at me. “Oh, don’t tell me, Justis, because I don’t want to hear it.”

Kona was the only person on the force who knew I was a weremyste. I’d told her early on, following number seven of my father’s ten rules for being a successful cop: “Never keep secrets from your partner.”

She hadn’t believed me at first, but it hadn’t taken more than a spell or two to convince her. And after my magical abilities helped us clear a couple of cases, she began to think of it as a good thing, even if it did render me useless three nights out of each month.

But on that morning in June, standing over what turned out to be the first of at least thirty murder victims -- thirty-one, if the papers were right about Claudia Deegan -- she wasn’t amused at all.

“Talk to me, Justis,” she said. She and my father were the only people who called me Justis rather than Jay. “What are you seeing?”

“There’s red magic on her face and chest. Powerful magic -- it’s already starting to fade.”

“If it’s already starting to fade--”

“The faster the residue fades, the more powerful the sorcerer,” I told her for what had to have been the twentieth time.

She nodded. “Right. I always get that backwards. So you’re saying she was killed by magic. For sure.”

“For sure.”

“Well, that’s just great. What do your magic senses tell you about that shit her killer did with her eyes?”

I shook my head. A white sheet lay over Gracia’s body, but I could still see her ravaged face in my mind. In fact, I still can see it to this day. “I have no idea,” I told her at the time.

The second body was discovered about a month later. Also a young woman, also killed by magic, her face mutilated in the same way. Others followed, some of them men, though most of the victims were women. All of them were young, and all of them died the same way. And, it turned out, all of the killings took place about a week before the full moon. Sometimes it took longer to find the bodies, but always the coroner put the time of death around the first quarter moon. I still have no idea what this means, but I know it’s important.

Each body had been found in either Red Mountain Park, east of Mesa, or in South Mountain Park, on the west side of Tempe, so those of us working the case referred to our perp as the East Side Parks killer. But the media fixated on the ritual aspect of the killings -- the facial mutilation -- and dubbed the killings the Blind Angel murders.

There had been no shortage of media coverage of the killings, but now that Claudia Deegan had been murdered it was likely to turn into a frenzy. Randolph Deegan, Claudia’s father, was Arizona’s most powerful and popular politician. Word was that he was running for governor

this year, and that a Presidential run might be in his future. Everything the Deegans did was news. Claudia's death would be on the front page of every paper in the country; the Arizona papers wouldn't be covering anything else.

Reading the article left little doubt in my mind that the Deegan girl had been murdered by the Parks Killer. The medical examiner claimed that she'd died two nights ago -- the night of the quarter moon. Her body had been found yesterday in South Mountain Park. The article also mentioned that like so many of the other victims, Claudia Deegan had drugs in her blood and on her person at the time she died. Spark to be specific, which in addition to being addictive and expensive, also happened to be one of the drugs some weremystes used to suppress the effects of the phasings. As to the rest, the paper dealt with the details as delicately as it could.

A spokesperson for Senator Deegan's family refused to comment on the condition of Miss Deegan's body. However, sources within the police department confirmed that her face had been disfigured in a manner consistent with past Blind Angel killings.

The paper said nothing about magic, of course. It never did. No one at the scene would be able to confirm that magic had killed the Deegans' daughter. That was why Kona needed me.

For the second time that day, I headed back toward Scottsdale, this time heading into the foothills near the city. Traffic was starting to build again, but aside from the stop-and-go, the drive from my place in Chandler to the Deegan estate wasn't a difficult one. Still, judging from the difference between the neighborhood where I have my office, and the community in which the Senator and his family live, you might have thought I'd entered another country.

The estate was located on a twisting road with more million dollar houses than you could shake a stick at, all of them gated, all of them with clear views of Camelback Mountain.

As I rounded the last turn before the Deegan house I found the road half blocked by a huge mob of reporters and cops. More than a dozen news vans lined the road; state patrol cruisers had been parked strategically to control traffic in both directions. There were sound booms and cameras everywhere -- still and video. I slowed the Z-ster and crept past it all. As I did, the media people peered into the car, hoping to recognize someone famous. They all looked vaguely disappointed when all they saw was some guy in an old bomber jacket with wild hair and a three-day beard.

A uniformed cop stopped me and signaled for me to lower my window.

“You live up here?” he asked.

I almost laughed. “No. I’m a PI. I’m on my way to the Deegan place. Kona Shaw asked me to come. You can call ahead and check with her if you want.”

He shook his head, straightened, and waved me on.

The Deegans’ driveway was maybe thirty yards beyond the mob scene; nice for them, but I doubt their neighbors were thrilled with the arrangement. I guess it paid to be the most powerful man in Arizona.

The wrought iron gate in front of the Senator’s place was guarded by two guys in navy slacks and powder blue, short sleeve dress shirts with the insignia of some security company I’d never heard of emblazoned on the sleeves. They were built like linebackers, with necks about as thick as my thigh. I also noticed that they carried forty caliber Glock 22s in their shoulder harnesses. A good choice; that’s what I carry, too.

“Can I help you?” one of them growled at me through my driver-side window as the Z-ster idled in front of the gate.

“Jay Fearsson to see Detective Kona Shaw.”

“License?”

I pulled out my wallet, flipped it open to my driver’s license and handed it to him. As an afterthought I took off my sunglasses. Most security guys want to see your eyes.

He studied the picture, looked at me, and handed back my wallet. “They’re expecting you.” He nodded to his partner and a moment later the gate slid open with a low electrical whir. “Everyone’s in the main house.”

I nodded and steered the Z-ster to a spot next to about nine other cars. Four of them were worth more than I make in a year, even a good year. Of the other five, two were police cruisers and two of the others were cheaper models with police tags.

I didn’t like this. Not at all. Aside from Kona, most of these people thought the worst of me. Many of them had nothing but contempt for what they thought I’d become; others pitied me, which might have been worse. A voice in my head screamed at me to leave now, while I had the chance. If not for the way Namid had pinned me with his stare when the phone rang, I would have. I got out of the car.

The driveway, if you could call it that, was an enormous cobblestone courtyard with a small bronze statue and fountain at the center. On the south side of the courtyard, arrayed in a semicircle, stood three buildings: two smaller ones -- guest houses probably -- flanking the main house. All the buildings were built in Spanish Mission style, which was popular among homeowners in Paradise Valley and throughout the Phoenix area. A cobblestone path to the front door of the mansion wound past an elaborate desert garden; hummingbirds darted among an array of glass feeders.

The door opened as I approached the front landing. I expected to see Kona. Instead, two people I didn't know emerged from the house. One was a short, slender man with thinning hair and tortoise shell glasses. He was wearing charcoal suit pants and a white dress shirt. His sleeves were rolled up, his tie loosened. He had dark rings under his eyes and a deep crease in his forehead, as if his face was stuck in a permanent grimace. He struck me as someone in the midst of a really bad day. Still, he managed a smile as he extended a hand to the woman standing beside him.

She was taller, and very attractive. She had long, curly brown hair that she wore pulled back from her face, and she wore dark-rimmed glasses with those small rectangular lenses that college professors tend to like. They were cute on her, though they also made her look way too intelligent for a guy like me. Call it a cop's instinct, but I had a feeling that she was every bit as smart as she appeared.

"Thank you for coming, Billie," the man said. "I trust you'll be kinder to the Senator than you've been recently. At least until we're through this."

"No promises, Mister Wriker," the woman said, smiling at him. "But I hope that you'll convey my condolences to Senator and Missus Deegan."

"I will. I'm sure they'll--" The man spotted me and stopped. "Who the hell are you? And how'd you get in here?"

The woman turned and eyed me with obvious interest.

"I'm Jay Fearsson. I'm here to see Detective Shaw."

The man narrowed his eyes, but then he began to nod. "Right. She said something about that. Forgive me, Mister Fearsson." He walked down the path to where I stood, the woman

following.

“Howard Wriker,” he said, as I shook his hand. “I’m Senator Deegan’s chief of staff and a close friend of the family.” He indicated the woman. “This is Billie Castle.”

“Miss Castle,” I said, shaking her hand as well.

“Are you a police officer, Mister Fearsson?” she asked.

I started to answer, but out of the corner of my eye caught a warning glance from Wriker.

“I’m an investigator,” I said. Before she could ask me more, I faced Wriker again.

“Where can I find Detective Shaw?”

“In the house,” he told me. “I’ll join you in just a moment.”

I nodded once to the woman and hurried to the door. I couldn’t say why, but I felt like I’d come through a shootout without being hit.

Stepping into the house, I saw that it was as impressive on the inside as it had been from the courtyard. The front foyer opened onto a large living room with oak floors that made the wood in my office seem cheap and dull. Opposite the entry was a bank of windows offering views of the mountain and, in the distance, the buildings of downtown Phoenix. My first thought was that this place had to be spectacular at night, not that it was bad now. The room was decorated tastefully with Native American art: pottery from Acoma and Jemez set on tables and shelves, Navajo blankets hanging on the walls, Kachinas in glass cases -- not the cheap dolls made for tourists by the Navajo, but the real things, carved from cottonwood by the Hopi. I knew enough about the Southwestern tribes to understand that the Deegans had one hell of a collection, one that would have been the envy of many museums.

I was still admiring the Kachinas when I heard a footstep behind me. Turning, I saw

Wriker close the door, a weary look on his face.

“That was well done, Mister Fearsson. If you can avoid talking to Billie Castle you should. For your sake and the Senator’s.”

“Why? Who is she?”

Wriker frowned. “You don’t know?”

I shook my head.

“You’ve never heard of ‘Castle’s Village’?”

“No. Should I have?”

“It’s a blog,” Wriker said, making ‘blog’ sound like a dirty word. “A political one -- probably the most popular of its kind in the Southwest. She has correspondents and opinion writers from all over Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Southern California, West Texas.” He shook his head. “Suffice it to say that few of them are fans of the Senator.”

“And yet you allowed her in the house.”

Wriker crossed to a wet bar in the near corner of the room. “You want a drink?”

“Water would be fine, thanks.”

“You don’t mind if I have a Scotch do you?”

“Of course not. I’m sure this has been an awful day.”

“You have no idea,” he said.

“You and the Deegans have my deepest sympathies, sir,” I said. There are only so many ways to tell the family of a murder victim that you’re sorry for them, and over the years I’d used every one. But just because I’d said these words a thousand times that didn’t mean I wasn’t sincere. I’d never been a fan of Randolph Deegan; I’d never voted for him. But I wouldn’t have

wished this tragedy on my worst enemy.

“Thank you.” He plunked ice cubes into a pair of tumblers, filled one from the tap, and poured a good deal of scotch into the other. “To answer your question,” he said, handing me my drink, “Yes, I let her into the house. Her readership is greater than the combined circulation of every newspaper in the state. And a little good-will now might smooth things over for us later in the year.”

I sipped my water. “Well, I know how hard a time this must be for the Deegans and for you. If you can just tell me where I’d find Ko-- Detective Shaw, I’ll be out of your way.”

Wriker nodded and took a long drink of scotch, draining more than half the glass. “Of course,” he said. “She’s in with the Senator and his wife right now, but I’ll tell her you’re here.”

He put down his glass and walked through the front foyer to the other side of the house. Left alone, I crossed to the windows and stared out at the city. For the past year and a half, as I’d followed the Blind Angel case in the papers, poring over every article for details of the sixteen killings -- now seventeen -- that had occurred since I left the force, I had tried to put myself in Kona’s shoes, to feel what she must have been feeling with every new murder. But I hadn’t been able to. Losing my job had devastated me, but it had also released me from this one burden. The killings continued to haunt me, but that crushing feeling of responsibility that I’d felt while still working homicide vanished once I was off the job.

Until now. Standing in Randolph Deegan’s living room, I felt it returning; I could almost feel my shoulders bending with the weight of it. One phone call from Kona and the Blind Angel murders were mine again. It wasn’t anything I wanted, and yet it felt strangely familiar, even comforting. I realize how twisted that sounds. As I said before, once a cop, always a cop.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

I knew that voice almost as well as I knew Kona's. Cole Hibbard: Commander of the PPD's Violent Crimes Bureau, and the man most responsible for forcing me out of the department. Before, when I said that I wouldn't wish the Deegan mess on my worst enemy, I had forgotten about Hibbard. I'd wish a whole load of crap on him.

I turned.

Hibbard stood in the entrance to the living room, looking like he had half a mind to pull out his weapon and shoot me then and there. He was silver-haired, stocky, and pretty fit for a guy in his mid-sixties. There'd been a time when he and my father were close, but then my dad's mind started to slip and Hibbard turned on him, assuming that he was using drugs or drinking. I suppose it's understandable. Unless you're a weremyste, you really can't understand the intensity of the phasings. It's not something we like to talk about. Even those of us who are willing to admit that we're mystes are hesitant to tell the people around us that we're doomed to go insane. That's one of the reasons we use the word “myste” to describe ourselves rather than “weremystes.” No sense conjuring images of werewolves howling at the moon; the reality is too close to that for comfort. Hibbard wouldn't have had any reason to suspect that one of his best friends on the force, a young, seemingly normal guy with a promising career ahead of him, was quietly going nuts right before his eyes.

Hibbard had it in for me from the start, assuming that I was trouble like my old man, and that it was just a matter of time before I screwed up, too. That he was right did nothing to make me hate him less.

“Hi there, Hibbard. Have you missed me?”

“Don’t give me any of your crap, Fearsson. I want to know what you’re doing here.”

“I called him, Commander.” Kona stepped around him into the room, with Wriker on her heels. It was like a big old family reunion; the kind you read about in the tabloids beneath headlines like “Grandmother Goes on Shooting Rampage.”

You couldn’t have found two people who were less alike than Cole Hibbard and Kona Shaw. Aside from the fact that they were both cops, they had next to nothing in common. Kona, whose real name was Deandra, was tall and thin, with skin the color of Kona coffee, which, as it happens, was just about all she drank. Hence the name. She was quite possibly the most beautiful woman I’d ever known, with big dark eyes, the cheek bones of a fashion model, short, tightly curled black hair, and a dazzling smile. She was also gay, in a department that was hard enough on women detectives, much less black, lesbian women detectives. That she had lasted in the department so long was testimony to how good a cop she was. If anyone needed further evidence, she had at least ten commendations to her name.

Kona had been my partner the entire time I was on the force. I can’t say that she taught me everything I know about police work, because my father taught me a good deal before his mind totally quit on him. But if it hadn’t been for Kona, I wouldn’t have been half the cop I was.

“You called him in?” Hibbard said, glowering at her. “Where do you get off making a decision like that without clearing it through me first?”

“Sergeant Arroyo told me to call him,” she said. Hibbard opened his mouth, no doubt to remind her that he outranked Arroyo. But she didn’t give him the chance. “And he was acting on orders from the assistant chief.”

“Latrell? I don’t believe it.”

If it had been me, I would have demanded to know if the bastard was calling me a liar. But that was one of the reasons Kona still had a job on the force and I didn't. She flashed that gorgeous smile of hers, and said, "You're free to call him, Commander. But I promise you it's true."

Hibbard turned his glare back on me. For several seconds he said nothing. Then he shook his head and muttered, "Fine. Keep him the hell away from me."

Before Kona could answer, he stalked out of the room.

"What did you do to piss him off?" Kona asked, turning my way.

"Since when do I have to do anything? You know that Cole doesn't play well with others."

She lifted an eyebrow.

I held up my hands. "I swear, Kona! I said hello, and he acted like I'd been saying stuff about his mother."

Wriker cleared his throat, and both of us looked his way.

"I take it you used to be on the force," he said to me.

"Yes, sir."

"And now you're a private investigator?"

"That's right."

"Would you be willing to work for the Deegans?"

I exchanged glances with Kona. The PPD wouldn't be paying me for whatever work I did to help Kona with the case. They never did. But still, working for two clients at once on the same case was a bit sketchy ethics-wise.

She shrugged. "It doesn't bother me."

"What is it you'd want me to do?" I asked, turning back to Wriker.

"The papers are saying that Claudia was a drug addict, that she had drugs in her system and on her person when she died. We don't believe that."

I shook my head.

"Hear me out," Wriker said. "Either the medical examiner will say that she had drugs in her blood or he won't. But the police say she was carrying. We'd like to know where those drugs came from. If . . . if she was an addict, like the papers and television news say, we'd like to see the dealer who sold her the stuff put in jail."

I glanced at Kona again. She was staring at the floor, her lips pursed, as they often were when she had something on her mind that she knew she couldn't say aloud.

"Arresting drug dealers isn't the job of a PI," I told Wriker. "As to finding out where she bought her stuff . . ." I shrugged. "I'm afraid I don't see much point. Chances are the dealer was small time -- maybe a college kid. I doubt it would do much good to go after him. Or her."

Wriker sighed, sounding exhausted. "You're probably right. Thank you anyway."

I took a breath. I'd never been fond of politicians, but in that moment I felt bad for the guy. Call it a moment of weakness. "I'll find out what I can, Mister Wriker," I said. "No charge. If I find anything of value, you can pay me then."

"Yes, we will. Of course. Thank you, Mister Fearsson." He pulled a business card from his shirt pocket, wrote his cell number on the back, and handed it to me. "Call me when you know something. Please."

"I will."

Kona and I thanked him for his time and left the house.

“No charge?” she said in a low voice, as we walked down the path toward the cars. “That your idea of a business plan?”

“You heard the guy. He was ready to hire me just so he’d feel like he’d done something.”

She winced at the memory, then nodded. “Yeah, I know.”

“I won’t spend much time on it. But we know that our killer seeks out kids who are using. Maybe knowing where she scored her drugs will tell us something.”

Kona looked impressed. “I hadn’t thought of that. You must have been a pretty good cop, and you must have had one very good teacher.”

“I did,” I said, grinning. I waited a beat, then, “My dad taught me a lot.”

“Shut up.”

We both laughed. It was good to see her. Of all the things I’d loved about being a cop, having Kona as a partner was what I missed the most.

After a minute or two she grew serious again. “You ready to go over to the OME?”

OME. Office of the Medical Examiner. I needed to see Claudia Deegan’s body, to confirm that she’d been killed by magic. It was amazing how quickly we could jump from the best part of my old job to the worst.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m ready.”

I started toward the Z-ster, but Kona didn’t move.

“You coming?” I said.

She remained where she was, watching me, a sly smile on her lips. “I’ve got something for you. Drop me at Six-Twenty before you park. We’ll walk from there.”

“What have you got?”

“It’s a surprise.”

I didn’t answer; I just waited.

“Fine then. Claudia Deegan was arrested a couple of weeks ago at a political protest down at the military base in Florence. She put it together apparently; they were demonstrating against some new bomber that her father had sponsored. She was trying to embarrass him, I guess.” She shook her head. “Anyway, there was someone else arrested that day. I think you’ll be interested in who it was.”

Before I could ask her more, she climbed into the Z-ster and pulled the door closed. I had no choice but to get in and drive her to Phoenix Police headquarters.