

Prologue

Looking up, he could see his eyes in the rear view mirror. They flashed with a deep seated fury, pulsed with a vicious hunger. This wouldn't do. At least not yet. He needed to get in the door. To find out what she knew and if it could hurt him. Exposing his preferred state of madness would not give him what he needed tonight.

Sister Fiona LaBeau suspected something and he needed to find out what it was. Damn the woman and her persistence! His grip on the steering wheel tightened until his fingers ached from the pressure. He could feel the blood boiling through his system. He knew he was losing it. Something he usually liked. Craved, actually. When the wild, fanatical urges pulsed through him he was like any addict...experiencing the euphoric state of ecstasy that transported him to another place. When he was alone like tonight he'd let the rush swirl through him and heat his blood. It brought him such pleasure, a feeling of power and domination. Of freedom and fulfillment.

A low growling sound escaped from him as the frustration burned. His personal burden was heavy, but so be it. The so-called civilized world would define him as mad. A predator. A fiend. If anyone, anyone alive that was, saw his true face, they would run. Then the authorities would hunt him down and cage him. The pressure to preserve the beast was intense and too often he had to push away the wild and exciting compulsions before they became more than a whisper in his subconscious.

He resented the need to do this, to wear his mask of respectability, of consideration and competence. But it was the only way to continue to survive. As much as he hated the mask, it was actually an excellent fit after a lifetime of practice and polish. It was the part he'd played in public his whole adult life. It fulfilled other, less intense needs. Like friendship, respect, even admiration. He needed the mask to function in the world. To walk its streets and interact with the people in it.

The only ones who knew the truth were dead. And now this interfering, prying, meddling woman was about to be put to the test. His test. His own personal test. It was completely pass/fail. If she passed, she lived. If she couldn't be persuaded to stop asking questions, she failed. And she died.

Maybe he should drive away. The risk on this could be too high. Something...something was warning him. There was an urgent intuitive feeling to let this play out a little longer. The only thing more powerful than the lust for blood throbbing through him was the need for self-preservation.

Should he leave? No, he decided. The risk of inaction was greater than pushing ahead. She wasn't going to stop on her own. He was determined that one way or the other, or rather one face or the other, was going to finish this tonight.

Using his concentrated will, he suppressed the malevolent persona and allowed his public facade to reassert itself. His eyes cleared and a smile appeared on his handsome face. He winked at the image in the mirror. It was a remarkable transformation, but then he was a remarkable man. The friendly, concerned expression he saw gave him a lift. It was always a relief to be able to alter his appearance so easily. One of his greatest fears was that the psychopath that lurked below the surface wouldn't release the face he needed to move among the unsuspecting masses.

Which was the real face, the real man? He was never sure. Certainly the polished, practiced man he allowed the public to see was the dominant face. It had control most of the time because he had to make a life and make a living among the cultivated people in his community. But he also knew it wasn't his preferred persona. It was when he allowed the beast to come out and feed, to take over and rule, that he felt fully alive and whole and satisfied.

It was desire rewarded, hunger sated, lust fulfilled.

Leaving the car in a stand of trees, he walked the short distance to the small building behind the school, careful to stay on the concrete walkway and out of sight of the other buildings.

Anyone who watched television these days was familiar with the power of forensic evidence. He knew that it was rare to solve a case quickly based a stray hair or a minute piece of fabric, but he wasn't going to take any chances and he certainly wasn't going to leave any proof of his presence here.

Light was pouring out of the windows giving the building a welcoming look. It was late, but the good Sister was obviously still up. She wasn't going to be an easy mark. She'd worked with troubled youth for years. He was quite sure, however, that he'd be her first homicidal psychopath. Snorting at his own observation, he took one more deep breath and knew from experience he was ready to face even the most perceptive adversary. He knocked on the door and it didn't take long before he heard footsteps approaching.

"Well, hello. I didn't hear you drive up." Sister Fiona LaBeau was a small woman with a soft voice and bright, intelligent eyes. Did he see suspicion there as well? Or was it only a reflection of his own misgivings. He needed to get her into the light. His rational, sane side, in control now, knew that her murder would attract unwanted attention. His preference this evening was to talk her away from the path she seemed bent on taking. He stepped over the threshold and into the bright and cheerful room as a stronger, more ferocious voice inside his head reminded him that he'd been hunting and feeding successfully for over eight years. Who could stop him? Not this petite little busy body. There was a slight buzzing in his head but he suppressed it before he turned to look at her.

"I was in the neighborhood and I wanted to talk with you about Carman," he said in a voice he thought admirably calm and reserved.

Her eyes shifted to the driveway before she closed the door.

"All right. Let's go into my office. Have you heard anything?"

"No. No I haven't. I just thought if we could talk awhile, something might come together. I'd like to know who you've contacted."

As she led him through the apartment to her office his eyes traveled casually around the pretty, tidy room. First to be sure they were alone, and secondly to see if there were any obvious clues to her investigation. They were alone. Good.

Then suddenly, he felt his stomach roll as his gaze fell on the books stacked on her desk. Damn. Could it get any worse? It couldn't be a coincidence. His eyes narrowed. So much for waiting it out. She'd put it together if he allowed this to go further. He had no choice now.

"Have you read those?" he asked, his voice still composed despite the dark picture forming in his mind.

"Yes. I intend to call Professor Morningstar sometime this week. I hesitated, not wanting to bring the tragedy all back for her, but I think she can be helpful."

Looking into Sister Fiona's eyes, he could see from the expression on her face that she was putting things together quickly and coming to the conclusion that would seal her fate. Her instincts and perceptions were finely tuned and he knew the mask had slipped when he saw the books on her desk. She was good. Very good. Trained in counseling disturbed juveniles, she'd probably thought she'd seen it all. Well, not quite. She was about to see something that no amount of training could prepare her for. Knowing what he had to do and that hiding wasn't necessary anymore, he let the monster peek around the mask.

Sister Fiona took a step back, horrified, fascinated, but not afraid.

"So," she began calmly. "I can see you know exactly what I'm talking about...what I've managed to uncover and piece together. Let's end it here. Please. Talk to me."

"Yes. End it. It's time," he agreed, although he was sure she meant something completely different than what he had in mind for her. Did she think he'd drop to his knees to repent and beg for her help? Even though she had vast experience with deviate behavior, he was miles beyond her usual dose of whining teens and sniveling delinquents.

His mind went back eight years. To his first human kill. Britt Morningstar thought she could help him too. And since then? Magnificent years of hunting and feeding. Of killing and hiding.

“I confess, Sister. I took them. I have them. All of them and more. They’re mine.” His voice had an edge of self satisfaction and he couldn’t help smiling. So this was why Catholics liked the confessional. It was cleansing, exhilarating even, to confess. To make public what was in the soul.

“How many?” she whispered, more pain than fear in her eyes.

“Counting you?” he asked as his hand went swiftly to the knife in the sheath at his side...and the mask dropped completely.

Sister Fiona’s eyes flashed the realization that the valley of death was coming out of the shadows and she grasped the rosary in her pocket. In the time it took for her to recognize he wasn’t going to be saved or convinced to seek help, he drew the knife and slashed it across her throat. She was dying before she slid to the floor, her blood pouring out of her jugular and onto the colorful rug.

As he watched her bleed, all sanity slid off his face. What a magnificent kill! He searched inside himself for guilt or remorse. She was a woman of the church after all. A good, productive woman who in the end only wanted to help him.

No. There was nothing like regret there. No shame, no repentance, no contrition. That probably meant no redemption. Didn’t matter. After the first kill he was damned anyway. Truth be told, he felt damned from birth.

Pleasure pumped through him and laughter erupted from his chest where his heart was beating wildly. Another potential problem completely corked! He was damned alright. Damned smart! Still laughing, still high from the kill, he went to work on the body.

Chapter One

Dr. Jette Morningstar looked at the lecture hall and knew from experience that this part of the lesson would captivate her students. She wasn't sure what it said about society that there was an endless fascination with cultural and criminal depravity, but it was definitely a factor in the popularity of her course in Forensic Psychology.

The classroom was packed. Jette was an award winning professor, a fascinating lecturer and a local celebrity. The fact that she was stunning, packaged in a drop-dead body and her voice had the timbre of an ancient Native American singer was only icing on the cake. The students were both mesmerized by her and interested in her subject. She found it fascinating, so they did too.

"Most people are familiar with the terms sociopath and psychopath because of their common use in media reports and in television and movie scripts, but the general population probably doesn't have a clear idea of their clinical definitions," she began, working her remote so that the next slide came on to the screen.

"Is there a difference between a Sociopath and a Psychopath? All the cop shows seem to use the terms interchangeably," asked a student near the back of the room, encouraged to interact by the informal atmosphere in Jette's course.

"For the purposes of this class and for any future exam, let me give you the common consensus in the psychiatric community," responded Jette putting down her power point controls to settle in for a nice conversation with her students.

"Did you say 'future exam'?" grinned one of her brightest, her pen poised and ready.

When Jette nodded there was a flurry of writing. Stimulus-response, she thought. One of the fundamental tenets of her discipline. Mention exam and everyone starts writing.

"The genesis of the classic behaviors of a sociopath occur in childhood," she explained, crossing her arms and walking around her podium to the front of the room. "In other words, poor parenting, inappropriate role models, perhaps a lack of early connectors create a fertile environment for the creation of a sociopath. Psychopaths are a rarer breed. For lack of a better definition, because these people almost defy our understanding of humanity, true psychopaths are 'born that way.' Where a sociopath may have his roots in early childhood development, psychopaths seem to evolve with a total lack of a civilized standard of conduct. They have a lust for power and control that seems innate. The distinction is a fine one, so I can understand why writers of fiction use one or the other or both to describe the same behaviors. However, your exam responses aren't works of fiction..."

"Joe's are!" said a laughing student.

"Imaginative responses and pure fiction are not exactly the same thing," responded Jette.

"Are they insane?" asked another student.

"Most are not. They know right from wrong and they actively choose wrong. They're cruel and pitiless, but not insane."

"Are they criminals?" asked a social science major.

"Good question. Many criminals are either sociopaths or psychopaths, but not necessarily the other way around. At least many are not hunted as criminals nor convicted of any crime. As a matter of fact, historically, warlike cultures gave virtue to psychopathic rage and fearlessness and saw them rise to hero status. Some legendary warriors may have had psychopathic tendencies and were fed by the sights, sounds and smells of battle. Today, there are sociopaths who channel their behavior into marginally acceptable pursuits and live invisibly on the edges of society. But on the whole, if their true nature is uncovered, most contemporary societies would consider their behavior as criminal and would try to stop them through incarceration."

"I'll bet the CIA hires these people for their assassin squad," said an earnest student.

“And I’ll bet you saw *Kill or Be Killed*,” replied Jette referring to that weekend’s blockbuster. The student nodded and the class moved into a mass digression on CIA recruitment practices. To get them back on topic, Jette asked a question.

“Who can tell me some of the behavioral characteristics of a psychopath?”

Hands flew in the air. Obviously they were keeping up with the reading, she thought. A quiet young man in the front row appeared dazzled for a moment when she called on him but grinned proudly when she nodded her approval at his clear, well thought out response. Her academic heart sang when another student elaborated on his answer and then another until voices rippled through the hall, engaging in discussion, several in debate and a few in flirtation.

“So let’s summarize this list. Psychopaths have a powerful need for stimulation and control. They can be cruel and homicidal because no rules of civilized behavior dictate their actions. They are manipulative, cunning, without empathy or remorse.”

“If they know right from wrong, don’t they feel guilt?” asked a student.

“No, they don’t. They haven’t got an active conscience. There’s nothing there to engage the feeling of shame or regret. No scruples, no ethics. No moral values. In addition, their sense of entitlement is too great. If any of you were to, say, plagiarize large portions of your next case study directly from an internet site, you may enjoy the feeling of success or completion, but there would be a psychological price to pay. There would be guilt.”

“Yeah, and if they’re caught, there would be expulsion. That would make someone feel very sorry,” commented a student hoping for some participation points.

“Perhaps, but that represents negative consequences. If a psychopath is ever sorry, it would be because he got caught. He’d never regret the original behavior. Psychopaths work very hard at not getting caught mainly because they’re smart enough to understand the negative consequences.”

“How many are caught?”

“Thousands.” Because her physiological profiles helped investigations across the country, she had personal knowledge of several and shared the examples she could.

“How many aren’t caught?”

“Same answer...thousands,” responded Jette.

“But how can they not get caught?”

“Several reasons,” explained Jette. “Most importantly, they’re pathological liars. This means that they’re very, very good at it.”

“Yeah. Just like my ex,” said a coed in a stage whisper.

“I would say your ex is more likely a garden variety of liar. I suspect he is your ex because he gave himself away,” nodded Jette.

“Yeah. He couldn’t look me in the eye and her underwear was stuffed in his book bag,” snorted the student.

“The former is a behavioral characteristic of someone who feels guilt and therefore we can deduce that he’s not a psychopath. The underwear would be more like following the clues. A much less intuitive process,” reinforced Jette.

“Duh. More like moronic,” said another young woman.

“That’s Chapter 6,” grinned her friend.

“Well, eating a double hot fudge gives me a major case of the guilts,” said another.

“That would probably mean you aren’t a psychopath either,” smiled Jette.

“I don’t know about that...the shoe seems to fit a few days a month,” said her male companion sitting in the seat next to her, earning him a swat from each of the four women surrounding him.

“I guess that’s penance enough for that remark, Howard,” said Jette laughing. “Any other questions?”

“What about your intuition. Wouldn’t you pick up on the evil that lurks beneath the surface?” asked an earnest student who hoped to be a profiler herself someday.

“No. Your intuition is based on a subliminal assessment of what you see and feel...what you hear and experience. It nudges you into a conclusion. But your instincts can't help you when confronting a psychopath. They can charm and seduce and aren't recognizable as deviant in any way when wearing their mask of deception. Their grandiose sense of themselves can be mitigated by an ingratiating manner. This superficial outer self may slip of course, giving the first clue to the true nature inside...their repressed deep seated rage, their need to feed. Because they have no conscience, they will not wear any of their malevolence or evil, as you call it, in recognizable expressions or body language. Or in any language for that matter. Their feigned, well-practiced emotions of interest, warmth, and socially acceptable behavior will cover their true and preferred nature. On the other hand, their need for stimulation is powerful and they can't hide all the time. These are very dangerous people.”

“Are you saying they can't control their behaviors?” Students were fascinated by both the topic and the possibilities. It was better than a horror movie, more scary than a roller coaster to consider the likelihood that there may be thousands of real life monsters among them.

“Quite the contrary. They have remarkable control over their behaviors. They choose to behave in a cruel, brutal fashion because they like it. Prefer it. The highly intelligent psychopath, and nothing is more dangerous, can live in society quite well. They know how to act. In other words a psychopath may not be overtly anti-social or dysfunctional.”

“Can they fool their family?”

“Of course,” nodded Jette. “They can be very, very cunning and clever but sometimes they're caught in a lie or someone observes their aberrant behavior. For the true psychopath, this doesn't make them stop. It can make them more cautious and can fan all the latent cleverness into a full flame of deceit.”

“Wouldn't you know they were bad?”

“Many of them, yes. This is due to the fact that many sociopaths and psychopaths are in trouble as juveniles, before they have the maturity to control their urges. They live on the fringes of society, are chronically in trouble. But with a true psychopath, no. Not necessarily. Many are born in privilege or have been given a break along the way and function at a high level of productivity in business, medicine, government, politics, even law enforcement.”

“How about education. I know a professor who may fit the definition,” said a student, poking the young man beside him.

“She wasn't that way before you took her class,” came the response, then to redeem himself in his professor's eyes, he asked a question. “Can they be cured?”

“No.”

Just then, the door to her classroom opened. No one turned right away; people were always coming in and out of the back of the room. Some days there were two or three people from the administration, the media or the Tucson police department standing in the back.

From her vantage point, Jette could see clearly. She didn't skip a beat, but felt a slight stirring of interest. As profound and as important as abnormal psychology was in the study of forensic psychology, it was pretty dull and dusty compared to what just walked in the door.

She put her responses on autopilot as she took in the man who entered. Here was someone she hadn't seen before. She definitely would have remembered. There was only one word to describe him. Beautiful. He was movie star handsome with long, wavy dark brown hair. Tall, powerfully built, wearing jeans and a NYPD jacket over a black T-shirt.

Was he a member of the New York Police Department or did he pick up the jacket when he visited New York? He stood like a cop. Commanding, alert, aware. And when he crossed his arms, she saw a glimmer of a New York attitude. She'd worked with people from the NYPD twice before and thought he might be bringing her a case. She felt a rush flow through her. While she loved her job at the University, it was her work in criminal profiling that brought her the greatest satisfaction and challenge.

She glanced up at the clock. Time to wrap this up. Suddenly, she felt a tremor of energy ripple through the room. Someone must have turned to see who was in the back and it started a chain reaction of elbow jabs and low whispers. Eyes started to surreptitiously turn away from her to the man standing almost motionless in the back of the room.

He seemed to be completely unaware of anything around him and appeared to be staring in her direction. He wore sunglasses, which definitely added to his cool, but it made it impossible for her to see his eyes. It looked like he had at least three day's growth of beard and a diamond stud flashed in his ear lobe when he turned his head slightly to check the clock himself. Stud. Yes, that was a good word to describe him.

Within a few seconds, the glances were no longer subtle and Jette found she had completely lost her audience. Definitely time to wrap this up, she thought.

"Prepare your final one page reaction paper to the assigned readings," she said to no one in particular. Her class was already gone...mentally. She'd have to post the homework on their class website to be sure they got it. "Have a great weekend and if you're going to pre-Finals Blow Out, drink responsibly."

There was a wave of zipping book bags, slapping folders and stomping feet. There was also a full compliment of whispers, giggles and throat clearing. As her students filed out, each one spared a glance at the incredibly compelling stranger. Some were covert, some were not. A number of the co-eds suddenly found they just had to exchange a few words with their friends right in front of the door where he stood.

Jette watched with humor as a bottleneck started to form on the stairway out. Turning away, she began to bring together her materials. By the time she flipped off the equipment and placed all the collected assignments into her briefcase, the man had snaked his way through the gaggle of slow moving students and was walking toward her.

He was even more impressive up close. He had a self-assured way of walking that spoke of success and confidence. The fact that he didn't seem to notice how the stragglers, mostly female, were fairly drooling was rather endearing. Either he really didn't notice, or he didn't care. Most of the Big Men On Campus would play to their adoring audience. Not this man. He was coming toward her with purpose, and since he walked like a cop, she assumed it was business.

She smiled up at him. "May I help you?"

"I'm looking for a Professor Morningstar. According to the course schedule he should be teaching this class."

Ah, she thought. The voice, the attitude, the accent. Pure New York. When he took off his sunglasses, she felt a jolt of surprise. She'd expected he'd have dark eyes to go with his dark coloring, but they were a light, piercing green. And right now they were filled with penetrating authority. She had no doubt that he was a very, very effective police officer. The steady, intense gaze had her ready to confess and she hadn't done anything wrong.

There was also something just below the surface, something like anger, but not exactly. Something that could be dangerous she was sure, but she didn't feel endangered. What she did feel was very, very curious.

"And what's the nature of your business?"

"I'll take that up with Dr. Morningstar. Now where can I find him?"

Marc Lexington was exhausted and could feel his usually short fuse becoming microscopic under the gaze of this sweet young teaching assistant or whatever. She looked fresh and enthusiastic. The purple suit she wore went well with her dusky skin and he definitely liked its short skirt. She had very long black hair tied back with a scarf and her eyes were the color of dark chocolate, his favorite.

He'd never in his life been too exhausted to appreciate beauty, even in this unlikely place. Going back to all of his college courses, he knew he never had a looker like this in the front of the room. He wasn't sure what her position was but if he'd seen her walk by back when he was a

randy freshman, he'd have followed her into medieval, medical microbiology presented in Latin, if that's where she was headed.

He hadn't paid much attention to what she'd been presenting, but he noticed the room was packed and that the students actually seemed engaged by her material. Or maybe they were simply engaged by her. She was very petite and even more gorgeous up close. He felt a little like a mountain man beside her. Shit. He shook himself. This barren desert country was getting to him. He had no idea what a mountain man would feel like; he'd never been on a mountain. He was all New York City, born, bred and educated. How did the people here deal with all this silence, all this space. All that blue sky? Gave him the creeps.

He used his cop's eyes to covertly assess the fingers of her left hand. No rings. Maybe she'd like to go out for lunch after his conference with Morningstar. Then he remembered why he was there and threw a net over his lust.

Exercising some discipline, he wrestled his thoughts back on the business at hand. Not getting much sleep the last few days made him edgy and impatient.

"Well?" The tone in combination with the badass attitude usually equaled answers...fast, willing and eager. This woman seemed cool, composed and completely unruffled. It must be something in the culture. All that space on the horizon; all that space between her ears. Maybe he'd throw her a clue. "According to the class schedule on the university website, Morningstar is supposed to be conducting a class in this room."

He looked down into the amused eyes. Her lips were curled up in a smile...a smile that looked like it had a secret. It annoyed him. What the hell was so funny?

"Are you his teaching assistant or something, cupcake? Can you take me to him...or at least point in his direction?" he prompted with a fair share of sarcasm.

"Okay," said the sweet cupcake as she snapped her briefcase shut. "I can play this one of two ways. I can be completely insulted and cleverly put you in your place, then stalk out of here feeling righteous. Or I can take you to Dr. Morningstar's office. I'm far too curious to play out the former, so if you'll follow me." She started up the stairs, then turned and looked him up and down. "Sweet Cheeks."

He stared at the line of her pert little butt as she started up the side stairs of the lecture hall. Sweet cheeks. Never in his life had any one ever called him that. To his face, anyway. And rarely did he get that kind of sugar coated, pissy tone of voice. His size, reputation and rank usually got him respect, fear, and cooperation. Intrigued in spite of himself, he followed her.

They turned down a corridor and a number of people greeted her with a friendly good morning. She rewarded them all with a responsive smile. Dazzling when she held it.

God, she had a beautiful mouth. Her lips were full and she wore a dark red shade of lipstick. Could make a woman look like a two bit whore, he thought, but because of her coloring, it just made her look exotic. How did all those male students and probably more than a few of the female, keep their mind on what she was saying?

Several of the people looked at him then back at her when they passed. Good, he thought. Hopefully he'd ruin her perky little reputation.

Jette was thinking the great looking man in the NYPD jacket would do nothing but enhance her reputation. The work she did with police departments always seemed to create more interest in her courses and consequently in what she chose to teach. The university grapevine would have his presence cataloged and communicated by noon. Speculation would be circulated during lunch and conjecture and conclusions on his purpose and their relationship would be party conversation for the weekend. She loved it. Let the grapevine rip.

Turning down a short corridor, she came to a halt in front of a solid oak door. It was covered with quotes from famous philosophers and littered with notes for her from students, colleagues, reporters and the departmental administrative assistant, Kathy. Jette flipped them all off the door and opened it. The big man followed her in.

Marc looked around the neat, warmly decorated office. Much of the décor looked Native American. Of course. Morningstar. Must be an Indian. He loved the ethnic diversity of New York. Actually spoke several languages, badly. Puerto Ricans, Chinese, Arabs, the Indians from India. But he didn't know any Native Americans. Probably because the Europeans stole Manhattan from them for some beads when they landed, he thought wryly.

A picture of his own office back in New York flashed through his mind's slide show. Dark, cluttered, scarred, his only décor a dead plant on top of his rusty battered file cabinet. Of course his building was probably a century older than this one and the dust in the corners was at least that old. And he knew for sure the creatures that inhabited the walls in his building could consume whole chunks of that big attractive oak desk sitting over by the window.

He stepped further into the office. Lots of natural light here, a nice view of the campus. He almost shuddered. More fucking blue sky. His window at the New York cop shop had about 50 years of grime on it and if he could see out of it there would be a lovely view of the brick wall next door. God, he missed it.

"Please sit down, Sweet Cheeks," said the woman in a pleasant tone.

"The name is Lexington. Detective Lexington, NYPD." His eyes narrowed. Maybe his impatient, irritated, on the edge look would work.

"May I see some identification? You can buy one of those nifty jackets in the gift shop at LaGuardia."

Obviously the look didn't work out here, he thought. Short circuited by the fresh air, no doubt. He almost snarled when he reached into his inside pocket for his credentials.

Taking the official looking identification from him, Jette looked carefully at the picture, the name, the address and the badge number, deliberately taking her time and ignoring the waves of impatience coming off him. It was a little perverse, but she decided he deserved it.

"Well, Marcus, it appears you are who you say you are."

"It's Marc," he said automatically, then snatched the identification from her. This was usually the point at which people would bow to the badge, show some nervousness, cower before his penetrating gaze, maybe even give him grief, but he couldn't remember the last time anyone so casually called him by his first name. Detective, officer, sir or fascist rat bastard pig maybe, but rarely Marcus.

Damn, why was she just standing there? Smiling like a goddamn cat and treating him like a freshman. If she didn't go fetch the professor soon, he was going to snap. He glowered at her. The same one he reserved for scattering a street gang working a group of tourists.

"Right," she said as she put her briefcase on the top of the gleaming desk. The look didn't work. She nonchalantly went through the messages and placed them in a neat stack next to the phone.

"Look, cupcake, if you'd just tell me when Dr. Morningstar will be here, I'd appreciate it." He was really irritated now and couldn't keep it from his tone.

"You're a detective with the NYPD?" asked Jette calmly as she went behind her desk.

"You read the ID."

"You seem fairly young to have reached that rank. It must mean you're good at what you do."

"I am." His eyes were blazing. Hers were cool. "Now..."

She interrupted him, some of the humor fading from her eyes. "Then I'd suggest you look around and use your investigatory skills, Detective...or my respect for the NYPD will be severely compromised."

Picking up the phone she pressed a button. Marc could hear a female voice at the other end.

"Hey Jette. How about some tea to go with that sweet roll?"

"Cupcakes. Sweet rolls. Is there a full moon or something?" asked Jette a reluctant smile pulling at her lips.

"What?"

“Never mind. Yes please. Bring me some tea, but I think you should bring in a mug of coffee for my guest. I’d say he probably likes it strong and black.”

Marc actually liked his coffee just that way. Still glaring at her, he was about to lose his grip on his temper when something started clicking in his brain. She was acting like this was her office. Looking around, his quick, observant eyes started to take in the details. Distinctly feminine colors. He sniffed. Female odors. Yup, there was potpourri in a little basket on the windowsill. Damn.

His mind shifted into a different gear. She’d been standing in front of the class, teaching, for God’s sake. And now she was standing inside Dr. Morningstar’s office looking right at home. He was tired, sure, but that was no excuse for totally missing this train. And he let it get completely out of the station. It was just that she didn’t look like his mental picture of a crusty old professor. He readjusted his thinking and looked at her for confirmation. The day was dawning. Where did they make professors who looked like this? Smelled like this? Maybe it was a thing in the Southwest. Taking a deep breath of the spicy air, he shrugged and slid his hands in his pockets.

“Dr. Morningstar?”

She nodded, smiling at his discomfort.

“You don’t look like a crusty old professor,” he said out loud, frowning.

“And you don’t look like a witless idiot.”

His scowl deepened. He was beginning to feel like one and he didn’t like it.

She met his flashing green eyes unflinchingly. Apparently impressed, but not intimidated. “You can continue to use your ‘on the brink of madness’ glare to try and terrorize me into submission. However, I’ll inform you that I have a degree in Psychology, Abnormal Psychology to be exact. I only find that look interesting.”

His irritation faded as he felt his world shift. His glare lost some the wattage and his brows lifted. He decided to change tactics.

“How to get out of this one with some dignity,” he said with a little ironic smile. It seemed the perfect antidote to any residual annoyance she was feeling.

“No chance there.”

She shook her head and pursed her lips. He wondered if she knew how adorable that was, if you were allowed to describe any part of an obviously successful professor and published scholar as adorable. Maybe he’d keep that description to himself. He might be slow today, but he hadn’t lost all of his good sense.

“You could go straight to groveling and begging for forgiveness,” she said, visibly relaxing and crossing her arms.

“Is that the technique your students use?”

“All the time.”

“Does it work?”

“All the time.”

“Okay. I give up,” He shifted the power from his eyes to the smile as it went from a tight curve to an open grin. It transformed his face and the charisma that pulsed from him caught the woman inside the professor in its magnetic pull. “My chief is a woman and she’d have kicked my ass down Broadway if I would have assumed a New York City Chief of Police was a guy.”

Jette simply nodded her approval.

“I guess I shouldn’t have stereotyped.” He kept the smile on, seeing that it was working better than the bad attitude.

“This is true. How would you like it if I looked at your long hair, that cute little stud in your ear, that radical jacket, your buffed up body and tight butt and assumed you were a brainless, male bimbo trolling for college co-eds?” She raised her eyebrow and let her gaze travel all the way up and down his body like she was taking inventory of the contents of a refrigerator.

The incredulous look he gave her made her laugh out loud.

“It appears no one must talk to you this way back in your city.”

No one did, no one ever had. He was considered the baddest of the New York bad squad. He doubted if anyone even talked like this behind his back. After the initial shock passed, he relaxed and thought he liked her laugh, too. It lingered in his brain like an echo and he didn't want to say anything until it faded completely. Hey, and there was a bonus. She must like his butt, he thought. She did mention his butt. Nice. He relaxed some more, found his killer smile, put it on and looked around.

Kathy, the departmental administrative assistant, came bursting in the room with a tray. “Who's a brainless male bimbo? Is he?” she pointed at Marc, “or did the quarterback cut class again.” She handed Jette her usual mug of herbal tea and was beaming with pleasure as she quite ceremoniously handed a mug of coffee to Marc. She winked at Jette as she worked her way back out the door. “If it's this one, be sure to tell him it was me who ran the ad for a brainless male bimbo.”

The door snapped shut and the air Kathy churned up settled. Marc shook his head and looked over at the professor who seemed to take her administrative assistant's chatter for granted.

“It must be all this sky and fresh air,” Marc mumbled as he took a sip of coffee. Good. And welcome.

“Pardon?” asked Jette as she indicated a chair and sat down in hers.

“All this flat land, the endless horizon. It must make people mushy,” Marc gratefully sat and sipped more of his coffee.

“I take it you're a city boy and our wide open spaces make you a bit edgy.”

“Yeah,” said Marc looking out the window again. “Where do you hide? It makes you feel so...exposed or something. It's very disturbing to someone used to living in deep shadows.”

Jette gave him a speculative look, as though she found what he said professionally interesting. That made him even edgier.

“That would be a subject I'd love to explore, however, I have a meeting in a few minutes. Can I assume you're here in an official capacity?” asked Jette.

He was glad to move things into a more professional arena. Her intense scrutiny was getting to him. It wasn't lost on him that she was a psychologist, a breed of professional that he'd avoided his whole life. People who were experts in behaviors, impulses, motivations, and deep seated psychosis made him itchy.

“Yes and no. I'm not here representing NYPD. I'm here on my own, investigating a homicide. You can call my chief in New York. She gave me tacit approval to pursue this case even though I'm officially on vacation.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a card. Jette took it and set aside.

“I'd like to hear what you have to say first. Then I'll call if I feel it's important.”

Marc nodded and went on. “Excellent coffee by the way. I appreciate the hit of caffeine.”

“You're welcome,” Jette said, relaxing back in her chair and sipping her tea.

“Did you know Sister Fiona LaBeau?” He liked to ask questions abruptly without preamble. Made for more honest, spontaneous responses.

She gave him an appraising look. “Asking questions abruptly so you can get a more truthful response, Detective?”

He raised his eyebrows over his green eyes. There was a flash of fire indicating he was getting annoyed again.

“Quit looking at me like I'm a fucking test subject. I asked you a simple question, Dr. Morningstar. If you don't want to answer it, say so.”

“Hmm.” Jette tapped the side of her mug. “An overly hostile response. Confrontational. Some defensiveness. Possible latent aggression. Usually means a highly developed desire to be in control. Now is it a cop thing or a man thing? I wonder.”

“Neither. It's a fucking New York thing,” he growled, trying not to be amused. “If you've been there you know we're all like this. And our aggression is never latent. It's right out there and

over the top. If it weren't, nothing would ever get done, we'd never be able to finish a sentence, cockroaches and rats would take over the city, we'd be slaves to the whims of snooty wait staff, no one would ever get a taxi, commerce would be at a stand still, traffic would never move, I'd be caught in a 5th Avenue jam right now and we wouldn't be having this fucking conversation."

Her eyes went wide. Was there admiration in them? He thought so.

Marc read Jette correctly. She was impressed and thought he was quick, intelligent and multifaceted. She looked at him clinically for a moment. There was more to him than was immediately apparent. He was educated, but there was an urban tough guy beneath the surface and that was his more natural state. He'd be an interesting man to analyze professionally. All those different faces, all that intensity blended with layers of appealing charm. She stopped herself and turned off her tendency to study, evaluate and examine. Sometimes it took all the fun out of getting to know someone.

"You're right...not latent at all," she agreed.

He just glared. She just stared.

"Well? Did you know Sr. Fiona?" he demanded, ending the little eye duel.

Jette frowned in concentration. Time to set aside her interest and give his question serious thought. The name sounded familiar. She could tell it was important to him and wanted to be as helpful as she could, but she simply had no recollection of a woman by that name in her wide circle of acquaintances, colleagues and friends.

"I'm sorry, Detective. While the name sounds vaguely familiar, I don't know her personally. I'm sure of it."

Marc pulled a picture out of his pocket and handed it to her. It was of a smiling, strong faced woman with an absolutely beautiful young boy. "This picture is an old one, but she didn't change much over the years. Maybe you're better with faces."

Jette studied the picture. Something moved in her brain, but not personal recognition. She didn't know this woman. Her eyes slid to the boy. He looked like he was about ten, maybe a bit younger. Then she looked up. Same green eyes. Same ridiculously long black lashes. His son? No. The picture was old and the detective was too young for this to be a son.

"I've never met her, although something about her name seems familiar. Is the boy you?"

Marc took the picture, looked at it again, then put it back in his pocket. In that one unguarded moment, Jette saw a deep commitment and a profound sadness. When he looked up, the fleeting emotion was completely gone and the bad boy was in control. Interesting. She wondered if he even knew the depth of his feelings and the fact that it showed if one looked very closely and very quickly.

"Yes." His smile had a melancholy edge. It touched her and she resolved to help him in any way she could. "Me as a kid. Many years ago. A lifetime ago."

Suddenly a light went on. Sister Fiona LaBeau. Jette's face registered recognition, then reflected her sympathy. "Of course. I remember now. Last week. In Liberty. I'm so sorry. Is this about her murder? Is there a New York connection?"

Sr. Fiona had briefly made national headlines when she was found murdered in her apartment. Few details were released to the public, but Jette remembered the shock on the faces of the people who knew her when they were being interviewed for local news reports.

"No. At least I don't think so." Marc had to swallow hard to get past the lump in his own throat. "This is personal. She saved my life and now I'm going to find her killer." And kill him, he thought. But this professor didn't need to know that.

"How can I help you?" Her meeting was forgotten for the moment.

"I don't know, but she apparently was an admirer of yours. Two of your books were on her desk. Inside one of them was a 'to do' list with your name at the top and this card." He handed her one of her business cards. "I see you use J.C. Morningstar on your books and on your card."

"Which is why you assumed I was a frosted confection when you came into my classroom and not the published author?" she asked taking the card. Her card.

“You’re not exactly what I was expecting.”

“That’s your story?”

“If asked under oath.”

Jette frowned and turned her card over. Nothing on the back. She often wrote down her office hours when giving them to a student or a parent. “She never called me, I’m sure of it. I’d have remembered. I have no idea why my name was on her list or why she had my card. I give out several of them a week.”

“It was worth a shot.” He tried to keep the disappointment from his voice, but Jette heard it and her heart bled a little for the boy in the picture.

“I remember the news reports on Sr. Fiona. I understand her body was sent back to the mother house somewhere near Paris.”

“That’s right. I just got back from there.”

“You were in France?” Jette shivered involuntarily, looking deeply into his eyes. She was both shocked and very, very touched. It strengthened her resolve to work with him and help him if she could.

“Yes. Yesterday. I flew from there to Tucson and have just come from her apartment.”

“Good God, no wonder you were a bit slow. You must be terribly jet lagged.”

“This coffee helps.”

“Have you checked in with Sheriff Todd here?”

“No, not yet. I thought I’d come directly to the university.”

“Whom are you working with in Liberty?”

“Actually, I didn’t check in with anyone there either.”

“Then how did you get Sr. Fiona’s ‘to do’ list and my card?” she asked. “It seems like it should be evidence. And how did you know my books were on her desk? There’s still a police seal on her door, I’m sure.”

“Well, if I told you, that would make you an accomplice.” He put the empty mug down on her desk. “Let’s just say I visited her apartment, saw your books and found the list and card tucked in one of them. Do you have any idea why she’d want to talk with you?”

“No, I don’t. Maybe if I knew more about her. Knew more about her case. Do you know what I do, Detective...when I’m not teaching?”

“Not really. I didn’t take the time to read or review your books, but since the titles were *The Criminal Mind* and *Crime Scene Analysis and Profiling*, I’m assuming you’re some kind of forensic psychologist.”

“I am. Have you ever worked with one?”

“No. Frankly, I consider it a soft kind of Ouija Board witchcraft. I prefer following the clues.”

Instead of taking offense, Jette laughed at his direct approach. She liked that. She liked him. “Well, when it comes right down to it, I guess I’ll take Ouija Board witchcraft over cupcake. It takes more skill and education, although neither is too attractive.”

“Hey, do me a favor and catch some amnesia about the cupcake bit too. If my chief gets wind of it, she’ll bust me to traffic.”

“So, I have something on you in case I need to get rough.”

Marc looked over her desk and could feel the smile move from the automatic response he had for a beautiful woman to a genuine reflection of what he was feeling. He may not think much of her work in profiling, but he was beginning to think a whole lot of her. So she had something on him in case she needed to get rough, did she? Somehow the picture of her getting rough didn’t jive with the sissy color of her suit and the little basket of potpourri.

Before he could respond, there was an authoritative knock on the door. Jette looked up as a handsome man in a conservative suit stuck his head in without waiting for a response.

“Hey Jette, are you going over to the meeting?” His voice trailed off when he spotted Marc. “Sorry. I didn’t know you were in a conference.”

Jette looked up at the man with a warm smile of welcome. "That's all right Scott. Dr. Scott West, this is Detective Marcus Lexington of the New York City Police Department. Detective, Scott is a forensic pathologist working out of the Tucson Medical Examiner's office. He teaches a course here at the medical school. He may be able to help you," suggested Jette.

"You doing some work for the NYPD?" Scott's face was open and interested as he glanced over at Marc.

When Marc nodded his consent, Jette explained. "Detective Lexington is not representing the NYPD, Scott. He's here to investigate a murder in a private capacity."

"Oh? Someone locally?"

"Liberty. Sr. Fiona LaBeau," said Marc looking up at the doctor.

"Oh yeah. What a shame." Scott's face registered sympathy, then a clinical detachment.

It occurred to Marc that the sympathy seemed fleeting and superficial, but he reserved his judgment. He knew that professional pathologists needed objectivity and the really good ones kept their natural empathy in check. "From what I hear Detective, they have few clues. Our office is handling the forensic evidence. We released her body late last week. God, what a mess. Are you working as a consultant?"

"Detective Lexington knew her personally, Scott," said Jette softly.

"Oh, hell. I'm sorry. She was a wonderful woman," responded Scott kindly. This time the sympathy seemed more genuine.

"You knew her?" asked Marc, suddenly more interested in the man.

"Yes. She is...was...on the hospital board of trustees. When I was appointed as the physician representative, she was on our subcommittee for the oversight on pathology so we got to work together on occasion. I remember she liked the intrigue of putting together clues to solve a medical mystery. She got quite involved in some of the cases. Like one of those civilian sleuths you see on television. A very quick mind. Tough, but with incredible compassion. I liked her very much."

Marc nodded switching off the friend and turning on the cop. "That describes her perfectly. When did you see her last?"

"At the quarterly board meeting. That would have been in January, I believe. We talked a few times since then on the phone."

"Anything in particular you're working on out of your office that would have caught her interest or put her on the trail of a killer?"

"Very interesting question, Detective. No. All of the cases we've been working on over the last few years have come to closure. We have no open, suspicious, or unexplained deaths. Violent death and murder is still relatively uncommon around here." His eyes slid to Jette and something passed between them that Marc thought might relate to some personal history.

"Was there anything different in her demeanor when you saw her in January?"

"No. Nothing...that I can recall."

"What were the phone calls about?"

"Fund raising mostly. That takes up a fair amount of the board's time these days."

"Can you remember any details of the conversation that would indicate she was interested in something other than business as usual?"

"No. Not really. Nothing comes to mind."

"Did you talk with her anytime in the last few weeks, particularly in the days before her murder?"

"I don't think so. No."

"You don't think so. You don't sound too sure."

"This is beginning to feel like an interrogation," frowned Scott.

Marc could see the questioning was making Dr. Scott West itchy, but that wasn't unusual. Innocent or guilty, most people didn't like the third degree. He glanced over at the professor. She didn't seem inclined to interrupt. Interesting. Most people would come to the defense of a friend

or lover. He decided to put this man on a list of people to contact and question more thoroughly later...when he was sharper and could choose the time and place.

“Sorry,” said Marc, although he didn’t feel at all remorseful and his voice plainly communicated the fact. “It’s the best way to get to the truth.”

“Are you working with the local authorities?”

“No. Not yet.”

“Then I think I’ll change the subject,” said Scott, clearly not appreciating the questioning of the man.

“Your call,” shrugged Marc wishing he had some jurisdiction.

“Did I ever meet her?” Jette asked Scott, clearly taking the opportunity to intercede before things heated up.

“I’m not sure. She might have been at the benefit dance I took you to last December, but I don’t remember any specific introduction. Why?”

“Just curious.”

Marc appreciated her discretion. He noticed she didn’t share the information relating to the list and the business card. She had to assume he crossed the police line to get into Sr. Fiona’s apartment, a technically illegal act.

“Who has the case?” she asked.

“Chuck Markle is working it,” Scott said.

“Has he sent over everything from the crime scene?”

“Yes. He usually gets things wrapped up pretty quickly.”

Marc noticed that Scott appeared eager to answer the professor’s questions. He leaned back and decided not to take it personally.

“I’ll contact him,” said Jette.

Scott frowned. “You’re going to work this case? Isn’t this an awfully busy time of the semester for you to be taking on extra work?”

“I can spare the time if it’s important.”

“Tenure is based on more than teaching your classes. If you want the Dean’s support...”

“Thank you Scott, but I think I have that well in hand. I’d appreciate it if you could go back into the conversations you had with Sr. Fiona and try to remember if she said anything, anything at all that might indicate something out of the ordinary.”

“I’ll let you know what I can.” Scott switched his gaze to Marc who could feel some of the resentment. Was it personal or did the man have something to hide? Right now everyone was a suspect. “As far as the forensics is concerned, you’ll have to go through Captain Markle for all official reports. On the other hand, if you have need for any forensic interpretation, please call. That I can do without violating confidentiality.”

Scott’s tone was a little imperious. Marc was pretty good at interpreting forensic evidence himself. He’d been in homicide for nearly his entire career and had visited more crime scenes and read more autopsy reports than he cared to remember. But he was breaking new ground here and a cop never knew when he’d need a contact. He decided to keep what he thought was superior expertise to himself. Let the guy condescend. Whatever game he had to play to solve this case, he’d play.

“Thanks,” he said without much sincerity.

“Don’t mention it. So Jette, you want to walk over with me? And how about we go out for drinks after your graduate seminar. Maybe I’ll remember something. Make a few calls.”

Interested in impressing the gorgeous professor are you, Dr. West? Marc thought. Didn’t matter. Whatever worked. He’d use it. He assumed Jette would pass on anything this man revealed to her.

“I think I’ll skip this meeting and I can’t do drinks later.”

“All right,” Scott hesitated, then went on. “But remember, your Dean counts absences and she’d like to have an excuse to put a little black mark next to your name.”

“Well, if you see her, tell her to sharpen her little black pencil, then stick it up her tiny tight exhaust pipe.”

“Yeah. Right. I’ll be sure to repeat that word for word.” Scott snorted. “Come to think of it, maybe that will scrape her off me. You know the only reason I like having you sitting next to me is to act as a Dean repellent. Anyway, I’ll keep my ears and eyes open. I frequently talk with other people on the board and can ask them if they remember anything.”

“I appreciate it, Scott,” Jette smiled at him and that seemed to be reward enough.

Marc watched as the man took one last look at Jette and left the room. Jette’s eyes rested on the closed door for awhile, a thoughtful expression on her face.

“I take it you and the Dean have your differences. A tight ass, huh?”

“Hmm. Good detective work. You must be the pride of the NYPD.” Jette dropped it with a dismissive, good natured wave of her hand. “Do you think you’ll be able to gain access to any of the crime scene photos, autopsy reports, investigative notes...through channels, that is?”

Marc stared at her. No one in his experience looked less like someone who’d say the words ‘crime scene photos.’ But he wasn’t going to risk stereotyping again. He assumed she’d seen a lot of them when she did research for her books.

“I will if the Liberty police department can be persuaded to share information with a New York cop working unofficially.”

“I know Captain Markle down there. We’ve worked together a few times. He’s a nice man, but from what I know he’d be very disturbed if he knew you’d crossed the police seal.”

“Yeah, well he missed a few things,” said Marc darkly.

“I agree, but right now I think some diplomacy would work better than your New York push. When in Rome...”

Marc rubbed his tired eyes and Jette took pity on him. He looked exhausted as well as sad.

“I’ll give him a call,” she said.

“Thanks. And I’d appreciate it if you’d contact me if anything comes to mind.” He took out another card and she took it from him. His fingers brushed hers. Their first physical contact. The energy around their fingertips crackled and intensified but both ignored it. For now. Marc leaned back in the chair and crossed his long legs.

“Where are you staying?” she asked.

“At a condo in Sequoia Ridge.”

“Nice.”

“It’s owned by someone who owed me one. I ah...helped get him out of a little trouble once.” Actually Al Talarczyk had visited New York and had been duped by a very clever con. Marc knew the tricks and saved him both a great deal of embarrassment and a lot of money. Al and his wife were back in Madison so he gladly sent Marc the keys and told him he wouldn’t need the condo again until the snow started to fly in Wisconsin. Marc had never been to Wisconsin, but he imagined that would give him until at least mid August.

“How about you go get some rest. It looks like you can use it. We can meet at this small saloon near there later. It’s quiet and nearly deserted until things heat up about ten o’clock, so we can talk. In the meantime, I’ll go through my calendars and correspondence and see if I can find a connection.” Jette wrote down instructions on how to get to the Cactus Rose Saloon while she talked. Marc watched her hands as they drew a small map. Beautiful, strong fingers, delicate wrists. Most importantly, he confirmed the fact. No rings.

“I thought you told the doctor you were too busy for drinks.”

She handed him the paper with a friendly, compassionate smile. “I *am* too busy. I’ll be working with you. Shall we say 5:00? That’ll give me time to clear off my desk following my afternoon class and make some calls.”

“Thanks, Professor. Or is it Doctor?”

“Both, actually, but I’d prefer Jette.”

“All right, Jette. I really would like to explore the connection between you and Fiona if there is one and why you were at the top of her ‘to do’ list.”

“If there’s a specific reason, we’ll find it.”

There was a knock on the door and a co-ed stuck her head in. Jette could see three more students just behind her. “Excuse me, Professor Morningstar. Could we talk to you about next week’s assignment? We didn’t get it written down.”

“Duty calls. I’ll meet you later.”

Marc stood up, excused himself and left her to her duties. Turning for another look at her as he walked down the corridor, he watched as she conferred with her students, smiling, pleased and helpful. Something stirred deep inside him as he realized how reluctant he was to leave...and how much he was looking forward to seeing her again.

Walking out the door into the sunshine, he put his shades back on. This time he didn’t even perceive the wide-open spaces; his mind was filled with a picture of Jette. In addition to exploring the connection between her and Fiona, he decided he’d like to explore any part of her. She had more than just a gorgeous face and a sumptuous body; there was wit and wisdom there, too. It made for an incredibly intriguing package. Damn, and those eyes. They were alert and seemed to see right through him...or rather into him.

That could be a problem. He’d have to keep his guard up. But he was used to doing that. He reached in his pocket again and pulled out the picture. Only one other person had ever looked into him. Ever cared to see what was behind the wall he built and carefully maintained. And he was going to use this Professor Morningstar to help him find her killer.

