

## *Unearthing Sights*

A Victorian mansion. Hanging ivy. Dark wooded paneling and floorboards. Arcane tapestries. Candelabras. Black leather sofas. Red velvet armchairs. The expected images in his mind.

Slater glanced at the address scribbled by Judas.

It was dusk by the time he arrived.

He rang an ordinary bell.

Absent was a door knocker forged into the shape of a bat.

North of San Francisco, across the Golden Gate Bridge, a house in Sausalito. High upon the hill. It overlooked the bay. A narrow winding driveway ended abruptly but expansively at the top of a knoll, paved and landscaped, landing him below the entrance.

There was a white wooden gate. Brick stairs curved upwards to a painted white door. The sidelights had stained-glass panels, images of wildflowers, roses, and humming birds.

On the landing, Slater turned and was amazed by the clear night and the lights of the city.

It was a glorious look back from where he had come.

He should have told Sherry he was doing this, he realized, as the porch lights came on and the door opened.

The woman's appearance was also not what he had expected.

"My presumed son, Judas," said Slater, "has informed me you have something important you need to tell me."

"You have a right to be angry," said Nina Stokes. "Come in."

"Is the cutlery put away?"

"I deserve that too. Please, won't you come in."

Slater hated the arousal this woman stirred deep within him. She was dressed in blue jeans and a loose-knit sweater that was draped attractively from her frame. She was barefoot.

"Would you like some coffee, or a drink?"

"Thank you, nothing," said Slater.

Nina placed her hands in her back pockets, a girlish stance, but clearly she was a woman, her eyes alert, smiling. "I don't know what to call you."

"I guess we were never formally introduced."

"We were." She corrected, "well, not formally."

"I was drunk, more than likely. You can call me Slater, as in the bad old days. Or, John."

"Nina, for me."

"Our son had to remind me who you were."

"Why don't we sit in the sun room?"

"It's almost dark."

"Moon room then?"

Slater hadn't intended to smile.

"You look wonderful," said Nina.

"Likewise," said Slater. "We preserve well."

Windows spanned the full length of the room they entered, the earth dropping off into treetops, rooftops, cascading into dark water. San Francisco was glimmering across the bay.

"Everyone stops at the view," said Nina. "I find it irresistible, still, after all these years."

Slater sat in a white wicker chair. "Can we get to the point? This whole thing is...it's all..."

"A surprise?" Nina offered. "Discovering you have a son?"

"The whole package, yes," said Slater.

"I'm not a witch," said Nina.

"I never said you were," said Slater.

"But you've thought it."

"I've thought about a lot of things regarding that night, Nina," said Slater with a bit of sarcasm. "But you haven't been *high* on my list. Can you appreciate that?"

"Regrettably." She smiled, sat on a cushioned lounge, tucking a leg under her. "That was uncalled for. Impolite?"

"I have questions," said Slater.

"As well you should."

"Like *why*?" said Slater.

"I was young and naive. Call me stupid."

"That explains nothing. So was I. What about details?" He lost his thoughts to the bay window. He recalled the raining shards of glass as Heather hurled a stone through her stained-glass rainbow motif in the living room window when he was a teenager.

"I belonged to a cult."

Slater's attention returned. "What kind of cult?"

"How many kinds are there? I don't know." Nina reached for a box on the table. She took out a cigarette. "I didn't even know what a cult *was*. I was simply having fun."

"*Fun?*" said Slater. "I was cut with knives!"

"Sorry." Nina lit the cigarette, took a puff, then crushed it in a bowl. "I'm trying to quit. It was horribly wrong, you're right. Look, I'm sorry. A friend, my roommate at college, took me to a meeting. I was under the impression it was a theatrical group. There was to be dancing. Masks were worn. Recreational drugs. Bizarre stuff, but it seemed harmless."

"You're not convincing me," said Slater.

"Harmless, mostly, it was." Nina leaned back in her chair and studied the evening view. "At that time I was into experimenting. My roommate taught me how to read Tarot cards. I was intrigued by the money she made by telling fortunes and doing charts."

"Astrological charts?" said Slater.

"Yes. She apparently liked mine." Nina glanced at Slater with an impish grin before looking away. "We were lovers for a short time. I'm not that way anymore."

"I really don't care," said Slater.

"You were hedonistic too."

"Yes, I got drunk," said Slater, "and I took drugs and slept with lots of women."

"And men?"

"Not that I recall. But my memory is shot. Which brings me to you. Why, Nina?"

"I could ask you the same thing."

"What?" said Slater. "You mean having sex? You were willing and ravishingly good-looking. Wasn't that the criteria?"

"It was." Nina smiled.

"Why the abduction?"

"It wasn't *my* idea," said Nina.

"Then whose?"

"My roommate's." She avoided his eyes and used her nails to groom her outer layer of cotton. She picked off lint before facing him with a borderline smile. "Or, it went *through* her. The idea of kidnapping and seducing a rock star amused us. It was, I guess you

could call it — I thought it would be — a prank?”

Slater saw something beyond evil. For an instant he had a sense of death. Dead skin, hair, nails — all the trappings of the human armor that shields against the ravages of oxygen. The only hint of life was detected in the tinted cells of her blue irises. Shimmering under transparent corneas. A glimmer of beauty. Then, nothing. As if the soul, like his heart, had skipped a timeless beat.

Slater blinked.

Nina’s eyes were playful again, then contrite.

“What do you want me to say?” she said. “That it was wrong? It *was* wrong. I was wrong. Bad girl. Shame on me. Never would I dream of doing anything like that today. I wouldn’t. Honest.”

Slater was frowning. “What *do* you do? Today.”

“I’m an artist. I freelance. Portraits are my specialty.”

Slater had seen the many faces on her walls.

“The ones in the living room?”

“Mine,” she said. “I like to study people. Portraits allow me to examine for hours who I’m with.”

“Was one of them Judas?”

“Yes, he looks like you,” said Nina. “He’s a handsome boy. When did you get the scar?”

This alerted Slater. “I thought you knew.”

“How would I?”

“Judas said you—”

“He’s mistaken,” she said abruptly. “He could have read some tabloid when he was young. God, he remembers everything. He’s spooky that way. I’m going to have that drink I offered you.”

She rose and looked down with a smile. “I won’t drug you this time. I promise.”

“Thanks, but no,” said Slater.

“I’ll be right back. Don’t go away.”

Slater studied the furnishings. Nothing ostentatious, but there were indications of money, expensive knick-knacks here and there, and the obvious value of the house. He stood. He had expected to find sinister artifacts or clues to the past. Everything appeared to be ordinary. There were a few framed photographs of her, and Judas at stages of growth, also a young girl, and a man he didn’t recognize.

Light, airy colors. Nothing at all dark about the place.

Except for the portraits.

Slater drifted into the living room to examine them.

He met Nina returning.

"Did you change your mind?" she asked.

"What are you having?"

"A dry martini. You can watch me make it, if you'd like." She had an equally dry smile. "If you still distrust me."

"On the rocks," said Slater. "Not too dry."

"You'd better keep an eye on me. I'll be right over here." She sipped her martini and went behind the bar. She topped off her own drink. "I'm using the same bottle, see? I'm *pouring*."

Slater resented her flippant manner, or wanted to.

Curiosity overtook his anger.

There was no denying the talent revealed in her portraits.

The subject's identities were almost palpable. He sensed each face's personality, social status, foibles, desires, fears.

He stared at the one of Judas. Their genetic similarities were unsettling. The eyes especially. Different from his somehow.

"*'Odyssey of sadness...sirens sighing on a mattress...mirrored narcissistic madness...how sweet this endless now.'* Isn't that how the song went? Here," said Nina.

Slater took the offered glass of gin. "Sounds about right."

"What follows?"

"I couldn't tell you. It was from *Naked Smile*."

"Shall we go back?" Nina walked them to the sun room and turned. "I still owe you an explanation."

"And I'm still waiting. You're a talented painter."

"High praise, coming from you."

"It made me realize something," said Slater.

"What?"

"The asymmetry."

"Very astute," she said. "Symmetry is not a natural property of life. We're lopsided creatures. Not as screwed up as a flounder with both eyes on one side. Like a Picasso. An eye is often bigger than the other. An ear lower. The right testicle larger than the left. That sort of askew."

"Is that part of your examination?"

"It is. I do nudes. Interested?"

Slater winced from the taste of gin. "You'd find my body too scarred."

"It adds character," said Nina. "A truly symmetrical face would scare me." She caught herself reaching for a cigarette and placed the lacquered lid back down. "Hard to rid myself of these nasty habits. Do you still smoke?"

"I've quit."

"Exotic herbs and other potions were used," she said, "mixed with belladonna. Belladonna means 'beautiful woman.' That was how you were slain."

"You poisoned me?"

"Not *I*. And it's only lethal if mixed improperly." She raised an eyebrow, then sipped her martini. "I wasn't the chemist. I was told this. Will you accept another... *I'm sorry*?"

"I could've been killed," said Slater.

"That wasn't the intent. Merely to dope you. And produce a comatose trance, hallucinations, the works. Wildly exotic. We took it as part of our initiation. I knew what you were experiencing."

"You too were cut with knives?"

"One knife. Small cuts, beneath my breast," said Nina. "It's like the one you received. It was to signify something. I'll show you mine, if you...want. I owe you that much. Care for a peek?"

Slater declined the offer, then wondered if she was telling him the truth. He thought about changing his mind.

"Who were these people?"

"Witches." Nina smiled before sipping her drink. "Not really. It's what people assume."

"You're very good at being indirect."

"Have you heard of Wicca?"

"I'm not sure," said Slater.

"We were a derivative. I was only with them for a short time. The origin's Germanic. Or French. It comes from the word *Wissen*, which means 'to know.' Derived from a medieval source — the Knights of the Round Table, or some idiocy equivalent. It's been awhile, all these memories long buried, hard to unearth. Anyway,

that was the promise. To attain wisdom. Enlightenment. Arcane powers found at the end of the herbal rainbow. The alluring sales pitch. You don't believe me?"

"I don't know," said Slater, "should I?"

"The sex was fabulous." Nina sipped her drink. "Listen, John, I was young. I made foolish choices. You're not proud of everything you've done, are you?"

"What do you think? You're avoiding the one *obvious* question I have."

"Only one?" Nina said.

"Why me? Was I randomly selected?"

Nina used a finger to stir her drink. "You were chosen."

"By you?"

"No. By *higher* powers, that's how it works. John, how much do you remember?"

"Nothing. Or practically. Until recently."

"Belladonna does that to you."

"I underwent a year's worth of hypnosis therapy," said Slater.

"I've had my share of therapy. Our night of wild sex?"

"What about it?"

Nina stood and approached the bay windows. The panes were blackened, transparent. Her sad bemusement was clearly reflected.

"Did you recall how romantic our love affair was?"

"Why, was I disappointing?"

"Yes, darling, our marriage was never *consummated*."

"But if, then how—did you say marriage?"

"I wasn't sure you knew." Her smile took a downward twist. "And now I know. Yes, my love, we took sacred vows, pricked our skin, drank sacrificial wine mixed with drops of our blood. And you passed out. Then you vanished from my life."

"Wait a second," said Slater, "if we never—"

"Had sex?" Her smile was blasé. "My darling, there are many ways to get blood from a stone. I assure you, Judas *is* your son."

A deep ache resurfaced in his groin. He touched his shirt where scars lay beneath, mostly faded.

"I need to show you something," she said.

In a swift motion she removed her sweater above her head. She

became naked above the waist. She lifted one of her small breasts to reveal a scar. Slater recognized the symbol. Three vertical lines and one horizontal slash that connected them. He had the same mark beneath his flat male breast.

“And there’s something else,” she said.

“I get the feeling I’m not going to like it,” he said.

“You won’t,” she warned.

“Tell me.”

“Sherry. She was my roommate in college.”

A cold fog overtook the hills from the ocean. It moved fast — striking him with white luminescence.

Slater shivered involuntarily as if struck blind.

“Hey, what’s happening?”

Slater turned to find Judas standing casually under the archway.

“Is this a party? Hi, Mom. Dad.”

Nina folded her arms, a relaxed pose that covered her breasts, comfortable in her skin.

Next to Judas was a miniature version of Nina.

A girl, age nine.

Gin was burning through Slater’s veins.

The girl had pale grey eyes that widened into double moons, full of surprise by this stranger’s presence, her mother’s nakedness.

The orbs narrowed into suspicious crescents slits.