NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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Oh Pretty Bird
An InCryptid Story
It is an interesting function of human-level intelligence that virtually all creatures in possession of it will occasionally look for ways to dull its edges. Sometimes, thinking is too great a burden, and needs to be set aside in favor of the calm blur of non-thought. Many species have their own unique drugs and intoxicants…but alcohol is universal to those with mammalian origins.

Not that the average bogeyman or Sasquatch could drink freely in most establishments, at least not until the human clientele was drunk enough not to notice who—or what—was sitting at the next table. And where there was a market, someone would find a way to serve it. Hence the Red Angel, one of Buckley’s seedier drinking establishments, built right up on the lake shore and with a semi-secret basement that did not appear on any town records, even though everyone on the town council knew full well that it was there. Favors had been promised and palms had been greased to get the doors open, and now that they were, it seemed as if an act of God would be required to close them.

The sound of laughter and tinny jukebox music drifted up the stairs as Jonathan Healy staggered out of the Red Angel’s basement. The smell of whiskey hung around him like a veil. Most of it was on him, not in him, thankfully; he straightened up, seeming to grow more sober with every step he took, until the illusion of drunkenness had been completely abandoned. Only then did he break into a run, heading for the Angel’s nearly deserted parking lot. The shape of his father’s truck was like beacon, promising safety, or at least, promising the opportunity to go home and tell the others what was going on.

They had to move. They had to move before it was too late.

Alice was sitting in the middle of the floor, industriously gnawing on the antler of her big stuffed jackalope. Fran had initially tried taking it away from her, only to give the idea up as a lost cause when separation from the taxidermy caused Alice—normally a tractable, if somewhat stubborn, baby—to start wailing uncontrollably.

“You’d better be teething,” said Fran, propping her chin on the heel of her hand. “I don’t think I could take it if you decided you wanted to be a bone-eatin’ monster.”

“Don’t approve of that as a career path?” asked Enid, passing through the room with a basket of clean laundry under her arm.

“Nah, I just can’t stand to see good meat go to waste.” Fran sat up straight, letting her hand drop back down to her lap. “What’cha got going on?”

“Nothing exciting until nightfall, I’m afraid,” said Enid, who knew extreme boredom when she saw it. Most of the time, Alice was the light of everyone’s life. Her laughter brightened the corners of the old house, and when she smiled, it was like everything that had ever happened to them, good or bad, had been intended to get them to that exact point. But then there were the times like these, when Alice didn’t want to take her nap, meaning she had to be supervised, but did want to spend upwards of an hour chewing on the same piece of taxidermy. “She’s not a bone-eating monster, Frannie, she’s just teething. It’ll pass soon enough. Then she’ll probably start biting things, at least for a little while, and you’ll have a whole new set of exciting problems.”

“That explains why she keeps going for the antlers, at least,” said Fran. “What’s going on tonight?”

“Peryton herd’s supposed to be passing through. We’re going to keep an eye on them, make sure they don’t raid any of the local flocks. You know how the farmers around here get when skinless flying demon deer drop down out of the sky and carry off their sheep.”
“I think you could leave the ‘around here’ out of that sentence and still be pretty much accurate,” said Fran. “What time’s the herd supposed to show?”

Enid, who knew desperation when she heard it, smiled. “Like I said, nightfall. I’ve already dropped by Mary’s house, and she’s available to babysit. Happy to babysit, in fact, since otherwise she’d be spending the evening doing her nails and not making any money.”

“Why that girl isn’t beating the boys off with a stick is something I’ll never know,” said Fran, glancing to Alice to be sure the toddler was still restricting herself to the relatively harmless pastime of masticating her taxidermy. “Still, it’s good for us. Helps a lot when your best babysitter can be available at a moment’s notice, and doesn’t mind doin’ all the sitting at her place.”

“That is a good thing,” agreed Enid, glancing around the living room. The monstrous taxidermy was on the verge of taking over again, with Alice’s jackalope representing only the tip of the iceberg. It would have been easier if there had been a cryptid museum of natural history somewhere that they could donate specimens to—but there wasn’t, and if they wanted to study the creatures they were working to preserve, they had to be able to do it in the safety of their own home.

It was going to be hard, when Alice got older and started making friends at school. She’d never be able to have them over to the house, never be able to fill the eaves with the shriek of sleepovers or pack the kitchen with girls baking cupcakes for the school pep rally. Enid knew it would be hard on her—it would be hard on all of them, really; they already hated telling the girl “no,” and she wasn’t old enough to ask for much beyond piggyback rides and the occasional cookie—but there wasn’t any other way. She just hoped the girl would be strong enough to understand that some things required sacrifice. Some things weren’t really choices, not anymore.

She’d tell Alexander it was time to shuffle the pieces in the barn and make room for more. That would help, a little, with assuaging the guilt she already felt when she considered the specter of Alice’s teenage years.

“I’ll just get little miss ready to go on a babysitting adventure, then, shall I?” Fran got out of her chair and crossed the room to crouch down next to Alice. “Howdy, puddin’. You want to go see Mary? I hear she’s pretty lonely, she could use a bright face like yours to make her day a sunny one.”

“Ask Mary if she can keep Alice overnight.” The voice was Jonathan’s. Fran and Enid both turned to find him standing in the doorway, his hands braced against the frame to either side like it was all that was holding him upright. His normally well-combed hair was ruffled, and his vest was only half-buttoned. He smelled of whiskey.

Fran blinked. And then, because she was a sensible woman who had known her husband for years, she asked, “You been down at the Angel followin’ something you’ve come to share with the rest of us?”

“Yes, I—no, there’s no time.” Jonathan shook his head violently. “I’ve already called the library. Father will be home inside of the hour. We need to be packing for the trip.”

“Jonathan Healy, we are not going anywhere with you until you explain what it is you’re on about,” said Enid, folding her arms and fixing her son with the sort of glare that only a mother can summon on command. “You’re unkempt and you smell of liquor. That’s not a good time to start barking orders, unless you feel like being unkempt, hung over, and in the basement.”

Fran scooped Alice into her arms, picking up the jackalope for good measure, since having the little girl begin to wail would really do none of them any good. “Did something happen? Is it Arturo?”

“No, he’s fine.” Jonathan shook his head again, but slower this time, like he was trying to steady himself. He took a deep breath, and said, “I went to the Angel because I was following up on something for Father. He’s been tracking the movement of the Apraxis wasps again.”
“I hate those things,” said Fran, shuddering and holding Alice a little tighter. Alice stopped chewing on her jackalope in favor of patting her mother reassuringly on the cheek. “Nasty buggers.”

“They were responsible for our engagement,” said Jonathan, a flicker of amusement breaking through his grim exterior. “I didn’t send them a wedding invitation, but it would have been reasonable to consider it.”

“Honey, I love you, and I loved you then, but if you’d invited a swarm of brain-eatin’ bugs to our wedding, we’d’ve been divorced before we said our I dos.” Fran frowned. “You still haven’t explained why we’re going somewhere, or what dropped you into the Angel. You can track Apraxis without goin’ drinking with monsters.”

“Yes, but you can’t confirm what you’ve learnt about the Apraxis without drinking with monsters.” Jonathan stood up a little straighter, trying to smooth his hair with his hands. Alice laughed and reached for him. He glanced to Fran, who nodded, before taking his daughter gingerly out of her mother’s arms. “Father keeps track of the hives as a precaution. We can’t eliminate them, but we can intervene when they come too close to human habitation.”

“Johnny, please stop trying to teach your mother how to suck eggs.” Enid crossed her arms. “We know about Apraxis wasps. We know why your father monitors them, and we know why we can’t wipe them out. What we don’t know is why you suddenly felt the need to go down to the Red Angel. Have the Apraxis eaten Indiana?”

“No.” It would almost have been easier if they had. At least that would have been a straightforward problem, and one that could have been solved with a sufficient amount of fire. Perhaps it was unkind to fantasize about burning an entire state, but fire had a tendency to cleanse what it destroyed; Indiana would have risen again, even if it would have been scarred by the process.

His family had already been scarred. He wasn’t sure they could survive any further damage.

Fran and Enid were watching him, both of them looking terribly concerned. He focused his gaze on Alice, who didn’t look worried in the least. Daddy was holding her, and she was old enough to understand that Daddy would never let anything happen to her. As long as she was with him, or with her mother, or her well-beloved grandparents, she was perfectly safe, and content to let the world roll by.

He found it soothing. He found it terrifying. He rather suspected that it was a function of parenthood that these two feelings could exist at the same time, mutually exclusive and connected all the same.

“I was at the Red Angel because Father needed me to confirm something before we did anything that couldn’t be taken back,” he said, eyes staying on Alice. It was easier, somehow, to speak the words while looking at the one person who wouldn’t really understand them. “It was essential that I make contact with the local bogeyman community.”

Fran went very still. He saw her stiffen out of the corner of his eye. Voice neutral, she asked, “Why was that?” She hadn’t forgiven the bogeymen for their role in the death of Daniel Healy, Alice’s big brother, who would have been eight years old on his next birthday.

Jonathan hadn’t forgiven them either, but he had one thing Fran did not: a lifetime of perspective. Sometimes, aiming your rage at the sword meant sparing the swordsman, when he was the one who really deserved to be punished. He…or she.

“Because I needed to ask them something.” He finally turned back to his wife, Alice seeming to grow heavier in his arms as he held her close to his chest. “I needed to ask them where she went.”

Enid stepped forward, her heart suddenly beating too fiercely in her chest and her breath seeming heavy in her lungs. There was only one “she” who could have been involved in this conversation, only one woman who had paid an unscrupulous bogeyman an assassin’s fee for a single night’s work that had
changed their world forever.

"Are you sure, then?" Enid asked. "Was it her?"

"Yes." Jonathan nodded. Fran stepped forward, arms outstretched, and he handed her the baby without waiting to be asked. She needed to hold their daughter, given what he was about to say.

Taking a deep breath, he looked into his wife's eyes, and said, "Heloise Tapper killed Daniel, and I know where she is."

Mary Dunlavy was sitting at the kitchen table, looking dully from the power bill to the water bill and trying to decide which one of them could be put off for just one more week, when someone started knocking at the door. She quickly shoved the bills under a placemat, casting an anxious look down the hall toward her father's room. He wouldn't be awake—not this early in the day—and she didn't want to risk waking him.

The knock came again. Mary rose and hurried to pull it open, revealing Frances Healy standing on the porch, with Alice bundled against her hip. At the sight of Mary, Alice beamed and announced, gleefully, "Mary! Down, Mama, Mary."

"We were wondering if you were available to babysit," said Fran, without preamble.

Mary looked past Fran and Alice to see Jonathan sitting in their truck, parked up against the curb. The Healy family's odd reluctance to use the telephone was well-known in Buckley; most thought it had something to do with the elder Healys being foreign and whatnot, although no one could say exactly how that would make a difference—maybe they didn't have telephones in England. Whatever the reason for the family's shared reticence, Mary was accustomed to Fran showing up without calling first. The only unusual thing was the small valise settled against Fran's ankle. Half the girls she knew from school had similar cases, big enough for an overnight trip but not much else.

"Enid said as she'd already checked with you, and that you were free for the night, but I'm looking for something a trifle more involved," continued Fran, cheerfully oblivious, as always, to Mary's slow examination. "Do you think you could handle our little monster for the whole weekend? I promise we'll be back by Sunday night, ready to reclaim her and let you head off for school like nothing's happened. We'll pay double."

Mary, who hadn't been going to school for the better part of a year, hesitated. Her father would be bound to wake up at some point during those three days; he couldn't help it. A man could spend a lot of time in bed, especially when he was working double shifts at the mill, but there was only so much sleeping anyone could be reasonably expected to do. Still, double pay would mean she wouldn't have to choose between the bills—and three days! That could put some real food in the pantry, and maybe even get new tires for the car.

She wanted to refuse; she wanted to come up with an excuse, any excuse, that would let her avoid doing something as risky as taking a little girl for three whole days. But in the end, the lure of that much money was just too much for her to resist. "I'd be happy to," she said, extending her arms for Fran to drop Alice into. The child laughed in delight, squirming to reach with sticky starfish hands for the improbable silver waves of Mary's hair.

"All her things are in the bag," said Fran, picking it up and offering it to Mary, who shifted Alice to one arm in order to take it. "She's been sleeping through the night, but if she gets fussy, just give her something she can chew on. A hairbrush should work. If you really get into a pinch, I packed some antlers for her to gnaw. Don't know why any child of mine should have such a powerful hankering for bone, but it is what it is, and I figure it's better to indulge her than to listen to her howl all the time."
Mary’s father had hunted deer and even the occasional moose when she was younger, before…well, before things went and got complicated on them. There was nothing forced about the smile she directed at Alice before tilting it upward to encompass Fran as well. “Horn’s a good thing for a baby to chew on. Not as soft as wood, not as unnerving for the parents as bone. I’ll keep her happy as a little clam while she’s here with me, don’t you worry.”

“I never do, when she’s with you,” said Fran. “Thank you again, Mary, you’re a lifesaver.”

“I do the best I can,” said Mary, her smile fading to a wan outline of itself. She felt sure that she had flickered, but if so, Fran didn’t appear to have noticed; the woman leaned forward, kissed the crown of her baby’s head, and then raced off down the path, slinging herself into the truck beside her husband. Whatever business they were on, it must have been important; Jonathan didn’t even wait for Fran to shut the door before he was tearing off down the road, leaving Mary staring after him while Alice gathered handfuls of her silvery hair and pulled, laughing as only safe, happy babies can laugh.

“They’re going to figure it out one day, Ally, and then where are we going to be?” Mary asked, looking down at the little girl in her arms. Alice laughed again. Mary sighed and closed the door, against the prying eyes of her neighbors, and against the future.

One day soon, Fran would notice that Mary wasn’t getting any older, or Jonathan would be leading a high school field trip at the library and realize that Mary wasn’t there. One day soon, it would become impossible to juggle the lies and small deceptions that she’d been…not living by, exactly, but using to smooth out her existence for the past year. As for what would happen after that, well, she just didn’t know. “How to get on with your life after you’re dead” wasn’t exactly the sort of thing they taught you in homeroom, or even down at the community center. She was pretty sure it included moving on to some afterlife or other, and she couldn’t possibly do that. Her father needed her here.

In the meantime, she had a baby to look after, and babysitting money to put toward the bills. The future, however uncertain, could wait.

Fortunately for Mary Dunlavy’s peace of mind, if not for their own, none of the Healys as yet had any inkling that their preferred babysitter was not among the living. If they had known, their plans for the weekend might have been quite different.

Johnny and Fran returned to the house to find Enid and Alexander sitting on the porch. Three large leather suitcases waited at the base of the steps, their sides bulging with a combination of clothing, weapons, and more esoteric supplies. Enid was holding a small leather case that Fran recognized from previous journeys—although in her experience, Johnny was generally the one carrying it. She cast a curious look in his direction. He shook his head.

“The mice like to stay with the eldest member of the family accompanying any given expedition,” he said. “In this case, that means my mother.”

“Isn’t your daddy older than she is?”

“Yes, but from their perspective, he’s the one who married in. He comes before me. Not before her.” Jonathan swung down from the truck and started for the porch. “Mary has Alice. She’s happy to keep her for the whole weekend. Are you sure that’s going to be enough time?”

“If it’s not, two of us will come back here and take care of her, while the other two keep hunting,” said Alexander. He stood and hopped down from the porch. Once on the ground, he picked up the largest of the suitcases and handed it to Jonathan, claiming the second largest for himself. “We can’t let her get away this time. I don’t know whether we’ll be able to track her down again.”
Tracking her down in the first place had taken five years. Five years of wondering who had hired an assassin to break into their home and kill Jonathan and Fran’s firstborn son. Five years of dead ends, bad leads, and so-called “tips” that led to nowhere at all. Johnny and Fran had done their mourning, and while no parent could ever be said to get past the death of a child, they had Alice to focus their energy and attention on: a living little girl who needed them more than her brother’s absent shadow ever would. Enid had been a little slower to let go, but even she had been recovering from her grandson’s death, inching toward acceptance day by day. But Alexander…

Of the two of them, Alexander had always blamed himself for failing the pieces of their family who had been left behind in England when he took his wife and ran from the Covenant. Enid hadn’t forgotten their older son, or their daughter; she wasn’t a beast, to so casually dismiss that which had been lost. But she had been able to find peace in the life she had made in America, and in a community where the names of their children were never known, or spoken, or mourned. Alexander, however—Alexander had never forgiven himself for the look on Charles’s face when he repudiated his father. The boy had been six years old, and already sunk so deeply into the teachings of the Covenant that he had refused to hear anything that might contradict them.

Ada hadn’t even been allowed to say goodbye to her parents. Enid still woke up with damp cheeks and aching eyes, remembering the smell of her daughter’s hair. But all that was in the past. The Covenant had seen to that, when they severed ties between the two oldest Healy children and their parents. Buckley was the present, and the future, and everything that mattered. That was the only way things could be.

Enid believed in bullets and building better defenses; she believed in closing the doors against the darkness. She had been a Carew before she’d become a Healy, and the Carew family had always been more about defending than attacking. The Healys, on the other hand…they were a family of killers, born and bred, and Alexander had been among the best of them. Maybe the absolute best of them, if some of the stories were to be believed.

This woman—this impossible woman, from a species that shouldn’t have existed in any universe, not under the auspices of any type of loving God—had done the unthinkable. She had harmed Alexander’s family. And now, barring a miracle of the blackest kind, Heloise Tapper was going to die for what she had done.

The others were already at the truck, loading their cases into the back. Enid stood slowly, unable to shake the feeling that this enterprise was going to strain them all to the breaking point. The part of her that would always be a Carew girl knew that this was not the answer. The part of her that had grown, content, into a Healy woman knew that it was the only answer they had.

Enid Healy swung her suitcase up into the bed of the truck before climbing into the cab, balancing the leather case that held the delegation from the colony carefully on her knees. She watched in the rearview mirror as Johnny and Fran pulled themselves up into the bed of the truck, settling atop the suitcases. Jonathan turned toward the front and flashed a quick thumbs up to Alexander, who started the engine. And just like that, they were away.

May God have mercy.

The drive from Buckley to Whiting, Indiana was long enough that under any other circumstances, they would have taken a train, or—barring that as a viable option—rented a closed car from someone in town. Something that seated four, rather than leaving half of their party exposed to the elements. But there hadn’t been time for that, not really, and the amount of equipment they needed made anything smaller than the pickup truck impractical.

Alexander drove with his hands strangling the wheel and his eyes fixed on the road, jaw set so harshly
that Enid could see every fluttering muscle when he swallowed. She watched him with concern. They weren’t young anymore. The days when they could hunt forever and never feel weary or cold were long, long behind them.

“Talk to me,” she said quietly. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

“I sent a letter to the Covenant before we left Buckley,” he replied. While she was staring at him, speechless with surprise, he continued, “I was careful about it. It’s being bounced through Chicago, Seattle, Manhattan—a dozen cities, all told, before it crosses the Atlantic. There’s no return address. But I made sure they’d know it was me.”

Enid knew better than to ask about whatever details he’d included with his letter. Even after more than forty years of marriage, there were things he wouldn’t tell her, things that sometimes woke him, crying, in the night. Growing up in the Covenant was not easy on anyone, but she sometimes thought that growing up a Healy must have been very different than growing up a Carew. And then her thoughts would turn to the children she struggled daily to forget, and she would find something to distract herself, something that was less likely to destroy her.

“I had to, Enid.” Alexander didn’t look at her, but his hands tightened on the steering wheel, until she began to fear that he would break his fingers seeking absolution. “They had to know what we’re facing.”

“What are we facing, Alex?” When Johnny and Fran had come home from Colorado bruised, burnt, and engaged, she’d honestly been more interested in her son’s sudden brush with common sense—marrying the girl was the only logical thing to do, given how long he’d been in love with her—than in his stories of a pale-skinned, dark-haired woman who had somehow been able to rewrite his memories. Maybe that was a failing on her part, that she was more interested in the here and now than in the potential future. But that was as she had always been, and Alexander was there, as he had always been, to make sure that nothing was missed.

For example, there was the fact that no one had ever documented anything like Heloise Tapper in any known record or oral tradition. Thought-transference was known of course—Apraxis wasps used something like it to communicate across the hive, some types of succubi and incubi were believed to be empathic, and clairvoyance had been documented across all intelligent races. There were even indicators that some non-intelligent races, such as shisa and Dawon tigers, possessed foresight or other clairvoyant tendencies. But thought-transference had never been identified as a source of memory manipulation. It should have been impossible for anyone to rewrite a human mind as Jonathan had described.

And yet Fran had corroborated his story, even expounded upon it: he had been the rewritten one, after all, while she had been his target. They had been left with no choice but to believe that Heloise Tapper, whatever she was, was something they had never encountered before.

Alexander had redoubled his efforts to map the migration of the known Apraxis hives after that. Perhaps more worryingly, he had called upon the scientists, bounty hunters, and monster-killers he knew all across North America, asking them to refrain from slaughtering Apraxis wasps unless there was immediate danger to a sentient population. Even Enid had not truly understood his reasoning…until she looked at the maps, and saw how sometimes hives bent away from what should have been their natural migration path. They were avoiding something.

They were avoiding Heloise Tapper, or something that was very much like her.

“We’re facing a monster,” said Alexander quietly. “You know that.”

“Yes, I do,” said Enid. “What I don’t know is why you felt the need to involve the Covenant in our family’s business. You know they’ll be setting every resource they have on tracking where that letter came from. If they find us…”
“If they track it all the way back to its source, they’ll find Whiting,” said Alexander. “God willing, she’ll still be there.”

Enid went quiet for a long moment. The road rolled by outside the truck, fields and houses blurring into one panoramic smear across the horizon. Finally, she asked, “What aren’t you telling me, Alex? Why are we doing this?”

“We’re doing this because I finally found her,” Alexander said. “I’ve been searching since the Colorado incident. I never gave up looking.”

“I know you didn’t,” she said, unable to keep the questioning lilt from her voice. Something was wrong. She just didn’t know what it was, and until she knew that, she couldn’t begin the process of trying to fix it.

Alexander didn’t take his eyes off the road. She supposed that should have been reassuring: he wasn’t so distracted that he was forgetting about safety. She couldn’t quite take it that way. It felt less like he was being a safe driver, and more like he couldn’t bring himself to face her.

“The last time I was able to pinpoint her location was in 1935,” Alexander said. His voice was flat, factual. It was a voice she hadn’t heard him use in years, not since he’d been called on to report the results of a botched cleansing to his superiors within the Covenant. It sent a chill running down her spine, where it buried itself in her belly and seemed set to freeze her straight through. “She was in Connecticut. One of my contacts there got eyes on her, and sent me a telegram using the signal phrase we’d agreed upon.”

“I remember you went to Connecticut that year,” she said slowly. “It was about a month before…” She stopped herself, unable to face the words that came next.

“A month before Daniel died,” said Alexander. “I went to Connecticut. I went to the last known location of my contact, a very nice Bigfoot man with shipping concerns in the area. He was gone.”

“He’d left?”

“She’d killed him.” A note of grim fury crept into his tone. “It looked like suicide, of course. The gun was in his hand, and I have no doubt that his finger pulled the trigger. But Marcel would not have killed himself. He had a family that loved him. He was one of their primary providers. He had a thriving business, and one of his wives was pregnant at the time. He was a man with everything to live for, and I had never known him to give any signs that he would consider suicide as an option.”

“You think Heloise found him out.” Enid had to fight to keep her voice steady. “You think she killed him.”

“Yes, I do.”

“But you think she read his mind first, don’t you?”

“The timing—”

“So he tells her you sent him, and then what? How did she know where we lived?” Enid was getting louder. She found that she really didn’t care. “Did you tell him?”

“No, but she didn’t really need to know, did she? All she needed to do was contact the local bogeyman community, and offer payment for the sending of a message. We’ve known for a while now that Heloise was behind Daniel’s death, even though she used another’s hands to carry it out. Whatever this woman is, she depends on secrecy, on being able to rewrite the minds of everyone around her. Well, Fran was able to overcome her control once before. She wasn’t going to come anywhere near us if she could avoid it. So she tried to destroy us in a different way.”
"She very nearly succeeded," said Enid. "Alexander Christopher Healy, you are going to tell me right now why we’re going after a mind-reader who’s already struck at us through our children once, or I am going to stab you."

"I’ll lose control of the truck if you stab me, dear."

"I’m very good in tense situations. I’m sure I can grab the wheel before we go entirely off the road. Now answer my question." There was abruptly a knife in her hand, appearing there as if by magic.

Alexander, who appreciated the difference between magic and a good old fast-draw, slowed down the truck a bit, to hopefully avoid any sort of massive disaster if his wife decided to carry out her threat of stabbing. "Open the glove compartment," he said.

"That isn’t an answer," said Enid, eyeing him suspiciously.

"Trust me."

Enid was angry, but she wasn’t furious. This was a deep, cold anger that would take a long time to pass, but which nonetheless left her capable of listening to reason. After one last wary look, she leaned forward and opened the glove compartment. The contents were mostly normal—a greasy owner’s manual, a flashlight, some battered leather gloves, a box of ammunition, some dried aconite—but there was a clean manila envelope on top of the jumble. Carefully, Enid extracted it and peeked inside.

"You brought…jewelry?" she ventured, trying to make sense of the jumble of copper chains and glass baubles in front of her. "I’m not that easily bribed, Alex. Never have been, God willing, never will be."

"They were made by a Letiche witch from Louisiana. She’s dealt with thought-transference before, and guarantees that these will keep our minds from being invaded by any force, be it friendly or otherwise. We’ll be safe from Heloise’s influence as long as we’re wearing them."

Enid’s frown didn’t lessen. "And if your witch is wrong about that? What happens if this Tapper woman plunders our minds in self-defense, and finds out about Alice? Mary Dunlavy’s not a fighter. She won’t be able to keep our granddaughter safe."

"I’m doing the best I can here, Enid." For the first time, there was a trace of strain in his voice. "We knew Heloise Tapper was a danger when John and Frannie came back from Colorado talking about her. We just thought she was a remote one. You all knew I was trying to find her—we needed to know more."

"You never told me you’d lost a man."

"What good would it have done, Enid? Marcel would still have been dead, and Daniel would still have been dead, and Heloise would have stayed miles outside of our reach. It’s taken me this long just to find her again. The Apraxis wasps…she can’t be the only member of her species. She’d need to be able to fly in order to cause as much disruption of their hives as I’ve charted."

"We don’t know she can’t."

"No, we don’t," Alexander allowed. "But right now, we’re treating her as a woman who is somehow capable of thought-transference on a level we’ve never seen before—a woman who Frannie swears took a bullet to the heart and kept on moving. We don’t want to credit her with any more powers than we already know for a fact that she possesses."

Enid sat quietly for a little while, looking at the packet of glass and copper charms in her hands. Alexander kept his eyes on the road, not interrupting her. He knew his wife: he knew that whatever decision she was going to come to, she needed the time to come to it naturally, and without any influence from him. Enid was one of the most forgiving women he’d ever known, as long as you didn’t endanger
her family. Well, he had endangered her family. Even though he hadn’t meant to, he was going to face the consequences of his choices.

“What is it you’re suggesting we do, Alex?” she asked finally. “You got Johnny and Fran so spun up that they let you lead us off half-cocked, instead of coming up with a coherent plan. That says to me that you already have one, and you didn’t want to waste time arguing about whether or not it was the best way to go.”

“I have a charm for each of us,” he said. “Wearing them should keep her out of our heads. That’s going to give us a tactical advantage that she won’t necessarily anticipate. We find her. We catch her. And we make her tell us everything.”

Enid’s lips pursed. “You mean I make her tell us everything.”

“I’m so sorry, darling, but yes.” Healys were killers. Carews were more defensive, building fences, building traps…and gathering intelligence, when the need arose, to help make those fences and traps as effective as possible. There was no one in the world more deadly with a pair of pliers and a smile than a Carew woman.

“Are we going to kill her?”

“Yes.”

“Is there any chance this is going to go badly for us?”

“Yes.” Alexander sighed. “If the charms don’t work—if she’s not the only one—if she’s managed to use her particular powers to subvert the entire town. We could wind up in a great deal of trouble. But we have a lot of bullets, and we have years of training between the four of us. Really, the only thing I’m genuinely worried about is those charms not working.”

“But Alice…”

“I sent Arturo a letter as well.” Enid was silent. Alexander continued, “He should receive it in a week. It asks him to call, and to ask several questions that would require an unrevised memory to answer. If we’ve been subverted, he’ll know. And if no one answers, he’ll know that something has gone wrong. The letter has instructions for what to do, if that’s the case.”

“Fran would want Alice to go to Juney, you know she would,” said Enid.

“I know. That’s why the instructions say that he should take the baby and find the carnival, see what they want to do. Alice is young yet, but she knows Arturo well enough not to be afraid if he takes her on an adventure, and then she can choose who she stays with.” The thought of his granddaughter growing up without him made his heart ache, but there was no way around it. This needed doing. Heloise Tapper couldn’t be allowed to become the family curse, lurking in the shadows, terrorizing them with her very existence.

For the most part, Alexander Healy was a man who had come to terms with his past and his future, and the areas where they would never overlap. But sometimes he missed the simplicity of the man who’d known his duty, known his place in the world. The Covenant was not necessarily a good place. It was still a place that had been his home for a very long time, and as he drove down the road toward Indiana, he found himself thinking, once again, that life was never easy for an exile. Not even a voluntary one.

In the back of the truck, Johnny and Fran huddled together against the cab, using it to block the bulk of the wind and the noise. They watched through the small window as Enid and Alexander talked. Fran frowned.

“Wish I could hear what they’re saying,” she said. “They don’t look happy about whatever it is.”
“I’m sure they’ll explain when we get to the motel,” said Johnny.

Fran nodded, and put her head down against his shoulder. An hour later, when they reached the motel where they’d be spending the night—or at least the next three hours; long enough for everyone to steal a bit of sleep, sprawled across ancient, unsteady beds like discarded toys, their brains afire with exit plans and worst case scenarios—Alexander and Enid went to the manager’s office to pay for the room without a word of explanation.

Three hours after that, when they got back on the road under cover of darkness, Jonathan now behind the wheel, Enid next to him, and Alexander and Fran asleep on a bed of suitcases in the back, the silence continued.

No explanations were given. Not to anyone.

Whiting, Indiana was a lake town, built on the lip of Lake Michigan and so close to the edge of Illinois that when the wind blew the right way, they could smell Chicago. Alexander had pulled off to the side of the road on the very edge of town, all of them a little moon-eyed and shaky after driving through the night. Fran—who wasn’t the most civilized of them, but was oddly the best with strangers, at least human ones—had hiked off toward the distant glitter of a gas station’s windows. She was supposed to return with coffee and donuts. Knowing Fran, she’d somehow find a way to return with a four-course meal.

Alexander didn’t care which it was, as long as she did it quickly, quietly, and without attracting attention to herself. “It’s a small town,” he said, gazing down the road. “The last census put the population at about eight hundred, mostly workers from the refinery and their families, although there’s also a decent number of fishermen. There was an Apraxis hive in the area up until three months ago. It had a migration path that brought it through here annually. Like clockwork, until this year.”

“But how are you sure she’s here?”

“The bogeymen told me, and Jonathan confirmed it,” said Alexander. He was repeating a conversation they’d had a dozen times during the drive, shifting it through different combinations of the four of them until it should have become senseless rote. Instead, it remained what it had always been destined to be: something to cling and cleave to, something to prove that they were where they needed to be, doing what they needed to do. “She’s been in Whiting for three months. Since the Apraxis moved on.”

“How do we know the bogeymen weren’t compromised?”

“They’re the ones who told me about the charms,” said Alexander. He had passed them out as soon as they were pulled over; even Fran, now just a speck on side of the road almost a mile ahead, was protected against thought-transference. “They’ve been using them since she hired one of their men to target us. It seems the bogeyman community is not thrilled about having a nest of ex-Covenant operatives riled up at them.”

“HAIL!” proclaimed the leather case in Enid’s hands, not to be left out of this conversation, as they had so many others. The mice understood the seriousness of the situation, and Enid was grateful that they had chosen to keep quiet while she and Alexander talked through his guilt and grief. Aeslin mice were more sensitive to moods than most people gave them credit for being, and they never betrayed a confidence. Whatever happened in Whiting, it would be preserved in the memory of the colony.

Enid just hoped that wouldn’t be the only way Alice would learn about her family, and where she’d come from.

“The bogeyman community is smarter than I ever gave them credit for being,” she said dryly. “If they’re the ones who told you where to find these nifty little trinkets, why are you worried about whether or not
“Humans and bogeymen diverged millennia ago, evolutionarily speaking. What works for them may not be as effective for us. But it should at least make it possible for us to evade her, for a while,” Alexander’s eyes were fixed on the distant shape of the town. “We’ll go in. We’ll find her. And we’ll kill her.”

“And if we fail?” Enid’s question was sharp, and accompanied by a meaningful glance toward Jonathan. Alexander sighed. He’d been hoping to avoid this. He should really have known that nothing could be put off forever. “If we fail, then we hope that the Covenant has better luck than we did.”

There was a moment of stunned silence, where Jonathan stared at his father and Alexander waited for the explosion he was sure would follow. Finally, Jonathan turned to Enid and asked, “Did you know that he was going to contact them?”

“No,” she said.

“Do you agree that he was right to contact them?”

Enid took a deep breath, and nodded. “Yes. Under the circumstances, yes, I do think that it was the right thing to do. If we fall here, if this... woman,” she put a depth of scorn into the word that almost immeasurable, “is enough to take all four of us down, then I think that the Covenant is the only chance these people have. They’re the enemy, but they weren’t always, and their mission is very simple. They want to protect humanity. This Tapper creature endangers us all.”

“I see.” Jonathan was silent for a moment. Finally, he nodded. “I understand why you felt this was necessary, and I understand why you couldn’t tell me before. I hope that you understand that, once we have returned safely home, with this crisis behind us permanently, you’re going to be the one explaining to Fran why we have to be so much more careful not to attract Covenant attention.”

“With pleasure,” said Alexander.

“Speaking of Fran...” Enid shielded her eyes with her hand, squinting down the road. “Looks like she’s coming back, and going by the sack she’s carrying with her, she was successful in her search for breakfast. We’ll be able to eat before we go and face the unspeakable monster girl.”

“Everything’s better with breakfast,” said Alexander.

Inside the carrying case, the mice cheered.

Whiting’s main street was as sleepy as the town surrounding it, which was an interesting change from Buckley: although half the size of Whiting, Buckley Township’s main street was always bustling, filled with teenagers running for the library or the diner, adults heading out to dinner or a movie, and housewives stocking up on necessities for the family. The Healys stuck out like a sore thumb as they pulled into the small parking lot of the local grocer.

Alexander was the first out of the cab. He frowned as he looked around, and then walked over to the bed of the truck, leaning over to say, “Fran, job for you.”

Fran swallowed her mouthful of apple cider donut, took a swig from her coffee—lukewarm, but that was better, really, when riding in the back of a truck—to wash it down. Then, handing her cup to Jonathan, she asked, “What do you need?”

“Go into the store. Try to buy something simple but odd for this time of day. Beer or raw chicken or
Fran frowned. “That’s a little nebulous, as jobs go. Any particular reason behind it?”

“Yes, but I want to see if you get the same feeling I do off the situation.” Alexander offered his hand. Fran took it, using him for leverage as she clambered down from the truck. “Don’t make trouble, and if things seem to be getting strained, get out. The question is important, but it’s not important enough to lose you over.”

“Got it.” Fran turned, blew Jonathan a kiss, and then flounced off toward the store.

“What are you hoping to accomplish?” asked Jonathan, once she was safely out of hearing. He had long since learned that once Fran was on a mission, it was best not to distract her from it. She would do what she was sent to do and report back without hesitation, as long as no one provided an alternate path. Once there were options, things could get extremely messy, very fast.

“This isn’t right,” said Enid, gesturing to the rest of the street with one hand. “This shopping district should be bustling. Just look at the place! Buckley doesn’t have half as many stores, and none of the ones we do have look like they’re doing half as well. We should have been fighting for a parking space—or if not fighting, at least cruising a bit before we managed to get one.”

“Whiting has a large enough population, and a high enough average income, that we shouldn’t be the only ones here, even at this hour of the morning,” said Alexander, smoothly picking up the narrative. “Something has clearly changed.”

Jonathan looked between his parents, not making any effort to conceal his horror. “Do you really think she’s powerful enough to rearrange an entire town to suit her whims?”

“That’s just the thing, Johnny: we don’t know.” Enid shook her head. “We have no idea what she’s capable of, and when I look at something that’s as outright wrong as this street, it makes me worry about what we’re about to wander into.”

There was a slam from the direction of the market. The three turned to watch Fran stomp back toward them. It was clear from her expression as she drew closer that she was annoyed but overstating her level of frustration for the benefit of anyone who might be watching her from inside the store.

Once she was close enough to be heard without shouting, she said in a low voice, “I asked for a six pack of beer and a can of bait. Said I was going out fishing with my husband, and wanted him to have a nice enough time that we’d be back to shore before noon. The man behind the counter looked at me like I’d just tried to buy a severed head from the meat department.”


“Because according to him, alcohol is illegal in the United States of America.” She threw up her hands, looking baffled as much as anything. “Seems like they missed the end of Prohibition here—only there was a whole cooler full of beer at the back of the store, and the fellow had a shelf of stronger stuff behind him. It was like he didn’t even realize it was there! I thought about shoplifting, just to see what would happen, and decided that busting me out of jail would slow us down enough to not be worth it.”

“Good decision,” said Alexander. He looked more than just worried as he turned to Enid and Jonathan. “If she’s rewritten that man’s memories enough that he can’t even see the liquor he’s selling, what is she going to do to us?”

“Nothing, because we’ve got your little charms,” said Enid. “Johnny, you and Fran met this woman once before. Where would we find her, if she was trying to play at being normal?”

“She was posing as a music teacher the first time we met her,” Jonathan said. “Look for someplace
where you’d drop off a student to get lessons."

“Good,” said Alexander. “We’ll do that: she’s not going to recognize us. You and Frannie, go looking for anything else that seems as out of place as a man who won’t sell perfectly good beer. We’ll meet back here in two hours.”

“Give us a mouse,” said Fran abruptly, sticking her hand out.

Enid blinked for a moment before unzipping the leather case, allowing a single black and white Aeslin mouse to scamper into view. Fran leaned forward, putting her hand in front of the mouse. It ran up her arm and vanished into her hair without saying a word.

It was a good idea. It was a proactive idea. Make sure that, should something happen, both halves of their party would have something with them to keep an accurate record of the event. Most of all, it was a sobering idea. It meant that the chances of something happening were high enough to make it necessary.

“Be careful,” said Alexander.

Fran smiled lopsidedly as she looped her arm through Jonathan’s. “Aw, that’s sweet,” she said. “He’s gone delusional in his old age. See you soon. Don’t get dead.”

“Haven’t yet,” said Enid, and with that, the two halves of the Healy clan parted ways.

As with many lakeside towns, the residential neighborhoods of Whiting were comingled with the commercial. Small shops operated out of garages, and signs advertising rooms to let or private lessons were hung in front windows. Jonathan and Fran walked arm-in-arm along the avenue, the very picture of a young married couple seeing the sights.

Fran stopped in front of the first house advertising piano lessons, squinting at the sign for a moment before she shook her head and started walking again. Jonathan frowned at her.

“I’m not arguing—I know better than that—but do you mind telling me what makes you so sure that’s not what we’re looking for?”

“Three months,” she said.

“What?”

“The hive got all funny three months ago, right? That’s what your pa said. Well, that sign’s been in the window at least a year, maybe longer, if the ink fade is anything to go by. Unless we think she’s taken over somebody’s house so completely that nobody argued about it, and made sure it was a house with a sign in the window that matched her cover, that ain’t the one.”

Jonathan chuckled a little, looking impressed. “You know, sometimes I forget your plethora of unusual skills.”

“That’s just because I only trot ’em out when I feel the need to really impress you,” said Fran. “Can’t work for the carnival and not know how ink fades out, city boy.”

“Fair enough,” said Jonathan, and kissed her on her temple. They resumed walking down the street, trying to maintain the narrow balance between walking quickly enough to be effective, and moving slowly enough as to seem like normal traffic. In the end, they needn’t have worried overly much: after going through four residential neighborhoods, they still hadn’t seen anyone at all outside of their homes.

“This is giving me the willies,” said Fran.
“You’re not the only one,” said Jonathan. “The lawns are all mowed, the windows have all been washed; if there was a competition for keeping up appearances, this town would score very highly. But there are no children anywhere. Did you notice that? No toys on porches, no bicycles in front of garages. A town this size has to have a school…”

Fran’s grip on his arm tightened. “Then we’d best find it, because I’m not feeling too good about what’s going on here. I want to see those babies.”

“All right,” said Jonathan. He looked around. There was a cross street just ahead of them. It extended in two directions: toward the refinery, and away from the refinery. He couldn’t imagine any city planner thinking that a school belonged in the shadow of a factory. “This way,” said Jonathan, and turned down the cross street, steering Fran along with him.

Neither of them saw the curtains twitch aside on the windows they had already passed, or the eyes that appeared there, watching them as they walked away.

Main Street was as deserted as their first glance had led them to believe. Alexander and Enid strolled along, trying to make the action seem nonchalant, while glancing into windows and taking quick looks down the narrow alleys between the various businesses. In each storefront they saw at least one person—generally the proprietor, only sometimes accompanied by a clerk—standing frozen behind the counter or near the register, like actors preparing for the play to begin.

“This is incredibly unnerving,” murmured Enid, voice pitched low to keep it from carrying to any listening ears. “Just how powerful is this woman? Can she really have seized control of an entire town?”

“No one in Colorado questioned her as a music teacher, even when her students were spending their time sitting in an empty room,” Alexander replied. “There’s no telling how many little changes she could have made in people’s minds, if she’d had reason and time to do it in. Stay alert.”

“You don’t have to tell me that,” said Enid. “We’re walking through a trap shaped like a city. The day I take that calmly is like to be the day I die.”

“Indeed.” Alexander stopped walking, looking thoughtfully at the storefront beside them. It showed a handsome display of hardcover books and stationary, all of them carefully laid out to catch and keep the bibliophile’s eye. “Let’s stop in here.”

Enid followed his gaze. “Dear, this is not a good time to go shopping for books.”

“Perhaps not, but the fact that I’m a librarian and you’re a librarian’s wife will justify the visit if anyone asks unpleasant questions, and perhaps we can learn more about what we’re facing.”

“I really prefer situations that can be more quickly resolved with gunfire,” muttered Enid, and stepped back, allowing him to open the door.

The bookstore smelled, as all good bookstores do, of leather and fresh ink and gently aging paper. The distinct acidic tang that would have indicated a text-eater infestation was missing—if the nasty little bookworms had ever been present, they had been cleared out, possibly by the town’s current dictatrix. Alexander made a mental note to start monitoring the movement of other types of insect, to determine whether it was the thought-transference or some pheromonal tag or territorial marking that was causing the Apraxis to migrate. Knowing the what didn’t necessarily provide the why, and the why could be very important in this matter.

The woman behind the counter was about Enid’s age, but softer, without the muscle definition that came from a lifetime of farming, hunting, and self-defense. She looked up at the jingle of the bell above the
door, offering the pair a polite, if somewhat vague, smile. “Good morning, and welcome to Whiting Books,” she said. “How may I help you?”

“We’re in town with my son and his wife—they’re looking into possibly settling down here, if Johnny gets that job at the refinery, and we thought we’d come along, since it’s a nice drive from Chicago,” said Enid smoothly. All traces of her normally Welsh accent were gone, swallowed deep into her throat. Alexander didn’t say anything. His own English accent was milder, but paradoxically more difficult for him to conceal. He always sounded a little foreign, no matter how much he tried not to. “This is just a beautiful little store. How long have you been here?”

“Oh, I couldn’t say,” said the woman. The calm placidity in her eyes didn’t flicker. “It seems like it’s been forever, but I’m sure it couldn’t be, now could it? Forever is an awfully long time. May I interest you in some postcards?”

“Actually, we were hoping for a copy of the local paper,” said Enid. The stack of newspapers on the counter would have been difficult for her to miss—as would the layer of dust that was growing atop it. All the other surfaces in the store were meticulously clean, but that one pile had been allowed to fall into neglect.

“I’m so sorry I can’t help you,” said the woman, still smiling serenely. “There’s never been a newspaper here in town. I’m afraid you’d have to go to a real big city to find an actual newspaper being printed. We rely on word of mouth around here—and the community bulletin boards, of course. There’s one at the library downtown.”

“Who maintains the bulletin board?” asked Enid. She was struggling to project her best air of calm, genial curiosity. Inwardly, she was roiling. The bookstore clerk couldn’t see a pile of papers that was right next to her. Just how powerful could this Tapper woman be? And if she was as powerful as all of that, could they have any hope at all of stopping her?

The clerk’s smile grew just a fraction of an inch as she replied, “Oh, that would be our librarian, Mrs. Tapper. You can always find her with her finger on the pulse of this community.”

“Is that so,” said Enid, struggling to keep the horror out of her voice. “Well, we’ll just have to go and make her acquaintance. Come on, dear, we don’t want to take up any more of this nice woman’s time.”

“Come back soon!” called the clerk, her last word all but drowned out by the jingle of the bell above the bookstore door. Then she paused, looking confused at the empty shop around her. Who could she possibly have been talking to? It wasn’t like anybody ever came to Whiting. Why, what would be the point in that?

There was nothing here to see.

Jonathan and Fran walked through the residential streets, listening for the sound of children at play. That was the surest way to know there was a school nearby, and given the hour, they were more than reasonably sure that there would be at least one class currently at recess or enjoying a good run around their field. But there was nothing. Only the rustle of the wind in the leaves, and the distant hum of the refinery.

“This is about as creepy as it gets while the sun’s still in the sky,” said Fran, keeping a tight grip on Jonathan’s arm. Her left hand rode low and easy at her side, but Jonathan knew that she wasn’t letting it relax; she could have a knife out and ready to throw in under a second, if she needed to. “I’d almost welcome something nice and bloodthirsty about now. At least that I’d know how to deal with.”

“Please don’t ask the universe for things we’re not in a position to deal with,” said Jonathan quietly. “It
would be most inconvenient if we were—oh.” He stopped mid-sentence, his original topic quite forgotten. They had turned a corner while they spoke, and the scene that had appeared before them was enough to shock the words right out of him.

Fran raised her free hand to cover her mouth. “Oh, my laws,” she murmured, her voice only slightly muffled by her hand.

They had, all accidentally, stumbled upon their target: Whiting Elementary, the larger of the town’s two schools. The front of the building was red brick, adorned with colorful pennants and topped off by a large clock. That was of less interest to the pair than the field that spread out behind the school, hemmed in on all sides by houses and separated from the street by a chain link fence. As they had expected and hoped, there were children there. Dozens of children, all of them standing perfectly still on the playground, their faces turned toward the sky.

They looked normal. They were male and female, tall and short, skinny and fat. Some of them wore nice clothes, and others wore what were clearly hand-me-downs, just a few more washings shy of the rag bag. But none of them were dirty, and none of them were running, or jumping, or doing any of the things a normal child would be expected to do.

As Johnny and Fran looked on in horror, the bell rang in the schoolhouse. The children, almost in unison, turned and walked back into the building. None of them spoke. None of them laughed. None of them looked toward the two strange adults who were staring at them as they went.

When the last child was out of sight, Fran dropped her hand. “Johnny?”

“Yes?”

“I’m going to put a bullet in that arrogant head of hers. I don’t think you should try to stop me.”

Jonathan slowly shook his head. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

The library was a solid little free-standing structure that had probably started life as a schoolhouse, back before the town became large enough to require a proper school. Enid and Alexander parked on the street before taking a moment to study the building, looking for obvious escape routes.

It seemed to be a quite straightforward floor plan. Barring a basement of some sort, there wasn’t much chance of them being separated once they were inside. Enid set the leather satchel containing the mice gently down on the truck’s front seat. “I need your attention, if you would be so kind,” she said.

A row of tiny heads immediately appeared through the open zipper, eyes all fixed on her.

Trying to look like she was doing something perfectly normal and understandable, rather than chatting with a small colony of talking mice, Enid said, “We’re going inside the library, and I can’t excuse carrying this bag with us. What’s more, the Tapper woman should be inside, and I’d rather not take you into her presence while I can avoid it. If we don’t return inside the hour you’re to go find Johnny and Fran and tell them where we went. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Priestess,” squeaked the novice in charge of this expedition, his ears going flat against his head. “We wish you would let one of us Accompany you.”

“I know,” she said gently. “But you can’t. We’ll be back soon.” She slid out of the truck, shutting the door behind her. Alexander was already waiting for her. She forced a smile as she stepped up next to him and slipped her arm through his. “Just had to fix my hair.”
“You look lovely, sweetheart,” he said, and together they walked up the library steps to the front door, which was painted a bright and cheerful red. An artifact of the building’s origins as a primary school, no doubt, one that the town probably maintained as a “tie to the past.” Alexander had often thought that nostalgia was one of the most powerful forces in the world, at least where intelligent creatures were concerned. No matter how good things became, they would always be worse than they had been before in the minds of some, and not as good as they could someday be.

Opening the door released a rush of cool air, scented with furniture polish and paper, and the cool, underlying smell of library, which was very much like the smell of bookstore, only larger and even more invasive. Alexander relaxed marginally at that smell. It was so ordinary, so much a part of his daily life, that he couldn’t help thinking it would have changed if Heloise Tapper were really standing as the librarian.

The entryway fed into a small space that had doubtless once been the school’s mud room. The cubbies and coat hooks were gone now, replaced by a returns desk and a small cart with books offered up for sale by the Friends of the Whiting Library. Alexander looked around, searching for the promised community bulletin board. Enid focused on the book sale cart. There was dust on the handle. Now, she wasn’t a librarian, but she had been a librarian’s wife for decades, and she was well-acquainted with the cheerfully interfering women of the Friends of the Library. They would have sooner died than allow dust to build up on their precious wares.

Whatever was wrong with this town, it extended to the library. Of that much, she was sure.

Alexander followed her gaze to the cart and nodded, indicating that he had seen the same thing she had. With no further discussion, they moved further in, past the returns desk and into the airy cathedral of the main room.

Shelves lined the walls. More shelves, these free-standing, filled the rest of the available space, falling away only when they reached the miniaturized fantasy kingdom of the children’s section, where all the chairs were made for smaller bodies, and all the books were brightly colored. A few long reading tables appeared here and there between the shelves, like ships sailing in a sea of knowledge. There were no patrons.

But there was a librarian. She was seated at a large mahogany desk tucked away behind the library counter, her head bent over whatever she was studying. Her hair was black, and her skin—what they could see of it from a distance—was exceedingly pale. Alexander and Enid walked across the library to the counter. She didn’t look up.

The two exchanged a look, equally bemused, before Alexander turned to face the woman and cleared his throat. “Excuse me?” he called, making no effort to blunt or disguise his accent. “My wife and I are lost. Is this the library?”

The librarian’s head snapped up, revealing a pinched but pretty face and large blue eyes of a color that seemed somehow unreal, like looking at the sky through a sheet of ice. She looked confused at first, and then, without missing a beat, her confusion became something akin to anger. “How did you get here?” she demanded, standing. Her voice was perfectly pleasant, at odds with the scowl that was forming on her face.

“‘The door was unlocked,’ said Alexander, feigning bafflement. ‘I’m sorry, are you closed? Should we come back later?’”

“We’re on a tour of the state, you see, and my cousin Marian said that this was one of the finest small town libraries in Indiana,” said Enid. “I told her, Marian, I said, you can’t be serious—Whiting is a refinery town! What would they want with a library? But she was firm, so we thought we’d come through and see if she was serious.”
Any real librarian would have been unable to resist that lure. Either they would have leapt at the chance to explain why they were the best, or they would have been offended by the insinuation that a refinery town couldn’t have a decent library—or possibly, if they were exceedingly lucky, both reactions at once.

The death-pale woman who had been seated at the librarian’s desk did neither. She simply continued to scowl as she said, “We’re open for business, but I’m afraid we’re short-staffed today, so if you need any help, you may find yourselves waiting for quite some time.”

“Oh,” said Alexander. He sounded genuinely disappointed. “Well, that’s too bad, Miss…?”

“Mrs. Tapper,” said the woman. “I’m the head librarian here.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, ma’am,” said Alexander. “I’m Paul, and this is my wife, Caroline. We’re sorry we snuck up on you before. It wasn’t our intention.”

For the first time since she’d stood, Heloise Tapper’s expression changed. Her scowl melted away, replaced by a look of absolute bemusement. “I must have been very focused on my book,” she said, tone remaining neutral, even pleasant, despite the confusion on her face. “I’m normally much more aware of my surroundings.”

“It happens to the best of us,” said Alexander. “May we look around a bit without disturbing you?”

“Do what you like,” said Heloise, and flung herself back into her seat without as much as a goodbye, turning her chair around so as to make their dismissal even more clear.

Alexander and Enid exchanged a glance as soon as Heloise’s back was turned. None of this made any sense. Still, they had managed to find her, and their charms against thought-transference seemed to be working, at least so far. That meant they needed to keep up their masquerade at least enough to avoid suspicion.

“Come on, honey,” said Alexander. “Let’s go see the reference section.”

Jonathan and Fran walked back toward the parking lot where they were meant to meet his parents as quickly as they dared. Any faster and they would certainly have attracted attention to themselves, which was the last thing either of them wanted. Not in a town where the children stood like statues on the playground and the streets were all deserted. Something was terribly wrong in Whiting, and whether that something was Heloise Tapper or even worse, they didn’t particularly care. They just wanted to avoid being swept up in it before they could make it stop.

The truck still wasn’t there when they arrived. The pair paused for a moment before turning, almost in unison, to check the clock that was visible atop the distant shape of city hall. The official meeting time was still twenty minutes away.

“We’re early,” said Fran needlessly.

“We’ll wait,” said Jonathan.

“While you’re waiting, would you care to explain what you were doing at my school?” asked a voice from behind them.

They both jumped, and it was sheer force of will—that, and a desire not to engage in a shooting match in the middle of the city—that kept them from reaching for their weapons as they turned to face the speaker.
It was a man, tall and slim and surprisingly pale for a refinery town in Indiana. His hair was black, and his eyes were disconcertingly blue, like pieces of carnival glass that had somehow found themselves inside a human head. He was frowning sharply at the pair of them, looking like he’d never seen anything like them before.

“I asked you a question,” he said.

“We noticed,” said Fran. “You just startled us, is all. We’re sorry we were looking at your schoolhouse if we weren’t supposed to be. We’re considering moving to Whiting sometime in the next year or so, and wanted to see the town. That included the school. A couple our age has to consider all the possible futures, don’t we?”

His frown didn’t lessen, although his tone was perfectly pleasant as he said, “I suppose that makes sense. In the future, it would be better if you called ahead. We don’t want to risk disrupting the children’s schooling.”

“No, we wouldn’t want that,” agreed Fran. “Forgive me for asking, but are you all right? You look a mite upset. Did we throw things off that badly?”

“I…” The man stopped, his frown turning into something complicated and confused. “I just didn’t realize that you were coming. That’s all.”

“We’ll be sure to contact the school before we come again,” Fran said. “Are you a teacher? If we moved here, would you be looking after little Richard and Sally?”

“I’m the principal,” said the man. “Robert Tapper.”

“Pleasure,” said Fran, and continued to smile, despite the difficulty it presented. She wanted to react to the man’s name. She didn’t dare. She dare didn’t offer her name, either, and Jonathan followed her lead, keeping quiet. The two of them simply stood there, smiling pleasantly, until the man—who had never ceased to look unhappily confused—finally turned and walked away. Still they stood, not moving, until he had turned the corner and disappeared from view.

“We alone here?” asked Fran quietly.

Jonathan twisted, scanning the parking lot for signs that they were being watched. “We seem to be,” he said, keeping his voice equally low.

“How much do you remember about what Heloise Tapper looked like?” She asked the question as carefully as she could, trying to keep the blame out of her voice. That, too, wasn’t all that easy. Even knowing that Heloise had used thought-transference to somehow manipulate Johnny’s understanding of his own past, Fran had never quite gotten over the image of him pulling a gun on her.

“She was…pretty,” said Jonathan slowly. He sounded uncertain about even that much. “Her hair was dark, I remember that. I think she was pale? Like she didn’t get out in the sun very often. I’m sorry, darling, I forgot most of the memories she made for me as soon as you broke her hold.”

“Believe me, I’m glad of that; if you hadn’t forgotten, I’d’ve been a widow before I was ever a wife.”

Jonathan, who valued his skin still attached to his bones, wisely said nothing about the contradiction inherent in her words.

Fran continued, “Here’s the thing: if you stood the man we were just speaking to next to her and said he was her twin brother, I’d believe you. He looked like a boy version of the same person. Not just a relative—the same person. We already knew she wasn’t human, but Johnny, what if this town is so messed up because there’s more than one of whatever-they-are hanging around? One of ’em was enough to convince you that you were a devoted husband, scare the crap out of a whole hive of Apraxis,
and get an entire town to believe that she belonged. Two or more…”

“Might explain why we’re back in the age of Prohibition, and why those schoolchildren were acting like they had been drained of all independent thought,” said Jonathan, picking up the thought. “At least we know one thing now: the charms work. He didn’t change anything in my mind, that I’m aware of, and he didn’t change yours, either.”

“Why would you say such things about my husband?” asked Fran, all wide-eyed innocence. Jonathan’s scowl was enough to set her laughing for a moment before she sobered, and said, “His face.”

“What about it?”

“There was something wrong with the way he was using it. It was like it didn’t match his voice, you know? He was trying to sound all pleasant and local and like he didn’t mind one bit if we wanted to hang around and look at stuff, as long as we came by the office first. But he was looking daggers at us the whole time. I got the feeling he couldn’t…well, that he couldn’t quite see us the way he expected to be able to.”

“If the Tappers come from a species that is naturally capable of reading minds, they may not have developed the fine facial recognition skills that humans and associated species possess,” said Jonathan slowly. His tone was thoughtful: he had switched over into his academic mode, and Fran was happy to let him. He did his best work when he had divorced himself from the situation, and started looking at it purely as a scientific conundrum. “That would explain the unusual facial expressions, especially with us wearing the charms to prevent thought-transference. If he can’t ‘see’ the appropriate expressions in our minds, he can’t mimic them.”

“But how do they keep from getting caught? You can’t pull faces like that and expect that nobody’s going to notice. That’s just silly.”

“You can if you’re also capable of subtly smoothing out the memories of the people around you, keeping them from remembering that you did anything out of the ordinary,” said Jonathan. “More, we’re acting as if this sort of manipulation is a blunt instrument, but I remember when Heloise was changing my mind, Fran, and it was a subtle thing. It was delicate. There isn’t another word for it.” He shook his hand, looking frustrated by the lack of appropriate vocabulary. “She made her changes deliberately and so that they would be internally consistent. The only thing she did wrong was in omitting the mice, and those wouldn’t be something she’d have any experience with.”

“Well, why not?” asked Fran.

“Because, Priestess, there are so few of us,” squeaked a voice from inside her hair.

Fran and Jonathan exchanged a look. The mouse that had accompanied them for their tour around Whiting had been quiet the whole time; so quiet that they had almost forgotten it was there.

“What do you mean, hon?” asked Fran.

The mouse emerged onto her shoulder, running pinkish paws once over its whiskers before it said, gravely, “We may be the Last. We do not know. We know only that every colony that has left us, for whatever reason—religious schism or the need to seek new mates, in a new place, as has always been the way—has vanished forever from our Ken, never to return. We have heard of no other colonies, learnt of no other faiths, in more generations than I have years to claim as my own. We are like to be the Last.”

Fran stared at the mouse. Jonathan looked away. That the Aeslin mice were virtually extinct outside the Healy family attic was a quietly unspoken fact. Everyone in the family knew. Aside from Fran, everyone had known for decades, and the only reason she hadn’t known as long as because there had been a time
in her life before she belonged to the family. The Aeslin were dying out. They were an evolutionary dead end, not suited to the harsh realities of the world in which nature had designed them to exist.

Finally, Fran spoke. “So you think that when Heloise read Johnny’s mind, she didn’t think the talkin’ mice were real?”

“Even so, Priestess,” said the mouse.

“Huh. Well, all right. You’d know better than I would.” She turned back to Jonathan. Then she paused and smiled, relief flooding her face. “Look behind you.”

Jonathan turned to see his parents’ truck pulling into the lot. “Oh, thank heavens,” he said. “We have a great deal to discuss.”

The lot was still mostly empty, and it took very little time before Alexander and Enid were safely parked and climbing out of the vehicle. Jonathan and Fran rushed over, ready to share their news. They were cut off by Enid, who announced calmly, “We’ve seen her. She’s in the library.”

The younger Healys stopped. There was a pause before Jonathan asked cautiously, “Heloise Tapper?”

“Yes,” confirmed Alexander. “Who else would we have seen?”

“Could’ve been Robert Tapper, since he’s apparently replaced the local school principal,” said Fran. “That’s why everyone in this town is so brain-scrambled. They’ve got two of whatever that woman is to deal with. Maybe more, I don’t know.”

Alexander looked horrified. Enid frowned at him.

“All right, Alex, what are you thinking?” she asked. “You’ve got to be thinking something nasty, or you wouldn’t be making that face. What’s the problem?”

“Two of them. A male and a female. In the same small town, when whatever they are is rare enough that we’ve never encountered one of them before.” Alex’s tone was grim. “What does that sound like to you?”

Enid raised a hand and covered her mouth. Jonathan closed his eyes, going pale. Fran looked between the members of her family, waiting for one of them to take the next step and explain. None of them did. Finally, frustrated, she placed her thumb and forefinger in her mouth and whistled shrilly. It was an old horse-calling trick that she had learned when she was still with the carnival, and it could carry for miles.

The others turned and looked at her. Fran dropped her hand and shrugged.

“Y’all were going into one of those wacky science fugues where you just sort of figure everyone else knows what’n the hell you’re on about,” she said reasonably. “We don’t have time for that sort of thing right now. Why’s this such a big deal?”

“Because there is a good chance that Heloise Tapper and her…friend…have been rewriting this town for a very simple, very universal reason,” said Alexander. “I think they’re nesting. And that means they’re getting ready to breed.”

For safety’s sake, they had retreated to a point two miles outside the Whiting city limits—after making another stop at the gas station where Fran had acquired their breakfast, this time to buy a map of the town. Jonathan and Alexander were bent over it, marking all the reasonable routes that Heloise and Robert could be taking between the library and the elementary school. Enid had wandered off into the
fields alongside the highway to let off a little pent-up aggression, leaving Fran to watch over the Aeslin mice that had accompanied them on the trip.

“I just want to be clear about this,” she said firmly, fixing the colony with a steady eye. “When we go back into Whiting, we’re leaving you out here. You got me? You’re going to be nice and safe in your little case, and you can have a nice vacation without worrying the pants off us in the process.”

“But Priestess, how can we Observe and Remember if you will not let us accompany you?” asked the novice in charge of the detachment from the colony. “One of us must be with you. You must allow us One.”

“Nope,” she said blandly. “Mustn’t. Shan’t, either, so there’s no point in trying for that angle. Robert didn’t spot you because you were in my hair, and he wasn’t looking for mouse-brains, and so you weren’t a target. But once we have them cornered he’ll be going for whatever he can find that might help him. We don’t want you being taken over by a deranged mind-reader whose girlfriend had a known tropism toward violent force.” She paused then, and chuckled. “I just said ‘tropism.’ City boy must be rubbing off on me.”

“But Priestess, what harm could one of us do to You, in all Your Glory?” asked the mouse. The others squeaked and twitched their ears in agreement, although none of them said anything loudly enough for it to reach Fran’s ears. She wondered, sometimes, whether they sounded like ponderous giants to the mice, which always sounded a little shrill and sped-up to her.

“Nothing,” she admitted, and leaned closer, trying to look the novice in the eyes. It was difficult: they simply weren’t constructed at the same scale. “But the trouble is, there’s a lot that I could do to you. If one of them took over your thoughts and convinced you that we were the enemy…my hands are bigger than your bodies. I could crush you so easily. Or you could be knocked to the ground, or stepped on, or…it’s just not worth it. Not when we can come back here and tell you what happened. Do you understand? I know this is important to you, I know you want to see what happens, but I’m begging here. Please don’t try to follow us. Please don’t make me be afraid that I’ll be used against you—because if she sees how much you love us, she’ll turn you into weapons just to make us destroy you.”

“Priestess…” The novice bowed his head, revealing the white fur on the back of his neck. For a moment, there was silence. Finally, he said, “It will be as You have said. But we are truly sorry that we cannot accompany You into danger. We have failed You.”

“No, you haven’t,” said Fran. “Keeping yourselves safe when you can’t gain anything by going into danger isn’t failing me. It’s protecting me. I’ll be better at doing what has to be done if I know you’re nowhere nearby.”

The scuff of a foot on the gravel bank behind her alerted her to Jonathan’s approach even before he spoke, saying, “We all will be. We thank you for your willingness to sacrifice for your faith.”

“HAIL!” chorused the mice—but there was something sad about the word, stealing its customary wild enthusiasm. Better than anyone, the Aeslin mice understood that sometimes your gods walked away, and never came back to you. Not alive, anyway.

Jonathan put his hand on Fran’s shoulder, murmuring, “It’s time.”

She nodded and rose, following him back to the truck. “What’s going on?” she asked.

“If they’re intending to breed, they’ll need a place with space, privacy, and one presumes, decent facilities to support a pregnancy,” said Alexander. He tapped a circle that he had drawn on the map, almost precisely equidistant between the school and the library. “This is the mayor’s house, traditionally. It’s large, airy, and has plenty of room for two people who don’t enjoy each other’s company.”
Now Fran frowned. “What makes you think they don’t like each other?”

“I don’t think that whatever effect they’re using to befuddle the townsfolk is geographically limited. We’ve seen enough people, in enough different parts of town, that I’m thinking it’s more likely something akin to hypnotism. The Tappers may need to speak to each person individually, which would limit how quickly their sphere of influence can spread, but they don’t seem to need to keep close in order to keep it going. They can just set up their little suggestions and move on. That means they’re spending their days in different places, different parts of town, because they want to.”

“They’d have no privacy at all, otherwise.”

“So they’re here because they need to breed, and they’re spending as much time apart as they can while that’s going on because they don’t like each other very much?” Fran shook her head slowly. “Seems like a complicated way to go about making babies. The human way’s a lot more fun. So are they like, I don’t know, cats, then? The mama cat chases off the papa cat as soon as the deal’s been done, but she tolerates her kittens until they’re grown up enough to be competition.”

“I…don’t know yet,” said Alexander slowly. “It’s not scientific to make guesses.”

Fran snorted. “Everything we’ve been doin’ since we got here has been about making guesses. What do you think?”

“I don’t think they’re like cats,” said Alexander. “I think they’re more like cuckoos. Brood parasites. Every other race of intelligent cryptids we know has a documented culture—even if the documenting was done by the Covenant after they had burnt that culture to the ground, at least they acknowledge it was there. These things seem to prey exclusively on what’s been built by other species.”

“We don’t know they target anything but humans,” said Fran. “I think you’re stretchin’.”

“Given that the bogeymen knew about the charms to prevent active thought-transference, and knew what she was—and further, given that the Letiche witch who sold me the charms we’re all wearing had spent the time to learn how to cast the charms, I think it’s egotistical to assume that these creatures solely target humanity,” said Alexander.

“It also explains how they can drop out of sight the way that they do,” said Jonathan. “If they’re rare—and they would have to be; a predator that can take over an entire city without being noticed can’t be common, the world simply doesn’t have the resources to support it—and they move from one culture to another at their whim, then it would be entirely possible for them to leave here and vanish into the company of the gorgons or the ghouls. They could spend a few years there, bending their companions to their will, and then move on to greener pastures.”

“It’s a cunning method of hunting, and it means we need to be extremely careful,” said Alexander. He glanced toward the side of the road. Enid was trudging through the field, a brace of rabbits slung over one shoulder. He couldn’t quite stop himself from smiling, very briefly, before he turned back to the others and continued grimly, “They’ve taken over this city. We’ve only seen it in the passive sense, with the people who don’t know what’s going on around them, but there may be an active side to their occupation, as well.”

“You mean like where Johnny was ready to put a bullet between my eyes for threatening his ‘wife,’” said Fran darkly.

Alexander nodded. “Yes, exactly that. We can’t dismiss the idea that the people of Whiting might respond if the Tappers call for them—and we won’t necessarily hear the call, if they send it with their minds.”
There’s another problem,” said Fran grimly. “You said they might be doin’ this—working together, taking over a whole city, the entire shebang—because they’re getting ready to breed. Now, I don’t have any objections to killin’ that bitch so dead that she never existed in the first place, and I don’t have any major ones to shootin’ her husband or whatever he is, since it’s clear he’s the kind of boy critter that thinks girl critters like her are just plain dandy. That puts him in the ‘kill it now’ category as far as I’m concerned. But…” She stopped there, anger and indecision warring for control of her face.

“But you don’t know if you can kill a baby,” said Enid, walking up to join the group. Fran nodded. Enid smiled, sadly. “What a moral quandary to walk back in on. Maybe I should have stayed out in the field for a few minutes more, and let you come to a conclusion without me.”

“What if they’re not here to breed? What if they’re here because they’ve already bred?” Fran sounded anguished. “They’ve done bad things, and they’re predators, we’re sure of that. I want to see that woman bleed for what she did to Daniel. I want to rip her apart with my bare hands. But I don’t think I have it in me to kill a baby. Babies aren’t good or bad or anything, no matter what their parents were. They’re just potential. How can it be right to kill something that’s just potential?”

“I think you’re borrowing trouble, Fran,” said Alexander gently. “We don’t know that they’ve bred, and if they have…well, we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. For right now, we just need to figure out what our approach is going to be. We can’t afford to go in guns blazing. If the townspeople see us, they may stop us, and we can’t just shoot innocent bystanders for the crime of having their minds controlled.”

“Not unless they present an immediate danger,” corrected Enid gently. “I won’t kill innocents unless I have to, but I also won’t let them hurt my family. I’m sorry. Maybe that means I’m not as good a person as I’ve always wanted to be. If it means you all stay alive, I think I can live with that.”

“I think we all can,” said Jonathan grimly. “All right: we’ve identified the mayor’s house as their most likely nesting point. Mother, you’ll scout the perimeter while Father approaches from the rear. Fran and I will take the front door. If they’re there, we’ll know immediately, and be able to distract them while you and Father come in the back door. If there’s not a back door, find a window. I’m confident that you’ll be able to find an alternate access point for the house.”

“What if we have the wrong house?” asked Enid.

“Then we step back, and we try again. They can’t detect us while we’re wearing these charms; if we claim to have gone to the wrong address, even if they’re suspicious, they can’t prove anything. We’ll be able to regroup.” Jonathan shook his head. “I don’t expect that to work more than twice, but twice is better than not at all. We can do this. We can overpower them, question them, and know, finally, for certain, that she won’t be hurting us again.”

Enid looked at her son and didn’t say anything. In that moment, she was seeing Jonathan as he would have been if they had stayed with the Covenant: calm, collected, and entirely willing to kill two non-humans for the crime of their nature. At the same time, she knew that he had been pushed past all reasonable bounds. Had Heloise Tapper walked away after Colorado—had she allowed Daniel to live—they wouldn’t be in Whiting now. They would have been perfectly content to live and let live, respecting the balance of nature.

Heloise had been the one to make things personal. Whatever happened next was on her.

“Are we all in agreement?” asked Jonathan.

“Just let me give these rabbits to the mice,” said Enid.

“Take your time,” said Alexander. “We have a few hours before sunset. We move at dark.”

The four Healys scattered, although none of them went very far. There was a great deal to do before the
sun went down. It’s always more work than anyone expects, planning a murder.

The mayor’s house was dark, with only a single light in what Jonathan assumed was the living room window. There should have been more. A house this size, there should have been a small staff; if nothing else: a cook in the kitchen preparing the next day’s bread, a housekeeper turning down the linens upstairs. But there was just the one light, and that more than anything made him certain they were in the right place.

Fran kept her hand resting lightly on his arm as they strolled down the sidewalk for the third time, letting him guide her while she watched the surrounding houses. In contrast to the mayor’s house, they had too many lights on, and she had seen more than a few faces through the gauzy curtains, twisted and distorted by the fabric until they became the shades of beasts. More lights went on with every circuit of the block.

“They may not be able to ‘see’ us mentally, but they’ve sure got this town on high alert,” she murmured, moving her lips as little as possible. “Can’t say that one of these folks won’t run to warn the masters if we don’t act soon. You seen enough? Because I think it’s time for us to move.”

“I have,” said Jonathan, and pulled open the front gate, allowing her to lead the way onto the property. It was a tactical decision, and not as heartless as it seemed: Fran might not have been raised a Healy, but she was the fastest shot they had, and was second only to Enid when it came to hitting her target without time to steady her aim. If anything attacked them, Fran was more than capable of taking it out while Jonathan was still going for his gun.

Nothing attacked them as they walked down the long walkway to the front porch, and climbed the steps. They exchanged a glance and nodded in unison before Fran leaned forward and calmly rang the bell. The door opened a few seconds later, revealing a weary-looking Heloise Tapper. “I know you, don’t I?” she asked. Then, perplexingly: “You came to the library today. I’m sure I did something to you once upon a time. You may as well come inside. Whatever happens next, I probably deserve it.”

Fran and Jonathan exchanged another glance, bewildered. They hadn’t gone to the library…but his parents had, and hadn’t they theorized that these…whatever the Tappers were, these cuckoos, couldn’t see properly if they couldn’t read the mind of the person in front of them. Maybe they were more right about that than they had expected.

“Thank you, ma’am,” said Jonathan, and stepped inside. Fran was right behind him, warily scanning the space in front of them. Neither of them looked back. Neither of them expected something as simple as a man hidden by an open door.

The door swung closed. There was a small, brittle snap as Robert Tapper reached up and broke the chain holding Fran’s anti-thought-transference charm around her neck. It was followed by a much louder click as she released the safety on the gun that was suddenly in her hand and pointed at the back of Jonathan’s head.

“There now,” said Heloise Tapper, suddenly smiling. “I did do something to you. Hello, Johnny. It’s been a long time.”

Enid saw Fran and Jonathan disappear through the front door and moved quickly to join Alexander behind the house, taking a route through the side yard of a house a block over, where the lights had not yet come on. He was waiting just outside the back door. A few seconds with a lock pick and they were in, stepping into a darkened kitchen that smelled of dust and neglect. It was just light enough for Enid to
see the dirty dishes piled in the sink, and the heaped-up remains of moldering food on the counter. She wrinkled her nose. These cuckoos clearly didn’t care about housekeeping.

Then again, why should they? It wasn’t like they’d made the nest that they were defiling.

Silently, the pair crept out of the kitchen and down the hall, following the light, listening for the sound of voices.

The first voice they heard belonged to Jonathan, and boded nothing good. “You can kill me if you like, but you can’t control my wife forever,” he said. “She’ll break whatever compulsion you have on her, and you’ll be sorry you didn’t run the second you realized we were here.”

Heloise clicked her tongue. “Oh, Johnny, Johnny, Johnny. I just can’t believe you went and married the uncivilized little thing. Wasn’t I a good enough wife for you? I would have made you happy, you know I would.”

“You killed my son,” he said, through gritted teeth.

“A son you would never have had if you’d just gone along with me,” Heloise countered. “I could’ve been your whole world, and when I got tired of you and cast you aside, you wouldn’t have had the strength left to mourn. It would’ve been better than this, because Johnny, let me tell you, this is going to be an awful way to die.”

“I wish you wouldn’t toy with your food,” grumbled a male voice that Enid and Alexander both assumed had to belong to Robert. He was the only absent party in this little passion play, after all. “Just make the bitch shoot him, and then herself. Nice and easy, and we can get back to amusing ourselves.”

“Don’t tell me what to do, Robert,” snapped Heloise. “I’m having enough trouble tolerating your company without you telling me what to do.”

“The feeling is mutual.”

Jonathan cleared his throat. “If you would release your grip on my wife’s mind, I would be happy to come back later, and allow you to settle this little spat in privacy.”

Smart boy, thought Enid, wishing she could see into the living room. She settled for hunkering down where she was and closing her eyes, trying to map the relative locations of the speakers. Once she knew where everyone was—more or less—she could leave the hall and start shooting.

Fran hadn’t spoken. Not once since her mother- and father-in-law had entered the house. That was the only real problem with figuring out what to do next. Rushing the living room might take out the Tappers, but it stood a more than even chance of also killing Fran.

“You’re not going anywhere,” said Heloise. “How did you find us?”

“Shouldn’t you be asking my wife that? You’ve seized her mind.”

“I could have yours, too, if I wanted it,” said Heloise. “You’re only still wearing that little trinket because I’m not afraid of you.”

“I am,” muttered Robert. “This woman’s brain is a cesspool of violence and pornographic imagery. Humans are disgusting. Please, can’t we just kill them?”

“I said no,” said Heloise. “Don’t push me. You know I’ll win.”

Alexander and Enid exchanged a glance. All was apparently not well in the cuckoos’ nest. They could use that to their advantage, if Fran would ever speak.
“Why did you take the town?” Jonathan’s tone was level, even reasonable, like he was having a perfectly normal conversation with two perfectly normal people. “Surely you don’t make it a habit to claim ownership of areas quite this…robust. I can’t imagine it’s easy for you, and it must increase the chances of your being found.”

“I wanted it, and so I took it,” said Heloise. “That’s how it is with us. When we want something, we take it, just like we’ve taken your wife. How did you find us? No one called you. We’d have known.”

“We followed the Apraxis wasps.”

Robert made a disgusted noise. “Those vermin. I told you I saw signs that they’d been in the woods near the lake. We should have hunted them down and killed the entire filthy hive before we let ourselves settle here. Imagine if they’d found the baby.”

The sound of flesh striking flesh was unmistakable. “Idiot!” hissed Heloise. “They didn’t know until you told them!”

“Yes, we did,” said Jonathan. “There was no other reason for you to have seized so many minds, set yourself up in such public positions. You came here to breed. Where is the infant? We’ll spare it, even if we can’t spare you.”

“Oh no?” asked Heloise.

“No,” said Jonathan. “You killed our son. I’m terribly sorry, but that’s something we can’t forgive you for.”

Heloise actually laughed. Alexander, who hadn’t believed himself capable of hating the woman any more than he did already, felt his heart harden.

“Why did you do it?” asked Jonathan. “We were miles away from you. We would never have gone looking. You were a curiosity, not a threat.”

“But you were looking, or at least you were charting the movement of those damn bugs, and what was I supposed to think? That you just wanted to know where the Apraxis were in case they might endanger your vacation plans? Uh-uh. I had to send you a message, one that you couldn’t possibly ignore. I had to make sure you understood the danger of tracking me down.” She clicked her tongue again. “I didn’t specifically tell them to go after your larva. That was entirely on whoever the bogeymen sent. Take any issues up with the way the contract was executed with them, not me.”

“He was just a message to you.” Jonathan sounded infinitely sad, yet somehow also unsurprised. “You’re a monster.”

“And quite proud of that fact,” said Robert.

“I see. Have you heard enough?”

“I have,” said Fran, finally giving the listeners her location in the room. The sound of her voice was followed almost immediately by the sound of a gun being fired.

“Johnny!” shrieked Enid, all stealth abandoned as she rose and flung herself into the living room—only to find Jonathan and Fran, both with their pistols drawn, slowly backing Heloise Tapper into a corner. Robert was dead on the floor, a hole between his eyes and a startled expression on his face. Something was leaking from the hole, something Enid could tell even at a casual glance wasn’t blood, but there wasn’t time to dwell on that. There was the matter of Heloise still to be attended to.

“How?” she demanded. She looked up at the sound of footsteps, and something almost like hope—raw
and naked—flashed across her face before she realized who had come racing in. Her attention went back to Fran. “I had you! I had you!”

“Nope,” said Fran laconically. “Didn’t you learn anything from Colorado? I ain’t yours to have.”

“Where’s the baby?” Jonathan asked. “We’ll see to it that your child gets a fair chance.”

Much to their surprise, Heloise laughed. “If I thought it would save me, I’d tell you. But it won’t, and so I won’t. You’ll never find our child, and when it grows up, it’s going to be just like mama. So you won. So what? You can’t beat us all. You can’t—”

Two gunshots silenced the rest of her rant; two holes appeared in her forehead. Heloise Tapper, looking as surprised as her mate, wobbled backward and slid down to the floor, silent.

Johnny and Fran, who had fired in almost the same instant, lowered their guns and turned to Enid and Alexander. If they had expected to be chastised, they were sorely disappointed: not a harsh word was spoken as their elders closed the gap between them, put their arms around them—Enid with Johnny, Alexander with Fran—and held them tight.

Getting out of Whiting before the population could react to the sound of gunfire was made a little easier by the length of the Tappers’ stay. Most of the citizens had been under mental control for so long that they couldn’t shake it off all at once; they reacted slowly, and by the time anyone thought to investigate the mayor’s house, the Healys were long gone.

They stood around the truck, the night sky spread out above them and the bodies of the two cuckoos wrapped in tarp in the back, mostly hidden by the suitcases. Dissecting them would be educational. “You could have warned us,” said Alexander.

“I did,” countered Fran. “We told you she didn’t manage to catch hold of me in Colorado. Don’t know why, and don’t care.”

“We didn’t figure on Robert breaking Fran’s charm, but once he had, it seemed like a worthwhile gamble,” said Jonathan. “I knew she wasn’t under their control.”

“How?” asked Enid.

“If they’d really been able to read more than just her surface thoughts, and had seen what kind of threat we posed, they would have ordered her to shoot me on the spot,” said Jonathan.

There was a moment of silence as the elder Healys considered this. Finally, Alexander said, “So it’s over. Do you feel any better?”

“I feel like maybe now we can move on,” said Fran slowly. “We did our job. We made sure that Daniel could rest in peace. That was enough, wasn’t it?”

“It’s never enough,” said Enid. She touched Fran lightly on the arm, one mother to another. Then she sighed and said, “I’ll get the mice. We should head home. Mary will be climbing the walls by now.”

“Yes,” said Jonathan, putting his arm around Fran’s waist. “Let’s go home.”