

HOTLINE TO HEAVEN



A METAPHYSICAL NOVEL
IN EBOOK FORMAT
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There were two navy blue police cars at the crime scene when Jillian Malone arrived, as well as an ambulance and several other vehicles. A variety of official-looking people she didn't know milled outside the trailer that housed the psychic hotline she'd so reluctantly agreed to work on. Robert, Jillian's best friend and fellow hotline reader, ran over and flung himself into her arms. She engulfed his tiny form and held him tight, feeling him shake.

"Oh, Jillie, it's so awful! I'll never be able to put it out of my mind! When I got to work, she didn't answer the buzzer, so I let myself in and found her on the floor. I shook her, thinking she'd passed out or something, but her body was limp. She's dead!"

"What happened? How did she die?"

"She was strangled. Her color was terrible, and her tongue was sticking out. You know how big her eyes were, but they were bigger than ever. They were clouded over, staring into space. I'll see them in my dreams. I won't sleep for a week."

He shuddered and sobbed convulsively in her arms. "I feel bad about the way we always put her down. She was a pain in the neck, but she didn't deserve to be killed. He paused to catch his breath, then went on. "And, I can't bear to say it, but she didn't have any panties on." As risqué as Robert was always pretending to be, he had probably never been with a woman in his life.

They wheeled the body out then, sending Robert into hyperventilation. *The black bag on the stretcher--how many times have I seen that scene on the news*, Jillian asked herself unbelievably. *I never thought that some day it might be somebody I knew.*

She bit the inside of her cheek to find out whether this was a dream—something her dad had taught her when she had nightmares as a child. It hurt, so she had to be awake.

She overheard a cop at the door of the trailer, talking to the ambulance attendant. "What a rummy bunch this is—trouble waiting to happen. Can you believe they're fortune-tellers from New York City? A 900 hotline right here in Port Townsend? They shoulda stayed back east. We sure as hell don't need them here."

She burned with shame as the ambulance attendant snickered to the cop. "A fortune teller? If she was so damned psychic, why didn't she see this coming?" They brayed with laughter.

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Hotline to Heaven. An astrological/metaphysical mystery novel. 8/2004
Angel in Peril. An astrological/metaphysical mystery novel. 8/2004
Flower Remedies—How Plants' Energies Can Heal Us. 2007 Edition

This book is dedicated to Karen McCauley for all the good times—and the good mysteries—we have shared. And for her help, so freely given during my illness.

About the Charts and Other Features of this Ebook: The characters in this book gave birth to themselves, and it was only after I came to know and love them that I began to speculate on their astrology charts. Having an idea of their age, I got a feeling for their Sun, Moon, and Rising Sign and then looked through the ephemeris for dates that fit those signs. Not only did I find the charts, but also the charts fit the characters well. Then, eerily enough, the transits for those charts also worked, using the year 1995, when the mystery was being written. Click on the bookmark tab on the right hand side of the page to find the characters' charts and to return to them whenever you like. Unfortunately, not all the characters were willing to cough up—I mean, divulge—their birth information. Those who are not students of astrology can use bookmark tab for the glossary, which contains definitions of the astrology jargon Jillian lamentably insists on using.

An ebook is also searchable—an advantage you will have in solving this case that neither Jillian Malone nor the police had in 1995. And so, for instance, if you started to feel like the scarves were significant, you could easily look back and see where else they were mentioned. Open the search engine by clicking on the binoculars on the tool bar. When it opens, put the term you wish to search for in the search engine box, and in seconds it will generate a list of all the places in the book that term appears. Click on the links to go to those sections.



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Chapter One

March 20

The Angel of Death kissed the panties that the Whore of Satan had worn and put them back on the altar.

*I warned her to change or die.
I gave her three chances.
She continued to sin.
Then she went to her rest, and peace was restored.*

The Angel of Death lovingly kissed the worn white leather Bible.

*The Whore from the Bookstore was only the first.
Now they say more of Satan's spawn are coming.
The Lord will need me again.
The world is full of sin.
I will give them a chance to change.
I will warn them they are to die.*

The Angel of Death knelt and prayed for strength.

* * * * *

March 25-27

It wasn't until Montana that they seriously began to get on each other's nerves. Jillian Malone, whose turn it was to drive, was exhausted from days of wrestling with the big, overloaded trailer that held all their belongings. With one hand, she tried to subdue her fly-away blonde hair, but after a week on the road, it was as unruly as the trailer. Her long legs were cramped from being confined in the small rental car.

Irritated, she said, "I knew we shouldn't have turned off for Helena, but you insisted. Butte was much closer on the map, and we could be having dinner by now."

"You'll live, Girlfriend," retorted her best friend, Robert Pierce, who held her plump, tattered tabby cat Beastie on his lap. "You're not exactly malnourished. There's another town coming up. We'll stop there."

But, like the three they'd passed since the last exit, that town was closed up tight, not even a gas station open. After a flaming sunset on the distant mountains, the rapidly

descending night was turning the vast stretches of land to ink. Not a point of light could be seen.

She glanced nervously at the fuel gage, which registered empty. "If we run out of gas in the middle of nowhere, it's your fault! We should have filled up in Bozeman, but you said keep going, we could get a better price."



"So, why did you listen to me, Smarty Pants? It's as much your responsibility as mine!" He was working his way into a snit. Displeased at his tone, Beastie dug in his claws, and Robert gasped. "I'm starting to HATE your rotten cat."

She looked over at Robert and felt contrite. His black eye had faded, but his face was still marred by cuts from the gay bashing that convinced him to make this move. Usually gorgeous, his well-trimmed black hair, rosy cheeks, and wicked humor gave him what she called the laughing pirate look.

"I'm sorry to be cranky," she told him. "I'm just upset about having to leave New York City."

A wave of loss washed over her. So much to leave behind, so many witty, insightful friends, and such richness of experience. But she'd had no real choice--no money coming in, and no reason to believe it would get better. There were more bills every day, collection agencies getting nastier all the time. She'd been two months behind on rent and her March rent had been due. The landlady was threatening to have her son Anthony deal with Jillian. Robert had seen Anthony in Mafia restaurants in Little Italy with some bad numbers and had warned her not to cross him.

She'd even considered looking for work, but the last time she'd tried, five years ago, she couldn't get so much as a temp job. At forty, she had no recent work history, and the astrology practice that had supported her well enough for years had gradually dried up. The psychic hotlines were so easy for people to access—pick up the phone and get a quick fix. How a legitimate astrologer could work on one of those things, she didn't know. The ads were so hokey.

Then late last month, after three years of dead silence, her ex-husband, Gary Jones, had called her about coming out to Washington State to work on the line he was starting, called The Hotline to Heaven. She wouldn't even have considered it, but just at that point, Anthony was beginning to put the squeeze on her for the rent.

Her stomach clenched. "Oh, Robert, I can't stand the idea of doing readings that way. You know how I work--it's like therapy, using the chart to find the reasons for people's problems. It doesn't make sense to predict without understanding why they get into the same situations over and over. Otherwise, what's to stop them from making the same mistakes?"



Before they'd left New York, Robert had been working for one of the lines for several months because they'd also cut into his Tarot practice. He said it wasn't that different from private readings--the same kinds of people, the same problems, but many of them wouldn't know where to find a reader in their own area.

"Don't be so down on the idea, Jill-Jill. You might like it after all."



"You may be right, but I still don't know if I can do it. And I learned long ago not to trust Gary."

She and Gary were married for five years, divorced now for ten, but Gary popped up from time to time. He was promising her a steady income, with long hours until he found enough readers. It's just like him to get into a 900 number, she thought. He falls for anything that looks like a fast buck. The trouble with his grandiose schemes is that I've never known one to work.

Looking over as she sighed, Robert said, "I hated to leave, too, Jill-Jill, but it's really not safe to be gay in New York anymore." He'd recently taken home

one of those hunky little Midwestern guys he found so attractive. The guy was straight, beat him to a pulp, and robbed him.

Robert shook his thick black hair and adjusted his diamond stud earring. "I know at least four others who've been beaten up. It's only a matter of time until gay bashing is named the official New York City team sport. I just didn't know where to go or how to support myself. I'm too old to be a chorus girl any more."

He'd come to New York from rural Ohio to be a dancer and had been in several Broadway productions ten years ago. She thought of him as a young Harvey Fierstein--but better looking. At just over 5', he had a dancer's slim body with tight, shapely buns.

She said, "God knows, we'll be the only New Yorkers out there in the Boonies." In her bleak state, even Jillian couldn't predict that in just three short months, she'd be so hopelessly in love with her new home that she'd wonder how anyone could live in New York.

Robert told her, "Oh, Seattle--and the gay life--can't be that far away. And there are faggots everywhere, girlfriend."

She was amused, as always, at his sardonic use of words like queer and faggot. Let those outside the gay life use them, though, and he'd be all over them like an irate hummingbird.

Robert and Jillian had been neighbors in Park Slope, a gentrified area of Brooklyn. They'd grown close, debriefing tough clients and chewing over metaphysical questions until late at night. He was already discontented with the city's filth and crime, and when he'd been beaten up, he decided to work on Gary's line, too. In just a couple of days, they'd arrive in their new home, Port Townsend, which Gary described as a jewel of a town in the mountains.



A loud snore erupted from the back seat, startling them. In their bickering, they'd forgotten their passenger. "That's another thing," Jillian said, "I'll never forgive you for sticking me with her!"

"Astarte's a pain in the tush," Robert agreed, "but you need her to work on the line, and you were glad enough when I introduced you. Where I worked before, she was the most popular reader. Best there was when it came to LOOOOOVE."

Jillian admitted, "She was good when I tested her. Came up with many of the same things you did in the tarot reading about this move, though she uses plain playing cards. She got both the Ace of Hearts and the Ace of Diamonds, so she said I was going to meet someone and that we'd do well financially. But, God she's aggravating! She talks about herself all the time--typical Leo.

He offered snidely, "You just hate her because she's young and beautiful."

That rankled, though it was probably true. Astarte was 24 years old and gorgeous. She had masses of fine, blonde hair, a pink, unmarred complexion, big green baby doll eyes and not an ounce of fat on her long, willowy torso.

Worse, she was spoiled rotten by her wealthy, doting parents. Jillian had observed that the Sun in the fifth house of the birth chart—like Astarte had—was often the mark of a spoiled child. Jillian had done Astarte's chart prior to recruiting her for the line to make sure Astarte's psychic gifts were genuine--and her strong Neptune testified that they certainly were.

Jillian said, "I wish I had parents still alive to bail me out of tough spots like this. It's just me and Beastie, and not a dime between us."

Robert reached over and kneaded her shoulder, working out knots from the long days of driving. "Don't worry, Jill-Jill. We're in this together, and we're going to make it."

Comforted, she still had to get it off her chest. "Astarte's folks give her the best of everything, so she expects us to do the same. She's so self-centered."

"Not so," he reminded her. "She's ALWAYS friendly and helpful when it comes to men."

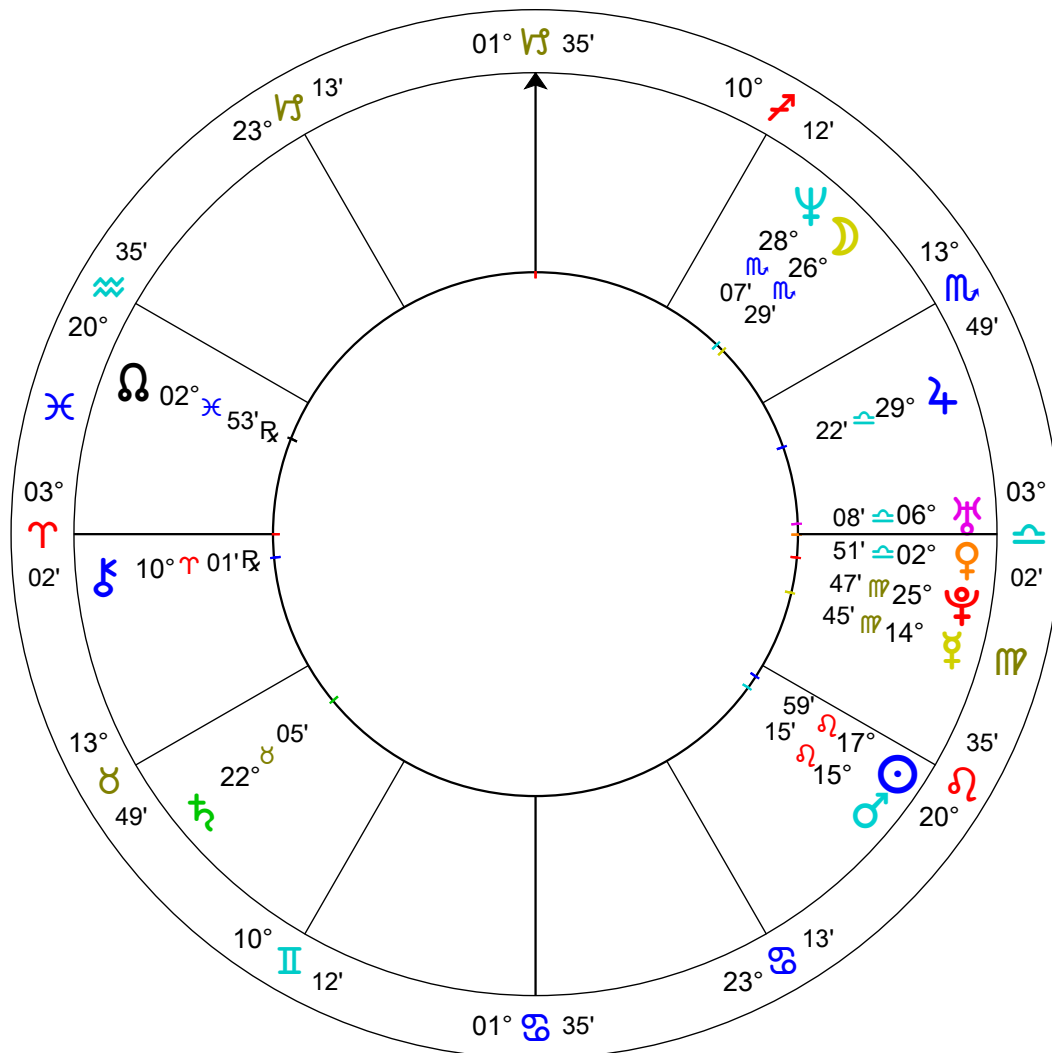
"You got that right. The next time we stop for gas and she cozies up to some Neanderthal trucker or biker, I'm going to let him carry her off."

"Oh, come on! Some of them were cute, in a greasy kind of way. I'd go for a ride with one of them in a minute. OOOOOOH, those muscles!" He pretended to pant.

"Right, and wind up in the morgue the minute you laid a hand on them! She has no taste at all. It doesn't seem to matter, as long as it's male."



astarte:
August 10, 1970
9:45 PM EDT
Greenwich, CT
41N01; 73W37



There was a stirring in back, then the continuing snores reassured them Astarte was dead to the world, so they relieved tension by thoroughly and happily trashing her until they saw the lights of Helena ahead.

The motel was only marginally less dismal than the others they'd stayed in. The spreads and drapes in the room Jillian and Astarte took were a vague, faded chintz, the furniture a Formica relic of the 1950s. Astarte claimed the better bed, leaving Jillian with a thin, lumpy mattress. They sneaked Beastie in and set up his litter pan in the rust-stained bathtub. He was 17 and crabby, but still in good health. He plopped down at the foot of Jillian's bed and started his bath.

She groaned inwardly as Astarte began preparing for her nightly meditations. "Do you really need those candles on all night?" It was hard enough sleeping with the drone of truck traffic.

Astarte imparted her candle lore self-importantly. "You must burn them at least eight hours a day to experience their power. The red one is to attract love. I want to get over my relationship with Jimmy and meet someone. I'm made to love and be loved."

Jillian tried not to sound judgmental. "It seems to me you'd want to give yourself time to heal...and maybe learn something from it."

Astarte protested, "I never dreamed he'd turn violent. Jimmy loved me so much at first, he wouldn't let me out of his sight. I felt I'd finally found my soul mate. He swore he'd never treat me like he did his wife...said her constant nagging provoked him, but that he could never get angry at me. Things only changed little by little, after he went back to drinking."

"Did you know he was an alcoholic when you got together?"



"He said he drank because he was so miserable over the divorce. When we started seeing each other, he gave it up for me." Astarte's big green eyes lost their focus, and she sighed as she recalled the hazy, romantic beginnings.

"That lasts about as long as the roses they send you." Jillian had dated an alcoholic or two herself--who hadn't?--but she'd never stand for someone hitting her. "Things must have gotten pretty hairy, or you wouldn't have been ready to drop everything and come with us."

Astarte nodded and massaged the wrist she'd sprained when he pushed her down the subway stairs during an argument. "It wouldn't have been safe to stay. Jimmy would never give up on getting me back--or making me pay for leaving him."

Jillian decided, *in our own ways, we're each fugitives. Her from her boyfriend, me from Anthony, and Robert from the gay bashers. Astarte may be one of a kind as far as her ideas go, but she's no different than any of the battered women in my old social work jobs and my astrology practice. They all think they can tame the tiger--that if they're just loving enough, they can make these men over and not get hurt.*

I'd bet any amount of money that the next guy she falls for will be every bit as bad for her as Jimmy--or worse. She hasn't learned a thing. Surprising herself, she felt a twinge of motherly concern. I'm being too hard on her--she's been through a rough time lately.

Astarte lit a fat, musky incense stick and wafted it through the room to drive out any impure vibrations left by earlier occupants. Pulling filmy scarves and brass objects out of her knapsack, she set up an altar. She hummed a strange, discordant melody, not unlike a Mid-eastern belly dance. As she swayed to the music, her usual long, flowing skirt brushed her ankles. Today's was a brilliantly colored tropical print, with the long scarves she always wore in complementary colors.

"Do you know why I call myself Astarte?"

"No, but I'm sure you're going to tell me."

"It was suggested by my spiritual teacher, Guru Mab. In a past life I was a Phoenician princess. Don't be impressed, though." From her hastily-covered yawn, Jillian wasn't.

"See, there were lots of us princesses--the king had many concubines. So, as one of the younger daughters, they sent me to a temple consecrated to Astarte. She was the Phoenician fertility goddess--a Moon deity, but in a way she was more like Aphrodite or Venus."

"I know," Jillian sighed, weary of Astarte's sophomoric preaching to the converted. "I know. She was also known as Ishtar, and the Hebrews called her Astoreth, mother of Baal."

It certainly fits, she mused. Astarte has Venus, the planet of love and beauty, setting in Libra, Venus' own sign. Venus in Libra loves being in love--all the more so as hers is standing next to both Uranus and Pluto. Venus with Uranus brings love at first sight--on almost a daily basis--and, with Pluto, could bring romantic obsession with some real heavies. There's plenty in that chart to worry about--the man trouble was far from over, by the looks of it.

This girl is weird. Never mind that I'm an astrologer, so half the western world automatically considers me a flake, weird is hard for me to swallow. I'm going to be stuck working with her day in and day out. I should have stayed in social work, gone on to get my master's. Astrology wasn't exactly a brilliant career move, but it's what I love.

Waking at sunrise, they had a ranch style breakfast at the truck stop, got the waitress to fill their huge thermos, and set off by 7:00. They made good time, since Jillian and Robert took long shifts at the wheel. When they finally stopped for the night west of Spokane, they only had one more day to go.

That last morning, they wound their way through the dirt-dry hills of eastern Washington. They followed the path of the wide Columbia River, which was sometimes smooth as glass, sometimes tumbling wildly over piles of rocks that had fallen from the hillsides. Along the highway, pale green leaf tips were beginning to show in the apple orchards. Bordering them were rows of empty weather-beaten cabins waiting for the late summer influx of migratory workers.

Astarte went on and on about her spirit guides. "...And then Persius evolved to a higher plane, and Lady Jane became my guide. She was a Druid priestess in the Middle Ages, and she has taught me so much about love."

"I have a spirit guide myself," Robert told her, winking at Jillian.

"You do? Tell me all about it! I always find people's psychic experiences fascinating. Plus it tells me so much about their level of spiritual development. What's your guide's name?"

"Mel."

"Mel, for Melchior?" At Jillian's mystified look, she explained, "One of the three wise men. Is it Melchior, Robert?"

"No, it's Mel for Melvin."

"MELVIN? What kind of information do you channel from him?"

"He tells me where to find the best buys on clothes. And where to go to get laid."

She reared back, shocked and puzzled. "Where to get laid?" Then the light dawned. "Oh! You're TEASING me!"

She laughed, then, for the first time on the journey--clearly sadder about the breakup than she was letting on. It was such an utterly lovely, tinkling laugh, like wind chimes in the breeze, that Jillian and Robert were charmed despite themselves and joined in the laughter.

The ice broken, Robert and Astarte sang along at the top of their lungs with the country music that was all they could find on the radio--all they'd found for days. Jillian cringed in her seat and wished with all her might for a classical station. Please, let Port Townsend have more than just country music, she prayed.

Then she remembered that Gary had sent her two issues of the town's weekly paper just before they set out, and she hadn't had time to look at them. Surely it would say if there were a decent radio station. When they stopped in Wenatchee for lunch, Jillian dug out the newspapers and read snatches aloud while Robert drove.

"On Thursday, there's lunch with the Full Gospel Businessmen. And the Master Gardeners meet every Tuesday at the Grange. Robert, there's actually a Teen Gay/Lesbian Support Group! Master Gardeners AND Gay Teens--now, this is an interesting place! Maybe you could give a talk on your cruising style, share some pointers."

"I'll have to rely on them to give ME pointers. Small town like that, I'm going to have to keep a low profile, like I did back home on the farm. I've almost forgotten how."

She teased him, "Right, like no one's going to notice. But maybe if you keep your earrings in the jewel box, and your feather boa at the back of the closet, you'll fool some of the people some of the time."

Privately, she'd become concerned for Robert. The question of how he'd fare in Port Townsend hadn't seemed that major in New York, where gay people were just another vocal minority. It had grown more real as they crossed the country, stopping to eat and sleep in small places. She'd watched the locals eyeing him, the ribald jokes they cracked. He made out that he didn't notice, but she was learning that small towns could be cruel.

She'd also heard en route that there'd been an anti-gay measure on the ballot in Washington State's last election, though it had been defeated. Would Robert be safe in Port Townsend--or in more trouble than he'd ever dreamed of in New York? Had she been selfish in asking him to come along? She concluded that it was too late, There was no turning back, for her or Robert anyway, no matter how bad it might be. Getting a toehold again in New York would be impossible financially.

She returned to the newspapers and was relieved to find two classical stations--one in Seattle and one in nearby Victoria, BC. Many of the ads--music festivals, boutiques, Native American art galleries, and bed and breakfast inns--were aimed at tourists. Because of its Victorian houses and natural beauty, the town pulled visitors from all over the world. From the comments, the locals weren't thrilled with them, even though they depended on their business.

She read on. "Letters to the Editor are hot stuff there. Two full pages of them, opinions from every part of the spectrum. The only thing these people have in common is that they're all dead sure their opinion is right and everyone else is a damned fool."

"Well, then, you two should fit in perfectly," Astarte retorted, getting a bit of her own back. "I think you're both being snotty. Port Townsend feels really promising, and I'm looking forward to it. My parents have some old friends here, the Masons, and they say it's a great place to live. If you give people a chance and keep an open mind, you'll find nice people everywhere."

Jillian replied, "NICE people are a dime a dozen. INTERESTING people are rarer. But it does sound like there are some interesting people there, I'll grant you that. Lots of artists and writers--even an annual writer's conference. Not your ordinary small town, apparently. You're right, I need to keep an open mind. Here's something for you--a singles group."

"Oh, great! I hope there are some neat single guys! You ought to come along. Otherwise, how are you supposed to meet this fellow the cards promised?"

Reluctantly, Jillian conceded that she might go. It had been ages since she'd had so much as a bad love affair, much less the great love that both Robert and Astarte were predicting. Wanting to review her notes on Robert's reading, she rummaged through her giant handbag to find her journal. Finding something in that purse was like conducting an archeological dig.

Robert had laid out twelve cards in a circle, set up like the twelve houses in an astrology chart and with the same meanings. He'd said there were several Pentacles and that meant pots of money. The first house--beggars in the snow--showed her state in February when the reading was done. The second or money house--a couple in a boat--predicted an escape from trouble, an opportunity, or a journey, and this move was the result. He said the third house, which represented the mind, was The Star, a very inspirational card that could have to



do with astrology and the hotline. The fourth house, the home--a fellow waiting for his crops to grow--suggested a wait until the money started coming in, but was fertile with possibilities.

Several of the cards looked horrible. The sixth house, representing work situations, was the King of Pentacles reversed--a guy with an agenda about money who could be up to something fishy. It confirmed her fears that Gary wasn't to be trusted, especially when combined with the seventh house, which was the Tower. She didn't know much about tarot--just enough to be a lousy client--but she surmised that The Tower meant some kind of catastrophe. Robert kept reassuring her it was just change.

Even more alarming, there were two cards in the center, one crossed over the other, to show a general theme for the year. They were Death, crossed by The Devil. She worried that the Death card meant she would die, but Robert insisted it was an ending and a new beginning. So why, she wondered, had he suddenly looked so pale and grim?

Her astrology chart would be having some tough Pluto aspects, too. Pluto could mean healing and transformation, but it still meant death often enough that the possibility couldn't be discounted. The combination of the chart and cards had her worried. Robert had confessed he didn't know what those cards meant--a bad situation, some rotter she had to contend with--but felt it would be over in about three months.

He'd been excited about the rest of the spread. The tenth house, showing her status and life path, was the Two of Cups--the marriage and partnership card. The fifth house, representing romance and pleasure, was the Ten of Pentacles--a family, in the lush country. The eleventh house, showing friendship but also her hopes and dreams, was the Ten of Cups--a couple, their arms around each other. He said it was the best in the deck, the happy-ever-after card.

Closing her journal and leaning back in the seat, she reflected on Robert's predictions about love and money, which were so much like Astarte's. She let herself hope for a minute, then shook her head. Marital bliss would never be her lot--not with her Venus! Had he rigged the cards? And what the devil was The Devil doing in her life? She'd only know as it unfolded.

When they finally spotted the turn-off for Port Townsend, the sun was low in the sky. Deep, evergreen forest shaded both sides of the road. Its hills and curves provided breath-taking glimpses of a sprawling bay and distant, snow-tipped mountains. They passed through the outskirts, houses and businesses getting closer together as the car climbed a long hill. When they popped over the crest, the vista revealed a vast waterfront laid out below.



There was a convenient overlook, so they got out to soak up the stunning panorama. At the far horizon, the pink-tinged snow on the Cascades reflected the brilliant sunset on the majestic Olympic Mountains behind them. The marina was full of yachts and small boats, but high-masted sailboats moved through the water dreamily, and a big tanker silently passed in the distance. Nearer the town center, old Victorian storefronts were painted in pastels. There was a long, winding island across the water, apparently reached by the flat, white ferry docked below.

"We're not in Kansas anymore," Jillian breathed.

Robert shook his head in wonder. "I think I'm in love."

HOTLINE TO HEAVEN
Chapter Two

March 28

Gary picked them up at the motel the next morning and swept Jillian into a bear hug. "Babe, you're prettier than ever! You always were my favorite Irish colleen. Sure you don't want to marry me again?"

"Surer than I've ever been of anything."



She was disgusted with herself for taking such pains with her appearance--the navy suit that was as professional as she got, the carefully applied makeup, the heels and hose--and disgusted that his compliments meant so much.

She wasn't displeased to discover that he'd sprouted a few lines in his face, that he'd grown a small potbelly, and that his hairline started higher than she remembered. Still, he was as good looking as ever. She'd forgotten how sexy he was. The cultivated casual outfit he was wearing must have set him back a pretty penny.

She told him, "This is Astarte."

"Astarte, it's terrific that you came along! We need good readers. Jillie, you didn't say she was such a beautiful little goddess." He bent over and took Astarte's hand, lifting

it to his lips.

Jillian hated the surge of jealousy this evoked. His roving eye was just one of the reasons she'd left him. "And this is Robert."

Gary relinquished Astarte's hand reluctantly. "Hey, hey, hey, Bobby! It's great to have a guy on the line. The ladies will eat it up--they love confiding in a man." Towering over Robert's petite frame, Gary thrust out a paw.

Robert clasped his hands above his head and stretched, neatly avoiding a shake. "It's Robert, actually."

"Robert it is! After we eat, we'll look at the trailer you'll be working in. We'll meet Midge there--our backer. I'm taking you to a great little place for breakfast--a diner, but with a view to die for. Is this town gorgeous, or what?"

They had to agree, especially after they got to the cafe and settled at one of the huge picture windows overlooking Puget Sound. They marveled that the water licking the rocky shore was perfectly clear. The water, a little rough that morning, was teal blue with whitecaps. Gary explained that it changed colors often, depending on the weather.



Robert said, "Whatever the weather, the water around New York is the color of sewage."



To the left of the restaurant was the ferry dock, a boat just coming in and a long line of cars waiting to board. To the right, the Olympics were visible. To the front was a glimpse of Mount Rainier, which Gary assured them was making a special appearance for their arrival. They could barely eat for gaping at the view.

Jillian brought up one of her worries. "Where will we stay? The rents are reasonable compared to New York, but most of them don't allow animals. I've got Beastie with me."

"God, does that take me back--you and me squabbling over that little tyrant!"

He reassured her that Midge had solutions to all their problems. Behind her big house on a hill, she had a mother-in-law for Robert--a small adjoining cottage people build when their parents are too old to live alone. One of Midge's friends had a two-bedroom apartment in a Victorian that Jillian and Astarte could share. She was a cat lover and wouldn't mind Beastie.

The vision of putting up with Astarte day and night was so appalling that Jillian held a quick, whispered conference with Robert, who nodded. "Thanks, but Robert and I would rather share."

Gary, who clearly thought he had Robert's number, was thrown. "Are you two an item?"

"We're just good friends. No offense, Astarte."



Astarte's face was pained, but she gamely tried to smile. "As long as we can do things together. I get lonely really easy."

Putting his hand on hers across the table, Gary assured her, "I'd be more than happy to show you around. Do you like music? Some good bands from Seattle come to the pubs on the weekend."

Astarte beamed, and Jillian could have kicked herself for the spike of possessiveness she felt. She told herself, *this has got to stop! He's clearly the same old lady killer, and I DON'T want him back, just don't want him chasing everything in skirts while I'm around. Respect, really, is all I ask. Now, isn't THAT stuffy*, she chided herself.

She came to the next concern. "How will we pay for all this? Won't it be a while until the line is running and we can collect a salary?"

"Can do! Can do! Midge is a great old gal--just wait until you meet her!"

He explained that Midge was assuming all the startup costs. She'd pay the readers' first two months' rent and loan them \$2000 each for expenses. They'd be

getting \$.50 a minute for the calls they took. Not bad, Jillian thought, compared to the line Robert and Astarte were on before, which paid \$.35 a minute. Still, when you consider that callers pay \$3.99 a minute, somebody's raking in a hefty profit.

"I'd like a contract," she made herself say.

"Midge handles that, but don't worry. She's a stand-up gal. Now, I want to clue you guys in. Midge loves astrology and all that, but her background is business. Everything that woman touches turns to gold. She'll come across as a little tough. But, we have to keep her happy, because she's the only backer we've got."

Astarte smiled. "She sounds wonderful--and so generous. I know I'm going to like her."

Jillian wasn't so sure. If she knew Gary, when he said a little tough, he meant a lot tough. After all these years, she could still decode his messages: be nice to Midge, she's your bread and butter.



They drove through the dirt roads of the marina--big yachts on boat trailers, smaller boats undergoing repairs, a fascinating mix of marine businesses--until they reached the site. It was twice the width of a house trailer, an aging yellow industrial model pitted with rust from the damp waterfront air.

Inside, Gary urged them to be careful as they stepped over boards, sawdust, and thick extension cords. A heavy lump in her stomach, Jillian was disheartened by the ugliness. The place

was dim and smelled of mold, the ceiling and wallboards stained from water leaks. There were still a few weeks of construction to go. Each reader would have a soundproof cubicle, so clients couldn't overhear other conversations. They made their way to the conference room in the back and settled at a table.

Midge rapped on the door and came in, laden with a coffee maker and a bag of provisions. "I hope you didn't start without me. I figured we couldn't survive too long without a good jolt of caffeine."

A striking woman, Midge wasn't more than 5'2", but she had a big presence and a loud, husky voice. Although clearly older, her looks suggested she might have been a showgirl--molded cheekbones, cat-like eyes, and beautiful silvery hair. Her tiny hands had long, salon-pampered nails and expensive rings. Her skirt and top were a soft, costly knit, short enough to display her shapely legs.

Gary jumped up to help and quickly put together a pot of coffee. He'd learned a few new skills, Jillian noted. Then he introduced each of them in turn. "Gang, this is Midge--the heart and soul of this operation. At least, it's her plaything until she finds a new husband."





Midge settled in at the table and lit a cigarette. "Well, you know how hot angels are now. Everybody's wild about them, from Christians to New Agers. Best sellers, t.v. shows, everything from stamps to tee shirts, all featuring angels. I think we should capitalize on the craze, make that our hook. It's a natural, with a name like the Hotline to Heaven. So, when the machine answers, it would say, *Now's your chance to ask the angels about*

your heart's desire. We'll connect you with the first available angel. Then we play harp music while they're on hold."

Sick at Midge's commercialization of something that should be spiritual, Jillian wondered whether she'd be able go through with this. But, what choice did she have?

Astarte, however, was delighted. "Oooh, I just love it! I'm going to learn so much from you, Midge. I have an idea, too. We readers can't use our own names because of the nuts who call--so why don't we use the names of better-known angels like Gabriel and Raphael?"

Gary smacked the table with his hand. "That's a crackerjack idea! I knew you were going to be an asset, the minute I laid eyes on you. Midge, Astarte's going to live in your mother-in-law apartment."

"Well, honey, we're going to get along just fine. I'll take you shopping for odds and ends, but there's still tons of stuff from when Mom was alive. It was obviously meant for you."

It's a good thing, Jillian thought. Astarte didn't bring much more than her clothes--and when she went to pack those, she had to take the cops along so Jimmy wouldn't hurt her again.

Midge asked, "What about my friend's apartment?"

"Jillian and Robert will share that," Gary said.

"Luckily, this is a broad-minded town. Are you planning on getting married?"

Robert archly echoed Gary. "No, she's just my plaything 'til I find a new husband."

Midge's mouth set in a hard line, and she crossed her arms over her chest.

Gary leapt into the oppressive silence that followed. "Bobby's a terrific reader, very popular with the customers on his old line. And Jillian has been an astrologer for years. She was studying it while we were married. Kept her busy while I was in night school."

Midge shifted her disapproving gaze to Jillian.

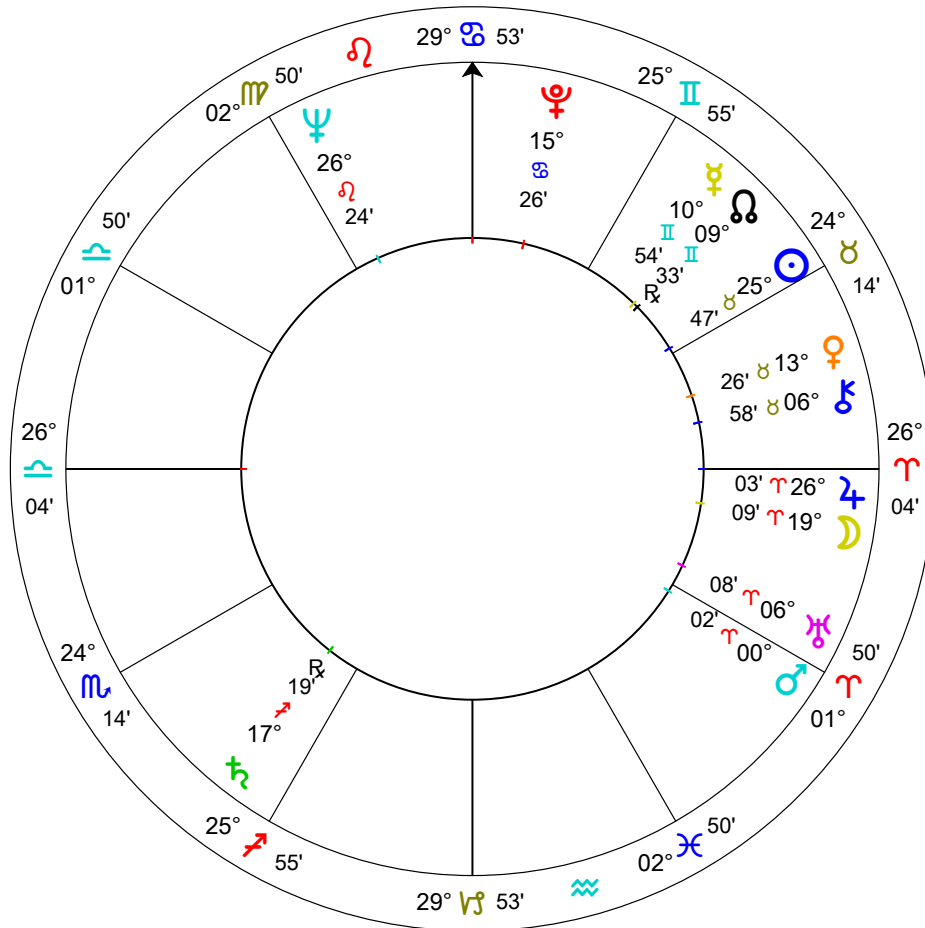
MIDGE MCCULLOUGH

May 16, 1928

5:00 PM

Wichita, KS

97W20; 37N41



"Oh, yeah? Tell me what you think of my horoscope." She pulled her chart from a designer leather envelope and handed it over.

"With the Taurus Sun, you've got a genius for business. You're practical, with good common sense, and you're always aware of the bottom line. Wow! Four planets in Aries! That makes you a real leader and a dynamo, but Libra Rising gives you the people skills to make others love you." *A shark in sheep's clothing is more like it*, she thought.

Mollified, Midge agreed with her analysis. "I took astrology classes, strictly amateur, while Barney and I lived in L.A., before we moved up here. Barney was my last hubby."

Jillian scanned the chart. "Look at this! Pluto has been traveling through your house of money for several years, and it's about to make a trine to your Midheaven. You stand to make a bundle on investments." Gary flashed her a grateful thumbs up, but she wasn't trying to help, it was true.

"That's good to hear," Midge said. "So, what's in your chart?"

"I don't give it out."

Midge's arms crossed over her chest again, and her tone grew frosty. "Reaaaally! I know some famous astrologers won't give out their birth information. Michael Lutin doesn't. Richard Idemon never would. Donna Cunningham doesn't do it anymore. But you're HARDLY in that class. What do you have to hide?"

Oh boy, this is not going well, Jillian thought. Angling for something that would make sense to the woman, she said, "It's just not good business. Suppose the client doesn't like one of your signs--say their dad was a Virgo and they hated him--then they may decide not to have you do their chart. Between the Sun, Moon, and Ascendant, there's a big chance they're going to hate one of your signs."

She fumed, *Not really, it's about privacy, damn it, and people's ignorant judgements and misinterpretations. She's definitely not getting my birth information! And Robert doesn't give his out, either, because he's vain about his age.*

Midge considered, dragging deeper on her cigarette, and then nodded her head. "That's a good point. None of you give out your charts or signs. We can't take a chance on turning customers off. Just say it's our policy not to reveal personal information, which is a good idea anyway."

Jillian discreetly fanned the smoke that was filling the room and hurting her lungs. She looked around, but there were no windows that could be opened. She thought, *if I ask her to stop, that will finish any hope of us getting along. But if she's going to work here, smoke will seep into everything. Maybe I can ask Gary to have her just smoke in her office--but he's clearly sucking up to her every chance he gets.*

Midge asked her, "Do you consider yourself a psychic?"



"I'm your usual solid professional astrologer who learned astrology from books, classes, and my clients. I'm intuitive, but I don't call myself a psychic, no."

When Midge asked the same of Robert, he stuck out his chin and said, "Definitely."

Astarte tried for a joke. "No, I'm not--but my spirit guides are, and that makes up for it."

They took a break to pour the coffee and share some carrot muffins. Astarte went over to Midge. "I can't believe you're nearly 70! How do you keep your skin so young? I hope I look half as good when I'm that age."

"Sweetie, I started taking care of my skin when I was your age. Night cream, proper cleansing, all the routines the cosmeticians teach. Use the best cosmetics, and never let up, and with that great complexion of yours, you'll be just fine."

Robert jabbed Jillian in the ribs, and when she glanced sidelong at him, he mouthed, "Face lift."

She whispered, "Please try to get along, or we're in big trouble." He made a sour face. She thought, *at least he didn't wear his black leather--it's probably still packed.*

Astarte marveled, "Midge, I wish I had your legs! You're so lucky!" Astarte was wearing her usual floor-length skirt and matching tunic, a filmy scarf at her neck. "Look at mine, how awful!" She lifted the skirt back to her knees, revealing long, laddered surgical scars.

"I was born with crooked legs, so I had to have six operations. It's either skirts like these or dark tights, and the shape isn't nice enough for tights." They were straight up and down and slightly puffy.

Midge patted her hand. "Well, child, you wear those skirts with such flair that I'm sure it never occurs to anyone that something might be wrong. We have a couple of high-end clothing stores in town--meant for tourists--but I've seen some long outfits there that would just suit you."

Jillian thought, *it's the only thing that mars Astarte's physical perfection--no wonder her parents spoiled her. So that's what that asteroid Chiron on the ascendant in her birth chart is about. They say it's the mark of the wounded healer when it's strongly featured.*

Funny, Astarte seems to genuinely like Midge. She's not just sucking up. But then, I've never known her to dislike anyone. She takes people at face value and sees the best in them. When did I become such a cynic? Decades of New York living can do it.

There was a tentative rapping on the tin door, and the mailman entered. He was short and bony, in his forties, mostly bald and very bland, with eyes that popped out like Don Knotts' eyes.

"Hello. Ahem, hello? I'm Ralph Lofton. The letter carrier for this route. Are you opening a new business?"

Gary introduced himself and the others. "Yes, we'll be starting in a couple of weeks. We're called The Hotline to Heaven."

"Oh, are you a church hotline? I'm a deacon at the Baptist church. It'll be great to have a religious group on my route."

Midge greeted him. "Didn't I know your Mom? Irma Lofton? Sorry to hear she passed--last November, wasn't it? No, this isn't a Christian hotline, it's for astrologers and psychics."

He had to think that over, not sure he approved. "Well, maybe you'd like to come to our church. We have potlucks the second Tuesday of the month. Always glad to welcome newcomers."

He goggled at Astarte. "We especially like to have young people attend. I'll remind you when it's closer. Listen, I see you're still under construction but you have to get a proper mailbox. Yours is so rusted out, I couldn't possibly put mail in it."

Gary said, "Can do! Can do!" and ushered the little guy out.

Jillian thought, *What a nerd, As much of a fussbudget as he is, he has to be a Virgo--a stickler for the rules.*

Robert and Astarte giggled when Midge observed, "Looks like you made a conquest, Astarte. Ralph's a real old maid--lived with his Mom 'til the day she died. I never did hear anything about his dad, 'though I assume he had one, as upright as Mrs. Lofton was."

Midge frowned. "I hope we don't run into trouble with the churches. It's not as bad here as it is over in Sequim--the next big town. That's real Bible country."

Midge told Gary to show Jillian and Robert their apartment and took Astarte home to the cottage. She offered to loan them Barney's old Chevrolet for the time being.

Jillian concluded, *She isn't so bad, really, Gruff--and every inch in charge--but a great resource. It's starting, this new life--now there's really no turning back. But how will I handle Gary and Midge? Even more to the point, how will Robert? I need to talk to him. If we can't get along with them, we could wind up on the street!*



HOTLINE TO HEAVEN

Chapter Three

May 14

The night before the hotline opened, Robert made dinner to celebrate. Midge was only coming for dessert, since she was overseeing a dinner for small businesses. Gary was in Seattle, meeting with advertising brokers. When the doorbell rang, Jillian went downstairs and Astarte rushed in, breathless, half an hour late.

She apologized profusely. "I never seem to be able to get anywhere on time! My boyfriends always want to throttle me. Isn't that a Leo thing, being late and making a grand entrance?"

"It sure is. Leo AND Libra--especially when somebody has both signs in their chart like you do."

Jillian wondered, *what's wrong with Astarte? She has blue circles under her eyes, and she's as nervous as a cat. Hopefully she hasn't gotten involved with some creep here in town, after she was lucky enough to get away from Jimmy.*

Astarte raved about the apartment, but her usual enthusiasm was strained. "Look at that leaded glass in the windows! And the crystal chandelier! Ooh, and the beautiful old ceramic tiles on the fireplace. Everything goes so well together, you'd never know you had separate apartments to begin with."

Jillian's antique newel table was solid and complemented the carved wainscoting of the living room and the roses molded into the ceiling. Her wooden filing cabinet also had an antique look. Robert's soft black leather sectional and armchair, art deco reproduction lamps, and glass-topped end tables were understated enough that they didn't clash with the Victorian touches.

Robert surveyed his new domain in satisfaction. "Aren't we the original odd couple? I'm such a neatnick, and she couldn't keep her papers stacked if her life depended on it. I'm just a WRECK trying to keep this house clean! What you really need, Jill-Jill, is a wife!"



The apartment was on the second floor of a wooden Victorian, the tops of pink-blossomed cherry trees fairly bursting into the room. It was warm, so spring fragrances wafted in through the open windows. Beastie had staked out a spot on a wide window sill and was busy supervising the rude ravens and soaring seagulls that were selling points in his fascinating new environment. A huge raven lit on a tree not ten feet away, challenging him with a loud RAAAK. Beastie's tail swished furiously as he made the choking noises in the back of his throat that were his hunting cry. Get you one day, he promised.

Through one of the living room windows, Mt. Baker loomed in the distance. When Astarte marveled at the view, Jillian agreed, "It is pretty,

isn't it? The sky is so huge out here. You couldn't see more than just a sliver of it peeking through the tall buildings in New York. We've got sunrise on the Cascades here in the living room, and sunset on the Olympics in our bedrooms. I find myself getting up at dawn just to watch the sunrise."

Astarte teased her, "So, Miss Snotty New Yorker, there are some nice things about Port Townsend, after all."

"I guess I did have a bad attitude about the move. I miss New York and my friends there, but I'm getting attached to all this natural beauty. I still don't know any of the locals, but from what little I've seen of them--on the bus or in the stores--they seem kinder and more relaxed than New Yorkers. And it's so safe--people don't even lock their car doors. Who knows, maybe I'll get to love it."

Astarte cautioned, "I was talking to George Mason--remember that friend of my folks who lives here in town? He says a superior attitude isn't going to make us any friends. People resent outsiders moving in and looking down their noses at them. Me, I'm crazy about the place. It's even more beautiful than where we lived in California."



Robert had worked all afternoon to prepare an authentic Italian meal--beef braciola, stuffed artichokes, and garlic bread. He'd made meatless lasagna for Astarte's sake, since she was a vegetarian. Garlic was a top note--everything was pungent with it, including the air. "I'm of the school that says garlic can do no wrong," he admitted.

Spooning a hefty helping of braciola onto her plate, Jillian told Astarte, "I had no idea Robert was

such a fabulous cook, or I'd have moved in with him long ago."

"If I waited for you to put something on the stove, Sister, I'd starve! Besides, it wasn't NECESSARY for us to cook in New York," he reminded her. "But, dear GAWD, what passes for takeout here is not to be believed! The restaurants aren't bad--got to keep the tourists fed--but the takeout? I mean, the deli at the supermarket? And the Chinese? HONEY!!! I can't even bear to THINK about the Chinese!" He shuddered dramatically.

Astarte said, "Gary's been showing me around. He's been really nice. We took the ferry over to Whidbey Island, the one across the way--what an incredible ride! Then we visited the rhododendron park, and he took me to lunch in the dearest old town, Coupeville. Do you mind, Jillian? I know you were married and all."

She thought about it and replied, "Truthfully, I don't. I just hope you won't get serious about him, because he's nobody to fall in love with. He puts a whole new spin on the term *charming ne'er-do-well*."

Taking more lasagna and some of the delectable sauce, Astarte said, "Serious about Gary? He's much too old for me. But he's a lot of fun. I haven't seen much of you two," she said with a look of reproach. "What have you been up to?"

Jillian felt a stab of remorse at not including her. "We've been exploring the Olympic Peninsula."



They didn't have much money, so they packed picnics and biked all over. They even took a trip out to the ocean and camped there. It was incredibly beautiful—water, forest, and mountains all the way out to the coast, with Canada just across the strait. The Pacific was powerful, compared with the Atlantic at Coney Island or Jones Beach.

Astarte raved about the remodeling job on the trailer and about the office furniture she'd helped Gary select. "I didn't expect much, considering how it looked that first day, but I think we'll be happy there."

"Remember, the funny little mailman, Ralph? He's still fussing with Gary about the mailbox-- something about the regulations we have to meet for its size and position, since we're a new occupancy. So, Ralph was complaining one day that there's no place to eat his bag lunch down there, and Midge said

he could eat in our conference room. I don't know if she was trying to get him off Gary's back or if she just feels sorry for him, but he drops by at noon every day now. He talks about his church all the time, but he's nice enough."

Robert licked the last bit of sauce off his fingers. "Mark my words, that man is going to be a pest."

The phone rang, and Astarte jumped. It was long distance for Robert, who took the call in the kitchen, while starting the dishes.

Seeing that the girl had turned pale, Jillian whispered, "What's wrong? You seem nervous, and you jumped a foot when the phone rang."

"I've done something stupid. Promise you won't yell at me."

"I won't yell."

"I called Jimmy. My boyfriend from New York? And I told him where I am, so he's calling every night."

"Are you NUTS? You told him where you are? After the way he beat you up?"

"I was so lonely. The house is so empty and quiet, I just ache with it. I don't know anybody here. Midge is good to me, but she's busy with her friends and her clubs. I don't drive, and the buses stop at 5:30, so it's not like I could just pick up and go somewhere. One night, it got to me, and I called him."

Jillian felt guilty for not spending time with her. "I can understand you calling him, but I still can't believe you told him where you are."

"Oh, he was so sweet at first--sorry for what he'd done and telling me how much he loved me. How much he



missed me. And I got to missing him, too. I do feel that it's a karmic relationship. Lady Jane--my spirit guide--tells me we've been together before."

"It may be karmic, but that doesn't mean you have to let him abuse you."

"No, no, I don't want that to start again. I didn't mean to tell him where we moved, but he wheedled it out of me. But now he says he's coming to get me--that we belong together and I was wrong to leave."

"Can't you just get an unlisted number?"

"That would really set him off. If he thought I was trying to hide from him, he really would come out here looking for me. He doesn't have the money for a ticket, but he'd get here somehow--hitchhike if he had to. I've been putting him off--telling him I'll come for a visit as soon as I earn some money."

"The man is dangerous."

Her big eyes brimmed with tears. "I don't know what to do. I've been such a fool."

Jillian patted her shoulder. "I honestly don't know how to advise you. This is a big, big problem."

The bell rang, announcing Midge's arrival. Astarte streaked into the bathroom to compose herself and repair the damage to her makeup. Jillian fretted, *What a mare's nest. Astarte's got a potential stalker on her hands. God knows what Gary is up to. Robert puts Midge's back up because he's gay--and he won't even try to get along with her or Gary. And me, I'm just trying to hold the whole thing together.*

Midge arrived, dressed for her business dinner in a basic cashmere sweater that must have cost a basic fortune, accessorized to the hilt with gold jewelry. Jillian decided, *It's the way she carries herself that makes her seem so much younger. She's absolutely convinced she's not a day over a vigorous 40, and she convinces you of it as well.*

Midge asked, "How's everybody? Excited about tomorrow?"

Astarte, the damage repaired, came back in and hugged Midge. "I'm excited about getting started. I love working on the line, knowing I'm helping people."

Midge inspected Robert's collection of framed posters from old movies. "So you like the oldies, do you? I was in a few of them, you know."

He asked eagerly, "You were? You were in Hollywood back then?"

"Yep--late Forties, early Fifties. I even had a couple of lines in *It's a Wonderful Life*."

"One of my all-time favorites! I'll have to rent it and look for you."

"I have a copy. We can watch it together. Otherwise, you'll miss me if you blink. I didn't have any talent to speak of, you understand, just my looks. I couldn't fool myself about that, so I accepted the first good marriage proposal that came my way. A producer--an old pig, really, but he was filthy rich. And none too well, so a couple of years after we got married, his ticker gave out while he was screwing the dickens out of



some starlet he'd promised to put in one of his films. Didn't break my heart, and the studio hushed it up, but I was 22 years old and set up for life."

Robert laughed. "Enter the merry widow! You must have known some of the big stars of the golden years."

"Some, yes. Lauren Bacall was a friend. Well, we called her Betty, because her real name was Betty Perske."

"Perske? Yeeks! Lauren Bacall has much more class!"

"Cary Grant lived next door for a while. But I really didn't enjoy the social circles, and the wives didn't want a pretty young widow around."

"I got my first astrology reading just about then," she told Jillian. "It was from Carroll Righter. In those days, nobody in Hollywood made a move without consulting him."

"Wow--I'd have loved a reading from him! He had to be the most famous astrologer in the world for about thirty years. What did he tell you?"

"He said my chart had the Midas touch. But with all my Aries planets in the house of work, I'd better find something productive to do or I'd turn into a rip-roaring bitch." She laughed hoarsely at this outspoken but accurate interpretation.

"So, I went back to work in a couple of movies--stinkers, really--just to fill my time, and that's where I met Bill, my second hubby. Him, I married for love. He was older and just a prop man, but what a hunk! He'd collected some wonderful pieces from those Forties movies. We took his collection and used his contacts with other prop men, and we opened a movie memorabilia shop in Beverly Hills."

Robert sighed, "I'da thought I died and went to heaven!"



"We made money hand over fist--people paid big bucks for even a minor piece that some star had used in a film. We cut a deal with some of the studios to sell things. Once, for just a while, we owned the ruby slippers from The Wizard of Oz."

He pretended to swoon. "You're killing me!"

"I actually had those slippers on my feet."

"HONEY!!! I' da been clicking them heels!"

"Not me! I grew up in Kansas, and there's no way I'd want to go back. We had to sell them, though--couldn't keep that much capital tied up."

While the two of them compared favorite movies of that era, Jillian made coffee and served Robert's dessert creation. To top off the Italian theme, he'd made tiramisu, a creamy concoction with ladyfingers that set everyone moaning.

"So, what happened to all the stuff?" he asked.

"Do you still have it?"

"Oh, just a couple of pieces--I'll show you some time. After my Bill died, it was no fun to work in the shop anymore, so I closed it. I needed a big write-off, with all the estate taxes, so I gave most of it to the Museum of Motion Pictures in Hollywood."

Jillian had learned the hard way that once Robert started talking about old movies, he could rattle on all night, so she decided to change the subject. "Midge, did I show you the chart for the line?"

"No, and I've been wondering about it. I want a copy."

Midge had asked her to select the time for the hotline to open. When Gary pooh-poohed the idea, Midge had told him, "Don't be a fool! What's the point of having an astrology business if you don't use the edge astrology gives you? Remember the big financier, J. P. Morgan? He was a client of Evangeline Adams, that famous astrologer back in the Twenties, and he said, 'Millionaires don't use astrology. Billionaires do.' We'll wait and start when the chart is right." He had reluctantly agreed, still a skeptic despite his long connection with Jillian--and his involvement in the line.

Jillian had protested that she was no expert in electional astrology--the art of choosing the optimal date and hour to begin an enterprise or event. When Midge persisted despite her protests, Jillian gave in reluctantly. They were having enough trouble getting along, as it was.

Still, Gary wanted to get the line up and going, so there was only a one week leeway. It wasn't just any old week, either, it was one marred by a triangular formation called a T-square, which promised plenty of conflict and hard work. The factors involved--the Sun, Mars, and Pluto--made Jillian even more uneasy, as they suggested ego and power struggles, possibly even some betrayals. Since it was in effect the entire span of time he gave her to choose from, there was no getting around it, the T-square was going to appear in the chart.

She'd always had qualms about the validity of electional astrology. She'd never been convinced that it was possible to avoid every problem by using astrology to choose the time to do something--like the song that says, 'Read your horoscope, cheat your fate.' To her, if something was a real issue, it would sneak into the electional chart in some form.

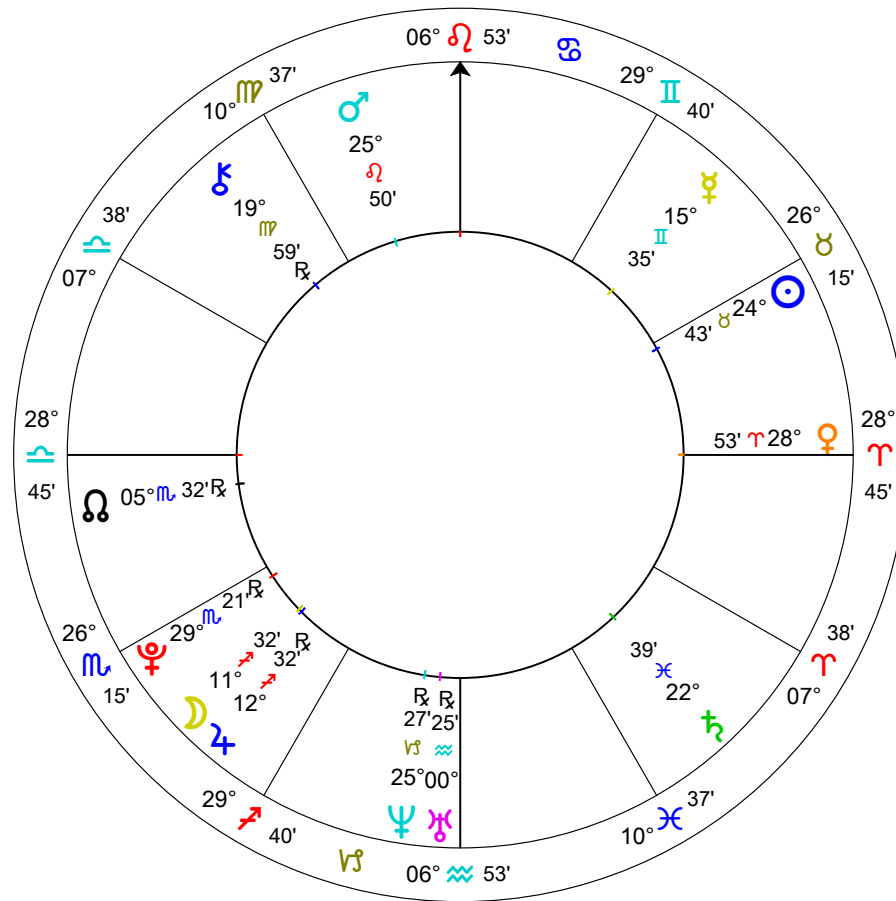
Using her computer, Jillian had erected charts for a variety of starting times. After pouring over 17 possible charts, she finally chose May 15, when the Moon and Jupiter were standing together in Sagittarius. Then she selected a time that tucked this lucky, expansive combination into the second house, the house of money.

However, in order to put those goodies into the second house, Uranus and Neptune had to fall in the third house--the house of communication. The combination seemed potentially erratic, yet she reasoned that both Uranus and Neptune have to do with the New Age, and it was a New Age telecommunications business. She succeeded in convincing herself that this placement could be positive.

Still, there were things about the chart that worried Jillian. She especially wondered if it didn't confirm her suspicions about Gary. She wished Midge hadn't given her the responsibility of choosing the chart--or that Gary could have given her more choice of dates.



hot Line opens
May 16, 1995
6:15 pm PDT
Port Townsend, WA
122W45; 48N07



Now, at Midge's request, Jillian retrieved a copy of the chart from her overflowing desk. "The moment the first call comes through will be the chart for the line. That's why we have to start at exactly 6:15 PM."

"I have several friends lined up for readings, starting right when you said. With a few calls in a row, it's an authentic starting time for the business. What's in the chart?"

"You have to understand that this is not going to be an optimum choice, given that there was only one week leeway. It's not like a wedding chart, where you could put the ceremony off for a few months until the astrological conditions were perfect."

Ever the practical Taurus, Midge cautioned, "The rent and phone bills don't stop, just because the chart's not perfect."

Looking the chart over, she exclaimed, "This is amazing! The Sun and Ascendant are identical to mine--to the degree! Did you plan it that way?"

"No, I didn't even notice it until now. But, then, so-called coincidences are so constant in astrology that you come to expect them."

Jillian gave Midge a brief interpretation of the chart, including some of the problems, but was able to add confidently, "The money-making indicators are so strong, the line just has to pay off."

"That's great to hear! Maybe I can get some of my friends to come in on it."

"Now, then," Midge told the three of them, "I wanted to talk to you about how you'll be working."

Here comes the drill sergeant, Jillian thought. She's been treating us to that Libra Rising charm, but now that we're getting down to business, we're going to see Aries in action.

"First, the schedule." Midge announced, "You'll work an eight hour shift to start, with a couple hours overlap so there'll be two of you in the busiest time slots. I know those are long hours to be doing readings, but there won't be that many calls at first. When we get so busy you can't take all the calls, we'll hire more readers. Then you'll work shorter hours, but the higher volume of calls will mean better money."



"I can work late," Robert offered. "I'm a night owl."

"Gary and I wanted you on the late shift anyway. We wouldn't want the girls alone in the marina then. Jillian, I hope you're an early riser. I've got you scheduled from 6:00 AM to 2:00 PM. Astarte works from 12:00 noon to 8:00 PM. Those are the peak hours, so we've also got Robert on the line from 6:00 PM to 2:00 AM."

Jillian wondered, *Eight hour shifts! Can I really be on target for eight hours in a row, seven days a week I'm a morning person, but 6:00 AM? I'll be lucky if*

I can punch a birth date into the computer, much less make sense of the chart. Still, it's the only possible plan, and it's temporary until the line really gets rolling. Isn't it just like Astarte to get the best hours?

"Okay, here are the rules," Midge continued. "Consider them the Thou Shalt Nots of working for us, because any serious infraction and you *will* be terminated."

"Number One: You cannot forecast death--either the caller's or anyone they care about. Got it? Nobody dies on this line. EVER!"

"Number Two: You cannot give advice on health matters without recommending they see a doctor. We don't want to be sued--or arrested for practicing medicine without a license. Likewise, with legal questions, you suggest they see a lawyer. For health or law, comment on what you see in the chart or the cards, but then recommend they consult a qualified person."

"Number Three: What the caller tells you, you must keep confidential. As professionals, I'd think you'd respect that anyway, but we'll be dealing with a lot of locals, and this is a small town.

"Number Four: You cannot take customers from the line and make them private clients. That should go without saying, but I want to make myself clear.

"Number Five: Even if you're not charging them, you cannot give customers your home number. Some very sticky situations--and liability--could result from doing that.

"Number Six: You cannot let a customer run up too high of a bill, or there's a big chance we won't be able to collect the money. You let them know when twenty minutes has passed, and you cut them off at half an hour. Also, if the caller says they're broke or on welfare, get them off the line as fast as you can. Do you have any problem with these rules?"

Astarte shook her head. Robert said, "That's standard. We had pretty much the same rules on the other line."

Jillian agreed. "They sound like basic ethics and good common sense."

Midge passed out the contracts. "Now, if you'll just sign."

Robert stepped in. "You don't realize you're dealing with a bunch of paranoid New Yorkers. We need time to read it over and figure out what we're committing to."

Jillian wondered, *how can I slow her down? Robert's right, but I don't want the two of them getting into it again.* "Excuse me, Midge, but don't you think it would be better if we signed them tomorrow, just finishing at 6:15? That way, we have control over the astrological factors, plus we'll all benefit from that loaded money house."

"Good point. Bring them tomorrow. Well, folks, we should all get a good night's sleep. I'll give you a ride home, Astarte."

"I'm curious," Jillian asked Midge as she was leaving, "How long have you known Gary?"

"It's been about six months. He moved to town maybe four months ago, once we started planning the line."

"And how did you meet?"

"Didn't he discuss it with you?"

She tried to be off-hand. "No, he never mentioned it."

Midge pursed her mouth. "Well, then, I'd rather not say."



Jillian thought, *Interesting. Could she and Gary have been lovers? Surely not! She looks great, but she's still old enough to be his mother. He has trouble keeping his zipper up, but he's no gigolo.* She exchanged glances with Robert, whose arched and wiggling eyebrows conveyed a different opinion. She rejected the possibility. *There is some mystery about their connection. I'll get it out of Gary.*

But when she asked Gary later how they'd met, he brushed it off with an airy, "Oh, you know, Babe, friend of a friend." The whole question of where he'd been and what he'd been doing in the three years since they last spoke was something he kept carefully vague.



When Jillian and Robert poured over the contract that night, there was nothing objectionable--there was a commitment not to work for any other line at the same time, and an agreement not to refer people to other readers for commissions. Readers had to agree to give a month's notice if they quit, but could be fired without notice for a breach of the rules. Still, to take advantage of the financial rewards the chart promised, they waited and signed at the moment the line opened the next day.

HOTLINE TO HEAVEN

Chapter Four

June 14

It was silent in the trailer other than the whir of Jillian's computer, set up to calculate a chart on command, and the gurgle of the coffee maker, filling with the day's first pot of French roast. In moving her work tools there, she'd brought along her favorite mug, the cobalt blue glass one. She filled it with coffee and held it up, loving how the light glowed through.

Waiting seemingly forever for a call, Jillian thought, *this shift couldn't get much deader. Between 6:00 and 7:30 AM, I'm lucky to get one or two calls. And I have to get up at 5:00 to make it here by 6:00. Cruel and unusual punishment, that's what this job is! Who in their right mind would be worrying about the future at this hour, when most people are still too groggy to know whether the right shoe matches the left. Or, they're busy trying to figure out whether the run in that pair of pantyhose can be made to look like it happened on the way to work. The line has only been running a month, but if business doesn't get better soon with that new advertising Gary is working on, I'm asking Midge if I can start at 7:00 instead.*

She used the interval to put on some makeup. She applied her favorite eye shadow, a pale, luminescent blue that deepened the blue in her eyes. Some intuition had told her to dress well today, so she'd put on a kelly green shirt and slacks. She was all dressed up and no place to go, but that seemed to be the story of her life in this town.

She picked up yesterday's issue of the weekly paper from the conference table and looked again at the article about the hotline. Hoping to stimulate business, Midge had used her pull to get a reporter to do a feature. It wasn't as hostile to astrology and psychic phenomena as most media coverage--the paper tended to be kind to new businesses. The headline read, "HEAVEN ON THE LINE? JUST PICK UP THE

PHONE." Above the article was a photo of Midge and Astarte--a.k.a. The Angel Gabriel.

Since Midge and Gary insisted on adopting Astarte's idea of using angels' names on the line, Robert had gotten Sophy Burnham's *A Book of Angels* at the metaphysical bookstore. According to the book, there were four archangels, so each of the trio chose one for their alias. Angels were said to be neither male nor female, so the apparent gender of the names didn't matter. Astarte chose Gabriel because that was the messenger angel, a bearer of good news, and she always wanted to leave her callers with a positive outlook.

Jillian had settled on Raphael, chief of the guardian angels, who was the angel of healing, but also of death. Robert picked the archangel Michael,



commander in chief of the celestial army, because he was young, strong, and handsome. The final archangel, Uriel, was the interpreter of prophecies and brought the knowledge of God to men, but was also the angel of retribution. They had speculated on who the fourth reader to work on the line would be, the one who'd take on Uriel's name.

Jillian reread the article and put it down. *I hope it'll bring more business. We're all putting in lots of hours, but still not earning much, since we're only paid by the minute for the calls we answer.*

As beautiful as the area was, she was starting to feel lonely. She still knew none of the townspeople. She and Robert had fallen into a pleasant routine of him making dinner when she came home so they could eat together before he left for his own shift. Money was tight by now, so they weren't sumptuous meals, but he handled the entire spectrum of budget entrees from chicken to meat loaf with flair. As he said, what else was there for him to do here but cook anyway? Sometimes they went for a walk on the beach afterwards, loving the fresh breeze and the sound of the waves. They had good talks and some good laughs, and on the whole, she enjoyed rooming with him. He was a total fanatic about housekeeping, so she was working to curb her natural untidiness.

The nights were tough, though. Robert took the car to work, since there was no other transportation when he got off the late shift, so she really had no way to get around. There was a cab--one single cab--in the evening but it was hard to think of going to a play or event on her own, not knowing a soul.

Astarte complained of loneliness, too, but Jillian felt the two-hour overlap in their work schedules was quite enough to spend with her. One could only listen to so many past lives before one wanted to puke. Jillian did believe in past lives. They explained parts of our lives and relationships that didn't make sense otherwise, but she felt Astarte misused them to feed her ego and justify her foolish mistakes with men.

Jillian had been so desperate for companionship the other night that she'd succumbed to Gary's invitation to dinner. He'd taken her to the town's showplace, Manresa Castle. Perched on the brink of a hill and visible from a distance, the imposing white building had been constructed by the town's first mayor in 1892 as a present for his new bride. Retaining the flavor of that era, it was now an upscale inn, one of the many tourist attractions.



They'd first had a drink in the mahogany paneled bar with bay windows looking out over the water and distant hills. Then they moved on to dinner in the softly-lit dining room, filled with antique furniture and fittings. Frommer's Travel Guide named it the top restaurant in the area. Gary had turned on the charm in telling her the story of the place and in making sure she ordered the best on the menu. She chose the delicately prepared local salmon; he got the mixed grill and offered her bits of all the tasty meats. The dessert tray looked exquisite, but Jillian gave it a pass.

He'd worn one of the three piece suits he used for business meetings out of town, knowing full well that she found him hard to resist in a suit. Over an after-dinner drink, he told her soulfully, "I didn't know how much

I'd missed you until you got here. We were good together, Jillie, we really were. You can't know how often I've kicked myself for blowing it with you. Over what? Over some twit who didn't have half your brains or capacity to love...wasn't even as pretty as you, come right down to it. Won't you consider taking me back?"

"Gary, you haven't changed one iota. Look at the way you drool over Astarte."

"She's a sweet kid, but she IS just a kid. I'm a mature man now, and I need a mature companion like yourself. Come on, Babe, don't you remember those Sundays we stayed in bed until noon, reading the New York Times, and...."

"I remember the Times," she rushed to say. "We always fought over the Book Review Section." *The other parts, I refuse to remember, no matter how much you turn up the heat. Blast you, you're still handsome, still sexy, but still all wrong!*

He kissed her hand. "It's our wedding anniversary, Babe. Remember? That's why I wanted to bring you here tonight."

"Of course, I remember. June 13, 1979--that was the day I made the biggest mistake of my life." *It is romantic of him to do this*, she admitted to herself.

"Want to see what the rooms are like upstairs, Hon? We could stay over. Wouldn't you like to be able to say you spent the night in a castle?"

"This may be a castle, but you're no Prince Charming. I'd have to be crazy to go back to you." She'd made him take her home early and hadn't invited him in.

And I WOULD have been crazy to give in, she told herself, as she strolled to the back of the trailer to pour another mug of coffee. *There are some side benefits to being tough, cynical, and forty--you don't make as many damn fool mistakes as you did at 25. I don't know whether it's a matter of developing character and judgement or simply becoming gun shy, but Gary would have gotten me upstairs even five, six years ago.*

As a matter of fact, just about five years ago, there was that wild night at the airport hotel when he talked me into meeting him at JFK on his way to Europe. Even now, he knows how to push my buttons, but at least I have better sense than to respond.

A call came in then, and she quickly jotted down the time and woman's first name and birth date on the log sheet and brought the chart up on the monitor. Jillian thought. *At least she knows her birth time, So many of them don't, and then all I can do is run a chart for sunrise on the day they were born. It cuts down on the accuracy and detail by at least a third.*

The woman wanted to know if her new boss--a married man--was as taken with her as she was with him. With Venus, the planet of love in the twelfth house--representing secrets and self-defeating behavior--the woman clearly loved romantic intrigue. Unfortunately, her Venus was in the sign Cancer, so she usually became too attached to these unavailable men, tried to mother them, and wound up with a chronic broken heart. This was no exception, with Neptune 180 degrees away in her house of work--probable heartache AND the chance of a scandal that would damage her career.

"Don't start," she counseled the woman. "He won't treat you well, and it can hurt your reputation at work. Even if you don't tell a soul, he might brag to the fellows."

The woman wasn't thrilled with the interpretation but had to admit she was probably right. Jillian mused, *Sometimes, anyone with common sense could tell these people the same thing. You don't need astrology to know this situation was a setup. The*

fact that I have a degree in psych and several years of experience in social work agencies doesn't hurt in this work either. Still, astrology provides details and a picture of the trends and timing.

The advantage astrology gave her was very clear when she took the next call. A young mother was having trouble with her six-year-old and wanted advice on how to manage him better. "I just now got him off to school after the short version of World War III. He hates getting up, drags his heels, throws tantrums, and winds up late for the bus half the time. He's sweet as pie in the afternoon and evening, but I can't take this horror story every morning. It ruins my day."

Jillian looked at both his chart and his mother's and found some important differences in energy patterns. Among other chart features, the mother was a quick-witted and quick-moving Sagittarian Sun and Mercury, while the boy had Sun and Mercury in slower-moving Taurus.

"He's not deliberately disobedient," she told the mother, "He just operates at a different pace than you do and needs more time to wake up and get moving. He's a plodder, you're a sprinter, and it takes a plodder a lot longer to cover the same ground. I'd suggest you complete as much of the morning's routine as you can the night before-- give him his bath, help him pick out the clothes he wants to wear, and have his books and lunch money organized. Then, wake him up a half hour earlier than you have been and let him muddle along at his own pace." The young woman promised to try it and thanked her profusely.

Jillian noted the time the call finished on her log sheet, then stretched and walked over to look at one of the metaphysical paintings on the walls. Midge had a big collection by artists who paint mandalas and angels and other New Age subjects, so she'd hung a few around the trailer.

She told herself, *Robert was right--working on the line isn't nearly as bad as I thought. Sure, it doesn't go as deep as the readings I do privately, and I don't have time to prepare and mull over the chart in advance. But I'm getting used to the pace and to thinking on my feet. These people need help so badly, and where would they get it in their little towns? There's a spiritual connection between me and the caller in these readings, just as much as in the other kind, and that's all that really matters. That and the satisfaction of knowing I've used astrology to bring some clarity. Maybe it's going to be okay after all.* She sipped her coffee and daydreamed, waiting for another call.

The silence was shattered by a loud crash and the tinkling of glass. Jillian rushed to the anteroom at the front of the trailer and found a big rock and shards of glass on the floor by the window, which now had a large hole. Heart pounding, she opened the door cautiously and peeked out. No one was there, but the back end of a dark blue van screeched around the corner, stirring up the dust. She went outside. Paint dripped from the message sprayed on the side of the building: SPAWN OF SATAN.

Surveying the scene, she felt sick and somehow ashamed, as though she'd been caught doing something bad. She wondered, *What's a nice girl like me doing in a place like*



this? Someone obviously doesn't see me as a nice girl, or this as a nice operation. What is trouble like this doing in my life? Why did I leave New York? Her chest burned with despair. Knees shaking, she went back inside and took the phones off the hook until she could compose herself.

She asked herself, sinking onto the sofa, *What's this all about? Some kind of religious fanatic, maybe a whole group of them? Maybe the article set them off. Spawn of Satan? Do people really think that way? It's so SICK!! What does that have to do with me looking at a chart and helping a young mother get along better with her little boy? I know some people think astrology is the work of the devil, but I never came face to face with them before. Well, thankfully, not face to face, even now! What if they come back? I shouldn't be here by myself. I'd better call somebody.*

Gary, she knew, was in Seattle working with the ad agency. She dialed Midge but only got her machine, so she left an urgent message. She considered calling Robert, but hated to wake him--his shift finished at 2:00 AM, and he probably hadn't gone to bed until 4:00. She told herself, *the police, Dummy, you call the police.* She dialed 911, and the dispatcher said she'd send someone right away.

Jillian shivered from the cold morning air blowing through the broken window--and from the shock of what had just happened. Sinking back down on the sofa in the anteroom, she felt an electric current running through her body. She barely had time to catch her breath before she heard a siren outside, the screech of tires, and a knock on the tin door.

The policeman who entered was a couple inches taller than Jillian, with the broad shoulders--and the broken nose--of a former football captain. "I got a call that you had some trouble." His near-black eyes were quick and keen, scanning the trailer with obvious curiosity. "What kind of business are you running here?"

"It's a 900 number, a psychic hot line."

His arched black eyebrows rose and crumpled into a frown. "Fortune tellers? How did you get to Port Townsend?"

Her heart sank even lower. Why weren't Midge and Gary here to handle this? Was she headed for the pokey? "We're not fortune tellers, we're professionals--more like counselors. Midge McCullough started this business. There was an article about us in the paper yesterday."

"I believe I did see something about that." He looked down at the floor and shook his head, saying more to himself than to her. "Hmm. Midge McCullough."

So he knows Midge. Is that good or bad, she wondered. "Excuse me, officer, but as you can see, we've had some vandalism here. I wanted to report it--and I'm afraid they'll come back."

He looked at her closely and took in her white face and trembling hands. He said, more kindly, "I'm sorry, Miss. I'm Dave Jordan. Can you tell me what happened? Why are you here by yourself at this hour? It's not even 7:00."

She told him about it, finishing by saying, "I never had anything like this happen to me before. I'm not used to it. I mean, I'm from New York and I've been mugged a couple of times--who hasn't? But I've never had someone hate me because of my work."

He inspected the area more thoroughly, carefully using a handkerchief to pick up a spray can of paint outside and the rock inside, to preserve any fingerprints. "I don't

know that we'll find anything. Most people are too smart to leave fingerprints these days, but you never know."

Jillian's cheeks reddened. She had recovered enough to be outraged at the violation. "Is that all, Officer Jordan? Aren't you going to investigate?"

He looked at her piercingly, taking in her blue eyes and tousled mane of hair. She wondered self-consciously, *Why is he looking at me that way? My mascara is probably running or something, and I'm sure my hair has gotten all disheveled.* She tried to pat it back in place.

A smile tugged at his face, then he said, "There are some Jesus freaks who picket in front of the metaphysical bookstore every Saturday. This doesn't sound like their speed, but I plan on checking them out."

"And what happens when you leave? What if they come back?"

"I'll see to it that a squad car passes by a couple of times a shift for the next few days, but I don't like the idea of you being down here by yourself. And you say there's someone working here until 2:00 in the morning? This is a pretty safe town, but there's some pond scum from outside the country that occasionally drift in on these boats. I'm going to come back and talk to your bosses about a decent security system. Isn't there anyone you can call to come and be with you now?"

"I've got a message in to Midge, but if she doesn't come soon, I'll wake up my roommate."

She avoided using pronouns in referring to Robert, because she was coming out of shock enough to notice that this was an attractive man--and seemingly a kind one. No wedding ring, either, not that that meant anything. With his dark good looks and angular face, she suspected a touch of Indian blood several generations back.

He sat on the edge of the desk. "I can wait a bit, so you won't be alone, as long as no other emergencies come in." He loosened up. "So you're from New York, are you? That's got to be a major adjustment. How are you liking Port Townsend?"

As they chatted, it became apparent that there was a chemistry between them. Dying to know if he was single, Jillian thought, this ploy worked for the guys in New York, so let me try it. "How does your wife like the area?"

His mouth twitched in amusement, guessing what she was up to. "Oh, my ex didn't like it at all. We were stationed near here on Indian Island when I was in the navy, but when I was discharged, she wanted to go back home to Bend--that's down in Oregon--to be around our families. When we got divorced, it didn't seem like there was anything left for me there, and I loved Port Townsend, so I moved here about four years ago."

She thought, *YES! Not married and four years past the trauma of the big D! NOT on the rebound--maybe even emotionally available, but let's not ask for the moon.* She had the sensation of wanting to melt into his arms, to let those big shoulders engulf her and soothe the nerves frayed by this difficult morning. She asked herself, *What are you, some love-starved bimbo? Yes, herself replied, yes I am. And wouldn't it be grand?*

She was glad her intuition had told her to dress carefully that morning. "Thanks, Mel!" she offered skyward. Both she and Robert had taken to claiming Mel as their spirit guide, to tease Astarte--and to occasionally succeed in making her giggle. *Maybe Mel is real,* she speculated. *I'll have to grill Robert about this.*

Not usually a flirt, she surprised herself by asking, "So, Officer Jordan, how does a newcomer get to know people around here?"

He said, "Call me Dave. And I'll presume to call you Jillian--pretty name for a pretty lady. Listen, you work down here on the waterfront, but I bet you've never been out on Puget Sound. Am I right?"

She nodded.

"Well, I have a boat, and there's nothing like it. Why don't you let me take you boating on Friday? That's my day off."

"I've never been on a boat in my life, and I'd love to go." She gave him her number, and they agreed that he'd pick her up at the trailer when she finished her shift on Friday afternoon.

Midge flew in, slamming the door, face like a thundercloud. "What's going on? I was dead to the world when you called, but I came as soon as I heard your message. Why are the police here?"

Jillian explained, and Dave put in, "Listen, Ma'am, I don't think it's all that safe down here in these early morning and late night hours. You need a top rank security system, but I don't understand why you'd conduct a business like this in the marina in the first place."

Midge bristled, her voice even hoarser and louder than usual. "There's no law against it, no zoning problem, so why shouldn't we take the best deal available? And just what is your name, officer? I have some good friends on the city council, and I'm sure they'd vouch for this business."

"I'm Dave Jordan, Mrs. McCullough. We met during the investigation into your husband's death."

Disconcerted, Midge lit a cigarette. "Barney suffered terribly toward the end, the cancer had spread so badly. He just got confused and took too many doses of the painkiller the doctor had him on. The inquest ruled it an accident."

Dave's eyes narrowed. "So it did, Mrs. McCullough, so it did. Well, I'd better be on my way. But, as I told Miss Malone, we'll have a squad car pass by from time to time to see that all's well--until you get a good security system, that is."

When he had gone, Midge rounded on her. "Are you retarded? Why did you call the cops? In a business like this, we don't want them sniffing around. If we're too much of a nuisance or there are too many complaints, they might pass one of those gypsy fortune teller ordinances and put us out of business. It's happened in other places. And you **HAVE** to know that those reporters listen in on the police scanner, so the first thing, it'd be in the paper. In a small town, we have to avoid controversy. You don't **EVER** call the cops again, do you understand? I don't care what happens, you get in touch with me first."

Jillian stood pat, her Irish temper flaring at being spoken to like a child. "I'm sorry, but I was frightened. I will try to reach you first if anything else happens, but I have to say that I'm not putting myself in danger, nor would I let Robert or Astarte." She told herself, *I wouldn't put up with her crap for a minute if I didn't need this job to survive.*

Midge rubbed her hands over her eyes. She'd come in such a hurry, she wasn't wearing makeup and her usually carefully-coifed hair was askew. At this hour, and without all the camouflage, she looked her age. "Hey, I'm sorry this happened to you. I was just upset when I saw the outside of the trailer. I'll look into a good quality security

system." She set about making calls to get the window fixed and the graffiti painted over that morning, before any reporters got wind of it, and then went home.

Overreacted a bit, didn't she, Jillian asked herself. And doesn't give a damn what happens to us, down here alone. No, I don't think it's about any gypsy fortune telling law. There was definitely something else, something to do with Barney's death. I wonder if Dave will tell me about it on Friday.

Friday! I can't believe I have a date--and with such a delicious man! It's been so long since I've been out with anyone promising--I hardly know how to act. She let her fantasies soothe her frazzled nerves, and when the calls began again, she was ready for them.

HOTLINE TO HEAVEN
Chapter Five

June 16

On Friday, Dave picked Jillian up in his burgundy Saturn. They drove to the other end of Water Street, the main drag. The boat wasn't moored in the marina, but at an area for smaller crafts at Point Hudson. On the way, he pointed out the nearby Wooden Boat School, where people came from all over to learn how to make old-style sailing vessels.

He helped her into the boat and got her seated, insisting she put on a life vest. It was orange, but fortunately, it went just fine with the white rayon slacks and shell she'd chosen. Dave was wearing tight jeans and a short-sleeved knit that revealed nicely-defined biceps, she noted with interest.

She asked, "What do you call this kind of boat?"

He told her it was a runabout with an inboard motor, a 20 footer. It was older, but lovingly tended. The canopy overhead was called a dodger. He cast off, started the engine, and ably maneuvered out of the rows of small craft into open water. It was odd to see Port Townsend and its charming Victorians from that perspective. As the town receded, a freshly painted white lighthouse came into view. He said it was part of Fort Worden, where they filmed *An Officer and a Gentleman*.

The boat rounded a curve, and the town and the fort disappeared. Only the hills and their evergreen groves were visible--that and the stunning water, islands, and mountains 360 degrees around them. The Olympics, stretched across the western horizon, were showing off in their full snow-capped glory, visible all the way to the mountains behind the mountains. The Cascades, on the other horizon, were playing it coy, dimly visible through the mist. Mount Rainier was typically incognito--maybe that white spike in the sky was a cloud bank, maybe it was Rainier. He handed her a pair of binoculars and pointed out a bald eagle soaring overhead, its wingspan huge.

"It really is an eagle, like you see on stamps," she said. "In New York, all we ever saw were pigeons."

"What's your sign?" she asked him. "With me, at least you know that's not just a pickup line!"

He looked her over seriously. "I can't say that I ever paid any attention. But you're an intelligent woman, and I can't imagine you devoting your life to astrology unless there was something to it. And, what if there IS something to it, and you don't like my sign? Or, what if you do my horoscope and decide we're not compatible. No, I don't think I'm going to tell you."

That's just perfect, she thought. The astrologer who doesn't give out her birth chart meets the man who won't say when he was born. Payback time! She worked all her wiles, but he wouldn't budge. Without his chart, how was she supposed to know who he was? She reassured herself, *You already know. He's a good, decent, delectable man.*

He asked her tentatively, "Did you put up a chart for our date?"

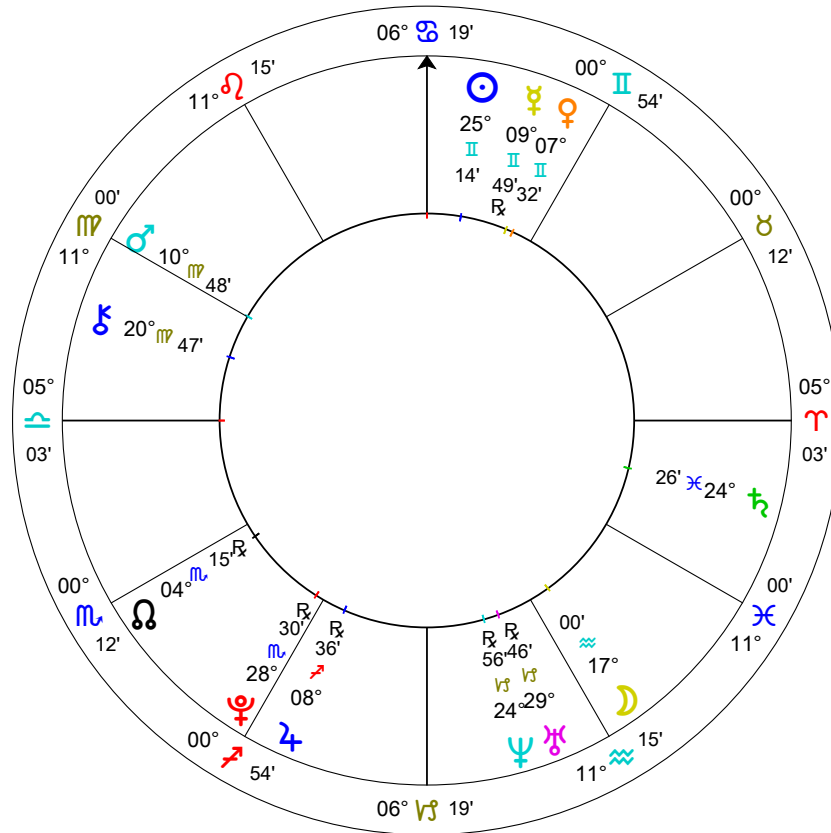
first date with dave

June 16, 1995

2:00 PM PDT

Port Townsend, WA

122W45; 48N07



She hid her face in her hands and laughed. He certainly didn't let anything slip by. "Of course."

"What did it say about us?"

Gemini Sun trine an Aquarius Moon, she remembered, lots of air trines. "Very good for communication and mental compatibility."

"What were the problems?"

"Your work might interfere, or maybe it's mine--or both. It's true, our work schedules do clash."

She thought, *It's possible that our lines of work would cause a deeper conflict than that but I don't know what it would be. He's not acting like he's going to arrest me for fortune telling--unless this is some weird form of entrapment.*

The work conflicts were shown by Saturn in the 6th house at a right angle to the Sun, plus a triangle involving Mars in Virgo. It was hard to be objective with her hopes riding so high, but that same triangle--containing Mars, Venus, and Jupiter--suggested they'd be a lively, feisty, sexy couple.

"If you didn't like the looks of the chart, would you cancel our date?"

No way, she thought. "No, but I'd probably reschedule it, to get a better chart."

He shook his head in amazement. "You really live your life by this stuff. For sure, you don't get my birth information!"

And it serves me right, she thought. *Old hoof-in-mouth Malone*. She forgot about astrology then and allowed the peace of her surroundings to seep in. The slanting late afternoon sun cast glints of light onto the water--in the distance, the flat stretches were as much gold as turquoise. Despite the hour, she applied liberal amounts of sunblock, not taking any chances with her pale complexion.

"You don't seem all that much like a cop," she observed.

"Thanks a lot! You don't seem all that much like a gypsy fortune teller, either. What do you mean, I'm not like a cop?"

"The ones I met in New York were so tough and cynical, like they didn't have a heart."

"This isn't exactly a high crime area, so we don't turn into hard cases. We've only had one real homicide in the time I've been here--sure, some domestic violence that got out of hand, but only one murder that went unsolved. It was a girl--a fifteen-year-old people say was a little wild. I don't know if it's true. They'd probably say that of anyone who had the bad luck to be murdered. Anyway, they found her on the riverbank, stabbed repeatedly. Rumor is that the Water Street kids know who did it, but nobody ever came forward."

"So young--it's a shame. Aren't there any drug dealers in town?"

"I imagine you could cop some homegrown pot from the old hippies in Hippie Hollow, as a favor if they liked you, or score some speed on the waterfront from a sailor, but no, no biggie."

The wake made by the motor was a pale green and white foam. Seagulls hovered behind them, mistaking them for a fishing boat and hoping to get lucky with some fish guts. Dave reached into a bag and gave her some dry bread, showing her how to throw pieces into the air for them to snatch. She laughed in delight at their antics.

She asked, "So, what do you mean, I don't seem that much like a gypsy fortune teller."

"Well, I hope this won't ruffle your feathers, but a lot of people who are into this New Age stuff seem out in Lala Land. We have plenty of them in town--they come up from California when it gets too polluted and urban for their tastes. Plus, it seems like every New Age dog and pony show on this coast comes through here to give workshops. The paper is full of ads for them every week--one cockamamie new notion after another that's supposed to cure all your woes."

Jillian nodded ruefully. "I have to admit some of my New Age brothers and sisters are pretty ungrounded. I've been working on a country-western song called, 'The New Age is Getting Old with Me.'"

Dave observed, "You don't act like that at all. You're an intelligent woman, and you seem sensible."

"I like to call myself a sane weirdo. I keep a skeptical eye on anybody who rattles on about past lives or UFOs or spirit guides. I DO believe in all those things, but I always watch to see if people who talk about them are well balanced before I listen."

"Here's one you'll love," he offered. "The head of the local witchcraft coven was arrested about two years ago. Seems his house caught on fire, and when they went in to put it out, they found he was growing pot. So they looked around a little more, and they found a stash of kiddie porn. Turned out he was a major distributor. The rest of the coven was all up in arms about the scandal."

Watching her reactions closely, he asked, "Are you a witch?"

She smiled wryly at his cautious probing, but also found herself annoyed. *Wicca is an old and honorable nature nature religion, she thought, and I don't know why so many people confuse it with satanism. What does it say about this town--and about Dave--that a cop like him is so wary of witches?*



She squashed the irritation and said, "No, I'm not a witch, but people get us mixed up all the time. Not that many witches are astrologers, and not that many astrologers are witches."

"Sorry. Can't be too careful. I've learned to check people out pretty thoroughly before I let them into my life."

"Me, too," she sighed, "Me, too. You mentioned that you were divorced. What happened?"

He shrugged and looked away. "Ah, well, I found out that my wife was having an affair with my best friend, Bill. I couldn't believe he'd do that to me. We were on the football team together in high school, we were in the navy together, and we even ran a filling station together for a while, but that failed. He was in and out of the house like one of the family from the time we were kids. Anyway, I was on the force down in Bend, too, working nights, and I guess she got lonely, so he came into the picture. They're married now. That's why I left--it hurt too bad, running into them around town."

He went on, "Bill bought me out of my share of the house--decent of him in a way--and I bought the Saturn and dropped \$10,000 of it into this boat. Bought it used

and fixed it up. Kind of foolish, probably, but I feel like I'm in another world out here, free and clean and at peace."

She remembered the name painted on the side of the boat. "Why did you call it Whispering Hope?"

"It was a song from when I was a kid and we used to go to the Baptist church. I don't even remember the words, but the name stuck with me."

"I think I remember," Jillian said. "Wasn't it a big hit in the Fifties--by Jo Stafford, maybe? My folks kept the record, a 78 it was, and played it sometimes." She sang it for him:

*'Whispering hope,
Oh, how welcome thy voice,
Letting my soul,
In its sorrow, rejoice.'*

He smiled. "That's the one. You've got a beautiful voice."

"We were a musical family." She thought, *What a wrenching song. How deep the wounds of that betrayal and divorce must go. Maybe he's not so emotionally available after all. Guard your heart, girlfriend.*

She only said, "I'm sorry for what you went through. My ex, Gary, was incapable of being faithful, too, but at least he stayed away from my friends."

"The same Gary who's running this hotline?"

She told him about it, explaining that Gary had asked her to come out and help. "I still can't believe I'm doing it. He doesn't seem to have changed at all in the ten years since we split up."

She grinned ruefully. "So this is what first dates are like in your forties, is it? Scar tissue show and tell."

Dave threw back his head and laughed. "It sure seems that way."

The waves got rougher, and he explained that the waves were created by the tide coming in. She soon discovered how to ride the dips and swoops, keeping her spine loose. *I'm not such a bad sailor*, she thought. *No doubt, Lady Jane would say I'd been a mariner in other lives.* "I love it," she told him. "It feels so natural, being out here."

"We'll stay in Admiralty Inlet," he decided. "I wouldn't want to take you out into the Straight of Juan de Fuca in a boat this size today. We'd be in real trouble in five minutes if the wind came up."

He shot her a speculative look. "You planning on having kids?"

This was a risky subject with new men, she knew from past experience. And was he ever playing it cool--no way to tell what answer he wanted. She told herself, *he's attractive, but say what you feel and hang the consequences. Nothing works in the long run but the truth, anyway.* "No, I'm not."

"Aren't you upset that your biological clock is ticking?"

"It can tick all it wants, I'm not listening. Gary didn't want kids when we were younger, and by the time I was 30, I was out of the mood."

"Am I relieved to hear you say that!"

Whew, we made it through that one! "So you don't want kids?"

"I already have twin daughters--identical, they are. They were real cute when they were little, and I enjoyed being the daddy. But now that they're 14, they can barely bother to talk to me. They live with their mom and come to visit maybe a week a year. At my age, I can't imagine starting all over again, with diapers and 2:00 AM feedings and then with potty training and runny noses."

"Enough! Spare me the details! I babysat constantly in high school to buy clothes and save for college."

"The last woman I was involved with was 35 and obsessed with that biological clock of hers. We hadn't been dating long when she started pressuring me to get married and start a family right away. After a while, I felt used. It seemed like all she saw in me was a suitable sperm donor and a provider for the kids she was determined to have. So, even though I cared for her, I finally broke up with her."

Touched, Jillian told him, "I'm so used to hearing the woman's side of the picture. I don't think I ever realized that men can feel used by women for their paychecks or for having a family, just as women often feel used by men for sex or home comforts. Most men aren't as verbal as you are about their feelings." *This is great, she thought, being able to talk so openly with a man. With him, I can drop the comedy routine and just be real.*

The wind came up, and the waves got too rough, so they hurried back to shore. Then they went to the pub on Water Street for burgers and a pitcher of dark beer. Sitting by the big picture window, they could see a piece of the waterfront, as well as the usual weekend stream of tourists. It didn't smell at all like a bar, she noticed, this sun-lit room with plants, high tin ceilings, and shiny wood floors.

Dave asked, "Are you as Irish as you look, Ms. Malone?"

"Full-blooded on my Dad's side, half on my mother's. My Dad--Mike Malone was his name--came over from County Galway when he was 18. They were poor as dirt in those little towns in the West of Ireland. The fields were nothing but rocks and thorny gorse bushes, so they couldn't raise much of a crop. He and his uncle came here to improve their lot. He didn't improve it much--he was a steel worker in Pittsburgh, a backbreaking job, and he was killed in an accident at the mill when I was ten."

"I'm so sorry he died. What was he like?"

"I adored him. He was always joking and teasing, and he had a soft brogue that made everything twice as funny. He played the guitar and sang these marvelous old Irish songs for me and Mom--quite a good tenor, my dad was. I used to go to the St. Patrick's Day parade every year in New York and once in a while to the Irish pubs for the music, just to hear voices like his again. And I was the only child, so he loved me to distraction. I can still hear him--'Me darlin' gerrrl,' he called me."

"It had to be a shock, losing him that way."

"He was there one day, so alive, and gone the next. There was a hole in my life from ten to thirteen. I kept my grades up--wouldn't have wanted to worry my mom--but it was like I was dead, too. I spent lots of time by myself, reading tragic Gothic romances I



checked out of the library by the armload. I missed out on the teenage crushes and dances because the boys all seemed so--so NOTHING--next to my Dad. I can't believe I'm telling you all this. I never talk about it."

"Did your Mom remarry?"

"No, and she was pretty and still in her early thirties, so it wasn't that no one was interested. But she said once was enough to get married in a lifetime--she wasn't cut out to be a wife. She vowed she'd never marry again unless she came to love someone as much as my dad. She worked two jobs to pay the bills, so she never got home until 7:30 or 8:00 at night. I'd clean the house and have supper ready. There were just the two of us. Mom was an only child, like me, and Dad's people were all over in Ireland. His uncle had gotten homesick and gone back."

"Did you ever go over and meet them?"

"No, but I always wanted to, as beautiful as he made it sound. He told me a million stories."

"Buddy of mine in the service went there for his honeymoon and just loved it. From the pictures they took, it's God's country. It made me think, if I ever get married again, that's where I want to go on my honeymoon."

"It would be a great honeymoon." She wondered, *Is it you? Could you be the one the cards keep talking about?*

He asked, "Are you and your Mom still close?"

"She died when I was 24, of cancer of the womb. There was always something wrong with her that way--why she couldn't have more kids. I hate sounding like Calamity Jane. That's the reason I never talk about my family. People feel sorry for me, and it's humiliating."

He stroked her hand. "You had it rough."

"Right after she died, I met Gary. I guess that's why I was dumb enough to marry him--couldn't stand being all alone in the world. And when it didn't work out, I decided Mom was right-- once was enough to get married unless I just couldn't help myself."

His keen eyes locked with hers. "It sounds like you've never stopped missing your Dad."

She marveled, *Jesus God, he understands. The man understands.* She fought back the tears that filled her eyes and scalded the back of her throat. He took her hand across the table and held it tightly as she kept forcing back the tears, and after a while, he went to pay the check so they could leave.



HOTLINE TO HEAVEN
Chapter Six

July 1

The Angel of Death stroked the panties that the Whore of Satan had worn.

*I warned her to change or die.
I gave her three chances.
She continued to sin.
Then she went to her rest, and peace was restored.
But the peace was threatened when the Spawn of Satan arrived.*

The Angel of Death lovingly kissed the worn white leather Bible.

*Now the other Whore of Satan is breaking the peace.
I will give her a chance to change.
I will warn her she is to die.
Perhaps she will heed the warning.
Then I can save her soul.*

The Angel of Death took out a piece of paper and a crimson marker, the better to highlight the warning. The message was short.

* * * * *

Surprisingly, Astarte was early for work. "I couldn't stand it any more. The house is so empty, and I feel so alone. I got on the Fort Worden bus this morning to see the town. It takes an hour and makes the whole round. This place is so beautiful--so many nice old houses, and all of them with flowers in the yard. In New York, we didn't even have yards, much less flowers! Anyway, the bus came right by here, so I got off."

"You still don't know anybody here?"

"Well, there's the Masons--remember those old friends of my folks I mentioned that moved here from California a few years back? George, he's kind of like a godfather to me. He was so sweet when I was a teenager--he'd hug me all the time and tell me how pretty I was. He really helped build my self-esteem. He and his wife, Barbara, have taken me to a few nice places to eat since I've been here. George has gotten religious in the last couple of years, which is a bit of a drag, but he's still been awfully sweet. But then, after the first couple of times we went out together, I started to feel that Barbara didn't like me. She really gives me the cold shoulder."

Probably a jealous wife, Jillian mused, and no doubt for good reason. This George sounds like a lech. Don't kid yourself--no grown man spends time smooching on a teenager as voluptuous as Astarte had to have been just to build her self-esteem. God, I hope he didn't molest her! That would explain her promiscuity. I've seen plenty of abuse cases with Chiron in the first house like she has. But if he did molest her, wouldn't she hate him now? Oh, come on, Jillian--a few years working in child welfare, and you see abuse everywhere. Still, I hope George Mason doesn't turn out to be a problem for her.

She urged Astarte, "You need people more your own age to hang out with. Have you been to that singles club yet?"

"How can I, with this schedule? I get off at 8:00 PM, and by the time I went home and got ready, the thing would practically be over. Everything starts so early here, not like New York."

Jillian rolled her eyes. *She's griping about HER schedule? She's got the best hours!* "Nothing here is like New York, and we have to adapt. Why don't you bring everything along when you come to work? Just change and put your makeup on between calls. There's nobody here but us. You wouldn't even have to change, really. You wear your pretty long skirts to work every day, with those long neck scarves."

"It's hard to go to something like that by myself. Won't you come along?"

"I don't need to. I've met somebody! We've been seeing each other for a couple of weeks."

"Ooohh! That's wonderful! See, the cards said romance was coming your way. Whenever I see the Ace of Hearts in a spread, I know there's a great love in the offing--maybe even a soul mate."

Impulsively, Astarte hugged her. Jillian responded stiffly, not the hugging type. She's good-hearted, she admitted.

Astarte took some rice cakes out of her bag. "I'm feeling sick at my stomach lately. I think it's the change in diet or maybe the water. They say there's red algae in it. Here, have one."

"Thanks, but no thanks! They taste like Styrofoam. If I ever start eating rice cakes--that and tofu--then you'll know a walk-in has taken over my body--some alien masquerading as me."

Astarte brightened up and beamed. "I have some good news, too. Did Gary tell you? They want to use me in the commercial for the hotline! I'll be filmed in an angel costume--wings and a white robe. They say I'm such a natural for the part that they don't need to look for a model. Gary says they can't afford to pay me, but they'll give me a copy of the tape in case I ever want to do any modeling. Isn't that neat? You'll cover for me, won't you, when we go to Seattle to film it?"

"Yeah, sure. That's great." she replied unconvincingly. "I'm going to make coffee."

She fled, her cheeks reddening. So much for Gary and his taste for mature companionship, she fumed. Good thing I wasn't dumb enough to give in to him--boy, would I feel ripped off! I feel ripped off, anyway, by that sleazoid. And Astarte is



so aggravating--the best of everything is handed to her because of her looks. Oh, Jillie, Jillie, when did you get to be such a jealous bitch? It must be the astrological version of the midlife crisis I've been having--that Pluto square to natal Pluto. I never used to be like this--begrudging others the good things that come their way.

The phones got busy then, so Jillian settled in to work, telling herself, *Put it aside. You're a pro, and you don't stint the clients just because you're upset.*

A woman caller said, "I feel like I'm in jail. I hate my job so much I have to drag myself in by the heels every day. I'm spaced out all the time at work because it's so awful. And I find myself drinking more than I should, to let down after I get home. Yet I'm not sure if I should look for another job, because I don't know what else I could do. I just know there's got to be something more than this."

Jillian thought, *I don't even have to look, Some people just talk their charts, and I know this woman must be having a Neptune transit to her Midheaven or sixth house. She pulled the chart up on the screen, and her suspicions were confirmed. For some time, Neptune had been crossing the woman's Midheaven, the career point at the top of the chart.*

She told her, "The way things stand, it wouldn't make any difference if you stayed put or changed jobs--you'd still feel the same. What's happening is that the soul part of you wants to emerge and fulfill a new and deeper life purpose, but that takes time. You'll probably need to go back to school and learn new skills. Next year, when Jupiter goes through your house of higher education, you may very well be in an educational program for a new career. This year, you need to explore different possibilities and save money for school, but not settle on anything."

"A year of this sounds like forever. What a bummer! But it helps to know I'm on my way to something better. Thanks."

Business was improving, and Jillian wasn't so tired now that she'd maneuvered Midge into letting her start at 7:00 AM rather than 6:00. Robert was calling their battle the clash of the titans. Midge seemed to realize she'd gone too far the day of the vandalism, and Jillian knew when to press her advantage. She'd shown Midge the phone log and halfway convinced her that it was costing more to stay open that hour than to start later. Midge refused to reduce Robert's hours, however, because that same log proved there were plenty of night owls calling between midnight and 2:00 AM.

While Astarte was busy with the next caller, Jillian slipped away to the conference room in the back and used the private line to call Robert and let off steam about the commercial. "I'll tell you the truth, Astarte gets me so mad, I could just STRANGLE her!"

She looked up to find Ralph in the doorway of the room, obviously listening, so she hung up. He was a bit of a snoop, she'd noticed. Taking Midge up on her offer, he ate lunch there each day, and, as Robert had predicted, he was a pest.

He greeted her. "How's everybody? We've been having some beautiful weather, haven't we? It sure clears up my sinuses--they get real bad in the winter when it's so damp, especially working down here on the waterfront. My mom used to have some good remedies for sinus, but she's gone now."

When he'd finished eating, he came out front with the mail. He was wearing a gold cross on a delicate chain around his neck. *I'll bet anything it was his mom's*, Jillian thought.

"Miss Astarte, this letter doesn't have stamps or anything, it was just in the box outside. I'd send it back for postage due, but there's no return address. People are supposed to put their return address on letters now, you know--it's the regulation. Anyway, I think it's for you. It's addressed to The Angel Gabriel."

Astarte took it and put it aside, because the phone rang, and it was her turn. "Thanks, Ralph," she warbled as he left.

Jillian could hear her urging the caller to forgive her husband for his affair and take him back. She thought, *Here's somebody who's really qualified to give advice on marital problems! The blind leading the blind. Not that you've done a whole lot better in the relationship department yourself.*

After the flurry of calls that generally came in around noon, Astarte opened the letter and gasped. "Oh, no, look at this!" She handed it to Jillian. Crimson ink from a permanent marker bled through the page of cheap white paper.

YOU'RE NO ANGEL.
YOU'RE A WHORE OF SATAN.
REPENT OR THE ANGEL OF DEATH
WILL TAKE YOU.

Jillian was alarmed, but tried to reassure her. "It must be the same fanatics that trashed the trailer. Don't worry, Midge ordered a security system, and it'll be installed soon. And a cop car is driving by several times a day."

She had to admit, Midge hadn't stinted on the system--it was top of the line, monitored 24 hours a day by a security company. There'd be a silent alarm to warn of a break-in and a panic button hidden under each desk, which they could trip if they were in danger. The resulting alert could get the police there in as little as three or four minutes.

With obvious reluctance, Astarte revealed, "This is the second letter, and I've had a couple of anonymous calls while I'm here alone. They all come from the Angel of Death. It's me they're after, and it's all my fault."

"Don't be ridiculous. You haven't done anything. It's just these wacko born-again Christians. It was your picture in the paper, so you were the one who got the letters." *Just like a Leo to believe the whole world revolves around them.*

"No, no, you don't understand. It's karma. I haven't been entirely honest about that lifetime when I was a Phoenician princess--remember?"

She sighed inwardly. "Yep. Sure do."

"Well, I wasn't really a priestess to the goddess Astarte. I was a prostitute in the temple--a sacred prostitute. There were lots of us, see, because she was a fertility goddess, and sex was part of the worship. It was supposed to ensure that the earth would be fertile. The money they paid for the sex went to keep up the temple. It's even in the bible, condemning those who served her."

"You were a sacred prostitute?" *Boy, does that make sense.*

"Can you believe it? Anyway, Lady Jane says that someone I know in this life was in love with me then. He couldn't have me to himself because of my vows, and he

got to hate me for having sex with so many men. And in this life, he kind of remembers, so that's why he's persecuting me."

"This is NOT your fault. It's got to be that bunch of born-again who think the hotline is the work of the devil."

"But it feels like someone is watching me at home at night. It's so creepy."

More alarmed now, Jillian considered another possibility. "What about Jimmy? Is he still calling?"

"No, thank heavens. I told him a couple of weeks ago that I didn't want to be with him. And he hasn't called since, so I think he's given up on getting me back."

"How do you know it isn't him? Maybe he's out here."

Astarte covered her face with her hands. "Oh, no, you might be right. Jimmy wouldn't give up that easy. And he does start in on the bible when he's drinking. What am I going to do?"

This child is a disaster waiting to happen, Jillian fretted. "Look, the security system is going in on Monday. DON'T open the door to anyone until then, just us. Call 911 right away if you hear any noise. And don't leave the trailer after work until the cab comes. But you shouldn't be in that mother-in-law by yourself. Tell Midge what's going on--she really ought to know anyway, since the hotline is hers. Maybe she'd let you stay in her guest room."

"I can't tell Midge or Gary about Jimmy. I'd be so ashamed, I'd never be able to face them again."

Try as she might, Jillian couldn't make her tell them. Reluctantly, she offered, "You could sleep on our couch for a while."

"But Robert would want to know why. I can't talk to him about it--he'd make a smutty joke out of the whole thing. Maybe we're blowing this out of proportion. It'll die down. And we're just guessing that Jimmy is here. Maybe he's in jail again--maybe he got drunk after I told him and got in a fight. That must be why he hasn't called. He wouldn't want me to know about that." She calmed down as she talked herself into accepting this scenario.

Jillian gave up for the time being. "Just be careful. And let me know if anything else happens. Dave--the guy I'm going out with--is a cop, so he'd know what to do."

"He's a cop? He must be big and strong. Oooh, tell me all about him! Is he good looking? Are you sleeping with him?"

"No, but I think we will soon."

She wondered, *Why do I feel so shy and virginal? It's been a long time since I went out with anyone. If my celibacy went on any longer, I'd have to undergo hypnotic regression to remember what to do. I've never been involved with such a worthy man--honest about his feelings, a good, ethical, caring guy, sensitive to me and the world around him.*

"Where has he taken you?"

"Oh, he has this neat boat, so we've been out on that a couple of times. We've been hiking in the Olympics, to Lake Crescent--that's a glacial lake in the mountains, so beautiful! I wish I had a day off, so we could go over to Victoria, BC, or drive out to the ocean. We can only get together about once a week, because our schedules just don't mesh. Would you mind trading with me some time?"

Astarte happily agreed, and they settled in for some girl talk. The rest of the afternoon went swiftly, with plenty of calls.

HOTLINE TO HEAVEN

Chapter Seven

July 27



The wind was high at the beach, relentlessly slamming into her and making it impossible to walk straight. Jillian didn't care--in her state of mind, being buffeted by the elements felt just right. The waves were rough, churning up seaweed and debris from the bottom. It was cold--she couldn't believe how cold--but the locals said late summer was often like that.

She'd come right after her shift, stopping at home only long enough to drop off the car for Robert to drive to work and to pick up her bicycle. She hadn't even gone inside, didn't feel up to making witty conversation. She wasn't ready to tell Robert that Dave had broken up with her last night, after six weeks of dating--and after they'd finally made love.

She'd only been able to see Dave once a week, as their schedules only meshed on Friday nights. The sexual tension--and attraction--had built and built between them, and then last Friday night, they'd slept together at last.

After an excellent dinner at an Italian restaurant up on the bluff, they'd gone to Jillian's. She'd never been to his place, as he said it was too untidy...a bachelor studio in a hotel downtown near the station. She'd made espresso for him, as they sat in her living room and talked, each about their work.

Drawing her into the circle of his arms, Dave said finally, "I can't wait any longer. I think about you every night, Jillian--dreaming how it would be to make love to you."

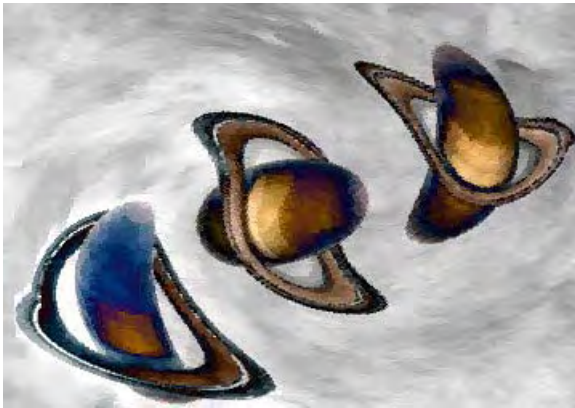
"Me too," she said, turning and kissing him to forestall any further discussion.

He kissed her endlessly, softly and then more and more urgently, until she got to her feet and pulled him into the bedroom after her. He slowly unbuttoned the satiny teal blouse she'd chosen for its sensuousness, unhooked her lacy bra, and moaned as he cupped her breasts in his hands. Having yearned so long for his touch, she felt her nipples harden and a creamy wetness begin in her lower regions. What a mixture he was--a football hero and a cop, but a tender and attentive lover as well. After an initial nervousness and shyness at having someone touch her in such an intimate way, she had responded eagerly and warmly.

They'd made love three times, with long, luscious intervals of sinuous entwining and slow mutual explorations. The third time seemed endless and eternal, as he was finally sated enough bring her to orgasm several times before a last intense crest of thrusts brought them both off together. Afterwards he held her tenderly, kissing her eyelids without saying a word. However, he traced something on her back with his

fingertip. She couldn't see what it was, of course, but it felt for all the world like, *I love you.*

He'd stayed over, and the next morning he'd gotten up very early to get ready for his shift. He seemed preoccupied--even haunted--and barely said a word, but she put it down to worries about the job. He'd been distracted and distant when he'd called this past week, getting off the phone as quickly as possible. She hadn't thought anything of it, buying his excuses about being shorthanded because some of the men were off at a training seminar at the capitol. When he'd picked her up last night for their usual Friday date, he said he wanted to go to the beach to watch the sunset before dinner.



They were sitting in his Saturn at the time, right here at North Beach. The sun was plummeting into the water, a breathtaking orange sunset in progress. Dave had sighed and rested his forehead on the steering wheel. "I don't know how to tell you this, Jillian, because I don't want to hurt you. It feels like we've been moving too fast. I need to bail out."

"But I haven't pressured you for a commitment. I need to move slowly myself. And, for sure, I haven't been after you to

start a family!"

"I know that. It's me that's moving too fast. And the more I open up to you, the more I start to feel the grief over my marriage and over Bill. I guess I shut that off too fast, because I was so angry about what happened, and anger was easier to handle. Now I'm feeling the pain, and it makes me afraid that if I loved you, I might lose you too. I couldn't stand that, not twice. I need to back off. At least for now, until it stops hurting so much."

"But I would be there for you. Why do you think you have to go through this alone?"

"I can't let you in, Jillian. I have to do this myself. Get out on the boat for a few days all alone, camp on one of the islands, think, let the hurt come up. I'll call you when I can."

She fought back tears and whispered, "I thought for sure this was it. I thought we were right for each other."

He looked on the verge of crying himself. "I wouldn't have led you on deliberately. I thought I could do this. I had no question that you were right for me and I was right for you. But I wasn't counting on this pain."

"I don't get it," she said. "I've tried to do everything right. I haven't tried to change you or your life in any way. I haven't tried to fix you, because I don't think you're broke. I haven't called you at work--I let you make the calls. We don't fight. I don't talk too much about my ex, and I let you talk about yours all you need to. I haven't let you spend too much on our dates or on presents for me. I haven't been too clinging, nor have I been too self-reliant. I haven't belittled you, nor have I played up to you too much. You've been getting the benefit of every stupid mistake I ever made in a relationship."

"I know. You've been perfect. And that's what's wrong. Perfect is scary. Perfect could lead somewhere."

He was right. Perfect could have led somewhere, and that had been scary to her, too. She was part heartbroken, part relieved. But mostly heartbroken, she confessed to herself now, watching the wildness of the waves. *You don't have to pretend you're tough, you can let yourself feel it. Damn, it hurts too much even to cry.*

She wouldn't know what to do with her sexual self either, so long dormant and now richly awake through their lovemaking. He'd also opened her up to the world of nature, here in what he called God's Country. *The nature, at least, I get to keep*, she told herself.

She felt an immense tearing in her chest, like a stiletto plunging deep. She told herself, *This is called heartache, and you remember heartache. Yes, I do*, herself answered, *and that's why I shut down years ago, so I'd never have to feel this again. Can I just shut down again? What choice do I have? Surely I'm not going to meet anyone like Dave again.*

Chewing over past relationships, she concluded, *It's always six. The guy always breaks up with me after six weeks. Or, if the relationship is really promising and we get past that, then he splits at six months. With Gary, it was going on six years. Maybe it's because my Venus is six degrees from an exact aspect to Saturn. They say our souls chose our charts before we're born--and I tend to believe it. But if that's so, when I chose that Venus/Saturn aspect, what was I thinking?*

She distracted herself by worrying about Astarte, usually a successful strategy. *One of her many charms is that she always gives me something to stew about. I know things aren't right with her. She swears up and down that the threatening phone calls and letters have stopped. But she jumps sometimes when the phone rings and cringes when she goes through the mail, like she's expecting something bad. She claims she hasn't heard from Jimmy in weeks, either. But no matter how many times I beg her to talk to Midge or to let me tell Dave, she won't hear of it. She's just not her usual aggravating self, and she has blue circles under her eyes, so I know she's not sleeping well.*

I do have to admit, she WAS great in the commercial for the line. She was beautiful, she was sweet, and she looked exactly like an angel who had compassion for everybody's troubles. However much I resented it beforehand, it was good. Gary's ad brokers placed it on cable shows all over the region, and business is booming. We've all paid off the loans to Midge, and we're making good money now. True, Astarte and Robert are doing better than I am because theirs are the peak hours for callers, but I'm doing pretty well myself. Better than New York, for sure, with a lower cost of living and no Mafia-connected landlady to worry about.

All the same, it worries me that Astarte's still having stomach trouble. She hardly eats anything but those ghastly rice cakes to kill the nausea. It's the stress, perhaps, but I also wonder if she isn't screwing up her metabolism with that vegetarian diet. You have to be careful how you mix and match foods to make up for the protein, and I don't see her boiling any brown rice.

Robert says there's nothing wrong with her that a couple of big, juicy hamburgers a week wouldn't fix, but I think it's more than that. And the ninny WON'T go to a doctor. Says she had enough doctors poking and prodding and cutting on her when she was a

child, with all those operations on her legs, so she's not seeing another doctor again in life.

In her direst moments, Jillian even worried that Astarte might have AIDS, as sexual as she was. Astarte's chart looked terrible--Pluto was traveling through her house of sex AND death, the eighth house. It was crossing over that self-same Moon/Neptune pairing in Scorpio that made her such a fool about men and sex. Putting all those factors together, Jillian felt AIDS was not outside the realm of possibilities.

When she had approached the girl about safe sex--as tactfully as she was capable of--Astarte cut her off. "Oh, I never allow the idea of catching AIDS into my consciousness, so I KNOW I'm not going to manifest anything like that!"

Recalling the conversation, Jillian thought, *maybe I should apply for a grant to study that as a possible way to prevent AIDS--call it the Bury Your Head in the Sand method. Name yourself after a fertility goddess, go nuts over anything in pants, and then pooh-pooh the idea that you might catch something. In this, Our Year of the Plague?*

Resuming her prowling of the beach, Jillian felt the surge of exasperation Astarte so often evoked. *She's so DUMB and so young. I don't know why I feel responsible for her. I'm sure Lady Jane would have an answer for that! 'It's KARRRRMAAA, my dear. You've known each other before.'*

Jillian paced for hours along the shore, the wind shoving her around, the icy dampness settling into her bones. She alternately raged and grieved about the breakup and the lifelong losses it evoked. She told herself, *Dave's not a bad guy, He didn't hurt you deliberately, he's just one of the walking wounded, like yourself. And who knows, maybe he'll get through his pain after a while and come back.*

Ten minutes later, she'd be cursing herself for being vulnerable to the hurt. *You know it doesn't work. Whenever you start to open up to a man, he always leaves you, so why even try? Oh, but Robert and Astarte both said we'd marry, her self ventured. Right! That's what you get for listening to these woowoo fortunetellers.*

She finally got home at 7:00 PM, chilled to the core. The answering machine, its red light flashing, had 15 messages. *It's Dave, she thought, relieved. He's come to his senses and wants to make up.*

Before she could play the messages back, the phone rang. It was Robert. "Jillie, thank God, you're home. I've been calling for hours. Please come down here right away! Get a cab!"

Her heart clenched like a fist. "What's wrong? Are you all right, Robert? What's going on?"

"Please, please hurry! The police are here. I have to go. Astarte is dead!"



HOTLINE TO HEAVEN

Chapter Eight

July 27

Predictably, THE cab--the single cab on duty at night--was on a run to the nearby town of Sequim and wouldn't be back for an hour. Shocked by Robert's news, Jillian jumped on her bike and raced to the marina. It was all downhill, and she was frantic, so she got there in minutes. There were two navy blue police cars at the scene, an ambulance, Midge's Cadillac and several other vehicles. Dave's Saturn, thankfully, wasn't among them. A variety of people she didn't know, all looking official, milled outside. Spotting her, Robert ran over and flung himself into her arms. She engulfed his tiny form and held him tight, feeling him shake.



"Oh, Jillie, it's just so awful! I'll never be able to put it out of my mind! When I got to work, she didn't answer the buzzer, so I let myself in and found her on the floor. I shook her, thinking she'd passed out or something, but her body was limp. She's dead. Astarte is DEAD! I can't take it in."

"What happened? How did she die?"

"She was strangled! With her scarf--the scarves she always wore? Her color was terrible, and her tongue was sticking out. You know how big her eyes were, but they were bigger than ever. They were clouded over, staring into space. I'll see them in my dreams. I won't sleep for a week."

Rocked to the core, Jillian gasped. "Astarte was MURDERED? Oh, dear God. I've been so worried about her, but I never thought of anything like this. Who on earth would do such a thing?"

"They don't know. It wasn't a break in, so whoever it was, she let them in. And she didn't trip the alarm, so it was someone she trusted."

He shuddered and sobbed convulsively in her arms. "I feel bad about the way we teased her and ran her down. She was a pain in the neck, but she didn't deserve to be killed. Oh, and Jill-Jill, you know how she always kept her legs covered. Well, her skirt was up to her waist, and there were those pathetic scars. She'd have HATED everyone seeing her like that."

He paused to catch his breath, then went on. "And, oh, I can't bear to say it, but she didn't have any--uhm--panties on." As risqué as he was always pretending to be, he'd probably never been with a woman in his life.

"How horrible! Robert, I'm sorry you had to go through all that. It's so hard to believe. Murder is on the news all the time and in mystery stories, but you never think of anyone you actually know winding up like that. Not Astarte."

Yet, as the reality sunk in, she **could** believe it. The threats from Jimmy, the vandalism of the trailer, the anonymous letters and phone calls--all leading up to this,

even though they'd both tried to shrug them off. *Why didn't I tell Midge, she asked herself--or, why didn't I insist on talking to Dave? It's all my fault. If I'd done something, this wouldn't have happened. Astarte was too young and dumb to know how serious it was. But, me, I should have made her tell them.*

I should have insisted she move in with us--not that we really have room. What a sorry excuse for a human being I am! Basically, I didn't want to stick my neck out or be bothered with her problems. You moral coward, you just earned yourself a heap of bad karma.



They wheeled the body out then, sending Robert into hyperventilation. *The black bag on the stretcher--how many times have I seen that scene on the news, she asked herself unbelievably. I never thought that some day it might be somebody I knew. That's Astarte in the body bag. I know her. I saw her earlier today. She was rattling on about her spirit guides and her past lives, like always. And now THIS is her past life!*

She bit the inside of her cheek to find out whether this was a dream--something her dad had taught her when she had nightmares as a child. It hurt, so she must be awake. She

thought, I know this is happening. I know it's not a dream, but I refuse to believe it. It can't be real. I'm so shut down from this thing with Dave, I can't even cry, but I feel terrible. Astarte was aggravating, but there was no harm in her, and in my own way, I did grow fond of her. Who could possibly have done this?

A uniformed policeman came up to her then, a brawny, red-faced man with streaks of gray in his dark-brown hair. "Are you Miss Malone? I'm Officer Lyons. Could I ask you a few questions?" He took her aside, and they sat in the back of a police car. There was nowhere else to go, the trailer being full of investigators. "I understand you were the last to see her alive."

Shock was beginning to set in, so she felt numb and spaced out. "The last one to see her alive? Oh, God, that's heavy! There was the mailman, Ralph Lofton--no, but he'd been there and gone while I was still around. And we weren't expecting Midge or Gary today, the owners--or any workmen."

"So, maybe I was the last to see her alive," she said dully. "Well, no, of course not! Whoever did this saw her alive. There, you see, I *wasn't* the last person!" It seemed important, in this foggy state, not to have been the last one there before Astarte died. It lessened her guilt, somehow, for neglecting her.

"Ma'am, please pull yourself together. I meant that you were the last one to see her alive before the killer. What time did you leave?"

"My shift ends at 2:00, and I never hang around. When did she die?"

"Your roommate discovered the body at 6:00, and there was no rigor mortis at that time. Rigor almost always begins within two hours, so we figure it had to be between 4:00 and 5:00 PM. Do you happen to know when she had her last meal? That would help establish the time of death when they do the autopsy."

She shivered. Rigor mortis? Autopsy? That happened on t.v., not here. "She was having stomach trouble, nausea, that sort of thing, so she wasn't eating much except rice cakes. I didn't even see her eat any of those today."

Lyons told her, "That helps. We also need to know what state of mind she was in and what was going on with her. You worked with her every day, so we're hoping you can give us some information."

She came clean, then, about everything--the trouble with Jimmy, the vandalism that had been reported, and the letters and phone calls from the Angel of Death that had not. "I'm the only one who knows about them, because she refused to tell anyone else--she was too ashamed."

He pursed his lips and blew air out, shaking his head in disbelief. "You've been very foolish, ma'am--you and the victim both. It's not always safe down here at night. You should have reported it."

She hung her head. "You're right. It's my fault she's dead. Why didn't I tell someone? Maybe I could have saved her." Her stomach churned with self-condemnation.

"I know it's hard, but I have to ask some other questions. Do you happen to know if the deceased was in the habit of wearing underpants? They were missing."

She thought about it. "We drove across the country together, but she always dressed in the bathroom because she was self-conscious about her legs. So I couldn't say for certain, but surely she wore underpants! She wore a bra. Wouldn't you think that a person who didn't wear underpants wouldn't wear a bra, either? I mean, she **was** kind of..." Slutty, she thought, but didn't want to say. "Well, uhm, she was...."

"Say what you mean, Miss. This is a homicide investigation."

She sighed and admitted, "Astarte was pretty sexual. But, still, you'd think she'd wear underpants. Is it that important?"

"Yes. If the pants are missing and we find the pants, we find the killer. Chances are, if he--we're guessing it's a he--kept them as a souvenir, he'll hang onto them. We won't know until we get the autopsy report, but from the looks of the body, we're thinking it's a sex crime. And he spray painted WHORE OF SATAN inside the trailer, just like the notes you saw. Must be the same weirdo."

They called Lyons to come into the trailer. "That's all for now, Miss Malone. I'm sure we'll need more information from you later." They got out of the car, and he went inside.

She overheard another cop at the door of the trailer, talking to the ambulance attendant. "What a rummy bunch this is--trouble waiting to happen. Can you believe they're fortunetellers? A 900 hotline right here in Port Townsend?"

The attendant asked, "A fortune teller? If she was so damned psychic, why didn't she see this coming?" They hooted with laughter.

The young cop went on, "So, this faggot discovers the body, and his roommate--looks to be straight, but you never know--is the last one to see her alive. Why don't trash like that stay where they came from? We don't need them around here."



She wanted to scratch their eyes out--better that than feel the shame of knowing that some of the townspeople actually thought of them that way. She went to Robert and put her arm around him, as he was still trembling. "We'll go home soon. I'll fix you steamed milk with honey so you can sleep."

Midge came flying out of the trailer and faced her down. "What's this I hear? You KNEW someone was threatening her, and you didn't say a word? I thought you had your head screwed on straight! I even suspected you had Capricorn Rising, you seemed so responsible--but that's a real laugh! You're at fault for this!"

Her heart sank even lower. "I know I was wrong, Midge. You couldn't blame me any more than I blame myself. I tried and tried to get her to talk to you and Gary, but she wouldn't hear of it. I thought the new security system would keep us safe. I told her never to let anyone in that she didn't know, and she promised she wouldn't."

Midge lit a cigarette, her hands shaking. "I won't forget this, Malone. I was crazy about that kid--she was something special! They're saying we can go now. We'll meet at your house tomorrow morning at 10:00. They won't let us back into the trailer to work for a while, and we have to figure out what to do. Gary should be back from Seattle by then, at least I hope so. I've got to get hold of him--and her folks, too. I'm dreading that, knowing how they doted on her. I just can't believe this could happen to an angel like Astarte."

They went home then, Jillian driving because Robert was still too shaken. They went over and over the scene until after midnight, still asking themselves who could have done it. She filled Robert in on what had been going on with Astarte. He finally stumbled off to bed, but she was wide-awake until dawn, worms of remorse gnawing on her gut.

HOTLINE TO HEAVEN
Chapter Nine

July 28

Midge showed up for the meeting, looking as worn and frayed as they did. "Astarte's parents are flying in from L.A. tonight. They're half-crazed with grief. It killed me to break the news. I couldn't track Gary down, but I've left messages for him to call here. He's going to be beside himself. He was fond of her, too, you know."

They sat down at the newel table. Silent and subdued, Robert served coffee and some carrot muffins he'd made the previous day, before all this had happened. Suddenly, the doorbell rang long and hard, someone leaning on it.

Jillian ran downstairs, expecting it to be the police or Gary. She opened the door to find a dark, unshaven young man in rumpled clothes that reeked of yesterday's sweat and several days' worth of alcohol. "Who are you?"

He demanded, "Wha' happen to 'Starte? I went to the trailer she worked at, but the cops were there, so I cut out."

A new conquest, she guessed. Boy, could Astarte pick 'em! Good looking enough, in a sullen way, if he were cleaned up and sober. "But who *are* you?"

"Jimmy, god dammit! Her boyfriend from N' Yawk. Now, what the hell's goin' on?"

Oh, God, he IS out here, she thought. Maybe he killed her in a blackout and doesn't remember. She hesitated. Is it safe to let him in? But we can't let him get away, either. If nothing else, between the three of us, we could sit on him. "You'd better come upstairs."

She hurried ahead and whispered to Robert to call the police. He quickly shut himself in his bedroom.

She asked Jimmy, "How did you find our place?"

"Mailman 'at works down there tol' me. Had his ass all in a twitter. Asked a million friggin' questions, but wouldn't tell me nothing. Said 'f I wanna know about 'Starte, ask you."

Good old helpful Ralph, she fumed. I'll make him pay for this. "I don't know how else to tell you, but Astarte is dead. She was murdered."

"Murdered? God dammit to hell! That Jezebel musta been whorin' around and got herself snuffed. That Whore of Satan!"

Chills ran down Jillian's spine as she realized those were the exact words in the death threats Astarte had received. Jimmy had to be the killer.

He belched. "Told her she shouldn'ta left me. I was the best thing that ever happened to her."



If you were the best, she thought, I'd hate to see the worst. But, then, I did see the worst. THIS is the worst. He doesn't act guilty, but maybe he was drunk and doesn't remember. And, like Astarte said, he DOES start in on the bible when he's drinking, so it probably WAS him that wrote those notes she got. Robert came back and nodded to let her know the cops were on their way.



Jimmy continued to rant, pounding his fists on the wall. "Fix the sum'bitch did it, 'f I ever catch him. Stupid bint shoulda stayed in N' Yawk."

Beastie fixed a malevolent eye on the intruder and growled, his tail fluffed to the max and twitching. When threatened by loud voices, Beastie tended to attack violently. Jillian recalled the scars he'd left on the argumentative alcoholic she'd once dated briefly. Not wanting to escalate the situation with Jimmy, she scooped up the cat and shut him in her room.

"Shoo, Shoo, old fellow," she told him, "Mamma won't let the bad man hurt you." She gave him a squeeze and a smooch and got bit for her efforts. When the bell rang again, she ran

downstairs to let in the police.

It was Dave.

Of course, it HAD to be Dave, she thought. Who else would it be but Dave? These small towns!

"You and I have to talk," he said. "Lyons is telling me some pretty disturbing stuff about you and that outfit of yours."

She cringed inwardly. Talk about worst case scenarios for a reunion! "Later. Right now we have a problem. Astarte's ex-boyfriend from New York is here, drunk as a skunk. He used to beat her up, and he'd been calling and threatening to drag her back there. I think he killed her."

Leaving the downstairs door propped open, Dave used his walkie-talkie to call for backup and then hurried upstairs.

When Jimmy saw the uniform, he scowled at Jillian. "Bitch! Why the fuck d'ya havta call the cops? Wasn't doing nothin'." He reared back and raised his fist to hit her.

Dave got between them and put up his hand to stop the fist. Jimmy teetered, off balance, and plopped into a chair. Dave told him, "Hey, look, fella, no sweat. Nobody called me. I'm just here to find out more about the murder."

Jimmy wiped a tear that suddenly spilled down his cheek. "Yeah, find out who killed my 'Starte. Booful 'Starte. I'll fix the sum'bitch."

Dave sat on his haunches at face level with Jimmy and patted his shoulder. "You knew her lots better than any of these people, didn't you?"

"Shit, yes. These rich bitches don' know nothin'."

"So, I wonder if you'd help us out. She didn't live here long, so we don't know anything about her. Would you come with us and tell us all you know? That way, we'll catch the guy faster."

"You wa'me help you? I knew 'Starte fer years."

"Boy, you're just the guy we need. We'll crack this case in no time with you helping."

"Shit, yes, I'll go." Jimmy stood up and glared at each of them in turn, fixing his gaze longest on Jillian. "These rich bitches let some bastard hurt her. Yuh otta run 'em outta town. Come on, less get outta here."

He lurched down the stairs. Dave followed him, after a meaningful exchange of glances with Jillian, whose heart leapt just to look at him. *Will we ever patch it up*, she wondered. *And how did he get to be so good with drunks?*

Jillian, Robert, and Midge were too shaken after this violent upheaval to continue. "Let's meet here again tomorrow morning," Midge said. "I'm looking into putting the phones from the trailer on call forwarding until they let us back in. And, my friend who runs a psychic fair in Seattle is looking for someone to fill in for Astarte until we get someone permanent."

She IS genuinely upset about Astarte, Jillian thought, *but not so upset that she'd put the business on hold. You'd think she'd at least wait until the funeral was over. Who IS this woman?*

Ralph called later. "I hope it was all right to send over that fellow of Miss Astarte's. I couldn't bear to tell him, I'm that upset about it myself. She was one very special young lady."

She sighed. "It's all right, Ralph. We took care of it."

"Look, I know Miss Astarte hadn't found a church here yet. I thought maybe her funeral could be held at mine. Pastor Anderson, he preaches a lovely eulogy."

Touched despite herself, she told him, "We appreciate the offer. Her folks are flying in tonight, and we'll have to see what they want to do. They might want her buried at home."

Unbelievable, she thought. *The deceased. Buried at home. Funerals. Eulogies. Perpetrators. None of these words made any sense, applied to Astarte, who was so young and beautiful and alive just yesterday.*



HOTLINE TO HEAVEN

Chapter Ten

July 29

The meeting wound up at Midge's rather than their apartment, because Astarte's folks wanted to meet them. They were expected in Port Townsend by noon, after spending the night at the Seatac Airport Hilton. Robert and Jillian hadn't been to the house before and were overwhelmed with the layout and view. Perched on the west side of a high hill overlooking the town, the house was one of Port Townsend's best Victorians. The living room windows gave a 210-degree view of both the Olympics and the Cascades, the harbor on one side and the Strait of Juan de Fuca on the other.

Midge told them that on a clear night she could see the lights of Victoria, BC, from the deck. They sat out there to have rich, fresh-ground Kona coffee and scones from a local bakery. Robert and Jillian had to admit the local coffee was as good as New York's. Seattle made a fetish of coffee and had addicted the entire Olympic Peninsula. In their drives to explore the area, they'd come across espresso shacks out in the middle of nowhere, waiting for tourists to pass, needing a fix.

Midge pointed out the small cottage with the same blue-gray siding a little further down the hill, where Astarte had lived. Jillian couldn't help but feel guilty that she'd never visited her there. Maybe if the girl hadn't been so lonely...

They moved inside for the meeting. Robert spotted the Victorian furniture and raved. "My GAWD, I've never seen anything nicer, not even in museums! Look at the patina of age--it has to be the real stuff. And poor moi, stuck with reproductions. "

"Oh, it's real, all right," Midge said. "When Bill and I lived in Hollywood, we met a rich old duffer whose house was completely furnished in this stuff. He'd bought it new twenty years before, and he needed to move to a senior complex attached to a nursing home. He was a big movie fan, so we traded memorabilia for some of his pieces. Stole them, really," she concluded with satisfaction.

She got down to business. "We won't be able to get back into the trailer for a week or so. It's still considered a crime scene."

Robert shuddered. "I hate the thought of going back at all."

"We have to use it. We've invested far too much money into rehabbing the place. Anyhow, I pulled some strings at the phone company and got them to put in call



forwarding right away. They'll install it by 5:00 tonight or first thing tomorrow morning. We'll only be able to handle one call at a time, but at least it's something. I'll forward the main line to your place tomorrow morning, so you'll be on duty starting at 10:00 AM, Jillian."

Business as usual? She thought, *this woman is too much!* "What about the funeral?"

"Her folks are probably going to have the memorial service in L.A. Look, I'd like to shut down the line for a week or two myself, but I can't. The ad campaign is running full tilt on cable, and it's costing a mint. You'll be on duty from 10:00 AM to 6:00 PM, and Robert will take his regular shift from 6:00 PM to 2:00 AM. You can spell each other if you need a break."

"Can't you put the ad campaign on hold?"

"We signed a contract, so we pay whether it's on or not."

"Can't Gary work out a deal with them? And, by the way, where is he?"

Midge looked disconcerted. "I really don't know. I've left messages everywhere in Seattle and Portland I can think of that he might be staying, but he obviously isn't picking them up. All I can imagine is that he went on to Victoria or Vancouver to start negotiating with Canadian outlets. Still, you'd think he'd phone me at some point. Maybe he's calling the business line at the trailer and getting no answer. So, no, I can't do anything about the ads, because I don't know who his contacts are."

Robert looked sick. "You can't mean they're using that ad Astarte's in? It's too awful, knowing she's dead. She's an angel herself now."

Midge exclaimed, "Oh Hell! You're right. Just let the media get hold of this one--a psychic on a hotline is murdered and she's in the ad. They love to trash anything to do with psychics or astrology, and they'd really go to town on this. It'd be a national scandal. We'd be in the Enquirer or on Hard Copy! I have to get them to pull that ad."

Robert asked, "Isn't there anything in his desk at the trailer to let you know who he was working with? Files or something?"

"I checked, with one of the cops watching over my shoulder the whole time. But, no, there wasn't much of anything there. He liked to carry most of his papers in that designer brief case he was so proud of. What few scraps I found were in that

chicken scrawl that passed for handwriting. Did you ever try to decipher it?" she asked Jillian.

"Unbelievable! One time I looked at his signature on our wedding certificate and wasn't sure exactly who I'd married. But I got to be kind of a specialized handwriting expert over the years. He'd send me a postcard from time to time, and I could kind of read what he wrote. If you still have those notes, I could probably tell you what they said."

"They didn't seem that important, so I tossed them. Damn, I really need to find out who he was working with."

Jillian suggested, "Maybe you could get into Gary's place somehow and see if he's left any files or contact numbers."



"Good idea. I do know his landlady from the Master Gardener's group, and maybe she'd let me in, considering what's happened."

It was on the tip of Jillian's tongue to offer to go along. She'd been curious about Gary's place. He'd been a slob while they were together. She resisted the impulse, however, knowing it wasn't an honorable one. Like many Scorpios, Gary could be secretive, and he'd hate her snooping. "Did your friend in Seattle find anyone to help us?"

"Yes, he's coming in a couple of days. A young man named Ethan Engel. She says he's a crackerjack psychic--does trance work, psychometry, the whole nine yards. I'll put him up here at the house for a while. The police still need access to the mother-in-law, to see if Astarte left any information behind that would help them."

"Did you say Engel?" Robert observed, "That's the German word for angel. How wild! Jillie and I and Astarte were wondering who the fourth angel on the line would be, the one who'll be called Uriel."

The door chimes rang melodically, announcing the arrival of Astarte's parents. Midge let them in and said, "You must be Joan and Paul Cabot. I'm sorry to meet you under these circumstances. Astarte spoke of you often."

They were a handsome couple in their late forties, well dressed and expensively groomed, and were accompanied by a second couple. Joan's face was tear-stained, and she broke down again at Midge's kindness.

Midge helped her to a chair. "I'm so very, very sorry," she said. "Astarte was special to me, too."

Paul put his arm around Joan and said, "Astarte spoke highly of you, Midge. She said you'd been very good to her, helping her get settled, taking her shopping, and showing her around. We appreciate it. It's so hard to believe she's gone. She was our only child, you know."

The couple who'd arrived with them made themselves known. In his late fifties, the coarse-looking man had obvious hair plugs in his thinning pate, a black sweater faintly reeking of mothballs, and a big, gold pinky ring. The woman was more tastefully dressed in a tan silk pantsuit. Her platinum blonde hair was molded into a Princess Di cut, and her thin face wore a pinched, bitter look, like someone on a perpetual crash diet.

He said, "We're George and Barbara Mason. We moved to Port Townsend about six years back, but we knew the Cabots in Hollywood. We got to see her a few times after she came to town."

Jillian recalled, "Astarte spoke of you. She said you'd taken her to dinner a few times."

He shook his head in wonder. "Not seeing her for six years, it was amazing what a knockout she'd become. Of course, she was always a beauty, even when she was a kid."

His face reddened, and Barbara scowled. Jillian remembered that when Astarte spoke of him, it sounded like he'd been leching after her and that Barbara had become jealous.



He cleared his throat and went on. "Hard to get used to calling her Astarte, though. We knew her as Pamela."

PAMELA, Jillian marveled. *Astarte's name was PAMELA Cabot?*

Joan explained, "She always hated the name Pamela, and we kind of agreed with her. The name was suited for some silly twit and didn't fit her stature. What did we know when we chose it, a couple of kids just out of college? Hippies, we were at the time, but at least we didn't name her Moonbow Hummingbird."

Paul smiled wanly, the strain showing. "Sold out to the Establishment, though, first real chance we got. I landed a honey of a job in a New York ad agency, and eventually we were able to buy a home in Greenwich, CT, where Astarte was born. Then we moved to California when she was--what, Joan, thirteen? They were making a movie in Old Greenwich, and the producer and some of the other bigwigs hung out at our country club. We got to palling around, and he offered me a job in PR for the production company. That's how we got to L.A., and how we met George and Barbara. George worked there, too, as the legal counsel."

Midge acknowledged the Masons. "I'm from L.A. myself. We'll have to play *Do You Know* later. First, I hate to have to ask this, but have you given any thought to the burial? The police will release her body tomorrow."

Joan's eyes filled with tears, but she said, "Oh, Astarte was quite clear about her instructions, from the time she was 18 and studying with Guru Mab. She wanted no embalming and asked to be cremated three days after her death. She said that way the soul would be completely released from the body and from its attachments to any traumas from this life. Especially in these circumstances, I'm certain she'd want us to honor that."

Paul observed, "Isn't it strange that she'd give us such explicit instructions, at her age? It's almost as though, on some level, she knew what was coming."

Midge told them, "She was so gifted psychically. I wouldn't be surprised if she did know. You'll want to use Johnson's. They handle the cremations here. Surely, you'll want to view the body beforehand?"

The parents looked at each other in horror, obviously not having envisioned that piece of the process. Joan said, "I don't know. I can't bear the thought of seeing her dead, and yet, it probably won't seem real unless we do. I wonder what Astarte would want?"

"You know what she'd say," he answered. "That this body is not her anyway, that she'd want us only to visualize her as spirit from now on. No, I don't think she'd want us to see it. Astarte was incredibly wise for her years," he told them. "At times we felt that she was more of a spiritual teacher for us than she was our child. Right, Joan?"

"Oh, yes. We were fortunate to have been the vehicle for her coming to this plane--a sacred trust. So often, we'd consult her on spiritual matters. She'd ask her guide, Lady Jane, or the one before that--Persuis. Persuis was WOOOONNNDERFUL! Did you ever meet him, Jillian?"

"No, I never did. But she talked a lot about Lady Jane and her past lives." Endlessly.

"Oh, did she? I wonder what Lady Jane would say about her death--what karmic purpose it fulfilled."

Jillian recalled, "She did say that the person who was threatening her was someone who had been in love with her when she served the Goddess Astarte in the temple." She didn't mention that Astarte believed she was a temple prostitute, not being sure if she'd shared that part with her folks--she was so careful to present her best front always. "She said he'd come to hate her because he couldn't have her to himself in that life due to her vows. He dimly remembered it in this life, and that's why he was persecuting her."

Joan nodded and dried her eyes daintily. "That makes so much sense! Oh, how I'll miss my beautiful little girl. She was so sweet and so very, very wise."

Jillian exchanged unbelieving glances with Robert. *Astarte, wise? Could they possibly have TWO daughters named Astarte? Dear God, they're as much out in LaLa land as she was!*

She only said, "This is a terrible loss. I'm so sorry. We can hardly believe it, just knowing her this little time. The idea of her being murdered is appalling."

An astrologer to the core, even in a crisis, she remembered a question she'd been pondering. "I wonder if you could tell me something. When I did Astarte's chart, the time she gave put the beginning of Aries on the Ascendant, and the longer I knew her, the less sense it made. She seemed more like a Pisces Ascendant." She so readily made herself a victim for Jimmy, Jillian thought, and no self-respecting Aries Sun, Moon, or Ascendant would do that. "When was she born? She told me 9:45 PM."

"No, it was 9:35. I'm quite certain, because I had her by natural childbirth--a bit unusual in those days."

"Given that the chart had such an early degree of Aries rising, that ten minutes difference *would* put her Ascendant back into Pisces."

"Yes, an astrologer told me years ago she had Pisces on the Ascendant. I remember, because I'm a Pisces myself."

No surprise that Mrs. Cabot was a Pisces, Jillian thought. The Moon represented the mother, and Neptune ruled Pisces. So, with the Moon and Neptune standing together in Astarte's chart, her mother had to be the mother of all Pisces!

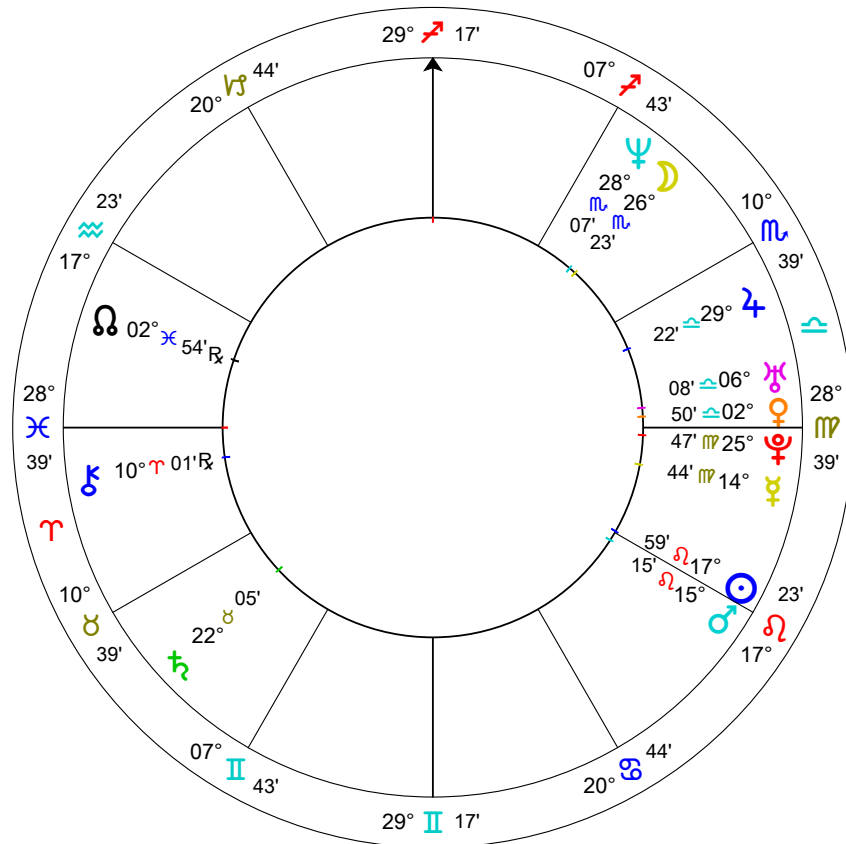
She told Joan, "Zodiac signs do run in families. It's not at all uncommon for the child's Ascendant to be the same as one of the parent's sun sign's. Pisces on the Ascendant explains so many things about her."

"It surely does--why she was so psychic and spiritual--and so compassionate toward everyone. She was such a special being." Joan's face crumpled, and she began to cry again, while her husband held her.

George Mason came over to Jillian. "Sorry you've had to go through all this." He squeezed her upper arm twice, managing to brush her breast and linger a moment too long. Catching Barbara Mason scowling at her, she sent her a wordless, wide-eyed, it's-not-my-fault entreaty. Barbara nodded and rolled her eyes, giving a long-suffering sigh at her husband's behavior.

"I know you're new to town, too." Keeping his hand on her shoulder, he offered, "When this has all settled down, you'll have to let us take you and Bobby out to dinner. Have you been to the Oyster House out on Discovery Bay? Real nice cuisine, great ambiance, right on the water, and not all that pricey."

astarte's chart, corrected:



Jillian moved away. "Thanks, but right now we're in a bit of a bind. We'll have to be working really long hours once the line opens again." Midge opened her mouth to contradict her, but thought better of it, and Barbara looked relieved.

Jillian thought, no doubt he was putting the same moves on Astarte that he just tried to put on me. Only, she said he was a sweetie, so she apparently didn't mind his leching. Surely, even she would have better taste than to...

The chimes rang again, announcing the police, who'd arranged beforehand to meet the Cabots there. It was Lyons, along with the young cop Jillian had heard shooting his mouth off about the hotline. The Cabots introduced themselves, but Mason, it seemed, had already run into Lyons--literally--while drinking.

He tried to make a joke of it. "Just my rotten luck, to hit a patrol car while I'm smashed out of my mind! Don't worry, Officer Lyons, I'm all through with my year of A.A. meetings and alcohol education. We go to church every Sunday because it helps me stay sober."

"Don't we, Barb?" he asked his wife, who only scowled. "Yes, sir, my life has really changed, now that I've found the Lord."

Lyons nodded. "Good going, George. Just keep it up. Mr. and Mrs. Cabot, I can't tell you how sorry I am for your loss. It's unusual for us to have this kind of crime here, and it's tragic when such a young person dies. Let me tell you about our investigation. We're proceeding on the assumption that she knew her attacker. There was an excellent security system and it wasn't breached, so he couldn't have gotten in unless she opened the door."

"Someone she knew? Do you have any leads?" Paul asked.

"Based on what Miss Malone here told us, we're holding your daughter's former boyfriend, Jimmy Gitano. He showed up on the scene just at the time of her death and hasn't a shred of an alibi. Says he's been hitchhiking across the country for a couple of weeks, but can't produce a single name of anyone he rode with or anywhere he stayed. He must have been drunk the whole time, 'cause he's come real close to DTs at the jail. He had a previous history of assault and domestic violence, and he had beaten her up before. We confirmed all that with the NYPD."

Joan began crying again. Through her tears, she said, "I knew Jimmy was bad for her, but she wouldn't hear a thing against him. Said he was a lost soul. Remember, Paul, when we came to visit New York, and we took them to the Four Seasons?"

She told them, "He wasn't our sort at all. He drank far too much and got in a loud argument with the waiter. We were mortified. Oh, Astarte, why couldn't you listen to me?"

Midge shot a hostile glance at Jillian, who didn't have to guess what it meant. *Me, too*, she thought, as the officers left with the Cabots to look through Astarte's possessions. *I blame myself for the whole thing. If only I'd spoken up.*

On their way home, Robert bemoaned the fact that there wouldn't be any funeral. He'd been subdued since finding Astarte's body, but a shred of his accustomed humor



shone through as he sighed. "I was so looking forward to getting out my good basic black Dior dress and the Gucci pumps!"

Jillian consoled him. "It's for the best. They aren't wearing black to funerals any more, and you'd just be passe."

She fretted about what Lyons had told them. *Surely Astarte would have known better than to let Jimmy in, IF he's the one that did it. If he did kill her, he certainly doesn't seem to remember.*

The trouble is, even though she swore she wouldn't open the door, Astarte would probably have let in any reasonably presentable man who spoke to her nicely and asked to use the phone because his car broke down. I have to get Lyons aside.

It could even have been this Mason creep--maybe he tried to force himself on her and killed her when she resisted. He says he's changed since he found the Lord, but I'm always suspicious of sinners who turn into churchgoers--these born-again beer-swillers are often lechers at heart. Look at all those scandals in the media about evangelists! Mason makes Gary look like a class act. And where, I wonder, is Gary? I'm getting a bad feeling about this.

HOTLINE TO HEAVEN
Chapter Eleven

August 3

Jillian stood at the living room window to enjoy the dazzling view of Mount Baker, then noticed brown tinges on the leaves of the big cyclamen Astarte had given them as a housewarming gift. The plant had survived and even bloomed for the past four months--an all-time record for Jillian. It was as though Astarte's own energy had been keeping it alive, but now it was starting to look like a goner. *Little did Astarte know*, Jillian thought, *that she was turning the poor defenseless thing over to a plant serial killer.*

Set up in the living room, the hotline seemed to take over the apartment, so that they each had to tiptoe around when the other was handling calls. She couldn't even put on the classical music she loved, as it could be heard in the background. She stayed in her room with Beastie much of the time she was off duty, mourning not only Astarte but also her own parents, the breakup with Dave, and the loss of her New York life and friends.

Robert tended to stay in his room during his off-hours, too, still subdued and withdrawn. He wasn't sleeping well--he kept having bad dreams about Astarte and about discovering the body. She wished she could do something for him, but the healing would take time.

The doorbell rang, and she hurried downstairs, so the noise wouldn't wake Robert. It was the Cabots, stopping by with Midge on their way to the airport. Ushering them into the living room, she offered them a seat. "Robert worked until 2:00, so he's asleep. Shall I get him up?"

Paul said, "It was really you we wanted to see. Astarte said you were like the big sister she never had, that she could talk to you about anything."

What a one-way relationship, she thought. *I tolerated her and worried about her, but never voluntarily spent any time with her. More guilt!* "I wish I could have helped her more." Midge gave her a look that would curdle paint.

Joan pointed to the bags at her feet. "We kept a few things for ourselves, to remember her by. We're going to treasure that tape of the commercial, where she's dressed up like an angel. Midge is going to make sure they take it off cable as soon as possible, though. It would be horrible, some night when I couldn't sleep, to turn on the television and see her there!"

Jillian agreed. "Bereavement is like a mine field. You never know when you're going to run across something that will bring it all back. I lost both my parents early on, but I can't imagine the pain of losing a child. My thoughts will be with you."

Joan handed her a bag. "We wanted you to have these scarves. They're quite pretty, and we thought you might like a keepsake."

The scarves? So much a part of Astarte--how could she ever wear them, knowing that the girl had been strangled with one? "Thanks. I'd never forget her anyway."

"Midge will make sure the charity thrift shop gets the rest of her things, when the police are done. She didn't bring that much with her from New York anyway."

"No, she was in a hurry to get away from Jimmy."

Joan's eyes welled up. "If only she'd never gotten involved with him. They're still holding him, on the basis of some outstanding warrants from New York, and Officer Lyons says they'll formally charge him soon. What their karma must have been!"

Jillian had some lingering doubts that Jimmy was the killer. The strangulation, the missing panties, and the anonymous threats from the Angel of Death seemed too convoluted for him. He was the caveman type and wouldn't lurk. He'd have just shown up, yelling and pounding on the door. When Astarte refused to go back with him, he'd have beaten her to death. Still, she conceded, *I could be wrong. I've only seen him when he was on the verge of DTs and it's possible he's smarter when he's not. Who knows what goes on in the twisted mind of a drunk or a stalker? And he did call Astarte a Whore of Satan, just like the notes.*

Joan asked, "By the way, did you recalculate her chart? What did it say about her death?"

"Pluto was crossing over her Moon and Neptune in the eighth house. That could be the death, but I wouldn't have predicted it, because it could have been any number of other things. She could have had a powerful healing--or a great love affair. She could have become pregnant. She could even have come into money."

Paul revealed, "She **was** due to come into some money. We settled a trust fund on her years ago that was scheduled to mature when she turned 25 this summer."

If this were a typical murder mystery, it would turn out that the person who was administering the fund had embezzled it and killed her to avoid being discovered. Jillian was a sometime reader of mysteries and, like many fans, knew the rules and regs of the genre. This situation clearly spoke to the *cui bono*--the *who benefits* part of detection. She asked, "What will become of it now?"

Paul and Joan looked at one another, questioningly. He said, "You know, we forgot to talk to George about that. We made him the administrator, since he's a lawyer as well as a good friend. I don't think we made provisions for this--we never imagined we'd outlive her. But I'm sure Astarte would want the money to go to Guru Mab's ashram."

Interesting, Jillian thought. *Slimy old George Mason! Not only was he leching after her, but he could also have had a financial motive for killing her. Is there any tactful way for me to suggest they ask for an accounting of the money? I guess not.*

Putting the matter aside, she told Joan, "I also set up a chart for the time of her death. The police haven't pinpointed it exactly, but the only thing that made sense astrologically was 4:00 PM."

"That chart was very strange! It had Pluto on the horizon, in a Grand Trine with Mercury in the eighth house and with Saturn, so both the planet and the house of death were involved. A Grand Trine is supposed to be very fortunate, and in fact, all the major aspects in the chart but two were favorable. It almost seemed like the chart of a very special spiritual event, not a murder."

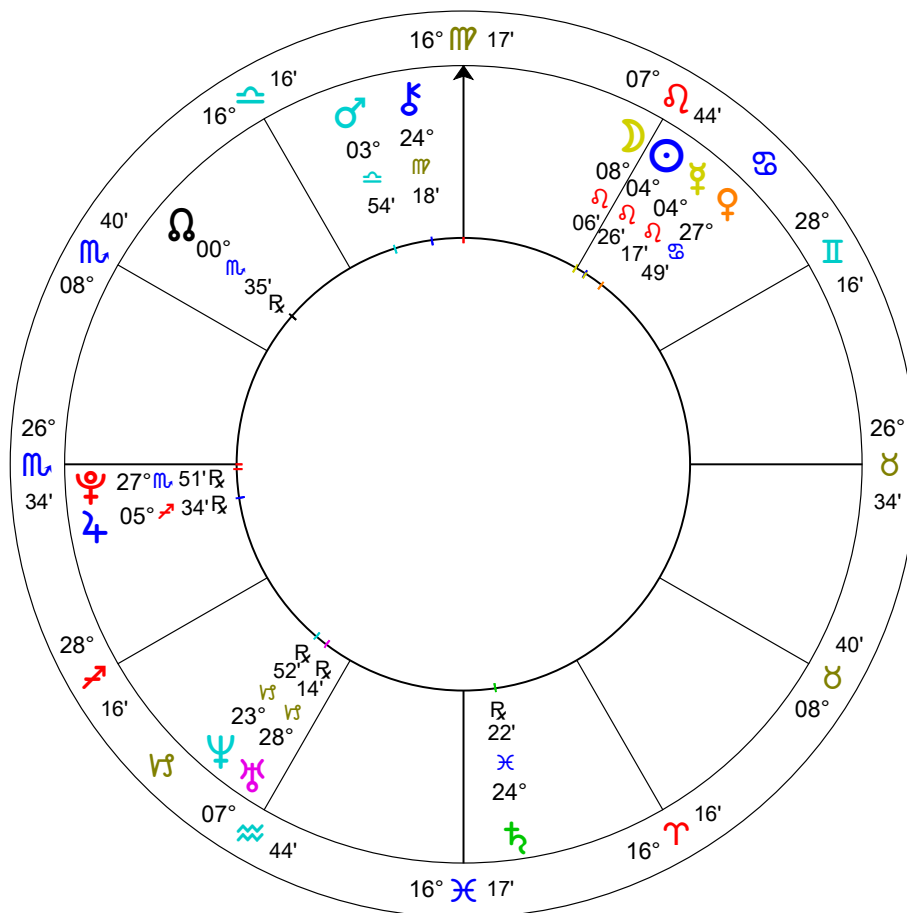
ASTARTE S DEATH

July 27, 1995

4:00 PM PDT

Port Townsend, WA

122W43; 48N07



Joan sighed. "You see, for Astarte it may have been a healing and a great release. As much as I adore her and will always miss her, I have a feeling she'll be happier where she is. I don't know if you knew, but she was in constant pain with those legs. She refused to take pain killers--she said pills interfered with meditation and spiritual practices."

Jillian's heart ached at how badly she'd misjudged Astarte. The pretty little rich girl who seemingly had everything, but never passed a moment without pain. "She never let on that she was suffering. What a brave soul."

Joan pulled a pine box out of the cloth bag she was carrying. It had a glossy finish, and on the top was a painting of a sunset. "These are her ashes. We're taking them to Ojai, to sprinkle at the ashram. I know she'd be happy about that. It was her spiritual home." She handed the box to Jillian.

Please don't give me your baby to hold, she pleaded silently. Stroking the top, she thought, it can't weigh more than ten pounds. How quickly it's all done, and how little there is left of her. When I die, there'll be even less--alone, with no family to mourn me. Robert's the same way--his family disowned him for being gay.

She cried, then, for all of it, and the Cabots hugged her and cried too. Paul told her that the Masons would be calling to take them out for dinner. Then, in a final flurry of hugs, they said their goodbyes and left.

Midge stayed behind to check on how business was going. She looked haggard. There were dark circles under her eyes, and her skin seemed withered and old. Though she didn't complain, helping the Cabots through this ordeal had taken a toll. Jillian knew she was going through her own grief about Astarte as well.

Checking over the log sheets, Midge said, "We lost momentum from not having the phones on immediately after the ads were shown. I don't know what we'll do for an ad now, but I'll be glad when we can get back into the trailer. Ethan Engel is still coming, but it'll take a few more days."

Jillian noticed with dismay that Beastie's eyes were riveted on the gold and faux emerald pen Midge was gesturing with. He was fascinated with anything that glittered, and such objects had a strange habit of disappearing around him. She'd have to watch him carefully.

She asked Midge, "Have you heard anything from Gary?"

"No, and I haven't been able to talk to his landlady about getting into his place. She's at her cabin in the woods near Hurricane Ridge. It doesn't have a phone--she wants to get away from it all while she's there. She'll be back tonight."

"So, hopefully, we'll have some answers soon."

Midge put down the pen and lit a cigarette, her hands shaking. "I'll be straight with you. I'm starting to worry about what I'll find."

"What do you mean?"



"You said Jimmy was the jealous type. What if Gary never left town at all? What if Jimmy found out he and Astarte were having an affair?"

"They were sleeping together? You know that for a fact?"

"No, but I can put two and two together."

Gary and Astarte lovers? Jillian told herself, *You knew who he was, and you didn't want him back, so why this absurd sense of loss?* "What are you trying to say? When was the last time you actually talked to him?"

"We spoke the morning of the day she was killed. He called from home and said he'd be leaving for Seattle in a little while. Now I'm wondering if Jimmy showed up at his place right after that and killed him."

Fear hammered Jillian's stomach. "It CAN'T be! He'll call today, just watch." The idea sunk in. "Oh, Midge. Maybe you're right. Have you talked to the police?"

"They don't even know he's missing. I just say he's away on business. I don't want them nosing around any more than they absolutely have to, to get Jimmy locked away. What if I tell them, and he shows up tomorrow? He'd be fit to be tied."

What a nightmare! Could Gary really be dead, too? "Look, I can understand your reluctance--and it isn't like Jimmy's going to get away--but I still think you ought to talk to Lyons. He's a decent guy."

"Not on your life. The less they know, the better."

Midge certainly is cop-shy, Jillian observed, wondering what that's about.

"Do you want me to go over to Gary's with you?" She didn't know if she could take it if he'd been lying there dead for days, but, tough as Midge always seemed to be, she needed support to face whatever was in that apartment.

Midge started to protest, then nodded. "I'd, uhm, appreciate it. I'll come by tonight at 8:00. She should be home by then."

Just then Beastie leapt on Midge's leather Gucci envelope, dug in his claws and shredded it, with an air of thorough enjoyment. As Midge swore and grabbed the envelope, her papers fell out and scattered across the floor. Jillian scrambled to help her pick them up, apologizing profusely.

"It's ruined," Midge fussed. "I ought to deduct it from your pay. These leather models are plenty expensive."

"God, Midge, I'm so sorry. He is a rotten cat."

Midge grumbled and swept out, saying she'd be back at eight.

Between callers, Jillian spent the day doing some deep cleaning--scrubbing down the floors and mucking out the refrigerator to relieve tension. She kept stewing about Gary's disappearance and reliving their long, ambivalent relationship. He was worthless, truly worthless, but they still had this weird tie. Naively, she hadn't suspected he and Astarte were involved--if, in fact, they were. After all, he insisted that she was too young for him, and she dismissed him as too old for her. Apparently, they were both lying through their teeth.

Please, God, don't let him be dead, too, she prayed. You've got a lot to answer for, you know. You've taken everyone I ever loved, so please don't take Gary now. Not if you ever want to hear from me again. I'd bargain and say I'd go back to church if you spare him, but we both know that's not going to happen. The Catholic Church and I are history. But I've tried hard to be a good person and done all I could to help others, so

you and I ought to be on better terms than this. Think it over, that's all I ask. In your spare time. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

When Robert got up, she filled him in about the Cabot's visit and the sad box of ashes. He told her, "Promise me something. When I die, I want you to put my ashes in a planter at Saks Fifth Avenue. THAT's my spiritual home!"

"The men's or the women's section?" She was delighted to see his humor returning.

She was waiting downstairs when Midge's Caddy pulled up promptly at 8:00. Gary's landlady had a bed and breakfast on the outskirts of town, one of the many Victorians providing rooms for tourists. He lived in a tiny cabin in back. The woman agreed to let them in, on the strength of her respect for Midge, a past president of her garden club.

She told them, "Haven't heard a peep from him since 'way last week. Just thought he was on the road. You'll see, it's a nice little place, furnished with cooking utensils and everything. I usually rent it by the month in the summer to out-of-towners, but when he wanted it longer, I was just as happy. Nice fella, good manners and all. No trouble. Hope he's all right." She gave them the key.

Midge and Jillian froze at the cabin door, dreading what they might find. It was dark inside, but they knocked, on the remote chance that he might be there. They looked at each other for a long moment, trying to gather courage, and then Jillian took the key from Midge and turned the lock.

She pushed the door open cautiously, feeling around for the light switch. No telltale smell of decay greeted them, only stale air..

The place was smaller than a hotel room, with an attempt at old-fashioned charm in the dried wreaths on the walls, the antique framed prints, and the ruffled floral curtains. The unmade bed, a dresser, a small desk, and a couple of armchairs gave the single room an overstuffed feeling. He'd obviously not been one to clean, as the kitchenette surfaces were sticky with dried-on food and dirt. They glanced around, not seeing any books, letters, or other personal touches.

Midge searched the desk first, but found no files or notebooks--not even paper or pens. "There goes that hope. Guess he carried everything in his brief case."

"Let me see how much clothing he packed." Jillian went over to the closet and opened it. It was completely empty, as was the dresser. Every trace of him had disappeared, except for the sour milk in the fridge.

Midge collapsed into the armchair. "He's gone! The son of a bitch is gone!"

Jillian sank onto the bed, trying to take it in. Was he really gone? What did it mean?

Midge's eyes were wild. "I have to go to the bank first thing in the morning and find out what he's taken."

Jillian moaned to herself. *This is it. The Devil card. That t-square in the chart of the hotline. You should have seen this coming. You knew not to trust him. But he's never done anything this bad. Maybe he's dead, after all. Maybe Jimmy tossed the body*



in the harbor and took all his clothes to make it look like Gary ran off. Get real. He's gone, and chances are, he ran off with a big chunk of money.

She told Midge, "You're calling the police. NOW."

"I can't. I can't get them involved."

"Well, if you can't, I can. I'll get Lyons over here right away." She picked up the phone.

"Don't," Midge begged. "Lyons was one of the cops that investigated Barney's death. Him and that Dave Jordan. They tried to have me arrested. It was an accident, that's all. Barney took too many pills. But they wanted me sent up."

That's why she's so paranoid about them, Jillian realized. "Look Midge, I'll wait 'til you go to the bank. I'll even go with you, if you want. But if he's taken off with the money, we have to call them in. That's all there is to it."

"If he embezzled the funds, I'll personally take out a warrant for his arrest. He'll be lucky if I don't take out a contract, too. I can do it. Not everybody I knew in L.A. was high society." She jerked the key out of Jillian's hand and locked up.

As they walked through the lane of cabins to the front of the property, Jillian asked, *God, are you still there? I signed off too soon. Could you please keep an eye on him? It doesn't have to be you personally. An angel will do. I know he's a scoundrel. You can send him to jail if you want. But please, God, keep him safe. He's crossed the wrong person now.*

Arranging to meet in the morning, they drove home in silence, each immersed in her own turmoil.

HOTLINE TO HEAVEN

Chapter Twelve

August 4

Robert filled in for Jillian the next morning, and she and Midge went to the bank. The teller said the account balance was zero. Although they'd both expected it, having it confirmed was a blow. They asked to speak to an officer, and were shown to a desk at the side. The bank manager was appalled and defensive when they told her what Gary had done. She pulled the records and documented that he'd produced authorizations for every withdrawal. The account was set up so he couldn't withdraw money without Midge's signature.

Midge was at her most haughty and intimidating. "Didn't it occur to you people to call and verify these big expenditures?"

"Even though they were sizeable, we didn't question them, with your signature. You handle pretty big deals sometimes, so we assumed those numbers were startup costs."

"I did sign them," she agreed, "but they were supposed to be for bank checks to different contractors."

The manager showed her the record. "They were bank checks, all right, but most were made out to the Kandu Corporation."

"Kandu." Midge mused. "Kandu. I think that's the ad agency that produced the commercial."

Jillian knew better. Kandu was Gary's warped idea of a joke. Any time he was cooking up one of his cockamamie schemes and he wanted people to believe in him, he'd keep telling them, "Can do! Can do!"

He probably diverted the money into a dummy account under that name at some bank in Seattle. He must have been planning this from the get-go. And dragged me into it, when he knew he'd be making off with the money!

Bile rose in her throat as she took in this betrayal. What did he think was going to happen to me now, after getting me to move out here in the middle of nowhere? I knew he was a scoundrel, but I always thought, deep down, that he cared for me. She blinked back tears. You are NOT going to cry, she told herself, not here and not now. Not in a bank.

Midge told the manager, "I hope you kept the authorization that cleaned out the account, because it had to be a forgery. It'll be evidence when they prosecute him."

"Here it is. The last withdrawal--\$50,000--was made late afternoon Thursday."

That was the day before Astarte was killed, Jillian realized. *The same day Dave dumped me, Gary was cleaning out the account. I have to look at my chart. Some gruesome lineup of planets must have been going on!*



Midge raised her voice. "You're telling me that when he called me, he'd already cleaned out the account. He was on his way to the airport, probably, to leave the state. That lying bastard! No way--I never authorized that withdrawal, so it is a forgery! I want a copy of the full statement--every transaction since we opened the account." The manager, apologizing profusely, made the copies, and they left.



On the way to the police station, Jillian asked Midge, "Why did you authorize cashier checks, rather than regular checks?"

Midge had the grace to look embarrassed. "Gary said he could cut a better deal if we paid that way. It's almost like cash, and they'd take some of it under the table, see, rather than claim it all on their taxes. I can't believe I'd be stupid enough to fall for that."

It's like they say, Jillian thought wryly--you can't con an honest man. Midge was so slick she tripped herself up this time.

At the station, they were told that Lyons was at the trailer, so they drove to the marina. Ralph came scurrying over as the Caddy pulled up.

He said, "I wondered if you were ever coming back. It just doesn't seem the same down here without you--especially Miss Astarte. I just can't get over it that she's gone. She really brightened up my day. They say they arrested that young fellow of hers. Not a nice man--I couldn't feature her involved with him, a sweet girl like her."

Midge said, "He was a walking time bomb, Ralph. You were lucky you didn't cross him when you ran into him that day."

"I've been feeling real guilty," he confided. "If only Miss Astarte had started going to my church like I hoped, this might not have happened. I should have kept asking her."

Jillian assured him, "There was nothing you could have done, Ralph. We all feel guilty for not doing more, but the truth is, we didn't have the power to stop it."

Asking them to wait, he hurried to the small mail vehicle and brought an armload of mail. "I've been holding this for you. Lotsa windows, could be bills but they could be checks coming in too. There are even some telegrams, which, by rights, aren't mail so I shouldn't have kept them, but I felt they were important."

Definitely a Virgo, Jillian concluded. All those regulations, everything by the book. "Thanks, Ralph. We ought to be back in a day or two, once the police release the trailer."

They stayed in the car while Midge opened the mail. It confirmed what they'd suspected. Gary hadn't paid for anything beyond initial deposits to establish credibility. There were huge bills and menacing letters from the building contractor, the ad agency, and the ad broker. The telegrams threatened legal action if they didn't pay immediately. The phone company was going to cut off service unless the bill was paid in full. At least now Midge had the names of the places he was working with and could pull the ad off the air.

They went inside, calling to Lyons. Jillian hadn't been there since the murder and was appalled. The floor was covered with footprints from all the coming and going, and there were fingerprint powder marks all over. She shook her head at the sign spray painted in red on the wall--

WHORE OF SATAN. Whoever did this was one sick cookie. Worse, she could feel the energy of the place, and it was roiling with violence.

Lyons, seeing them look at the marks, said, "Oh, yeah. I meant to call. You all have to be fingerprinted, so we can eliminate your prints and concentrate on any unknown ones. Except for you, Mrs. McCullough.

Conveniently, we still have yours on file from when your husband died." Tense looks passed between Lyons and Midge.

He announced, "We're starting to have second thoughts about Jimmy Gitano. We'd been thinking for a while that he might not have done it, since none of the prints in the trailer matched his."

Midge was still sold on him. "Maybe he wiped them clean or wore gloves."

"He wasn't in any condition to think that clearly, drunk as he was and for as long. He's definitely broken up about her death, too, and he's not smart enough--nor does he care enough what people think--to be able to fake that."

Midge suggested, "He did it in a blackout and doesn't remember. When it comes to survival, drunks can be cunning--drunks and psychos--and he'd pretty much fit into either category."

"No, we liked him for it as much as you did. But now that he's been sober a while, he's coming out of the haze. He remembered spending a couple days in a shelter for alcoholics on Skid Road in Seattle right around the time of the murder. We checked, and, sure enough, they remember someone by that name who fits his description. We'll be taking him up to Seattle for a lineup to see if they identify him. If it pans out, we're right back where we started. Not a clue or a lead as to who did it."

Jillian and Midge looked at each other in horror. They hadn't even considered the possibility that Gary might have killed Astarte. They carried on a silent dialogue. Tell him, Jillian urged with a look. Midge grimaced, then steeled herself. She told Lyons how long Gary had been missing, when he last called, and that he'd cleared out the cabin AND the bank account. She showed him the bank statement and the stack of bills she'd just gotten.

Lyons' face got redder and redder as he listened to her tale. "You should have told us right away that he was missing, Mrs. McCullough. I ought to run you in for impeding an official investigation. It's just too much of a coincidence that he disappears with all that money and she gets murdered the same day, unless he was the one that



did it. She probably found out and threatened to tell. Or she was blackmailing him. He looks real good for a suspect. What the hell were you thinking, keeping this from us? Because of you, he's had four, five extra days to find a hiding place. The trail's good and cold now. He could be half way around the world."

Midge colored. "I just thought he was out of touch. You know what I mean, not calling in because he was traveling. You think I wouldn't have had you put out an APB if I knew he'd cleaned out our account?"

"We'll do that right away, you can bet on it. We just need more particulars on where to find him. How did you meet him?"

Midge tried to pass it off. "Oh, you know how it is. Friend of a friend." Same song and dance Gary gave me, Jillian remembered.

"You can do better than that. If you don't give us more to work with, it'll be hard to convince the prosecutor you're not in it with him. They're giving out stiff jail time for fraud these days."

Furious, Midge crossed her arms and stuck out her chin. "I'm not saying another word without my lawyer. I might just ask him to sue you for slander, while he's at it. We could probably prove harassment. You've never let up on me since Barney died."

Jillian wondered, *my God, IS Midge in on it? She's a major piece of work, and she'd do anything for money. But what would be the point of stealing her own money? No, she's too shaken up about this whole thing to have known what Gary was planning. So, why isn't she talking?*

Lyons said, "You do that, ma'am. You may very well need a lawyer, because your track record with us isn't that great. We'll be getting Jones's fingerprints--probably pick them up in that cabin. We'll send them to the FBI and see if he's wanted anywhere else."

Jillian saw a fleeting expression of dismay cross Midge's face. What was the big mystery, she wondered. *How DID they meet? And if Gary did kill her--which I don't believe for a second--why did he do it? It's ludicrous to think of Astarte blackmailing anyone. She'd probably light candles for them instead.*

Lyons left in a hurry for the cabin. They drove home, Jillian still grieving over the betrayal, Midge grim-lipped and silent. She only spoke once, muttering about an old pal from L.A. who'd fix Gary's wagon.

Perversely, now that there was doubt about Jimmy's guilt, Jillian was more certain of it than ever. Maybe he was on Skid Road, but he still could have gotten over here in a couple of hours, killed her and then gone back. And he does have that religious streak when he's drunk, which Gary certainly doesn't have.

HOTLINE TO HEAVEN
Chapter Thirteen

August 6

They met at Midge's house, and she introduced them to a stunning young man with shoulder-length, curly blonde hair. "This is Ethan Engel. He showed up this morning, before I could call and tell him not to come. I'll leave him with you today, to show him the ropes.

"But I told him and I have to tell you that the hotline might close down. I haven't decided yet. It's going to depend on exactly how much Gary took and what other bills are outstanding. So far it looks like maybe \$200K. I have to check into it and see if it's worth my while to pay off the creditors he scammed and to keep on backing the line. You'll get paid what's owed you, but I'm leaning toward bagging the whole thing."



Jillian was floored. She hadn't thought of the possible ramifications of Gary's defection. What would she do for a living if the line shut down? There was no way she could get enough money together to go back to New York and rent a place, and her practice was dead anyway. There didn't seem to be many jobs in town--the economy was pretty flat, even now during the tourist season. She'd heard of people with master's degrees working for minimum wage, others with B.A.s taking two and three jobs to support their families. Was she going to wind up on the street?

She looked at Robert in a panic, but he gave her an exaggerated wink. What did he mean? Did he think Midge was blowing smoke? Maybe trying to get them to take a pay cut?

Midge narrowed her eyes. "That was some chart you picked for the hotline, Malone. The money house was loaded, all right--loaded with my money!"

Flushing, she defended herself. "You know Gary didn't give me any leeway. That t-square was in effect the whole week he gave me to work with. And I still think it could make money, if we stayed with it."

"Yeah, well, so far I wouldn't give a dime for your judgment --on anything. I have to go. I have an appointment with my accountant to see if I can salvage anything out of this. If nothing else, it's a tax write-off. Ethan has the key to the mother-in-law, because the cops are done with it. Drop him off when you're finished." She ushered them out of the house.

Jillian felt sick with shame at Midge's comments. *Sheesh! She blames me for everything.* She asked Robert, "What were you trying to tell me?"

"Hoo Boy! You turned white as a sheet! Don't worry your pretty little head, Jill-Jill. I can get us hired on the last line I worked for. They hated it when Astarte and I left, and they can always use another good reader. It's not as much money--only \$.35 a minute--

but we wouldn't have to move. They can plug us in by remote hookup. And it's so well-established nationwide that we'd get more calls and probably make the same or better."

"That's a relief! I'd almost rather work for someone else, even if she does keep the line going. But, what are the owners like? Are they as greedy and sleazy as Midge?"

"Nothing like her. They believe in spiritual growth and in providing a service. Naturally, they're making a good profit, but they consider it a moral investment--like Green products."

Breathing easier, she told Ethan, "I'm sorry we've been so preoccupied. You can see you've walked into a hornet's nest."

"Midge was telling me about it. You guys have been through so much!"

Without all the distractions, she saw how very beautiful he was--not in an effeminate way, but without gender, as an angel might be. He had fine features, molded cheekbones, and soulful eyes. He was also heart-tearingly innocent and young. He was wearing what they would discover was his standard outfit--loose-fitting white gauze shirts and trousers, like someone would wear in the tropics. Later, Robert would dub them his Jesus clothes.

They took Ethan to their place to show him the ropes of the hot line, and Robert made them coffee. He was clearly entranced, devouring Ethan with his eyes. "You'll fit right in here, because we're all Engels. *Engel* means angel, I'm sure you know. Midge made each of us take the name of an archangel for working on the line, because it's not a good idea to use your own name."

"I'm Michael, the chief of the celestial army--the most beautiful of all the angels, of course. Astarte was Gabriel--the messenger of God. We ought to retire that name--like you retire a team number to honor a champion. So, you'll have to be Uriel--that's pronounced OOOH-REE-UHL. He's the interpreter of prophecy and also the Angel of Retribution."

"Jillian here is Raphael, the angel of healing." He thought a minute. "HAH! Wasn't he also the angel of death? Maybe it was YOU that killed her, Jillian!"

"Oh, Robert, that's not even funny! Midge keeps saying it's all my fault anyway. I really can't believe Gary would kill anyone. He did run off with the money, that much I know, but you'll never convince me he murdered Astarte. We were married, Ethan, and I know him better than anyone."

She shook her head in bewilderment. "I just wish I had a clue as to what happened. I've looked and looked at her chart. Pluto was in her house of death--the eighth house--going over her Moon and Neptune, so that shows the murder, but it really doesn't tell me who did it."

With becoming modesty, Ethan offered, "Maybe I could pick up something, if I did a reading. You know how it is--the two of you might be too close to the situation. It would be hard to be objective and easy to read things into the chart or cards."

They watched, enthralled, as he went to work. His eyes focused into the distance, and he began rocking front to back in the chair. Jillian had seen the autistic kids in one of her social work jobs rocking in just that way--or, orthodox Jews davening. She told herself, *no doubt Lady Jane would know what lifetime that mannerism came from--and why he's such a natural reader. He's too young to have had any training. Silly Jillie, not only is Astarte gone, so is Lady Jane.*

He was shuffling a deck of plain playing cards in a hand over hand manner, rather than the usual riffle cut. His hands were delicate and pale, the fingers elongated. Now and then, he'd cut the cards, showing them the one that came up.

"The Ace of Spades reversed, that's the violence. Paired with the Jack of Spades reversed--I get the impression of betrayal and that the killer was someone she trusted. The Queen of Clubs reversed. Would that be Astarte? It's a woman who's ungrounded--friendly, maybe too friendly, kinda sexy? With these cards in combination, I think this is one time she was too friendly for her own good.



"The Ten of Clubs reversed--something aborted, some project or goal. Sometimes it's a miscarriage, but it might be the hotline itself, and maybe it'll go under after all."

He explained, "Sometimes the cards speak on several different levels at once, and it feels like that's what's happening here. The cards are all reversed, as you'd expect with a tragedy. Here's the Two of Diamonds reversed. Some message or communication gone astray--seems like it's a letter. It's all very hazy. I'm not getting any clear impressions. I'll have to do some trance work."

He set the cards aside and closed his eyes, still rocking but more gently. He breathed deeply and audibly for a while, then his whole body jerked. Underneath his closed eyelids, the eyes began to flutter rapidly, like people in REM sleep. After a few minutes of this--or, maybe it was years--he shook himself awake, much to Jillian's relief. Weird was hard for her to take.

He explained, "I don't get words or messages when I'm in trance, I only see images. Sometimes they're symbolic, and sometimes they're exact pictures of something in the person's life--I never know which. I did get some clear images this time."

"Was Astarte blonde and pretty? Yes? Was there something about her legs? She was pointing to them. Yes? Good, that's confirmation that I was picking up the right person. She seemed upset and sad, but there was compassion in her face. I get a sense that she felt sorry for her killer, and that's part of what sent him into a rage."

"This may all be symbolic, but she was holding a baby--a little blonde cherub--in her arms. And then she showed me a letter. I have no idea what that all meant, but maybe it will mean something to you. I'll just leave it with you."

Jillian said, "You seem to have reached Astarte, all right. She must be referring to the anonymous letters she got. Maybe she means the person that wrote them was her killer. See, I knew it wasn't Gary! I bet it was the religious fanatics that vandalized the trailer. Although if it was, why would she let them in? Thanks, Ethan."

After a few moments hesitation, she said, "I know we've just met, and I hope you don't think I'm being forward, but I'd love to see your astrology chart. When were you born?"

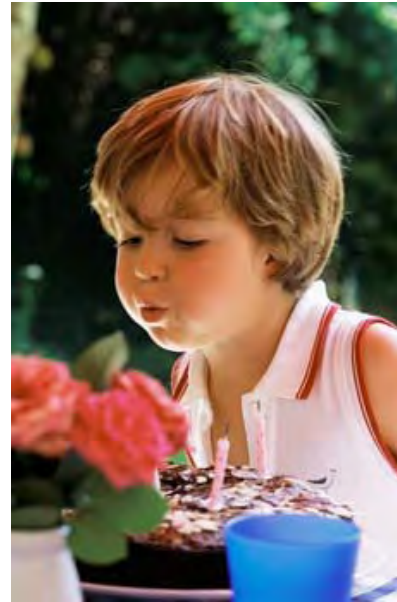
He shook his head and smiled. "I don't know."

"You don't KNOW?"

"It's quite a story, and I don't usually get into it before I know someone well. But my inner guidance is that I'm supposed to tell it, because for some reason it's going to mean something to you, Jillian."

"I was a foundling. They came across me wandering in a state park in Kentucky. I was somewhere between five and seven, they think--maybe a big five-year-old, maybe a small seven-year-old. I had no memory of anything before that, only that my name was Ethan. I took the last name of my foster parents, the Engels. That was in May of 1980, so we always celebrated that as my birthday, but we really don't know. I might be anywhere from 21 to 23."

Exactly like Etan Patz! He was six, she recalled, when he disappeared in May of 1979--one year before Ethan showed up in Kentucky. He was blonde and angelic just like this boy. He and his folks lived in Manhattan--a loft down in Soho. One morning, he left the house to get on the school bus--the very first time he'd ever gone alone--and he never made it to school. They never found out what happened, but many people never forgot him. I remember the whole thing like yesterday.



Jillian had only been in New York a couple of years when it happened. She headed there before the ink was dry on her BA in psych from Chatham--just wasn't the Pittsburgh type--and got a job as a foster care worker at the Bureau of Child Welfare. She saw terrible things happen to slum kids, but Etan Patz made her see that terrible things could happen to middle class kids too. She even volunteered for the committee that put out posters and flyers about him. It was a national effort.

*She told herself, surely, you **don't** think Ethan is really Etan Patz. Still, it's strange about the name--it might be exactly the way a little boy would mispronounce Etan--or how people who'd never heard that name would interpret what he was saying. And the timing is right. I know his parents never stopped believing he was still alive, and I always thought one day we'd hear what happened.*

Come on, Jillian. You're losing it! You know it's a pipe dream.. I guess deep down I understand that it can't be him--it would be just too weird. There wouldn't be any way to know for sure, anyway. But if he isn't Etan Patz, who is he? It COULD be him, her heart said.. Hush, Heart, she scolded, don't you ever give up?

She acknowledged Ethan's story with a sympathetic look. "Thanks for telling us. You're right, it does mean something to me." Maybe she'd never tell him her foolish thoughts.

Then she asked, "Do you need to eat after you do trance work? I know it's that way for some people. Psychic work seems to lower their blood sugar. Let me make us some lunch."

She went to the kitchen to fix sandwiches and soup. Robert followed, pretending to help. He whispered, "If he's not gay, I'm slitting my wrists! Did you ever see anyone so drop dead gorgeous?"

"Only you, Pet. I don't get vibes either way, whether he's gay or straight." She could usually spot them--a survival skill for a New York city gal--but Ethan had her stumped. He was much too pretty to be straight, but he wasn't giving off any gay vibes either. Maybe, as young as he was, he was still in the closet.

She told Robert, "It's good to see your libido coming back! Now, go entertain our guest."

After lunch, she dropped Ethan off at Midge's, then treated herself to a latte and a blondie at a cute bakery and coffee shop that was becoming one of her favorite spots. She sat on its deck, soaking up the sun and smelling the bowers of roses. Although she didn't know anyone, she always enjoyed speculating on which of the interesting-looking patrons were locals and which were tourists. Sometimes it was obvious, as it was today when a laughing foursome nearby turned out to be speaking German.

She went back inside and ordered a refill of the latte. It was a new pleasure for her, a west coast brew not served in New York. Returning to the deck, she became aware that the trio at the next table was speaking still another foreign tongue--astrobabble.

A woman in her forties with her near-black hair cut in a pixie complained, "I sure wish Neptune would stop squaring my Moon. I'm so forgetful I'm lucky to remember where I live."

Another woman with long, gray-streaked braids laughed and asked, "Is that Neptune square the Moon, or is that the menopause? Boy, Neptune is all over my chart like a cheap suit. It's opposite my Venus and square my Sun. If they wind up putting me away, you'll know why!"

The silver-haired fellow with a beard commiserated. "Neptune can play hell with your life. I just finished two years of it going back and forth over my Ascendant. Just when I thought it was safe to come back to the real world, it starts opposing my Mars." His companions consoled him with the idea that sooner or later, the transit would pass.

Jillian chuckled. *The funny thing, is that they actually think they're communicating. It's hard not to use the jargon, but I do try to speak English with clients. Among ourselves, though, astrologers talk funny.*

I wonder if they're from that local astrology club Midge told me about. I meant to attend a meeting, but once I started seeing Dave, my Friday evenings were filled. Maybe I should go over and introduce myself.

She worked on herself for several endless minutes, trying to overcome her shyness. *That stupid Venus of mine, she fretted. If only I could turn it in on a different one, in Gemini maybe, and feel perfectly at home with new people. That would be radical surgery!*

The man asked, "What about that hotline they've started here in town? Do you think those people are frauds? They couldn't be serious or they wouldn't be working for one of those rip-off 900 numbers."



"You're absolutely right," the gray haired woman said. "Those hokey ads on t.v.-- like the one for Miss Cleo's line!"

Jillian moaned. *So much for fellowship with other astrology buffs here. It rankles that we have such a cruddy reputation. To hear people talk, we might as well be peddling phone sex!*

The fellow asked the women, "And what do you think about the murder? They say now that the woman who was killed was pregnant."

Jillian gasped. Astarte pregnant? Could it possibly be true, or was this just another ridiculous rumor?

One of the women offered, "I saw her once, out at the pub with that blond hunk that was running the hotline. She seemed kind of slutty to me."

"Really?" the other asked. "Isn't he the one that ran off with the money? I'll bet he was the baby's father. Maybe he wasn't too thrilled that she got knocked up, and he killed her."

The man told them, "I've heard a lot of dirt about that bunch. It makes me halfway embarrassed to be involved with astrology."

The other woman agreed. "Especially now, with those Christians picketing at the metaphysical bookstore every Saturday. I'm worried about a backlash developing against the New Age, what with Pluto moving through Sagittarius." After some speculation about this astrological mega-event, the trio left.

As Jillian bussed her tray, she thought, *so I'm not the only one who thinks that transit is bad news. Lyons will never follow up on that bunch of born-again. He wants Gary to be the killer, because Christians can wield a lot of political clout in a town this size. I'm going down there on Saturday and see if I can infiltrate. But I'd better talk to the store manager before that and see what she can tell me about the picketers, so I'll be better prepared. I'll do that tomorrow afternoon.*

She drove home, still wondering if there was any truth to the rumor about Astarte's pregnancy. She phoned Lyons and told him what she'd heard.

He swore about his coworker's anatomies and ancestries in vastly improbable terms. "When I find out who leaked that, they're history! It wasn't supposed to get out, but, yes, the young lady was pregnant. We just got the autopsy report today."

You idiot, Jillian told herself. *That stomach trouble you were so worried about? She didn't have AIDS, she had morning sickness! The subtle, you get immediately, while the obvious escapes you.* She asked Lyons, "Was it Jimmy's?"

"She wasn't that far along. We figure it had to be Gary Jones'. That was his motive, we're thinking. When we searched the cabin, we didn't find her missing underpants, so he must have taken them with him as some sort of sick souvenir."

"What happened with the lineup in Seattle. Did they identify Jimmy?" She'd still clung to the hope, despite the mounting evidence to the contrary, that he'd prove to be the killer and save Gary's worthless behind.

"Not only did every staff member on duty then pick him out of the lineup, they have him on their rolls both the night before and the night of her death."

"They remember him, see, because he started a couple of brawls, just in the short time he was there, so they tossed him out early on the morning after her death. He must have headed straight for Port Townsend. Nope, Gitano's in the clear, though we're still holding him on those outstanding warrants."

Robert was gesturing wildly, dying to know what was going on. She hung up and told him.

"Oh, tell me she wasn't pregnant! Can you imagine Astarte as a mother? HONEY! That'd be one screwed up granola bunny! Remember, Ethan saw her holding a baby--that's what it meant."

Jillian noticed, *I'm feeling frustrated with Astarte--one last time, for old time's sake. If she thought she could prevent AIDS by creative visualization, maybe she also thought it was a good birth control method. I'm not telling her folks they lost a grandchild too. Let Midge do it.*

Washing up the dishes from lunch, she told herself, *the eighth house isn't just death, it's also birth, so that Pluto transit over Astarte's Moon should have alerted me. Why in the world didn't I suspect she was pregnant? Denial, no doubt, because I didn't want to believe she was seeing Gary. Plus, in all my adult life, I've never been around pregnant women. My friends were all single or couples who were childless by choice.*

I wonder if Astarte herself even knew? She was such a space cadet and so afraid of doctors--maybe she never guessed she was expecting. On the other hand, she always hid anything embarrassing and might not have felt she could tell anyone. Jillian was suddenly, surprisingly, grief stricken--not only for Astarte but for the child that never would be.

HOTLINE TO HEAVEN
Chapter Fourteen

August 7

That rainy afternoon, there were only a few customers in the metaphysical bookstore, which was called The Pleiadean Portal. Standing in front of an impressive display of sparkling stones, Jillian felt herself getting lost in the purple depths of a huge amethyst crystal, then shook herself out of the reverie it induced. It cost a mere \$350, she noticed. *Right, I'll buy a couple dozen as soon as I make my first million. Midge probably paves her patio with them.*



I wish they'd can that syrupy harp music--it's the worst thing about the whole New Age movement! Nothing wrong with that bunch that a steady dose of old time Rock and Roll wouldn't cure. She held up a big clear quartz crystal and sang to it, *Gonna rock around the clock tonight, gonna rock, rock, rock, 'til broad day light.* The crystal seemed to wink back at her.

Lingered regretfully over the mystical art, she made her way back through the dream catchers and shaman's drums and past the pungent scents of the aroma therapy aisle to the manager's office. There, a woman who was pouring over book vouchers greeted her distractedly. Unadorned by makeup, she was striking, with a waist-length French braid of honey-brown hair and a long, loose batik dress.

"I'm Veronica. What can I do for you?"

Jillian introduced herself and explained that she was from the psychic hotline. "We're starting to have trouble with the born agains, and I wondered if you could tell me something about them. Do you have time to go for a cup of coffee?"

"I don't do drugs."

"Um, I didn't mean to imply that you did."

"Well, coffee is a drug--and a highly addictive one at that."

Great start, she thought. Now what? "Well, how about some wheat grass juice?" *Just don't expect me to join you.* "We could go to the juice bar at the health food store down the street."

The woman agreed, and when they were ensconced at a minuscule table at the juice bar, Jillian asked about the picketers.

Sipping a murky vegetable concoction, Veronica told her that it had been going on for about a year. Customers had been harassed coming and going, and since Saturday was their busiest day, it had seriously cut their income. "Frankly, we're thinking of moving to another town."

"It would be a shame," Jillian sympathized. "You're a great resource, and there are plenty of New Age people here."

She drew deeply on the strawberry-mango smoothie that was the most enticing offering on the menu. It was delicious. *Some of these health foods aren't half bad, she thought, so long as they leave the tofu out of them. The texture of tofu reminds me of the fatty pork in those big tin cans of pork and beans we'd practically live on when Mom got laid off.* The memory made her shudder.

She told Veronica about the vandalism to the trailer and about the threatening notes and calls Astarte had received. "Then, when she was killed, the murderer painted WHORE OF SATAN in red paint on the wall. That's why I'm convinced a religious nut is behind her death."

Veronica leaned back in her seat, crossed her arms, and chewed her lip for a moment. "That never came out in the paper--or on this town's unreal grapevine. Oh, my." She rubbed her face with her hands and sighed. "Oh, my."

"What is it?"

"Well, we had a young woman working at the store for a couple of months last winter--kind of a transient who came through town, you know? Jennie was her name--Jennie Olsen. After a while, she got a note in the mail, addressed to her at the store, and it called her a whore of Satan. She got real spooked and said she felt someone watching her at night. Then one day she got a weird phone call at the store and turned white as a sheet. She never came back to work after that day, and we never heard from her again."

Goose bumps ran down Jillian's arms. Had the killer killed before? "Did you report it to the police?"

Veronica shook her head ruefully. "We just thought she'd drifted on to the next stop in her life's journey--like maybe she took the call as an omen that it was time to move on."

"It never occurred to any of you that something was wrong?"

"You have to understand, Jennie was the flaky sort. Oh, a real pretty little blonde and sweet as pie--the customers loved her. Bit of a flirt, though. If a man came in, you couldn't get her to wait on anyone else, because she'd be hanging on him."

Sounds more and more like Astarte, Jillian thought. The killer must have a type. George Mason, now, he has a thing for blondes. His wife is one, and I could see her being like Astarte in her youth, before she got all bitter and anorexic. This little Jennie was destitute and alone in the world. Mason could have met her at the bookstore, spent a wad of money wining and dining her, and then gone off the deep end when she rejected his advances.

Veronica went on, "Jennie was a total space cadet--made tons of mistakes and screwed up the register all the time--so we weren't that unhappy when she didn't show up for work. We decided that she'd taken off, not thinking she had to give us any notice. Now you're making me wonder if something terrible didn't happen to her." She rolled a strand of amber beads back and forth between her fingers with a worried look.

"Didn't anyone go over to where she was staying or call her landlady to check on her?"

"She didn't have an apartment. She was crashing on a houseboat in the marina. The owners had gone down to Baja for the winter, and they let her stay on the boat. As I said, a drifter."

Poor girl, Jillian thought, with no one to care if she disappeared. Like Ethan. I hope the killer doesn't zero in on him next--another pretty blonde youngster. I'll have to watch out for him.

"I'm not sure what to do," Veronica said. "That was way back in January, and there's nothing to say she didn't just pick up her backpack and head out of town. No, she's probably on a beach in Malibu as we speak, getting a tan."

Her face lightened, and she assured Jillian, "I'm sure of it. My intuition tells me she's fine. We're making a mountain out of a molehill." She chuckled and waved a hand dismissively.

She was clearly talking herself out of any responsibility, but Jillian's intuition told her that the girl came to a bad end. She asked for the location of the houseboat, then paid the check for them both and shook hands with Veronica as they left the juice bar.

"The store sponsors readers from time to time," Veronica told her. "especially during the tourist season. You seem like a solid sort and easier to deal with than some of our readers. Mind if we give you a call when we need someone?"

She gave Veronica one of her cards. "Right now, my schedule on the hotline is impossible, but it could change in the future, and then I'd love to do it." It would be great to have something other than Midge and the hotline to rely on, she thought.

The fog had rolled in, with one of those lightning changes of weather she had come to expect. She drove down to the marina, enjoying the rambling dirt road that led through the panoply of marine businesses. When she finally found the right place, the houseboat was no longer there. The grizzled old sailor living on the boat that had taken its place said the owners had moved the houseboat to one of the hundreds of islands in the San Juans for the fishing season. They wouldn't be back, he was sure, because they'd given up the berth for good. He didn't know their names.



It was a dead end, she concluded regretfully as she strolled along the waterfront, inhaling the salty air. *I have a very bad feeling about this Jennie. She is NOT soaking up rays on a beach, she's six foot under someplace. What would the killer do to hide a body here? Take it out on a boat and dump it into the Sound with an anchor tied to her feet, no doubt. She'll never be found.*

And how will Jennie's folks ever know what happened to her? Sorrow burned in Jillian's chest. God, it's painful to think how vulnerable young people are when they leave home. How did my Mom ever let me leave Pittsburgh to go to New York? Guess she knew better than to try and stop me. Dear Mom--she never tried to manage my life. She always trusted that I was sensible enough to make major decisions for myself.

She pondered whether to tell Lyons about her suspicions but decided, he wasn't going to take it seriously, since there was no evidence whatsoever that anything

happened. Besides, if he did believe it, it'd be one more charge against Gary. He was already living in town when Jennie disappeared in January, so Lyons would assume he killed her too. He'd figure Gary could have met her at the bookstore and asked her out--and, knowing Gary, he very well may have. She decided to keep this to herself for a while.

She plucked a lone yellow wildflower along the shore and inspected it, wondering what it was. She thought, *maybe this is all a chimera, and Jennie skedaddled as soon as she got that threatening phone call. I certainly would, in her shoes. Maybe she's happily married in a little rose covered cottage somewhere. What do I know for sure?*

Shaking off the specter of Jennie's demise at the hands of The Angel of Death, Jillian drove home to the dinner she knew Robert had left in the oven for her. He'd promised Cornish game hens *a l'orange*, stuffed with brown and wild rice. *I'm so lucky to have Robert in my life. When did Jenny ever have anyone or anything waiting at home for her?*

HOTLINE TO HEAVEN
Chapter Fifteen

August 8

They were back in the trailer working. Midge had called a meeting to set up regular hours again. Because of the air conditioner there, Jillian, Ethan, and Robert were all crowded onto the sofa in the anteroom, Midge having claimed the lone armchair. The air conditioner struggled with its load, but a drop of sweat trickled down Jillian's back. *Good thing it's seldom this hot here, she thought. Most nights I don't even need the fan.*

Midge told them that on her accountant's advice, she'd decided to go ahead, for now, as it was a good tax move. She also needed to keep her credibility in the community, as she had other projects in mind. She'd paid the most pressing bills--the phone and air time for the commercial, as well as half of bill to the ad agency. She got the contractor--a local man--to agree to a moratorium on the rehab bill for the next couple of months. In the long run, whether she kept the business going depended on how fast business picked up again.

She told them, "With all the losses, we need to cut costs, and the only slack is our pay-per-minute rate. The rent and utilities will be the same, phone changes will be the same, and advertising will be the same or more, so the only thing I can cut is your wages. We'll drop to \$.40 a minute, rather than \$.50."

Robert narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms. "Without us, you won't need the phones or the ads. We DO have a contract."

"I've drawn up an addendum for you to sign, if you want to keep on working here. You weren't straight with me about the pay scale, to begin with. Astarte told me you were only getting \$.35 on the other line."

Robert smacked his forehead with the palm of his hand in disgust. Jillian fumed, *leave it to Astarte. She probably blabbed it in all innocence, but even beyond the grave, that girl can cause more trouble than anyone I ever knew. Man, Midge figures all the angles. She thinks that if she gives us \$.35, there's nothing to stop us from going to work for someone else. But, give us \$.40 and, out of either loyalty or inertia, we'd probably stay. And she's right, blast her. But I wonder, how rich do you have to be for \$200,000 to be a nice tax write-off?*

Jillian shifted uncomfortably on the sofa to avoid Robert's sharp elbow. She wondered, *doesn't Midge know that old saw about catching more flies with honey than vinegar? If she really wanted our loyalty, she could have pled hardship, thrown herself on our mercy, and begged us to stay even though she couldn't afford to pay us as much any more.*

For someone with Libra rising, she sure is nasty. Hmm, now it occurs to me, it's the tail end of Libra--maybe she really has Scorpio Rising. She's certainly secretive, which would go along with Scorpio. It certainly doesn't go along with her Aries planets--one thing I like about Aries is their directness. Plus that would shift the Midheaven from Cancer to Leo, which makes more sense, given her Hollywood history. The time could easily be off. Born in the Twenties, the birth records couldn't have been that good, and

she'd only have to be born about twenty minutes later to have Scorpio rising. I'll have to redo her chart. But surely an astrologer of Carroll Righter's stature would have rectified her birth time, wouldn't he--for a millionaire client?

Midge continued, "We go back to the original schedule. Jillian from 7:00 in the morning to 2:00. Ethan in Astarte's place, noon to 8:00, and Robert from 6:00 in the evening to 2:00 in the morning."

Not fair! Jillian made herself say, "I feel we should rotate. I've been on the early shift all this time, and I'd like the middle shift."

"We need Robert on the late shift. He functions well at that time of the night, and not everyone can. And Ethan, here, is a slow starter."

"It's true," he said apologetically. "My brain doesn't really kick in until about ten in the morning. I'd do it if I could, but I wouldn't be any good for the callers on the early shift."

Jillian agreed grudgingly that it seemed like the only option. "If we ever get more readers, I want off that shift."

Midge announced, "We'll be advertising on cable again soon. We're not quite back to square one--for just another couple thou, the ad agency can splice in a new angel and dub over the voice in other segments. They'll keep the same script, costumes, and scenery, just reshoot the part with the angel. I'm going to have them use Ethan here, because he's such an appealing type."

Robert discreetly shot Jillian a note: *What am I? Chopped liver?*

She wrote back: *I'm sure she considered you for the part first. But angels don't wear berets and pony tails.*

She thought, *it's just the same as it was with Astarte. She loves Ethan, hates me, and all but ignores Robert's existence because he's gay. What's she going to do if Ethan turns out to be gay?*

After Midge left, Robert staged a mock audition for the angel role, camping it up. "You got problems with your man, Honey? He's not putting it to you that often any more? He's got them ROOOVIN' eyes? Call me, the Angel Michael, at the HOT Line to Heaven--that's the HOT Line to Heaven, 1-900-666-0666. For a mere \$3.99 a minute and your best looking cousin, I'll tell you how to get him back. I know ALLLLLLL there is to know about these men and their wicked, wicked ways. What you do is..." He launched into an obscene but hilarious and probably effective method of recapturing a man's flagging interest. Jillian and Ethan laughed at his antics, Ethan blushing a little at the language.

Lyons had asked them to come to the station and get fingerprinted, so she went down after her shift. It was a clean, surprisingly cozy office on Water Street across from the combination city hall and town museum. The chatty dispatcher at the reception desk was as used to answering drop-in tourists' questions as she was 911 calls. Behind her, two cops in slate blue, short-sleeved uniforms were struggling unsuccessfully to operate the copy machine, to the dispatcher's amusement.

How many cops does it take to make a photocopy, Jillian wondered. I know. It takes one to handle the paperwork and one to read it it's rights.

Lyons led her through a maze of paneled hallways to a windowless room they used for interrogations. He set up the kit and carefully took her prints.

Struggling to get the jet black ink off her fingertips afterwards, she asked, "Is Jimmy still in jail?"

"Nah, the extradition came through, so they paid the fare for one of our men to escort him back to New York. Dave was pretty good with Jimmy, so we sent him."

She said, "He was fabulous with him, that morning Jimmy showed up so drunk and violent. We were all terrified, but Dave cooled him down and led him off like a little lamb."

"Yeah, Dave is good with drunks. But he had plenty of practice at it growing up, since his dad was an alkie." Seeing her look of surprise, he glanced at her curiously. "Maybe I shouldn't have said that, but I figured you already knew. He doesn't talk about his love life much, but I know you two were an item."

Not knowing what to say that wouldn't cause a problem if it got back to Dave, Jillian just nodded. *So his dad was an alcoholic, was he? I'll bet that explains part of why he dropped me when we got too close, she speculated. Maybe I ought to read those John Bradshaw books I'm always recommending to clients with alcoholic parents. It would give me some insight. He never did give me his chart, but he must have both a strong Neptune and a strong Pluto. That's what Donna Cunningham wrote about children of alcoholics, and in the cases I've seen, it seems to be true.*

Dave in New York, she sighed. I'd give anything to be there with him. Now that he's turned me onto jazz, we could go to some of the great jazz clubs in Greenwich Village. I'd take him to my favorite restaurants, too, maybe go to a museum or concert. With my luck, though, he'd probably want to spend the whole time at Shea Stadium, watching the Mets. God, I miss New York. And Dave. Will we ever get back together?

Lyons told her, "We're not getting any useful information from N.C.I.C. because Jones is too common a name."

What the world could NCIC be, she wondered. Some kind of oracle?

Seeing her look of bewilderment, he said, "The N.C.I.C.--the National Crime Information Center. It's a national computer data base. You feed in the name and birth date, and in five minutes it prints out all kinds of useful information about anyone who's ever been convicted. Did Jones ever tell any of you about where he'd lived before or where he came from?"

"Well, since our divorce, he's never really told me where he was living. I've never had an address for him or known where to contact him. He always just calls or drops in out of the blue."

He gaped at her. "Since your DIVORCE?"

"I thought you knew we were married."

Lyons roared. "GUDDAMMIT TO HELL!! You mean you were married to him, and the other day when I said we'd be putting out an APB, you didn't speak up? Didn't it occur to you that you might have some useful information? Like where his family is? I've never seen such a bunch for obstructing justice!"

Hoo boy, I'm in deep doodoo now, she thought. "I was sure Dave told you."

"He and I have an agreement that we don't discuss this case, since the two of you were dating."

"I don't know what to say. We'd just discovered he'd cleared out the bank account. Then you came up with the idea he'd murdered Astarte, so I was in a state of shock."

"I can understand your feeling like that right at that minute. But you let two more days go by, while the trail got colder and colder. What am I supposed to think? Are you trying to help him get away? That makes you an accessory after the fact."

"Of course I'm not trying to help him. I just didn't think of it, because I don't have anything useful to give you. He was so secretive, even while we were married, that he never told me anything much about where he came from. It was a pretty messed up family, I do know that. I think his dad was in the pen. But I never did meet any of them. They never so much as called or wrote, and he didn't call them."

"You're sounding more and more like an accessory. I want you to wrack your brain--day and night, if that's what it takes--and tell me anything at all you can remember."

Jillian thought hard--and fast. "I do know he was born in Cleveland, because I did his astrology chart once."

"Well, being an astrologer, you ought to know his birth date. **That** would help with NCIC."

She pondered. "His birthday was in November--late Scorpio, it was--sure, the 22nd, right on the cusp."

"And the year? How old was he?"

"He was about my age, but I don't remember if he's going to be 40 or 41 this year." She did the calculations on a scrap of paper. "It was November 22nd of either 1954 or 1955."

"That's something to start with. Oh, ho! You've got to have a picture of him. We can add it to the APB."

Jillian's chest ached. "Only our wedding picture." She'd always loved it--Gary so young and handsome, both of them with such hopes shining in their faces. She'd hate to see it on a wanted poster in the Post Office. "Nothing more recent. He hated being photographed."

"I'll pick that up from you tonight." Seeing the misery on her face, he reassured her, "You'll get it back after we've copied it. One of the guys in the department is a computer whiz, and he has that program where you can age people. He'll scan that picture of Jones and work out what he looks like now."

She reluctantly agreed. Then, as casually as possible, she asked him something that had been on her mind for a while. "By the way, her folks are wanting to know. How far along was her pregnancy when she died?"

He tsked in sympathy. "They would wonder, I can imagine. Their only child and their only grandchild, gone in an instant. You can tell them she was two months along."

Jillian's solar plexus twisted in shame. As far as she knew, the Cabots still didn't know about the pregnancy, and she had no intention of distressing them by telling them. She was asking for her own green-eyed, nefarious purposes.

Packing up his equipment, he said, "Mark my words, he's known to the law somewhere. Now that I've got your fingerprints, we can isolate his from the others in the cabin and ship them off to the FBI."

Concerned for Gary despite herself, she told him, "Look, Officer Lyons, I've known him a long time--over 15 years. And, okay, he's no saint. He does have a conniving mind. But I never knew him to be violent. He never lost his temper once in the time we were married, and, let me tell you, I gave him plenty of provocation."

He looked at her wryly. "I can believe that, ma'am. But you haven't been around him in years, if what you say is true. You don't understand how the criminal mind works."

He warmed to the topic, puffing out his chest. "They progress, you see--go from bad to worse with each crime. So after a while, on a big haul like this, they'd kill to get away with it."

She wondered again whether to talk to him about her concern about the girl, Jenny, but dismissed the idea. As hot as he was on Gary's trail, it wouldn't help the situation at all.

She only said, "I still don't think he killed her. Are you sure it wasn't someone else? What about those notes and the paint on the walls? Gary's not a religious fanatic, no way he's even interested in the church. How do you know it wasn't one of them?"

"He's just trying to throw us off. Knowing about the vandals, he figures he'll put the blame on them. So he kills her, then paints that slogan on the walls. It's a red herring, see. He's devious--even you admit that."

Not wanting to push her luck by defending Gary any further, she said, "There's something funny about the connection between him and Midge McCullough. I asked him once how they met, and he gave me the same song and dance she gave you the other day. She knows more than she's telling about what he's been up to in the last few years. You ought to follow up on that." She knew she'd gone too far when the storm clouds rumbled across his face.

"Look, Miss Malone--or, by rights, I should call you Mrs. Jones--we're running this investigation, and we don't need you to tell us what to do. But we do need every bit, and I mean EVERY bit of information you have about him. I'll be back to talk to you again. And again." Lyons ushered her out of the police station, growling to himself.

HOTLINE TO HEAVEN
Chapter Sixteen

August 9

Ethan was taking a call, while Jillian waited for her turn on the phone. She thought, *this work is my solace. It's hard to focus at first, but when I listen to their problems, they seem so much worse than mine that it takes my mind off all this.*

A caller said, "I just got out of my second lousy marriage, and I was lucky to get out alive. Both my husbands were problem drinkers, and both of them beat me so bad I wound up in the hospital. Please look at my chart and tell me when I'm going to meet a good man. I need some happiness."

You want to be happy, stay single, Jillian felt like saying. She looked at the chart, and the woman had Mars, Saturn, and Neptune standing together in the house of marriage, the seventh house. Over the past several years, both Uranus and Neptune had been forming difficult angles to that trio, going along with the turmoil. Now the series was almost finished, except for a last Neptune aspect to Saturn coming up soon.

She advised, "Don't let your ex prey on your sympathies and convince you to take him back because you feel responsible for him. He hasn't really changed. But it does look like the worst times are nearly over." *I wish someone had given me the same advice about Gary,* she thought wryly. *Not that I would have taken it, any more than I get a sense this woman will.*

As gently as she could, she asked, "Has it occurred to you, after two marriages turned out the same way, that your choice of men isn't just bad luck? There is something you're drawn to about this type of man in the beginning."

In this picture, Saturn was the ruler of the tenth house, which would describe one of her parents, so she speculated, "Did you have an alcoholic father? I thought as much, from your chart. That kind of background leaves its mark on your relationships, and they won't change unless you do. You really should go to Alanon, or to the Adult Children of Alcoholics meetings." She gave her the national number for Alanon from the list of emergency and help line numbers she had compiled.

Ralph brought the mail, and promptly reestablished his claim on the conference room for lunch. From the looks of the stack, there were more outstanding bills for Midge to worry about. One envelope carried the name of the printer who'd done their stationery, flyers, and brochures. They'd forgotten that expense.

"How's the investigation going?" he asked, between big bites of his egg salad sandwich. "I hope they put that young fellow away for good."

Embarrassed to tell him, Jillian explained that Jimmy had been released and that they were now looking for Gary.

"Ooooh, my heavens! That Mr. Jones? Who'da thought it, as nice as he always dressed. But, you know, I did think he might be just a little gone on Miss Astarte. One time, when I stopped in for lunch, he had his arm around her. He jumped like anything when I came in, and, Miss Astarte, she was all flustered. Ooooh, my goodness!"

He asked her, "Don't you call yourself The Angel Raphael? I was named after him myself--only my mom put Ralph on the birth certificate because Raphael was too,

you know, foreign. So we're both Raphael, you and I." He tittered, then stifled the laugh with his hand.

Later, during a lull in the calls, Ethan said, "You seem convinced your ex-husband didn't do it. What about his chart? Do you get any sense of what's going on from that?"

Jillian flushed. "This is dumb, but I burned it one time in a ritual." They both giggled. "Well, see, I read in a book that if I wanted to end the karmic connection between us, I should write this incantation and burn it with the chart, so I did. Obviously, it didn't work."

Ethan was still chuckling. "Don't quit your day job. You're clearly not cut out for the magic business. Speaking of rituals, I was thinking that we need to do one for this trailer, to cleanse the energy of the violence. I don't know about you, but I feel it all the time, and it's oppressive."

"It bothers me, too. And Robert's still having nightmares. I'll take part if you'll lead it. I'm not that familiar with rituals myself. Obviously! What would it be like? Do you use a book?"

"Like a grimoire--a book of spells? Heavens, no! I think the most effective rituals are the ones you make up yourself, to fit the situation. We could do a powerful one here tomorrow, at the Full Moon."

She checked her ephemeris. "The moon is full at 11:15 AM. I'll ride my bike to work and have Robert pick you up with the car. Do I need to bring or wear anything special?"

His eyes twinkled. "Like a pointed hat or a jeweled dagger? Hardly! It sounds like you're not that comfortable with the idea."

She admitted, "Weird is hard for me to handle. I hope it won't be too woowoo."

"You'll have to trust me on that." The phone rang, and Ethan took his turn.

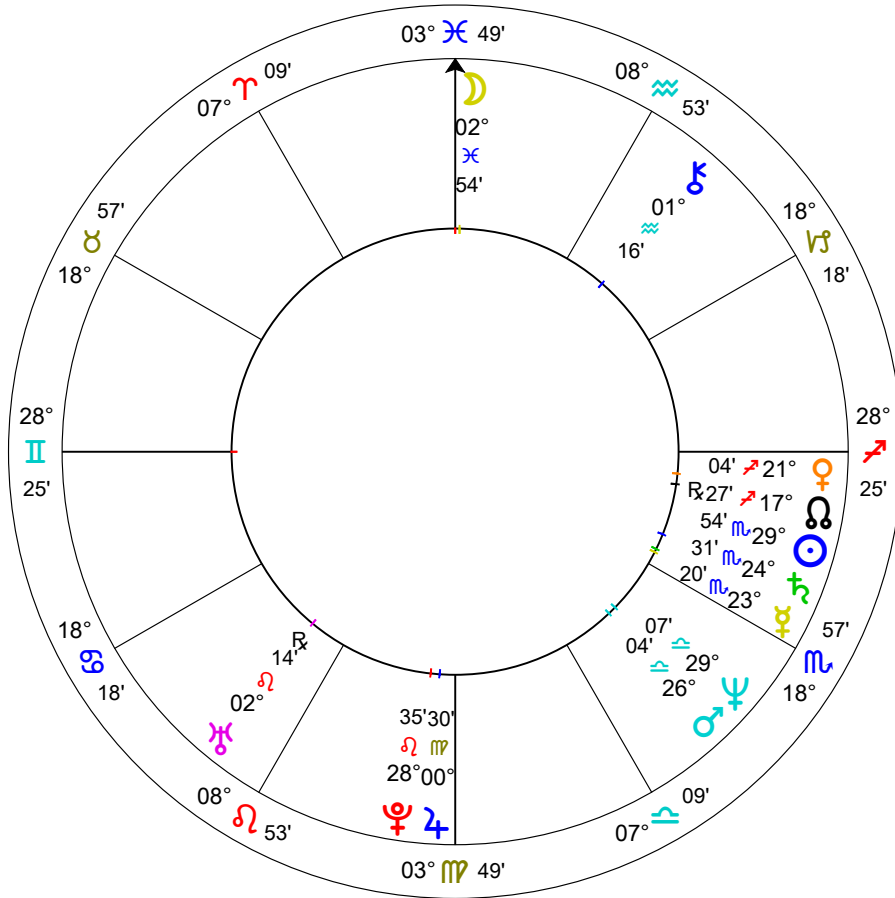
Jillian started wondering if she could reconstruct Gary's chart. She already had the possible dates--either November 22, 1954 or 1955. She thought, *I seem to remember he had Moon in Pisces...these men with Moon in Pisces are such fools for women. Like Elvis, with his constant groupies, but his sainted mother. And Michael Jackson with his weird THING for Elizabeth Taylor. Or, the Duke of Windsor, who gave up his throne to marry his Duchess.*

She got out her 50-year ephemeris and looked under November 22, 1954. *No, the Moon was in late Libra, early Scorpio. She flipped ahead to November 22, 1955. Yes, the Moon went from late Aquarius to early Pisces during that day. Gemini was rising from about 5:00 to 7:00 PM, and the Moon had moved into Pisces by then. That's probably it!*

She called up the menu of her astrology program on the computer and selected rectification, the feature for unknown birth times. She worked a while, trying to move the planets around into the houses as she dimly recalled them. She told herself, *it seemed like the Moon was up near the zenith but in the ninth house, with very late Gemini rising. Here we go--I think I've got it!*

She printed out the result. She thought, *I haven't seen this chart for five years or more, but how did it ever escape me that this is the horoscope of a con artist? Any one of these factors by itself wouldn't necessarily make him dishonest, but put them all together, and it's unmistakable. Back then, I just thought it was the chart of a charmer.*

GARY JONES
November 22 1955
6:45 PM EST
Cleveland, OH
81W41; 41N29



*It's impossible to see someone's chart clearly when you're in love. Maybe it's just as well I don't have Dave's birth information--I wouldn't be any more objective with that. What's really weird is that if Gary had been born just half an hour later, his Sun would have moved out of Scorpio into Sagittarius and he'd have Cancer on the Ascendant rather than Gemini. He could have been a much different person--okay, still a Romeo, but not a criminal. For all I know--as little as he ever told me about his family--he **could** have a twin brother born half an hour later. Just my luck to pick the evil twin!*

When she compared the charts, Gary's Scorpio Sun was sitting on Astarte's Scorpio Moon in her house of sex, birth, and death. Pluto was now traveling over that combination, so he certainly was a prime candidate for the baby's father. She sighed, admitting, *With all his connections with Astarte's chart--that Sun/Moon conjunction, especially--they were actually a better match than he and Jillian. If they'd been closer in age, and if the die hadn't already been cast in Gary's scam, they'd probably have been good for one another.*

In Gary's chart, Pluto was going through the sixth house, the house of work, having made a series of daunting aspects, but suggesting his financial treachery. She thought sadly, *I guess that pretty much settles it. If I don't see it in the chart, it's not real for me. It's like Robert says--I wouldn't believe the sky was blue, unless I could prove it by astrology. That combination might also show Gary was the murderer. That's NOT what it means, I'm sure of it, but it's a good thing Lyons doesn't read charts!*

Putting together a snack of raw veggies for herself and Ethan, Jillian told herself, *I ought to have some concrete proof, rather than only the charts. How would I get it? I'll bet you anything he took her to the castle for the big seduction scene, just like he took me. He never had much imagination. Gets into a pattern and sticks with it--all those planets in fixed signs. Maybe I could go over to the castle and sneak a look at the hotel register.*

But when would they have stayed there? If she was two months along when she died July 27, then they had to get together by the end of May. Wait a minute--it was June 12 when Gary took me to the castle for our anniversary! She was already pregnant while he was trying to get me upstairs, telling me he wasn't interested in her because she was just a kid!. What a conniving, lying bastard! A worm turned in Jillian's stomach

She drove to the Castle after her shift and spoke to the receptionist. "You know, I wonder if you could help me. My husband and I stayed here a couple months back, and I lost the receipt, so careless of me. Well, now Gary--that's my hubby--is trying to get reimbursement from his company for that trip, and they won't do it without a receipt. I was passing through, so I thought I'd drop by and ask. Could I impose on you for another?"

The receptionist was a bubbly, young local woman who was still excited about landing a summer job in such a prestigious place. "I'd be very happy to help you out. What dates did you stay?"

Jillian pretended utter vacuousness. "Now, was it the fourth week of May or the first week in June? Dear me, what did Gary tell me about that?" She sorted through her bag helplessly. "Oh, NOOOO, I've left my date book home, too! Gary always says I'd forget my head if it wasn't fastened on. Quite a sense of humor, he has. Do you mind if I just look in your guest book? I'm sure I'll find it."

Rolling her eyes at this space cadet, the receptionist passed the book to her, and Jillian turned to late May. There it was, May 25, in his chicken track handwriting: Mr. and Mrs. Gary Jones. She showed the receptionist the entry and left proudly clutching the receipt.

She stood on the castle steps, drinking in the view of the distant hills and water. *My very first piece of detective work, she thought. I had no idea it was so easy. Of course, the people in this town are so trusting, anyone could scam them. They don't even have library cards, for Pete's sake! You just sign for the books. What a contrast to New York, when there are armed guards in the library and you have to go through a detector on the way out to make sure you haven't stolen any books.*

She strolled through the castle's rose garden, marveling at the perfection of the huge Peace roses and breathing in their delicate fragrance. Exulting in her success, she thought, *wait 'till I show this to Lyons! Dummy, if you show it to him, he's going to be dead certain Gary was the killer. That's not what you hope to accomplish, no matter how furious you are--you want Lyons to keep looking for other suspects. No, put it away for later, if it turns out it can do him some good.*

HOTLINE TO HEAVEN

Chapter Seventeen

August 10

Since the Moon would be full at 11:15 that morning, Robert brought Ethan to the trailer at 10:30, so they'd have plenty of time to prepare. They agreed to take the phones off the hook and explain to Midge later, if she complained about the gap in calls. They rationalized that the ritual was for the good of the line, freeing their work from the disruptive energy of the violence.

Jillian lit a bundle of sagebrush wrapped with thread, which she'd bought at the metaphysical bookstore. "We should be smudging with sage regularly anyway, since we're dealing with clients' problems all day long. It'll clear out any negativity we soak up."

The sagebrush wand smoking heavily, she started at the trailer door and made an unbroken circuit along the walls to the outer door again. She traced the outline of each window and doorway as she went, then swung the wand through the center of each room. The ritual was to be held in the front room, where the body had been found, so she smudged especially heavily there. The smoke was strong and pungent, not unlike marijuana, but the place felt palpably lighter. She concluded by passing the wand through each of their auras to cleanse them.

Ethan showed them a book, *Ask Your Angels*, by Alma Daniel, Timothy Wylie, and Andrew Ramer. "I'm basing the ritual on this book and Sophy Burnham's *A Book of Angels*. They're full of information about the archangels we're named for."

He gave them copies of the pages in both books covering their personal angels. He explained that each archangel has guardianship of one of the directions and that the qualities associated with those directions are significant. Usually, a ritual proceeds around the compass points from east to south to west to north. In this ritual, they'd be starting with the west, since the goal was to dismiss spirits rather than summon them. Jillian was to go first, since Raphael is the Protector of the West--the angel of death but also of healing and transformation. For that reason, the west was a key to freeing Astarte's spirit, so Jillian would be carrying the weight in this ritual.

Robert, as Michael, Protector of the North, was to go next. In this ritual, Michael represented peace, harmony, and global cooperation. Ethan was Uriel, the Protector of the East, the guardian of the mental realm, and the interpreter of prophecy. Jillian would

also invoke Gabriel, the angel whose name Astarte used on the line and the Protector of the South, which has to do with love, the heart, and hope--Astarte's own strengths.

Jillian and Robert read the pages, murmuring in surprise at how prescient they'd been in choosing their names all those months ago. At Ethan's instruction, each composed a prayer to invoke their angel, mentioning the angel's special jurisdiction



and qualities.

He asked them to begin by visualizing a circle of white light, for protection, surrounding the trailer. Checking carefully with a compass, he made a small altar at each of the four directions, using bowls of holy water and the scarves Astarte's parents had given Jillian. He placed a stick of incense and a candle at each compass point. He said a silent prayer as he lit each one, to call in the energy of the direction.

Jillian thought, *this would please Astarte. She always burned candles.*

To invoke the angels, Ethan taught them a chant from *Ask Your Angels*¹:

Eee Nu Rah

Eee Nu Rah

Eee Nu Rah

Zay

He added, "It seems like there's another chant--it wasn't in the book, but I channeled one to summon specific angels:

Gah Raphael Nah

Gah Mik-ay-el Nah

Gah Uriel Nah

Gah Gabriel Nah

Zay

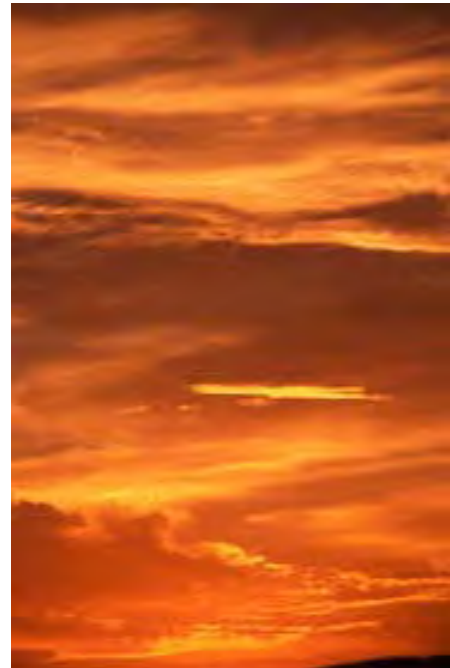
They each stood behind the altar of their namesake as they chanted the lines together for several minutes.

Jillian had always felt a powerful affinity with the west and the sunset. She found it natural to be covering the west in this ceremony. She prayed,

"Raphael, you who are the Angel of Death, please release the spirit of our departed sister, Astarte, who is also known as Pamela Cabot, from the earthly plane.

As you are the Divine Healer, please heal Astarte's astral body and soul of all bodily and emotional afflictions and give her peace.

As you are the Chief of the Guardian Angels, watch over all of us, but especially over Astarte's soul so that she may be free of all unwholesome influences. Please also help the soul of her unborn child to release any shock connected with the sudden severance of their connection



¹ These chants, including the unpublished one, were channeled by Andrew Ramer, co-author with Alma Daniel and Tim Wylie of, *Ask Your Angels*. They are used with his permission.

and also to find a new vehicle for incarnation if so desired.

I also ask your special indulgence in sending a guardian angel to watch over Gary Jones, though not to interfere with his appropriate karma.

Please uplift and heal all of us who are associated with the Hotline to Heaven, and help us be a source of healing and transformation for all those who call us."

Jillian hadn't told Ethan or Robert about young Jennie, since there was no way to know for sure if she was alive or dead, so she said a silent prayer for her as well.

At the north corner, Robert self-consciously prayed,

"Michael, please be with us in seeking freedom for Astarte. As you are the Guardian of Dreams, let Astarte sleep in peace, and let my dreams and all our dreams be free of disturbance.

As you are the Guardian of the Night, I ask that you keep this place safe for me and Ethan to work at night.

As you are the Commander in Chief of the Celestial Army, defend us all and keep us safe from harm."

At the east point, Ethan prayed,

"Uriel, please lend your strength in uplifting our sister, Astarte. As you are the keeper of the rising sun and the Light of God, let a new radiance infuse her spirit, releasing any darkness and bringing her joy.

As you are the Angel of New Beginnings, let this be a new beginning for her, in which she releases the violence of her death and any issues remaining from this lifetime.

As you are the Angel of Retribution, let the one who did this deed fulfill its karma.

As you are the Angel of Work, please cleanse our workplace of any residue of this death so we can give the best possible service to those who need us. Be with us now and always, Uriel."

As Ethan requested, Jillian turned to the south and prayed to the Angel Gabriel.

"You, who are the name angel of Astarte, please be with her always. Celebrate and cherish the love she so freely offered the world, and return that love a thousand fold, so she need never feel alone, but is always surrounded by a host of loving souls. Please bring solace and healing to her parents, Joan and Paul Cabot, that they may experience her continued love. Let them know that there is no loss or

separation in the world of spirit, and that they will be reunited



with her when their time on earth is done."

The sense of angelic presence was strong when they finished praying. The room seemed suffused with a soft white light. There was an aura of joy and love. Jillian marveled, *the Catholic Church was right! There really **are** angels who will answer when you can call! I thought this angel craze was just another fad that would pass, but it's real!*

Ethan had offered to do a trance session to contact Astarte and to be sure she was free. He said that with the presence of the angels, he didn't need to go so deep, so he could report on what was happening as he went along. As he went under, rocking from front to back in his seat, he suddenly grimaced and moaned. "The pain! The pain! My legs hurt so bad, I can't bear it. Why doesn't it stop?"

Jillian told him, "That's Astarte. Her Mom said she was in constant pain. Ask her to move some distance away, so you won't have to feel it."

Ethan moaned again, breathed more deeply for a while, then the grimace left his face, and he relaxed. "I do see her, the same blonde woman who was there the last time. She's the one in the tape of the commercial, so it has to be Astarte."

"Does she look okay?" Robert asked. "When I think of how I saw her last, I feel so bad. I dream about it all the time."

Ethan said, "Oh, she's beautiful and quite radiant. For some reason, she's wearing a belly dancer's costume. She seems very joyful, and she's doing a dance. Now, she's lifting up her skirt and showing me her legs--they're perfect and they're very shapely. She's kicking them high, like a Rockette. I think she's trying to let us know that they've healed since her passing, and they don't hurt anymore."

Robert was puzzled. "But you felt the pain in her legs when you started."

"That often happens in mediumistic contacts. The person who passed on is no longer suffering, but when the medium taps in, it's through the vehicle of the physical body they had in life. It's surprising she would have cast it off so quickly. The repair of the astral body usually takes time, but she seems to have gotten her healing right away."

"Maybe it was because of the cremation," Jillian guessed. "She left strict instructions about that, and apparently she was right. The belly dancer outfit is probably from that past life where she served the goddess Astarte. Ethan, can she tell us

anything about who killed her?"

"As I said last time, I don't usually get verbal messages, only pictures, and then they're often symbolic. Let me try." He closed his eyes again, rocking and breathing deeply for a while. "It's just like before. She's showing me a letter. But I do feel love and forgiveness radiating from her, even toward her killer. She must have been very evolved, not to hate the person and even to wish him well."

"That letter again," Jillian mused. "She's referring to the anonymous letters she got from the Angel of Death. It's those born-again's that vandalized the trailer, probably the ones that demonstrate at the metaphysical bookstore every Saturday. I've believed all along that they were the ones that killed her. Lyons won't check them out, since he's so convinced that Gary's the one. He doesn't want it to be anybody local. I've been thinking about infiltrating the group to find out for myself."

Ethan told her, "I don't think she'd want you to do that. She doesn't seem to care about punishing the instrument of her death. I just get the impression of a great joy at being free. Now, this is odd. She's carrying something that looks like a cake, and it has lighted sparklers on it--lots of them. Oh, it's a birthday cake, and she's offering pieces to us. Why would she be doing that?"

Jillian gasped. "It's her birthday today! August 10th is her birthday! She would have been 25, if she'd lived. It's amazing that the Full Moon is today, so we wound up doing this ritual, like a completion of her years on earth. Poor soul." A wave of sadness washed over her.

Ethan slipped back into a deeper state, almost as though he were being pulled. "Now Astarte's gone, and I'm seeing a man. He's middle aged, and he's got red hair. He's waving and blowing a kiss. It's for you, Jillian, and I get the most overwhelming feeling of love and pride from him. Who would that be?"

"For me? I wouldn't know. Maybe it's my guardian angel."

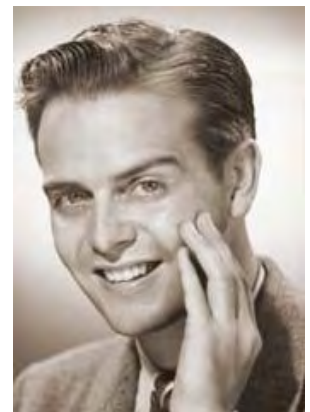
"He's not dressed like an angel--no robes. Actually, he looks a lot like you, now that I see him more clearly. He's moved in front of Robert, and he's pointing down at the altar at his feet. I get the sense that he's trying to give us his name."

Robert said, "I'm at the altar for the angel Michael. Could that be his name?"

Jillian was stunned. "My father? Michael was my father's name. Could it be him? I never told you, Ethan, but he died when I was ten. Could you really be in touch with someone who's been dead that long?" Her heart welled up with joy and sorrow at the same time.

His eyes closed, Ethan looked radiant. "He's never left you, Jillian. I wish just for a moment you could have this gift and feel the love that's coming from him." When he opened his eyes, an infinite pain crossed his face. "You've suffered a terrible loss, I can tell, and yet it must have been wonderful to have a father who loved you that much."

She was swamped with emotions. Pity for Ethan. A wrenching sense of loss over her father's death. A dizzying joy at knowing he still watched over her. A deep awe at the power that this ceremony had released. *So much to feel*, she thought, *and so much to digest. There IS magic, and there ARE angels. I was appalled when they made us use the angels' names on the line, but now it feels like some kind of*



holy plan was at work. God, let my life be touched by this moment, and let it be changed.

After saying a prayer commending Astarte's spirit to the angel Gabriel and thanking their own angels for taking part, they stood in silent prayer a while, then ended with the same chant:

Eee Nu Rah
Eee Nu Rah
Eee Nu Rah
Zay

Ethan had channeled another chant for dealing with specific angels, this time to thank and dismiss them:

Nah Raphael Su
Nah Mik-ay-el Su
Nah Uriel Su
Nah Gabriel Su
Zay

They put away the candles and other tools they'd used. Sitting in subdued quiet afterwards, they did instant replays on the ritual and how they perceived it.

In her recap of the ritual, Jillian said, "I've felt so guilty since Astarte died, thinking that I could have saved her if I spoke up about what was going on. Now I feel at peace, as though a great weight were lifted."

She thought, *we may not know who Ethan was, but I do have a sense of who he will be in ten years or so. He'll be the brightest star on the metaphysical circuit--the Lynne Andrews or Marianne Williamson of the year 2005. He'll be surrounded by groupies who make a guru of him and base their lives on his teachings. I only hope he can keep that beautiful humility intact, so all that adulation won't warp him like it has so many guru wannabes.*

She shook her head in wonder. "I forget sometimes, Ethan, that you're only 22 or thereabouts. I'm old enough to be your mother, if I'd had you at 18, but you teach me every day. Where on earth did you learn all of this?"

With his usual touching humility, he replied, "Most of it, I just seem to know somehow. Oh, I read a lot, but what I read usually just confirms what I knew anyway."

Robert rolled his eyes. "No joke, you read a lot--you went through our bookshelves like a cookie monster goes through cookies! And you've certainly plundered that study of Midge's!"

"It's a remarkable collection," Ethan told them. "It's like the reincarnation of the library that was burned at Alexandria. She has accounts with all the New Age publishers, and they automatically forward her every book they publish. I don't think she reads them, though--she just has this need to own them all."

"That's the mark of a Taurus with entirely too much money!" Not for the first time, Jillian wished she were on better terms with Midge. "I'd love to have access to that collection. When I first started studying astrology, there were maybe ten books on the subject, all old ones. Now there are dozens published every month, and it's easy to get

behind. I know how doctors feel who can't keep up with the developments in their field."

They were startled by a knock at 12:15. They'd forgotten that Ralph would be coming for his lunch. When Robert unlocked the door, Ralph came in and sniffed.

"What's that stench?"

Jillian thought, *Oh, lord, sage smells a lot like pot! He'll blab all over town that we're smoking dope.* "It's just incense, Ralph. It gets pretty close in here sometimes, now that it's summer." She opened the trailer door and fanned it to bring in some fresh air. *If I told him what we were really doing, his stories would be even wilder!*

He sniffed again, raised an eyebrow, and shook his head, not buying their excuse for a minute. Taking a few steps into the room, he looked around in puzzlement, then finally in fear and confusion. He swayed slightly, his eyes losing their focus. With a look of surprise, he fell to the floor in a faint.

They rushed to help him, Robert bringing him water, and Ethan propping him up. Jillian quickly called 911. He stirred and moaned something indistinguishable--something about legs.

A few minutes later, he was sitting up and insisting she cancel the ambulance. "It's nothing. The incense, that's all. I'm very allergic, what with my sinus trouble."

He looked uncomfortable and a little scared as he told them, "I know this is going to sound weird--and I'm not crazy. I've had my ups and downs, especially since Mom passed on, but I'm really not crazy. Just for a second there, I could swear I saw Miss Astarte waving at me, pretty as ever. It gave me such a turn." He shivered and wiped cold sweat from his brow.

He stood up unsteadily and brushed off his uniform. "It was probably just the heat. It's usually pretty cool here in the summer, but it's hot out there today. I'm all right now."

Jillian insisted, "Ralph, I wouldn't want you to drive after fainting like that. Let me call the post office and have them send someone to finish your route. One of us can take you home."

"No, no, I wouldn't want that on my record," he said anxiously. "They'd make me go for tests, and it was nothing, really. No, honestly, I'll go on. I'll skip lunch so I can go home early." He handed them the mail and left, despite their renewed protests.

They looked at each other in shock. Ethan said, "He saw Astarte! Can you believe it? I wouldn't have figured him for a sensitive. And he was saying something about legs--he must have felt her pain, too."

Robert agreed. "He probably has the gift and doesn't realize it."

Ethan said, "People in this country are so poorly educated about life after death. The nonwestern world knows all about the afterlife and how to help people who don't die well. This country is the only one that would put you away for seeing spirits. No wonder he didn't want his job hearing about this."

He shivered a bit. "You know, I've had the strangest, goose-bumpiest feelings about Ralph all along--something hidden, some weird energy around him--and it must have been because of this gift of his that's suppressed. That can make your energy pretty strange."

Jillian felt an unaccustomed pity. "Poor guy. He's all alone in the world and hasn't a soul to talk to about these things. If he opened his mouth about it at work, they probably would send him for a psychiatric evaluation! Do you think we should talk to

him about his experience?"

Ethan considered, then shook his head. "No, it was clear that he was already pushing it away--too scary for him, or it wouldn't have caused him to faint. His abilities are probably one reason he's so involved in his church--a defense against knowing about these other levels of being. He's probably already convinced himself it never happened."

"It's sad, all the same," she said, resolving to be kinder to him.

That night, Jillian called Joan Cabot to tell her about the ritual and Ethan's perceptions of Astarte and about the healing of her legs. "She really seems happy. I could feel it, too, and I don't consider myself gifted that way."

Joan said, "Thank you so much for calling--and for doing the ceremony on her behalf. We were pretty down tonight, it being her birthday and all. Before she was killed, we had planned to hold a big celebration for her here in L.A. today, since it was her twenty-fifth and the trust fund was maturing."

Jillian couldn't help but feel a surge of envy about the trust fund, even knowing how Astarte had suffered. She told her, "It's so strange. She never once said anything about the fund, in the time I knew her."

"It was no big deal to her. We wanted her to buy a home with it or something, maybe there in Port Townsend, but she wasn't that interested in material things. We believe she'd have donated most of it to Guru Mab's ashram, so that's what we've decided to do with the money on her behalf. We need to work with George on that, since he's the administrator, but he's not returning our calls. Maybe he's on a trip."

She remembered that the Cabots didn't know about Astarte's pregnancy, but she couldn't bring herself to tell them. Not on this birthday--they'd had enough loss to contend with. Thinking about the connection Ethan had made with her father, she signed off by telling Joan, "It's hard to lose someone you love, even when you believe they're all right on the other side. I'll be thinking of you."

Jillian hung up and began preparing for bed. As usual, this involved choosing and setting out her clothes for the next day, so that she didn't have to get up quite so early. She shook her head in the mirror at how unruly her hair was becoming. She'd had four haircuts since she arrived, by four different beauticians, and each was worse than the last. She'd taken to stopping well-coifed strangers on the street to ask them wistfully where they got their hair cut. Half the time, a startled tourist would reply, *Back home in Sydney, Mate, or Bitte, Entschuldigung? Never mind the killer, she thought, if I could just track down a decent hair stylist I'd consider myself a crackerjack detective. Still, there's that new one from L.A. who trained at Vidal Sassoon that I heard about recently. I'll try her next.*

The call to the Cabots, with the news that Mason wasn't returning their messages, made Jillian resolve to talk to Lyons and tell him her suspicions. She thought, *If Mason isn't answering their calls, maybe he **did** take the money. He did say he'd started going to church to stay sober. Some of these reformed sinners are true fanatics, with all sorts of warped ideas about sex and wealth. Yuck! Mason's a regular Jimmie Bakker--he might just be the Angel of Death.*

From the day of the ritual onward, she had to admit the energy in the trailer felt lighter. She was free of her guilt about not protecting Astarte, and Robert was sleeping better, with no more nightmares. Jillian wanted to connect with the angels in her work,

so she did the chants before she began each day, especially for Raphael and Michael. She felt closer to the angels and to her father.

HOTLINE TO HEAVEN
Chapter Eighteen

August 11

Around 11:30, Ralph came with the mail, including a surprise for her. "As far as I can figure, this postcard is for you. It's the worst handwriting I ever saw in my life. The only way it even got here is that the person included the zip +4, which, by rights, everybody should be using routinely now. And, since it was used, they knew it was my route. I puzzled and puzzled and finally guessed it was addressed to you."

You snoop! You probably puzzled over the whole message, she thought as she took the card and looked at it. Her whole being leapt. It was from Gary!

For politeness' sake, she asked, "Are you okay, Ralph? No more fainting spells?"

"No, no, I told you it was nothing." He unwrapped another of his wet, drippy egg salad sandwiches. He gestured at the card. "Sure is strange that someone would go to the trouble of sending a postcard of a hotel. Seems like there's a lot better sights than that in New York City."

Her heart pounded when she looked at the front of the card. It was the airport hotel where they'd spent their final night of mad passion, several years back. Quite a message there. *She thought, he passed through JFK, probably on his way out of the country, since many of the international flights leave from there. And he stopped overnight in that hotel. The man does have his sentimental side.* She went to her desk and started the laborious task of deciphering the card. It read:

Babe,

I'm sorry to let you down.
I'll never be the man you need me
to be, but I do love you. Hope you
liked the gift I left you. I know
that Astarte's folks will take
care of her, but I didn't want you
to suffer because of me. If I never
see you again, you'll still always
be my favorite Irish lassie.

Gar

Jillian Malone
Hotline to Heaven
325 Tenth Street
Port Townsend, WA
98368-1821

Her eyes misted at the finality of this goodbye. *He does care, after all, and he's sorry for dragging me into this. The fact that he mentions Astarte and her folks shows that he doesn't even know she's dead. I KNEW he didn't kill her!*

Oh, wow! That's what Astarte keeps trying to say when Ethan contacts her. She

keeps holding up a letter, and she must mean this one! She wants us to know Gary didn't do it! But why did it take so long to get here? Mail from New York can take as much as a week, but this is almost two weeks old. Maybe it took a while to figure out where it was going, with that wretched handwriting. Ethan did say it was a letter gone astray.

What does Gary mean about leaving me a gift? I haven't gotten anything in the mail, and he was never in our apartment. Maybe he left something here at the trailer. Hmm. Gary always had secret hidey holes when we were married. Some of them he showed me, like for our savings account book and jewelry. Others he kept to himself, but I could usually find them. It was that hiding place where I found love letters from the girl he was seeing that finally broke us up. I'll bet he had some hiding places here, too.

Between calls, she searched the trailer inch by inch. She pulled out desks to see if he'd taped anything behind or underneath them. She looked through the hard drive on her computer, to see if he'd left any messages. She got on his desk and lifted the ceiling panel to hunt for a cache. She even took the lid off the toilet tank and grubbed around in the rusty water to see if he'd wrapped a package in plastic and hidden it there. She thought, *I can't imagine what he left me, but I do feel a weight lifted, knowing that he cares what happens to me.*

Ethan arrived for his shift, their times overlapping for two hours a day. Again she was struck by his humility and ethereal beauty. *I have to admit, she thought, I already adore him, and Robert is totally smitten. I have such mixed feelings. I'd love to see Robert meet someone and be happy, but I'm not sure I want this angel child to be gay. I don't know what that says about my attitudes, because I love Robert like a brother and can't imagine any other life for him. I don't think it's secret homophobia, I think it has to do with that heart-stopping innocence. I can't contemplate Ethan having sex with a woman either.*

Oh, well, I promised Robert I'd be point man for him and try to find out if Ethan is gay. Robert was afraid it would seem like he was coming on to him if he asked the question himself. I'm clumsy at things like this, but here goes. "So, Ethan, what does your girlfriend think about you moving up here?"

A flash of amusement in his eyes, he evaded the question. "I'm not ready for a relationship. At this stage of my life, I need to devote myself to developing my work. What are these talents for if not to be used to help others?"

She remembered then that Midge had said he was gifted at psychometry. She handed him the postcard. "Do you think you could pick up any impressions about Gary from this?"

He closed his eyes and held the postcard up to his third eye for a while, then sat back, holding it in his lap. After a few moments he opened his eyes and shook his head.

"There's such a jumble of impressions. I do get the sense of dishonesty and sneakiness, of something hidden and dark, but there are so many overlays. That's the problem with a postcard. In the course of getting to you, so many people have handled it other than the writer. I could be picking up those sensations from any of the mailmen who carried it--even from Ralph."

"Could you try some trance work to see if you get anything about where he is or what's going on? I'm pretty worried about him." About Midge's threats, she meant, but didn't say. She wasn't sure Ethan had Midge's number and didn't want to taint his attitude about working there.

Ethan went into his rocking and deep breathing routine, but soon broke it off. "There's a block. He doesn't want me to tap into him. I see a big, hulking guy with his arms crossed, standing in front of Gary to protect him, like a body guard. It's not a real bodyguard; it's all on the astral plane. I get the impression this is someone in his family who's in spirit but still watching out for him--someone who died violently, maybe in a gunfight."

"Gary always was secretive. But it's frustrating that you can't find out what's happening to him. What about the cards?"

"It wouldn't be ethical, knowing he doesn't want me to."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do anything wrong. It's just that I'm concerned about his safety."

"He's protected, that's for sure. More than that, I couldn't say."

She wondered again if this young man might be Etan Patz. *Should I say anything to him, she debated. Suppose that when the commercial is aired, it brings out the truth? Maybe I should prepare him. She tried to approach the subject gently.* "Ethan, don't you ever wonder where you came from?"

"From the Pleiades, I think."

"The Pleiades? You mean, the star system?"

"I know it sounds weird. But how else can I explain appearing out of nowhere with no memories? My feeling is that I was abducted by aliens and spent a year or more on one of their planets. Or else--and I hope this doesn't freak you out, but I've felt instinctively that I could trust you--maybe I am an alien myself, sent here to uplift the earthlings' consciousness. That would account for my gifts and the teachings in books I know without knowing how. When I read Barbara Marciniak's *Bringers of the Dawn*, I felt this deep connection with the Pleiades."

Was it all that weird, she wondered. Any weirder than what she believed? But maybe they both were correct. Maybe Etan Patz had been abducted by a UFO, and that's why he disappeared without a trace. Much better to believe that than the sickening rumors that floated to the surface every now and then about him being used for kiddie porn. But how could he have been carried off by a flying saucer on a crowded New York City street and nobody noticed? Very clever, these aliens!

She only said, "We'll never know, will we? But you certainly are gifted."



HOTLINE TO HEAVEN
Chapter Nineteen

August 12

When Jillian arrived for work, a leering devil mask hung on the door knob. She shuddered at the faintly obscene texture of the red rubber. It's just a plaything, she told herself, but it feels so menacing. A crudely printed flyer was pasted on the door, denouncing astrology and fortune telling as the work of Satan. *It's those born-again*, she realized, *and it's certain now that they know where we are.*

I only hope they aren't about to start picketing us, like they do the Pleiadean Portal. It would be great publicity for their cause to stage a blockade here. I'd hate to have to pass through them every day on our way to work, not to mention the negative energy they'd send us. I was so sheltered in New York--oh, it was dangerous, of course, but it was so large that we weirdoes were anonymous. Here anything we do stands out starkly.

Repelled by the unwelcome intrusion yet somehow ashamed as well, she took spray cleaner and scraped the flyer off the door as best she could. She didn't want Robert or Ethan distressed by it--or Midge getting riled. For the same reason, she decided to get rid of the devil mask. She hid it in a trash bin down the street, hoping no one would connect it with the hotline.

Mid-morning, a woman called about her fiancé. "I got hold of his birth certificate without his knowing, so I do have the time he was born. I want to know if we're really compatible before I marry him."

"He wouldn't give you his birth time?"

"I wouldn't dare to ask. He's a Christian, and he thinks astrology is the work of the devil."

It was one of the ethical dilemmas that plague professional astrologers. Like many pros, Jillian had strong feelings about casting someone's chart without their permission. It seemed like an invasion of privacy. "I'm sorry, but I can't read his chart."

"Why not? I'm paying good money for this, and I need the information. You're supposed to be here to help me."

Working for herself, Jillian would have put the woman in her place in a minute, but here she had to think about the reputation of the line.

She tried to reason with her. "How would he feel if he found out? It would destroy his trust in you. You may want to examine whether this is a relationship that's honest enough to work in the long run."

"Don't give me that psychological garbage. Your service stinks, and I want a refund. Let me speak to your supervisor."

Jillian wasn't sure what Midge would think about her position on this issue and whether she'd back her up. She certainly wouldn't approve of anything that turned customers away. Hopefully, the woman would cool down and forget her threat. She couldn't afford any more grief with Midge. "I'm sorry you feel that way," she told the woman. "She's not here today."

"I'll call another line. There are plenty besides this, and one of them will tell me what I need to know." She slammed down the phone.

As she nuked some soup for lunch, Jillian thought, *Oh, well, it's not the first time a caller has hung up on me when I wouldn't give them the answer they wanted, and it won't be the last. Our ad is pretty honest--Gary at least listened to me about that--but so many hotline ads promise people the Moon if they'll only call. It does the whole field a disservice.*

Wait a minute! It's just too much of a coincidence that I find that flyer on the door this morning and now I get this call. Maybe the call was a setup--maybe it was one of them trying to get something they could use as propaganda against us. If so, I must have frustrated them no end.

Today is Saturday, the day they demonstrate at the bookstore. I keep saying I'm going to infiltrate, but I keep hanging back, not wanting to be around their sick minds. Now I have to do it. Not only could it help clear Gary and maybe find the real killer, but I need to find out if they're planning a propaganda campaign against us.

If they start a campaign in earnest, I'm sure Midge will fold the line. She's iffy about it anyway--the investment may or may not pay off. But she won't want to be associated with anything that will make her look bad in the community.

When Jillian's shift was over, she drove downtown, circling the blocks on Water Street seemingly forever before she found a parking space. It was the height of the tourist season, and she was beginning to share the locals' impatience with the weekend invasions.

She spotted a grim, quiet crowd carrying picket signs in an orderly procession back and forth in front of the store. The signs read, "Stop Witchcraft Now," "Drive Satan From Our Town," and "Save Our Kids from Black Magic." A gawky man in a powder blue suit read aloud from the Bible. Another man in shirt sleeves was passing out the same crude flyer that had been pasted to the trailer door, citing scriptures against astrology.

See, it was them, she concluded. I wonder if one of them killed Astarte--and maybe Jennie as well. It would be great if you could tell just by looking at someone whether they were a killer or not.

She stopped one of them, a thin, coarse middle-aged woman in a homemade white cotton dress. Crossing her fingers behind her back, Jillian lied. "I want to thank you on behalf of my whole family for what you are doing for this town. I don't know why there aren't a hundred people out here demonstrating."

The woman nodded, "I pray night and day for more to join us. We need enough marchers for this community to take notice and pass a law against these spawn of Satan."

Jillian said, "I'd really like to get involved. Could I come to a meeting?"

"Praises be! We'd welcome you--bring your family along, too. The more the better. We meet at the Divine Guidance Church of Our Holy Lord every Friday night to pray and plan our next week's work on the Lord's behalf. Come at 7:00. I'm Martha, and I'll be looking for you." Strengthened by this recruiting coup, Martha hoisted her sign and marched with renewed determination.



Veronica, the manager of the bookstore, came to the door then, so Jillian quickly turned away. If Veronica waved or spoke to her, it would blow her cover. She hiked back to her car, looking longingly in the windows of the pricey clothing boutiques along the way.

She shook herself. *I don't think any of them has ever cracked a smile in their lives. What joyless existence would drive someone to be so militant about Christianity? I wonder what Ralph thinks of these people--his church is Baptist, but it's nowhere near as extreme as this one.*

HOTLINE TO HEAVEN
Chapter Twenty

August 14

Lyons called both Midge and Jillian down to the station late Monday afternoon for a confrontation. He met them in the sunlit reception area, then marched them back along the paneled halls to the windowless interrogation room. The stale air made Jillian feel trapped, and she noticed that the neon lights turned Midge's skin a ghastly white.

"Listen up," he told them. "It's about time I got some straight answers from the two of you about Gary Jones. Now that we have his birth date and picture, we got a report from NCIC, so we know he's been in trouble before."

Consternation flashed over Midge's face. "I'm not saying a word without my lawyer."

He handed her the phone. "Get him over here, then, because I think you're gonna need him." Midge pushed the phone away disdainfully and sat back with her arms crossed.

Jillian's stomach clenched. "Officer Lyons, I don't know a thing about Gary being in trouble. We were out of touch for the past three years, until he called me in February. Please, tell me what you found out."

"It seems our fellow Jones has a habit of scamming people. He spent two and a half years in the federal pen at Chino, California. It's minimum security, not for hard cases."

She shook her head sadly. "This is the first I've heard of it, but I have to say it's not entirely a surprise. What did he do?"

"He got in with some con artists who were selling fake timeshares in a luxury condo on the beach in Aruba. They only leased it, but they set up offices in Miami, Dallas, and L.A., and they sold each share about twenty times. Made it real reasonable, see, and since they'd leased the condo, the marks could go down for a week and inspect what they thought they were buying. If they tried to go down and stay after they bought it, they were told their unit wasn't ready yet."

"The feds said Jones was a fall guy in the scam, one of their salesmen. Wasn't smart enough to have dreamed it up himself, but he was the one they caught. Got a reduced sentence for testifying against his partners in crime--a real stand-up guy."

He turned to Midge, "He was released in October, shortly before he showed up here, and he went right to work for you. So, we figure you had to know him before--maybe while he was in the pen, maybe before. I want a straight answer. How'd you meet him?"

She shook her head stubbornly, arms still crossed.

"You'd be better off telling me, unless you want us digging into your affairs. I think we've got probable cause for a search warrant already. Now that we've got this information, we'll be in touch with Chino, find out who visited him while he was in jail, who his pals were, and who visited them. If your name is on record for any of those visits, we'll come after you."

Midge thought for a long moment, probably wondering if Lyons was serious

about the search warrant. She rubbed her temple with her long, manicured nails, as though it throbbed.

She shrugged. "I guess you'll find out anyway. I **did** meet Gary in Chino, but it seemed like he'd gotten a bum deal. He claimed he didn't know any fraud was going on, that he was selling those shares in good faith. Now it looks like he was just as guilty as the rest, but at the time, I felt like giving him a second chance."

"It scans," he said. "I can accept that. But, HOW did you meet him? What were YOU doing there?"

Midge thought some more, chewing on her lower lip. "All right, you win. I have an old boyfriend who was in Chino at the time. Rocco and I dated years back, after my second husband, Bill, died and before I met Barney. We knew we couldn't make a go of marriage, but we were fond of each other and we stayed in touch. I was on a trip to California, so I visited him."

"What was he doing there?"

She took out a cigarette and went to light it. He shook his head emphatically and pointed to a No Smoking sign. She glared at him and said, "I don't see that it's any of your business, but since you'd get the information anyhow, Rocco's with the mob. He was in on income tax evasion, about all they could pin on him. He liked Gary, took him under his wing, and introduced us. When Gary's time was up, his parole depended on having a job, so Rocco asked me to hire him. BIG mistake!" *Rocco must be the Mafia guy she keeps threatening to send after Gary*, Jillian guessed.

Lyons told Jillian, "I'm having a hard time believing you didn't know any of this. I'm not convinced you weren't in on this hotline scheme from the beginning."

Midge cast a speculative eye at her. *Don't let her send Rocco after me too*, Jillian thought. *What is it with me and the mob--Anthony in Brooklyn, Rocco here? But, how much of a cretin does Gary have to be to make friends with a mobster, who gets his moll to give Gary a job so he can get out of jail, and then Gary scams her out of \$200K and takes a hike? He's not just stupid, he's suicidal!*

She told them, "I really didn't know what he was up to. Gary kept so much of his life secret, even while we were married. I never knew him to do anything criminal before--questionable but not criminal."

Lyons shrugged. "Well, your boy has graduated to the big time now."

Her shift was over, so Jillian went home after their meeting. She sat holding Beastie in a rocking chair she'd picked up at a garage sale. "Old fellow, your papa is in a fine fix. One day, it gets better--I find out he didn't kill Astarte. The next day, it gets worse. I find out he was in prison after he left us. It's a good thing I got custody of you when we separated, because I don't know where your kibbles and bits would have come from."

Beastie yawned. Old history, he seemed to be saying. Forget him. I have. Never liked him that much anyway. He began a leisurely bath.

She rocked and looked out the window at the Cascades, listening to classical music. She thought, *I know I shouldn't be surprised Gary was in prison, but it's still a blow. I'm a nice girl. A nice Catholic girl with a degree in psych from a nice private girls' school. I've never so much as cheated on my income tax. So how did I get mixed up with a criminal? Of all the ex-husbands in the world, why does Gary have to be mine?*

Is Midge really serious about taking out a contract on him? His chart really looks

bad. With that Pluto going over his Sun in the house of work, I'm sure he took the money. The Sun is the ego, so he probably saw it as a chance to become a big shot. Dummy, \$200K isn't enough to make you a big shot for more than six months these days! Maybe he saw it as seed money for a bigger score--a drug buy perhaps. Gary, a pusher? But with that Pluto transit over his Sun, plus Uranus and Neptune making aspects in his house of death, he could definitely get himself killed.

She prayed then, earnestly. *God, I know you're not used to hearing from me this often, and I don't mean to be a pest. We've spoken before about this matter of Gary and the mob. Things are looking pretty bad for him now. Do you maybe have a supervisor I could speak to?*

Almost against her will, she set off on her bike for Gary's that night. *Maybe I should just let sleeping dogs lie. I might regret I ever found that present of his.* She was dressed in jeans, sneakers, and a dark tee-shirt in case she got dirty looking through the nooks and crannies of his place. She parked the bike a block away and quietly broke into the cabin, using her bank card to slip the flimsy lock. A sign on the door said that entrance was prohibited by the police, but she swallowed and went in.

She searched every inch. The cops had looked, too, but she knew a few of his tricks that they didn't. She lifted the mattress to look underneath, under the springs as well. She got on a chair and pushed up a ceiling panel. The place was still filthy, because the police hadn't released it yet for the landlady to clean. She wished she'd brought rubber gloves, and not for the sake of fingerprints.

Hearing the sudden whir of a siren, she froze. The landlady was outside saying, "I called right away, Officer, when I saw lights in there. I know you're still looking into his disappearance." The cop told her to get back in the house.

She quickly snapped off the lamp and hid in the closet. She heard the cabin door open and male footsteps walking around the room, then drawing closer. She scrunched her eyes closed, as though if she couldn't see the cop, he wouldn't see her. A breeze fanned her face as the closet door swung open. When she heard a sharply in-drawn breath and a curse, she opened her eyes reluctantly.

It was Dave.

They stared at each other in astonishment, a melange of emotions crossing their faces...shock and rage in Dave's, fear and shame in hers. *Oh, Scotty, Scotty, she pled, if you're ever going to beam me up, do it now!*



Finally, it struck her as just too ludicrous, too totally catastrophic, and she began to laugh. She slid around him and out of the closet, and she chuckled and guffawed and roared until she had to sit down on the bed for support.

He glared at her, peeved at this unrepentant stance, but the corners of his mouth began to twitch and jerk too. Finally he threw back his head and roared. He laughed until he was holding his sides and had to sit on the bed too.

"Okay," he demanded when the laughter subsided. "What are you doing here? You have to know it's against the law."

Reluctantly, she showed him the post card and translated select segments. Not

the part about being Gary's favorite Irish lassie. "See, I knew he didn't kill Astarte. I'm here because it says he left something for me. I couldn't find anything at the trailer, so I thought I'd look here. I know his secret ways of hiding things, but I didn't find anything. I have no idea what he's talking about, I just thought it might help clear him of her murder."

He tucked the postcard into his pocket. Her hands, of their own accord, made a move to snatch it back. He told her, "I have to give this to Lyons. Maybe it will help clear him of her death, I couldn't say. But you know and I know, if we ever do find him, he's going away a long time for embezzlement."

Now that Midge's secret was out, Jillian told Dave about the woman's threats to set the mob on Gary. She said, "I know he needs to be punished, but I'd hate to see some hit man rub him out."

Dave looked her over intently. "You know, you're just as hung up on your ex as I was on mine." He turned his face away and cleared his throat. "I've been, uhm, seeing someone."

Her heart plummeted to the floor. "You're dating again?"

"Oh, no, I mean I'm seeing a therapist. I always thought therapy was for wimps. Then, when all that pain about Bill and my wife came up, I decided I'd better do something."

"Oh, Dave, I'm so glad. I know it will be good for you."

"Anyway, my shrink says I hung onto that betrayal to keep from letting go of either of them. But, it's weird--I see the same thing in you when you talk about Gary."

She thought, *Maybe he's right, and I am still too hung up on Gary--maybe that's why I never attract anyone who wants to commit.* "I'd never go back to him--I know who he is. But he's the only family I have."

Dave's dark eyes met and held hers, a promise in them that gave her hope. "I miss you, Dave." The words caught in her throat.

He reached a hand out to caress her hair. "I always did love that hair of yours. I miss you, too. But now that you're involved in a homicide, Lyons and I have agreed that I have to stay away from both you AND the case. So, what say you promise not to do any more breaking and entering?"

They smiled at one another shyly. Then the fact that they were sitting so close together on an unmade bed suddenly penetrated, and Dave got up and perched on the arm of a chair. Overwhelmed with desire for him, she looked down at the floor so that he wouldn't read it in her face, this perceptive man. *Why did he have to be so handsome--those dark, angular good looks!*

He said, "Lyons is under tremendous pressure to make an arrest, you know. The mayor is on his back, the police chief is on his back, and the churches are on his back. The newspaper is full of editorials and letters."

She rolled her eyes. "I read them! They make it sound like we're a bunch of Satanist scum from New York, come to entice their children into a life of sin. Or, like we sacrifice endangered spotted owls in black masses."

"Oh, yeah. The regulars who write letters to the editor get pretty carried away--but Lyons is frantic to get the whole lot of them off his back. He's talking about trying to put Gary on America's Most Wanted."

"HE ISN'T!!! Oh, my God!!!" She had to laugh again in disbelief.

Dave reassured the landlady that everything was under control, put Jillian's bike into the back of the patrol car, and dropped her off at home.

In bed that night, with fresh regret at being there alone, she had to giggle as she pictured America's Most Wanted coming to Port Townsend. The host, John Walsh, opening the segment on the overlook, with Port Townsend and the marina spread out below him. Lyons recounting the case and showing Gary's prison mug shot. She and Robert leaving the trailer, hiding their faces from the flashbulbs. Midge slamming the door on the press when they asked her about Rocco. Gary's dad being interviewed in the pen, regretful that his son was repeating his mistakes. The locals shocked that anything like this would happen in their town. Ralph, with his bag of mail, saying it was too bad Miss Astarte never made it to church.



The camera would show Astarte's tearful parents and their plea for justice. She sighed, *ah, but THAT's not funny. How terrible for them if the case did make America's Most Wanted. For that matter, I don't think I'd be all that delighted to see Gary on the show, being arraigned in one of those ghastly neon-orange jump suits with the numbers on the pocket. Imagine if I ever had to wear one of those, with my coloring! Good thing I'm not the criminal type.*

No, I guess the idea of the case getting on the show isn't so funny after all. Don't worry, it won't happen, she told herself. How many hundreds of thousand of cases are there each year? The chances are remote--although the producers might just jump at the chance to put a sensational scandal about a 1-900 hotline on the air. NAH, she reassured herself, and finally dropped off to sleep.

HOTLINE TO HEAVEN
Chapter Twenty One

August 15



A mouse ran along the trailer's wallboard. Jillian's skin crawled, and she thought, *I hate those things. They put me in mind of my job in child welfare--those home visits in the slums where I'd see rats running across babies' cribs. This place is giving me the creeps--it's the last straw to have it taken over by a bunch of disgusting mice. I'll bring Beastie in to get rid of them. He'll enjoy having some new playmates.*

Lyons showed up mid-morning. His mood was an odd mixture of anger and triumph. "Dave gave me that post card. I don't expect you'd have turned it in if he hadn't caught you red-handed."

She acknowledged it ruefully. "Did it help?"

His smile took on a menacing cast. "Sure did. With that as probable cause, we got a search warrant for the airline records. Given the date on the card and New York as a destination, we tracked down Jones's flight. He was actually in the air when she was killed."

"He went on from New York to Aruba, with no trace of him after that. We figure he stashed some dough there from that timeshare scam, so he's fixed himself up with a fake ID. I guess we won't need America's Most Wanted after all. It'll be the FBI's problem, not ours--flight across international borders to avoid prosecution. But he's in the clear on the murder rap."

Her heart sang. "That's wonderful! I told you he didn't do it! He's just not a killer." *So why, she wondered, is Lyons looking at me that way--like Beastie with a bird?*

She asked, "Who did it then? I've been meaning to tell you anyway, you ought to check out George Mason. Astarte told me he took her out a few times, and he's a real lecher. Maybe he tried to force himself on her, and when she resisted, he killed her."

Lyons yawned and looked away. She asked him anxiously, "Who else could it have been?"

Staring into her eyes, he said, "We're thinking it's you."

She sat in stunned silence. "Me?" Her voice cracked, so she cleared her throat and tried again. "You suspect me?"

Blood roared in her ears. "You think it was ME?" It couldn't be! And who is this we he keeps referring to, she wondered. Does Dave think that, too?

He crossed his arms and sat back. "You lied to us consistently and withheld evidence. You're the only one with all three factors we look for--motive, means, and opportunity."

He ticked them off. "Number One--MOTIVE: You were jealous of her to begin

with. Midge McCullough says you were green with envy over how pretty she was. Then you come clear across the country to be with your ex-husband, and she moves in on him."

"Jealous? He asked me to get married again, but I wouldn't have him."

"We have only your word for that. And she was probably pregnant with his child. We think you found out about it and snapped."

"Oh, God, no! I'd feel sorry for her if I found out she was having his child. He was no one to rely on, so she'd be going it on her own."

He raised a cynical eyebrow. "Easy for you to say that. Neither of them can contradict you now. And you sure didn't shed any tears that day she was killed."

"I was in shock." *He's right, I didn't cry, she remembered. I was numb because Dave had just broken up with me. But from Lyon's point of view, it looks bad.* "I didn't know they were seeing each other, but I wouldn't have cared." *Not that big of a lie, she thought.*

"Dave says you're still hung up on Jones, that that was one of the problems between you."

She gasped in disbelief. "Dave says I'M hung up on MY ex? What about his hang-up with HIS ex?"

"He's not accused of killing the rival for his ex's affection--though, God knows, he had plenty of provocation."

"I can't believe this," she moaned. Dave adding to the case against her?

He resumed his litany. "Number Two--MEANS: She was strangled with her scarf, not hard for a woman to do, and it was right at hand."

"Number Three--OPPORTUNITY: You were the last person to see her alive. You worked right along with her, and she trusted you. Probably never knew what hit her, poor girl."

She protested, "But she was alive when I left at 2:00. Wouldn't the phone records show she got calls after that?"

"The calls stopped at 4:00, right when we figured she was killed. There's nothing to say you didn't come back--maybe brooded about their affair, worked up a head of steam, and came back to finish her off."

"I didn't! I was at the beach."

"In the middle of that cold spell? Can anyone verify it?"

She remembered, *Damn! I was so upset about Dave dumping me that I just dropped off the car and didn't even go inside to talk to Robert--not that they'd believe him anyway, since we're close. I walked the beach for hours, but it was deserted because the wind was so high.*

"No," she admitted, "I didn't talk to anyone."

Put that way, it was a coherent case. She'd suspect her, herself, if she didn't know better. But if it wasn't Jimmy or Gary, who did that leave?



She remembered, "The hate mail, the phone calls, and the vandalism. Shouldn't you look into where they came from?"

"Like I said the other day, a red herring. It's a matter of record that the vandals broke the window and spray painted the outside. Then, when you killed her, you painted that slogan to make us think it was some religious nut."

She conceded, "I guess a woman could wield a can of spray paint as well as a man. What about the calls? Isn't there a way to trace them?"

"Not on a 900 number. How would you separate them from legitimate calls for predictions? Unless you can pinpoint the time to the minute."

"No, I can't pinpoint them," she said in quiet despair. Lyons was convinced she did it, she could tell. And she'd thought he liked her. An idea hit her. "But the letters. What about them?"

"We have only your word for it that they existed. There wasn't anything like that among her things."

She remembered, "The other day, when I got to work, I found a devil mask on the door knob and a flyer pasted on the door denouncing astrology as the work of the devil. It was the same flyer those born-again pass out when they demonstrate downtown. I know they're involved."

"Let me see the mask and the flyer," Lyons demanded skeptically.

"They were so disgusting, I threw them out," she admitted, cursing herself for her own stupidity. "It never occurred to me I'd need them."

"Lame." He rolled his eyes. "Really lame."

"There was another girl who disappeared in January." She told him about Jennie and the similarities between her and Astarte. "I think it's the same killer."

Lyons frowned and thought a moment, then shook his head. "We never got any kind of missing persons report on her, and we don't even know that there's anything wrong. Street kids like that, they start off as runaways at 14, 15 years old and they just drift. When things get rough where they've crashed, they pick up and head on to the next place. They're like cats--they know how to land on their feet. No, I'm not buying that it has anything to do with the murder."

Hope dawned. She told him, "Ralph! The mailman! I know he saw at least one of the letters Astarte got, because he was all in a twitter over the fact that it didn't have a stamp and someone stuck it in the mailbox. He can tell you."

They found Ralph nearby, on his route. Lyons asked, "Did you deliver any letters to the victim that she told you were threats?"

He looked blank. "Threatening letters? Somebody sent Miss Astarte threatening letters? Not that I heard--I'd have reported it to the postal inspector in an instant if she told me."

Jillian pleaded, "Ralph, you've got to remember. The time a letter came in with no stamp? Somebody had just stuck it in the box? You DO remember, don't you?" Lyons glared at her for leading the witness.

Ralph thought it over and shook his head. "No, ma'am, I don't remember anything like that."

She was dumbfounded. "You have to! You were there!"

Lyons stepped forward, shutting her off. "Thanks, Mr. Lofton. We'll need you to make a statement to that effect later today."

As Lyons pulled her away, she felt Ralph watching and turned back, surprising a look of satisfaction in his eyes. She thought, *Sure, that'll be his big bit of gossip for the month. That total loser is the center of more attention than he's ever gotten in his life. Biggest scandal to hit this burg in years, and he's in on all the details. I bet they've got mailmen lined up for days, praying he'll get one of his sinus infections so they can sub for him.*

Back at the trailer door, Lyons said, "I never figured you for a wrong one, Mrs. Jones, but all the evidence points that way. I hope it's not so, for Dave's sake if nothing else, because I can tell he still cares about you. But if I were you, I'd be looking for a lawyer. We haven't got enough right now to indict you, but that's not saying we won't."

After he left, she sat in a daze. She kept grappling with the words **arrest** and **indictment**, words that couldn't possibly exist in the same sentence with the name Jillian Malone. She bit her cheek to see if she was dreaming, but it hurt, so she had to be awake. She went over the case he'd outlined against her. Each piece was a fact, but the spin Lyons was putting on the pieces was completely wrong.

She admitted, *Well, okay, I WAS jealous of Astarte--I'm human, for God's sake. And it did hurt some that she and Gary were lovers. But how could Lyons think I'd KILL anybody? I can't believe Dave would suspect me, either--how could he actually think I'd end another person's life?* The room turned gray for an instant as she took in the hurt.

A lawyer--how would I even go about it? Surely there aren't any criminal lawyers in this town. I don't have the money anyway. Just my luck to get in a jam, now that Perry Mason's dead!

This murder mystery is pitifully understaffed. No brilliant silver-haired and silver-tongued defense attorney to turn my hopeless case around at the last moment. No fearless and resourceful private eye to track down leads about suspects' hidden motives. No computer hacker genius to research bank balances and data bases. There's just me and Beastie, and not a clue between us.

The hotline phone rang, but she sat in a stupor, letting it ring on and on. When it stopped, she took all the extensions off the hook. *It's that Pluto transit to my Midheaven I've been wondering about for months, she realized. I hoped it meant transformation and the beginning of a new prosperity. Instead, it's the death of my life as I know it. She sat numbly, she had no idea how long, trying to take in this bombshell.*

The business phone rang, back in the office area. She hurried back to listen as the machine clicked on. No way would she answer if it was just another of the hotline's creditors. It was Robert, so she picked up the phone.

He was hysterical. "Jill-Jill, the police are here with a search warrant! They think you murdered Astarte. I can't BELIEVE this! They're tearing the place apart! Come at once!"

HOTLINE TO HEAVEN

Chapter Twenty Two

August 15

Jillian reached the house in three minutes with only two near collisions. She couldn't remember whether she'd locked the trailer, but Ethan would be arriving soon for his shift. She raced up the stairs, two at a time. Lyons and two other cops were there, tearing everything apart.

Robert was literally wringing his hands. When he saw Jillian, he flung himself at her, throwing his arms around her and holding her tight. He told her, "I tried to stop them, but they have a warrant. Jillie, I'm so sorry this is happening. I can't believe they'd think you did it."



Lyons came from her bedroom, holding a paper bag. "Before you say a word, Mrs. Jones, I have to caution you. You are under arrest as an accessory to embezzlement. You are under suspicion for the murder of Pamela Cabot. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say may be held against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. In the event....."

Jillian could finish it for him. Any child over the age of ten could probably do so as well.

As he finished reading her rights, she came to with a start. "Wait a minute! Did you say I'm under arrest as an accessory to embezzlement?"

"Yes. We intend to charge you with the murder as well, but right now we have enough solid evidence to charge you with being an accessory."

She was incredulous. "Meaning you think I helped Gary embezzle the money? On what grounds?"

"We believe you were in on his scam from the beginning, but at the very least you profited from it."

"I'm dead broke. I can't even afford an attorney. So where do you get that I profited?"

"Our search warrant stipulated access to your bank records. We found the \$10,000 that was deposited the day before the murder."

"That's crazy! I have about \$100 in my account." He showed her the printout. There was, in fact, \$10,105.

She sank onto a chair in a daze. "It must be a bank error. I've never had \$10,000 to deposit at one time in my life."

"According to the bank records, it was deposited just minutes after Jones withdrew the last \$50,000 from the business account. He dumped the \$10,000 right into yours. But you can't keep it--fruits of the crime. We put it into a holding account as evidence."

How in the world could she keep it anyway, knowing it was stolen? She'd see that it went right back to Midge, when they released it. "How did he know my account number? I never gave it to him."

"Sweet-talked the dumb little bank teller. Said he owed it to you in back alimony, that you were going in to have surgery. She deposited it into your account for him. She's one sorry little chick at the moment, catching hell from the manager. Probably lose her job over it."

That had to be the present Gary left me, she realized, to take care of me, after he absconded with the rest of the money. That moron thought he was doing me a huge favor, and instead I could wind up in jail as an accessory. Why in God's name did I ever meet him?

She told Lyons, "I didn't know anything about it--not the scam, not the embezzlement, and not the \$10,000. You have to believe me!"

He opened the paper bag he'd found in her bedroom and brought out Astarte's scarves. "Here's another nail in your coffin. They look just like the scarf you strangled her with. They have to be hers. How'd you get them? Steal them?"

It all looked so bad, and it was all so innocent! "Her mother gave those to me as a keepsake, when they cleared out her things. Call and ask her."

"You can bet we will. We have to fill them in on the new developments, anyway. Tell them we've arrested you."

Oh dear God, she thought, another blow for the Cabots. They thought so much of me. If this weren't terrifying, it would be downright humiliating.

He rubbed one of the scarves between his beefy fingers, then sniffed it. "There's candle wax on them, and they smell like incense. What were you doing with them? Some kind of black magic?"

Her heart sank. It must have been from the ritual they did to release Astarte's spirit. Lyons would never understand--nor would Dave, for that matter--so she didn't dare explain. "Astarte burned candles and incense all the time," she told him. "Ask her folks."

"Oh, we will--and we'll ask them everything they know about you." He motioned to the young rookie who'd made the scathing remarks about the hotline the night of Astarte's murder. "Cuff her and take her down to the station. Book her."

Robert burst into tears and hugged her tight. "Oh, Jill-Jill. I can't believe any of this! Call and tell me what's going on."

The ride to the station, handcuffed in the back of the police car was humiliating. People they passed on the street turned to look at the car curiously. Even though she knew it was untrue, she felt they all knew that she was from the hotline and that they condemned her on sight as a murderess.





Down at the station, the smirking young cop shut her into the interrogation room and started the paper work. She'd been in the darkly-paneled room before and not felt threatened by it, but today its lack of windows was oppressive. The stale air caught at her chest and made it hard to breathe. Worse, she could feel the turbulence of its energy--the fear and despair of earlier prisoners so closely matching her own.

After what seemed like hours staring at the gloomy brown walls, Dave burst in, obviously steamed. He threw a piece of paper down on the table in front of her. "What the hell IS this? You convinced me you wouldn't think of having anything more to do with Jones, and you were sleeping with him the whole time. It makes me sick to think I let you fool me that way."

She picked up the paper. It was the receipt she'd gotten from Manresa Castle, clearly marked Mr. and Mrs. Gary Jones. Her first big piece of detective work, and it had backfired!

She told him, "That receipt is for a night Gary spent at the castle with Astarte. I got it so I could figure out if he really was the father of her child. It wasn't me--I haven't slept with him in years, just like I told you."

His intense, dark eyes glistened with hate. "I'd love to believe that, but I don't trust you. You're just another lying, cheating bitch like my wife. I thought Lyons was losing his grip, suspecting you. But first the money and now this--what else can I think?"

She pleaded, "If you have any feelings left for me, question the people at the castle. See if anyone remembers them. Astarte was certainly striking enough to stand out."

He curled his lip. "We'll certainly do that. But even if it turns out to be true and that's why you have the receipt in your possession, it's all the more reason for us to think you killed her when you found out." He swept out, slamming the door.

Soon after that, Lyons came in and grilled her endlessly about the murder. He hammered on her lack of an alibi and her claim of walking the beach for five hours. She couldn't bring herself to explain that she was there because of the breakup with Dave.

After an hour and a half, Dave opened the door, pointedly averting his face, and whispered something to Lyons, who left with him. She waited in agony until Lyons returned.

Triumphant, he told her, "This clinches it. You're under arrest for murder. We have a witness who heard you threaten to kill the victim."

Her mouth gaped open. "This CAN'T be! Who'd tell you a complete fabrication like that?"

"We brought your mailman, Ralph Lofton, down to make a statement about those letters you claimed he saw. He unburdened himself of quite a bit about the goings on down there."

I'll just bet he did, Jillian fumed.

"Finally he recalled overhearing you on the phone, threatening to strangle her. And strangle her is just what you ultimately did."

"Ralph said that? I can't believe he'd lie like that."

She sat with her face in her hands, stunned. *First he denied knowing about the letter, now this. Why would Ralph lie? He hates me,* she suddenly realized. *That little nerd has known all along how I really feel about him, and he's been waiting for a chance to get back at me.*

Then she recalled the day Astarte told her about the commercial. She'd been so mad, she called Robert and told him she could just strangle Astarte. And then she'd looked up and saw Ralph in the doorway of her office, listening.

She told Lyons, "I DID say that, but it was only a manner of speaking--an expression of disgust. I never meant it for a moment!"

"You need a lawyer."

"I don't know any lawyers here. Or anywhere, for that matter." Her New York friends ran more to therapists, health care workers, and other astrologers. "I've never had any reason to consult one."

"Give George Mason a call. He's a lawyer, though I don't know if he ever went for the Washington State Bar exam."

Jillian's skin crawled. "That lecherous slime? And have him paw and maul me? I'd rather stay in jail." Suddenly, she recalled the trust fund. "That's another thing about him! Not only was he coming on to Astarte, like I told you before, but he's also the administrator of her trust fund. Maybe he embezzled it and killed her because it was coming due this summer."

He sneered. "You're grasping at straws now. That man has more money than he'll ever need. Just because every third person you know is a criminal doesn't make Mason one. My Mom always said you could know someone by the company they keep, and yours makes you look guilty as hell."

She bristled with shame. It certainly didn't look good from his perspective.

"We'll be taking you over to the country jail in just a few minutes. The lawyer will have to see you there. If you can't find one yourself, we'll get a public defender."

"I don't know who to call, and I've never heard anything good about public defenders."

She sat and thought. *This is the worst day of my life. I have no one, no family to turn to. There's no one here I can call on--Robert and Ethan don't have any more money than I do. And Dave would rather spit than look at me. This is going to mean some serious groveling, but there's only one possible answer.*

She told Lyons, "Please ask Midge McCullough to come see me."

HOTLINE TO HEAVEN
Chapter Twenty Three

August 15

It was late afternoon when the jailer got Jillian from the cell at the county jail and took her to the interview room. Midge was dressed, as usual, in designer casual. She sat swinging her shapely legs, clearly enjoying herself. She gestured at the neon orange pants and shirt Jillian had been forced to put on when she was booked into the jail. "That's some fashion statement."

With all the degradation Jillian was enduring, her vanity was the least of her concerns. She forced herself to be pleasant. "Thanks for coming."

"I'm not sure why I'm here. Surely you don't think I'll help you out of this mess you've gotten yourself into."

"I haven't got anyone else to turn to, or I wouldn't ask, but I need you to bail me out. Besides, it's not good for the line to have one of the readers in jail. What if the media got wind of it?"

"I'm at the point of not worrying about that any more. Who knows, maybe the publicity would bring in a ton of curiosity seekers who'd be good customers once they tried the service. I'd just as soon not have my connection with Rocco hit the papers, but they might not dig that up. Besides, I still believe that if it weren't for you, Astarte would be alive today. It's ridiculous to think you killed her, but you ARE responsible for her death."

No longer feeling guilty about that since the ritual, Jillian felt a surge of rage at the accusation. Heat rose into her face as she remembered all the times Midge had treated her unjustly. *What a stupid idea it was to call her*, she fumed. *The bitch enjoys watching me squirm, and she has no intention of helping.*

Her Irish temper finally erupted. "Forget it, then. You treat me like shit! You give me the worst hours, you tell me I'm a lousy astrologer, you ridicule my ideas. You have **always** treated me like shit, and I don't understand why."

"Because you get on my nerves."

"I WHAT?"

"You get on my nerves. You're always kissing ass, trying to maneuver around me--you think I don't know when you're manipulating, but I do. I let you get away with it because you always present sound business reasons, but it still bugs me. You cave in when I'm being outrageous, like some spineless toad. I DO know when I'm being a bitch, but you're such an easy target I can't help myself."

"But Astarte would have been easy to bully, and you were good to her."

"I liked Astarte. She wasn't sucking up because of my money, like ninety percent of the people I know--like you and like Gary. Like everybody I've met since I was 22 and fell into a fortune. That gets real old. The only people in my whole life that weren't that way were my Bill and Rocco. Neither of them gave a damn about my money, they just dug it that I was this feisty dame. Astarte was that way, too. She genuinely liked me, for myself."



Sneering at the No Smoking sign, Midge lit a cigarette and deliberately blew smoke at her. *She's known all along how smoke bothers me,* Jillian realized.

Midge said, "Besides, bullying Astarte would have been like beating a fawn. With you, it's more like baiting a high-spirited dog."

"An Irish setter," Jillian said, intrigued despite herself at how the woman's mind worked.

"Exactly--an Irish setter. You bait it and bait it, to see if you can break its spirit or if it's going to wind up turning on you. Today, it looks like you finally turned."

She finally smiled, the first genuine smile she'd ever directed at Jillian. "I didn't think you had the balls. I like spunk, and I knew you weren't in on the con, or you'd have wound up with way more than \$10,000. Nobody's that dumb."

"Thanks, I think." Jillian asked, "So, will you put up the bail?"

"Yeah, provided we can come to an agreement. I need you right now on the line. You're a good reader. I've had people call in from time to time to test the readers, and they all said you were good."

Jillian felt exposed at the revelation that anyone she spoke to could be a spy for Midge. Robert had mentioned that as a possibility--standard practice on other lines--but she didn't dream Midge was doing it. *Good thing I passed muster,* she thought, *especially under these circumstances.* "What kind of agreement?"

"With all the debts I have to make good on after that ex-husband of yours skipped, hiring a lawyer for you is a stretch. I can't pay you \$.40 a minute anymore. It would have to be more like \$.25." The smile took on a wolfish cast.

The shrew knows she's got me, Jillian thought. *Can I make it on that? She scratched out the figures on a piece of paper. Let's see, when we were making \$.50 a minute and business had built up, I was averaging 30 minutes an hour in calls, the rest down time, so I was making about \$90 a six hour shift, \$630 in a seven day week, and \$1260 in a two week pay period--minus whatever taxes I'd have to pay. Sure, she's making a fortune on us, at \$3.99 a minute, but it was still a lot more than I was bringing in the last few months in New York.*

At half that, I'd only be making \$7.50 an hour! What a rip off of all my years of study and experience in astrology! I was getting \$75 for a one-hour reading in New York. Still, there's no hope of setting up a practice in this town. The economy's so bad that the one or two astrologers I've met are getting \$35 to \$40 for a reading. And not only do I need an income, I need to get out of jail and find out who really killed her so they won't convict me. Lyons isn't even looking for anyone else.

No, Midge is baiting me again, plus Taureans HAVE to bargain. It's their idea of a contact sport. "I can't make it on that. It'd have to be at least \$.30 a minute."

Midge sat smoking for a minute, drawing out the suspense and blowing smoke in Jillian's face. "It's \$.27, you pay back all the legal expenses, and we sign a new agreement with a six-month commitment."

Jillian tried out the new figures. She'd average \$680 a pay period, but maybe a third would go to taxes, and forget about health insurance, so her real take home would be about \$900 a month, for six grueling hours a day of readings, seven days a week. Her heart sank. *What's the point of an existence like that? I'd be living Mom's life all over again, after all her hard work to help me get an education. I'm glad she didn't live to see this.*

She rapped on the door for the jailer. "Forget it," she said sadly. "I couldn't live with myself if I let you do that to me. Find some other Irish setter to bait." A grim future in the women's penitentiary loomed before her.

"The hell with it." Midge stubbed out her cigarette and grabbed up her purse. "I need you on the line. I'll bail you out, and we'll leave things the way they are. You pay back the legal expenses, and you use a public defender for the trial. But if you skip bail, Rocco's men will hunt you down, and I promise, you WILL have a long, painful death."

She swept out of the room when the jailer opened the door, leaving Jillian behind with her mouth agape at Midge's capriciousness. *I'll never fathom that woman in a thousand years, she thought. It's always the bottom line with her, so I'll bet she figures she can't replace me that quickly. The new commercial with Ethan is just starting to pull in business, and with another interruption like we had when Astarte died, the line would be finished. But she'll have her friend that runs those psychic fairs in Seattle looking for a replacement for me, just in case.*

*Now I have to find out who killed Astarte, so I won't be convicted. I'm the world's most pathetic excuse for a detective. Everything I've done so far has backfired. I'm certainly no Kinsey Milhone! Okay, Sue Grafton, sooner or later, you'll need a case for Kinsey that starts with Z. Zebra would be a stretch. Would you consider us for **Z is for Zodiac**?*



Whether by happenstance or design, Midge couldn't get her lawyer to bail Jillian out until the next morning, so Jillian spent the night in jail. The women's block had two sets of bunk beds, separated by a wall, with no door between them. There was a day room with a t.v. set and hard plastic institutional chairs. The other women insisted on watching sitcoms all evening. She detested the silliness of sitcoms and couldn't focus, anyway, for worrying about her situation. The narrow bed had a thin, vinyl-covered mattress. In the bunk above, a large, mean-tempered alcoholic woman snored through the night. Jillian survived the endless hours until dawn by pretending she was in a bunk at camp, dredging up and humming to herself the dumb songs they'd made her scout troupe learn. *French Cathedrals*, she recalled, *White Coral Bells*, *John Jacob Jingleheimer Smith*. *But I doubt if I could get these toughies to sing rounds with me.*

HOTLINE TO HEAVEN
Chapter Twenty Four

August 16

At the arraignment the next morning, Jillian was formally charged with the murder of Pamela Cabot and with being an accessory to the embezzlement. Lyons asked that she not be granted bail because she had no ties to the community and presented a substantial risk of flight. The judge, however, was one of Midge's cronies, a fellow member of the Chevy Chase golf club. She agreed to \$50,000 bail, since Midge had vouched for her. Midge agreed to post bond and to guarantee her appearance at the trial, on the condition that Jillian continue to work for her.



When she got home, Robert was asleep on the living room sofa after his late-night stint, waiting for her. He wiped his eyes sleepily as he sat up, his black hair for once tangled and loose from the pony tail. His pajamas were like a hospital scrub suit, only an improbable cardinal red. As he greeted her, his fingers automatically combed through his tousled hair and set it straight, putting the rubber band firmly back in place.

He gave her a hug. "Jill-Jill, I've been beside myself! Was it awful in that place?"

"I've been in better places on the New York Subway. On the GG line, yet."

"The subway STINKS, and the GG is its armpit, so jail must be a horror! I was pouring over my cookbooks to find a good cake to bring you. I figured I'd bake that sachertort you love, to keep your strength up, then hide a file between the layers so you could bust out."

"Your Chocolate Decadence would have hit the spot. I couldn't swallow a bite while I was there. The food was so bad, I actually considered sending out for Chinese."

He shook himself all over. "No, no, not the Port Townsend Chinese! That's temporary insanity. Hmm, maybe we could use that as your defense."

The familiar banter was calming--as though she could step back out of the twilight zone she'd inhabited for the past 24 hours and reclaim her life.

Robert exclaimed, "I can't believe that tightfisted Midge bailed you out!"

"She made me sweat bullets before she did." She told him about their meeting. "If this were a movie, Bette Davis would play Midge."

"HONEY!!! That woman is a world class harpy! You're right, she's Bette Davis in Whatever Happened to Baby Jill."

"You know what I think?" he asked her. "I've always believed Midge was the killer. She's ruthless."

Jillian asked herself, *could it really be Midge? It's pretty clear that she offed her last husband, Barney. I'm sure that's what the police keep hinting, they just can't prove it. Why had they even come into the picture unless there was good reason to believe*

she killed him? Okay, to give her her due, she might have given him an overdose out of compassion, to end his ordeal with cancer. More likely, knowing Midge, she did it so the costs of his care wouldn't eat up her fortune.

Robert was making coffee and toast for her, while they stood in the kitchen and talked. Jillian thought, *Midge keeps talking about taking out a contract on Gary, so murder isn't exactly unthinkable to her. She wouldn't have killed Astarte herself, she'd have hired a hit man. But, why would Astarte let a stranger in, as frightened as she was? Maybe Midge gave him a key, and he caught Astarte off guard. Hit men are careful to throw the scent off, so he could have taken the vandalism and elaborated on it with the slogan on the wall to make it look like the work of a religious fanatic.*

She shivered and told Robert, "She's capable of murder, but she seems genuinely upset about Astarte's death. She keeps blaming me for it."

"Don't buy it for a minute. She's trying to draw suspicion away from herself. I think she bailed you out so you wouldn't suspect her, but she's setting you up to take the fall for it. Girlfriend, I wouldn't trust any lawyer of Midge McCullough's for a minute. He's probably in with the mob too."

Could Robert be right, she wondered, or is that just his New York cynicism? "I don't know, Robert. I've never seriously considered Midge as a suspect. I'll have to think about it."

As they sat at the dining table over a second cup of coffee, he asked, "What in heaven's name is going on in your stars? You must be having the horoscope from hell this year!"

She told him, "I obsessed on my chart the whole time I was in jail. It's so ironic-- I'm able to tell other people what's coming, and they say I'm right on target. But here I am, in the worst crisis of my life, and I stare at my chart and can't make heads or tails of it. I guess it's not that unusual--like doctors trying to diagnose their own illnesses. How objective could I possibly be? Pluto IS racking up half my chart, though."

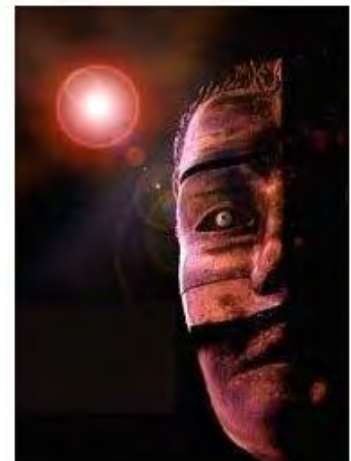
He swished his pony tail. "GAWD! If they'd just send up a rocket and blow Pluto to bits, half the world's problems would disappear."

She felt an unease she knew was silly. "I wouldn't let Pluto hear you say that, if I were you. Can you do a reading to see if I'm going to prison?"

"Oh, Jill-Jill, I was so worried while you were in the pokey, I must have thrown twenty spreads. But it's like you and the chart--I couldn't see anything at all. I'm too close to you to be objective."

He pondered where to look for guidance. "I know! Remember that reading we did just before we left Brooklyn? You kept the notes in your journal. I find that particular spread is good for six to eight months, so it should still be in effect. Let's see if it holds any answers."

Using his Tarot deck and her notes, he recreated the layout to see what more he could learn. "GAWD, the whole story was there all along! We just didn't know what it meant."



"The Five of Pentacles in the first house shows the bind you were in at the time. The Six of Swords in the second, for money, that's Gary's offer and our move out here. Look, the Star in the third house of the mind, siblings, and neighbors--don't you think that could refer to Astarte--A-STAR-te? Weird, huh, because you didn't even know her when we did this. The Seven of Pentacles in the fourth house, the home, that's us planting new roots, but waiting for business to take off. The Ten of Pentacles in the house of romance, the fifth, shows you and Dave doing coochie coo in the country."

He tapped the reversed King of Pentacles in the sixth. "This house shows work situations, and it's Gary, running off with the money--especially next to the Tower in the house of partnership. HONEY! That Tower is all hell breaking loose, and that's what it's been. I can't lie to you--I was plenty worried when I saw that card. I did think it had some connection with the cards in the center, the Devil and Death, but I had no idea it meant a murder."

He pointed to the eighth house. "GAWD, look at this Seven of Swords in the house of death--you all tied up! Sometimes the cards can be so literal. I never would have dreamed in a bajillion years that it meant you'd be handcuffed and arrested for murder! Not Miss Catholic Girls School Malone!"

"Look how the sixth, seventh, and eighth run together to give a coherent picture. In fact, this spread isn't usually chronological, but if you go around the circle starting with the first house, it does tell the story of what's happened. I wonder if it'll continue that way--we'll have to watch. If so, we've just gotten through the Eight of Swords, your arrest, and the Knight of Swords is next--a knight in shining armor rushing into the fray to rescue you."

She contemplated the menacing array. "Is it possible the killer will strike again? Isn't that pair in the center the keynote for the whole period?"

He chewed on a hangnail, a worried look on his face. "I honestly don't know. It may just be the aftermath of the murder that lingers. That Knight of Swords does worry me--the knight in shining armor wouldn't have any reason to rescue you if you weren't personally in danger. Jill-Jill, please swear to me that you'll be careful. Don't let anyone in, either here or at the trailer, unless you're sure of them. And I won't let anyone in at night down there even IF I'm sure of them. Let's ask Ethan to do the same. Brrr!" He shuddered, and worry twisted Jillian's stomach.

He insisted, "The knight in shining armor just HAS to be Dave. It's surely not me. The cards always make me the Page of Cups. Ethan, with all his powers, is the Magician."

"Who am I in the cards?"

"I always figured you for the Queen of Swords. Capable, a bit of a tough facade, but you've had a hard life and a lot of heartbreak, so you're scared of getting too close. And Midge, she's the greedy, grasping Queen of Pentacles reversed. What a crew we are!"

He went back to the spread. "Who else could the Knight of Swords be besides Dave? Beastie's the only other man in your life, unless you count Ralph. RIGHT--like Ralph is really going to rescue you! If his sinuses aren't too bad that day, maybe. But, listen to me, there IS danger in these cards. Please be careful, Jill-Jill. It would KILL me to lose you! You're all I have in the world." She squeezed his hand, blinking back tears herself.

He shook himself, then brightened as he considered the next card. "I just know you're going to get out of this. If you were going up the river, that Eight of Swords would be in the tenth house--your status in the world or your life path. Instead you have the Two of Cups in the tenth. That's you and Dave getting married, I'm sure of it. You HAVE to let me be the maid of honor--I've got my dress all designed! Plus the Ten of Cups, the happy ever after card, is in the eleventh house of hopes, dreams, and wishes. That's three marriage indicators, if you add in the Ten of Pentacles in the fifth--see, that's you and Dave, with family all around you."

Swept up in the fantasy, she suggested, "It has to be his family then, because I don't have any. He has those identical twin daughters--maybe they'll come to visit. Oh--I know! It's my Irish family! On our very first date, he said we'd go there on our honeymoon and find them."

"That could be--look how lush and green the country is in this card. Maybe it's not just his kids and your Irish family--maybe you'll have rug rats of your own. The twelfth house has the Empress, which can show a pregnancy. However, it's reversed, so maybe it's just the issue coming up and you decide against it."

She nodded. "It **would** be an issue for sure! He dumped his last serious girlfriend because she was pressuring him to have kids. Besides, can you picture me pregnant? Never!" She allowed herself to bask momentarily in the dream of making up with Dave and getting married.

She ran her hands through her hair, noticing it smelled faintly of disinfectant from the jail. "No, Robert, you know I believe in the Tarot and in you. All the cards in the spread up to now have been right on the money, but I'm still having a hard time believing the rest. You should have heard how Dave spoke to me at the police station. He absolutely loathes me now. I don't know what the cards are talking about, but Dave is **definitely** not my knight in shining armor." Still, despite her doubts, a sliver of hope took root.

She told him, "If I do get out of this, I want you to do me a favor and get me a job on that hotline you used to work for. As soon as I pay off my debt to Midge, I'm out of here."

"You know I'd help, but the money is better on Midge's line."

"I don't care. I can't work for her any more."

"She's too much--and she loathes gay people. I'll switch to the other line, too. We could set our own schedule there and start to have a life. No more seven days a week."

Jillian recalled, "Veronica--the manager at the Pleiadean Portal--offered to have me do readings there, so I could start to build up a bit of a practice. And, you know, I think I'd enjoy teaching an astrology class. Nobody's doing one in town, and there are plenty of New Age people."

Robert asked her, "So you really want to stay, do you? I've been thinking that I'd be better off in Seattle, where there's a gay community. It all depends on what happens with Ethan."

She fretted, *I hope he's not headed for a broken heart. I still can't figure out if Ethan's gay or not. I'm just going to have come out and ask him. Whatever his preference, he doesn't show any sign of more than a friendly interest in Robert.*

Robert put on a fake-fierce grimace. "Now that you're out of the hooskow, I have to take a stand. You've got to do something about That Cat!"



She stalled for time. "You mean Beastie?"

"How many other cats are we blessed with in this household, exactly?"

"Um, well, he's staying down at the trailer, riding herd on the mice. That ought to count for something." When he remained implacable, she sighed. "What's my precious son done now?"

"Stolen another pair of my cufflinks. My best gold ones, mind you,

that Peter, my first lover, gave me for our second anniversary."

"Gold ones? I told you to always put them away. You know Beastie can't resist anything that glitters. He thinks he's a raccoon."

"Fine," he sniffed. "From now on, I will ALWAYS, ALWAYS put them away. But I want them back. NOW."

She considered Beastie's habits and his possible hiding places for glittering objects. Most likely it would be the sofa. When he was soccer-kicking his favorite targets around the floor, they usually wound up underneath it. She and Robert lifted one of the pieces of his black leather sectional. Sure enough, there were not one but two pairs of Robert's cufflinks.

They also discovered a fancy gold and faux emerald pen that looked suspiciously like the one Midge had missed one day while the hotline was still at the apartment, most likely during the Gucci envelope debacle. Jillian debated whether it would cause more friction to return the pen than to just forget about it. After sweeping up some recalcitrant dust that had eluded him by hiding under the sofa, Robert snatched up his jewels and commandeered the bathroom to complete his toilette.

Jillian used the day to sleep and heal, bathing twice to get rid of the sleazy feeling of the jail. *How am I going to get out of this mess*, she asked herself as she soaked in the tub. *I have to do something to help myself, because Lyons isn't looking anywhere else. George Mason is really my best suspect, and Lyons won't hear a word against him, so it's up to me. YUKKKK! I hate the idea of seeing that slimy lecher again and letting him put his filthy hands on me. Still, it's the only way I'm going to find out where he was when she was murdered and whether he embezzled her trust fund.* She called and made a dinner date with him for the next night. She needed another shower afterwards and a thorough shampoo.

HOTLINE TO HEAVEN
Chapter Twenty Five

August 17

George Mason droned on while Jillian stifled a yawn. "That was one of the biggest deals the studio ever made, and even the president had to admit, it was because of me."

She said, "Very impressive," and took a bite of the wild rice that accompanied her shrimp marinara. She looked out the huge picture windows at Discovery Bay. The restaurant, part of a complex of vacation condos, was right on the sparkling, blue water. Across the bay, the foothills of the Olympics, covered with evergreens, spanned the horizon. An occasional house tucked back in the woods was the only intrusion into the wilderness that surrounded them.

The food is good, she thought, and the view is great, but the company leaves a lot to be desired. The man is gross--and BORING! He chews with his mouth open, and those hair plugs are so obvious. Wealth is a waste on a man like that.

He told her, "I spoke to the Cabots the other day. They don't believe for a moment you had anything to do with Pam's death, and I agree. Lyons is a decent guy, he's just desperate to pin this on somebody."

Relieved, she thought, *I'd hate it if they believed I killed her.* She said, "It's funny, but Astarte never even mentioned her trust fund. Was it a lot of money?" She might as well not worry about tastefulness and tact--Mason obviously didn't.

He stuffed his mouth with baked potato and chewed loudly before answering. "Wasn't a lot to begin with, only half a mil. But I made some savvy investments, and now it's closer to a mil. Not that she'd care one way or another. Money didn't mean anything to that kid."

"What will happen to it now?" she asked, watching him closely for nervousness or guilt.

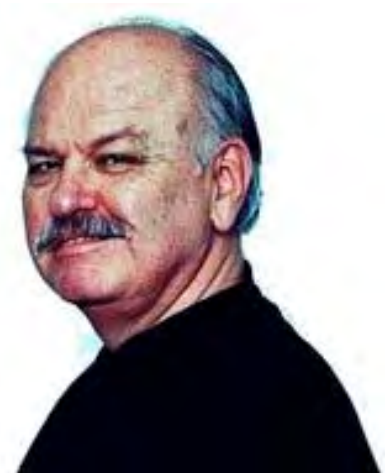
"Aw, jeez, her folks want to give it away to that guru of hers. I can't see it--what's he gonna do with it? Buy a lifetime supply of saffron robes? Though that Rajneesh fella liked his Caddies, didn't he?"

He guffawed at his own joke. "Anyway, I'm trying to talk Joan and Paul into using the fund to back a New Age movie. Pam would have liked it--spread the word about the things she believed."

Despite herself, Jillian was swept up in the idea. "Like one of Shirley MacClaine's books, maybe. Or the Celestine Prophecy--it was on the best seller list for months."

"That'd cost millions, just for book rights. No, we'd want to go with an unknown."

"What a break it would be--there are so many metaphysical writers out there with talent." *Even in the astrology world, she thought, like the wacky musicals Michael Lutin produces at our conferences.*



Slurping his soup, he confided, "I've been thinking that my life would make a helluva good movie. I don't mind telling you, I was quite a sinner before I found the Lord."

What an egomaniac, she thought. And who would we get to play him? Danny DeVito, maybe--or Dom DeLuise. She only said, "A lot would depend on the treatment."

He told her, "A million isn't much more than seed money, but it could get other backers interested. I'm halfway convinced to sink some of my own money into it--though they say in the business that only a fool invests in his own movie."

"Not that I'd miss the money, you understand, even if the movie was a bomb. I'm so well set up, I don't have to work another day in my life, but this project has me itching to get my hand in again--always wanted to be a producer myself, see. And it'd be a helluva memorial to Pam."

"She'd love it."

It's possible he didn't embezzle the trust fund, she concluded reluctantly. There ought to be a way to check on the fund and to find out how solvent the Masons really are. He brags too much about his wealth and flashes too much money around--he could be broke and putting on a good front. Where are these computer hackers when you really need them? The next murder I get involved in, I'm definitely going to insist on one.

Even if he's as rich as he wants me to believe, and it's not just a come on, I still wonder if he didn't try to force himself on her and kill her--maybe accidentally--when she refused. How can I find out if he has an alibi? Oh, well, subtle isn't really the point with him.

She asked, "Where were you the day she was killed?"

He was taken aback. "Why would you want to know that?"

"Oh, I'm always curious about what was going on with people when someone passes. Like when they got the news that Kennedy was shot--or John Lennon."

"Man, what a morbid hobby!" He shook his head at her weirdness. "I don't remember about Kennedy or Lennon. That's pretty far back."

"And what about Astarte?"

He stopped to ponder. "Barbara and I and some friends from out of town went down to Seattle that afternoon for that excursion train, The Spirit of Washington. It goes into the mountains, with a tour of the winery at Woodenville--plus they serve you a great prime rib dinner on board. We booked onto one of the dome cars--gives you a panoramic view of the mountains. Quite a romantic ride, about a three and a half hour trip. Maybe you'd like to go sometime." He looked at her hopefully, but she cultivated a blank expression.

He continued, "Anyway, I remember because we had such a great day, then we stayed over in Seattle to see our friends off at the airport the next morning, and when we got home, there was that message from the Cabots. Shocking."

She wondered how she could check that booking out. *Maybe I could go to the travel agent and pass myself off as his wife--say we need a copy of the receipt so we can write it off on our taxes as a business expense. No, I'd never pass for skinny little Barbara. In a town this size, as rich as they are and as many trips as they take, the travel agent probably bakes them fruitcake at Christmas.*

Mason asked, "How about dessert? They have some great treats here, and this is on me. Sweets for the sweet." He winked, as though this were some great witticism.

What the heck, she told herself, I might as well get some pleasure out of this. When the waitress brought the dessert tray, she chose a sliver of white chocolate mousse--light and delicious.

"It's a bad break that they accused you," he said. "And you all alone in the world--no family, no husband."

A bad break? Jillian thought, *it's a catastrophe.* A heavy fog of discouragement settled over her.

He clamped his thick paw over her hand. "I pal around with some of the lawyers in town--golf buddies, you know. Maybe I could get one to take on your case *pro bono*. For that matter, I know lawyers in Seattle, too, in the bigger firms." He squeezed her hand twice and rubbed the back of it with his thumb.

He means he'll help if I come across, she realized. "It's a kind offer, George. I wonder if you'd excuse me for a minute?" She made her way to the bathroom and locked herself in. *God, that man is a slime,* she thought--*exploiting my situation to get laid!*

She asked herself, can you really afford these scruples? You may very well spend the rest of your life in prison if you don't get some decent legal help. You'd be lucky if you got out at 65, that red hair you're so proud of turned yellow-gray, and without a hope of a job. Mason could link you up with a good lawyer. Maybe you'd only have to sleep with him once. Couldn't you do that? Close your eyes tight and pretend it wasn't happening? You're a survivor--you could even survive rape if you had to.

She let herself imagine sleeping with him, made herself say she'd do it. But her stomach heaved at the idea, and she vomited until her sides hurt. She washed her face afterwards and tried to rinse the foul taste from her mouth.

I can't go to bed with him, she concluded, even if it means going to jail. He's so damned repulsive! Now, how am I going to get home without him jumping me? I should have brought the car and met him here. I just thought he'd be more forthcoming about Astarte in the privacy of his car. I'm in a pickle, because that octopus is definitely going to maul me before he takes me home.

I wonder if I could call a cab. Right, call THE cab, and even if it's available, it'd take them an hour to get here. Robert has the car and he's at work, so he can't pick me up. Ethan doesn't drive. No, I'm stuck riding with Mason. If that corrupt bastard so much as touches me, I'll throw up again. That's it! I'll call the waitress and show her that I've vomited. Get them worried about me being sick, and tell him I have to go home right away.

It worked. Mason was concerned and solicitous, asking if she wanted to go to the emergency room. She told him the seafood was probably bad, and that she'd go to the doctor if she didn't feel better by morning. It wasn't hard for her to shiver and moan convincingly. When they got to her house, he wanted to take her upstairs and help her get comfortable, but she insisted she'd be all right, so he left.

Dear God, she thought, *I hope he's not the knight in shining armor the cards say is going to rescue me. Just my luck--the knight finally shows up, whips off his helmet, and turns out to be a pig!*

HOTLINE TO HEAVEN

Chapter Twenty Six

August 18

The early morning breeze tossed Jillian's hair and stroked her cheek, making her feel clean again after her encounter with Mason. She was walking to work, since Robert needed the car to take Ethan to the nearest shopping mall, an hour and a half away. *The walk takes longer than my bike*, she thought, *but it gives me time to think and enjoy my surroundings*. She reached the bluff overlooking downtown and the waterfront, pausing to soak up the vista, then turned right at the big grey stone post office.

I can't dismiss Mason altogether, she decided. *He makes such a deserving suspect. I'm not sure how I could prove or disprove his alibi. It 'd be a cinch for the cops to check it out, if they only would. Still, if he embezzled the money and then killed her because of it, it will come out fairly soon, when he has to make an accounting. The Cabots are trusting, but they're not stupid or they wouldn't be that rich by their own efforts.*

Passing one of the delightful Victorian bed and breakfast inns, she was captivated by the old monkey puzzle tree that towered over it--an evergreen with a tangle of long tail-like branches that inspired its name. Imported from the Andes, the tree thrived locally, since the climate was similar. *It's like a Christmas tree on acid*, she concluded. *This case itself is like a monkey-puzzle tree--all tangled and twisted until you don't know what's related to what.*

Could Robert possibly be right about Midge? She'd do practically anything for money. She's certainly sadistic enough to carry on a campaign of letters and threats like the Angel of Death has done. Now, if I were being threatened, I'd consider Midge a prime suspect!

Still, what possible motive would she have had for wanting Astarte dead? It couldn't be that Astarte found out something that would hurt her--like her mob connections. Astarte wouldn't have been capable of blackmail. She was crazy about Midge and had her own issues about embarrassing secrets. No way was Astarte a threat, and Midge genuinely cared about her.

She IS a control freak, though. Maybe she had some kind of frustrated maternal attachment to Astarte and then discovered her affair with Gary, so she felt the control slipping away. She'd have to be fairly deranged to carry it that far--but, then, whoever did this isn't exactly sane.



She was the one who insisted we use the angels' names. If she's really going off the deep end, maybe she considers herself the Boss Angel--the Angel of Death. That typical criminal megalomania could be taking over--she'd already killed her husband and gotten away with it, so it was a predictable step from there to killing again.

How in the world could I find out for sure if she did it? Digging into her life would stir up a nest of vipers--she'd put one of Rocco's men on me in a minute! This is where I need your typical hardboiled P.I. with a heart of gold--unfazed by danger and bull-headedly determined to save this damsel in distress. But this is reality, girlfriend, not some far-fetched mystery novel. You'd better steer clear of Midge.

The lawns Jillian passed were brown in patches, with water restrictions keeping owners from sprinkling. She hadn't been prepared for how dry the area was in summer. Her vision of the Pacific Northwest had been that it was waterlogged, but Port Townsend and neighboring towns were in what was called the rain shadow. The clouds emptied while passing over the Olympics, then only filled up again as they crossed Puget Sound to rainy Seattle. As parched as the grass was, she was charmed by the nearly microscopic flowers of various colors nestling among the blades.

Beastie greeted her at the trailer door, vocal in his demands for breakfast. When she picked him up and gave him a squeeze, he swatted her, still miffed at her earlier absence. After he ate, though, he curled up in her lap. *I miss him at home, she thought, but it's comforting to have him here, where so many bad things have happened. It makes me feel a little safer, somehow.*

She shivered, then, as a mouse ran across the floorboards. Beastie saw it and leapt off her lap, dashing across the floor. When it disappeared beneath the sofa, he crouched, swiping a paw underneath. When the paw emerged, it held no mouse, but a glittering object he proceeded to bat around playfully. He's certainly kittenish since we brought him down here, she thought, as though the mice gave him a new zest for life.

She bent and took the object from him, earning a look of indignation. It was the cross Ralph wore--although she hadn't noticed it in a while. *It must have come off sometime while he was eating lunch, she thought. I'll give it to him today.* She tacked it up on the cork board in her cubicle, then spied the month-by-month list of planetary positions posted there.



I need to do an update on my chart. Something more than this endless Pluto transit to my Midheaven has to be going on--hopefully I'll find some good Jupiter aspects to offset the trouble. I should check the 9th house, too, since that shows legal matters. She studied her chart, but couldn't be objective enough to come to any conclusions. At one moment, she could interpret everything there in glowing terms, and in the next, could see only gloom and doom.

She put the chart aside when the first call came through, then didn't have a break until nearly noon. Business had picked up since the new commercial began airing, with Ethan as the angel. Feeling drained, Jillian had difficulty concentrating on charts and coping with clients' demands. *Why are they always at their neediest when you don't feel*

up to par, she wondered. *I must focus, because I have to work for my bread, board, and bail. It'd be just like Midge to have one of her cronies call and test me now.*

When the time came for Ralph to appear, she found herself dreading the encounter. Wondering why, she concluded, *I can't face his snooping and prying, knowing he's going to gossip about me. Then, too, his big mouth was what finally got me arrested. I haven't seen him since that day, and I wouldn't know what to say to him.*

She was relieved when a substitute showed up, saying that Ralph was out with a painful sinus infection. The man surveyed the trailer with malicious curiosity, smirking at the New Age posters and paintings.

He asked avidly, "Which one are you?"

Screw you, you nosey bastard, she wanted to say. *I'm the vicious murderess. The seducer of youth into pagan debauchery. The spotted owl serial killer. I'm a dangerous woman.*

She grabbed the mail and pointedly held the trailer door open. "I'm the Angel Rafael."

The Angel of Death stroked the panties that the Whore of Satan had worn.

I warned her to change or die.

I gave her three chances.

She continued to sin.

Then she went to her rest, and peace was restored.

The peace that was broken when the Spawn of Satan arrived.

The Angel of Death lovingly kissed the worn white leather Bible.

Now the other Whore of Satan is breaking the peace.

She seeks to know who I am.

I must not be known, so that I may continue to serve.

The Lord will need me again.

The world is full of sin.

I will give her a chance to change.

I will warn her she is to die.

The Angel of Death lifted the phone and dialed.

The Whore answered on the second ring. "You have reached the Hotline to Heaven. This is the Angel Raphael."

There was a raspy whisper. "And this is the Angel of Death. You're no angel, you're a Whore of Satan. Change or you'll die like that other Whore." The connection was severed abruptly, replaced by a dial tone.

Jillian sat in stunned silence, her heart thumping in her chest. Gooseflesh coursed down her neck and over her arms. She realized, *that's the lunatic who killed Astarte, and probably that poor young woman from the bookstore as well. I'm the next target. The cards warned that I was in danger, but I shrugged it off because jail seemed like a bigger threat at the time. Somehow I half believed this Angel of Death business was an act--a red herring, like Lyons always says--to cover up for some more mundane motive. But the person who just called was completely deranged. It was creepy! I can't even say if it was a man or a woman--with Midge's husky voice, it could very well have been her.*

Too shaken to deal with callers, she took the phones off the hook and tried to figure out what to do. *I wish I hadn't told Ethan and Robert I'd cover some of Ethan's hours so they could go to the mall, she thought. Ethan would be here by now if I hadn't. I certainly can't tell Midge. She'll yank me off the line in a minute, and I won't have a cent coming in. Oh, Dave, I wish you believed in me. I'd feel so safe if you were here.*

Well, the security system will protect me. I just won't open the door to anyone until Ethan comes, so I'll be safe for now. I won't even feel secure at home alone any more. We have to install a really expensive set of locks. We'll probably be the only people in town with a deadbolt.

I need to call Lyons and report this. I know what he's going to say, but I want this on file. Maybe I'll bring a tape recorder to work and set it up to tape any more threats. And I certainly won't be dumb enough to throw away any anonymous letters. Astarte got several threats, so maybe I will too. Taunting the victim seems to be part of the Angel of Death's pattern.

Lyons was furious when she reached him. "You think I'm stupid, don't you? Another damned arrogant New Yorker looking down on us yokels. Well, it won't work on me, so don't even try!" He slammed down the phone.

She told herself, *You knew he'd react that way, so why do you feel so ashamed? I'm on my own, that much is clear, and any investigating that gets done, I'll have to do it.*

The person who made that call was definitely a religious fanatic, so it's time I looked into those born agains. Their planning meeting is tonight. I'm frightened, now, to go to the meeting and maybe run into that maniac, but what choice do I have? The cops won't look into it, and it's the only possible answer. God, I wish I had a gun. I wonder if there's something at home I can carry in my purse--one of Robert's sharp carving knives, perhaps.

Feeling ice cold, she lay huddled on the couch, Beastie at her feet. When Ethan arrived, laden with packages, she told him what had happened.

A worried look creased his face. "While we were driving back from the mall, I kept getting these scary images over and over about you, Jillian. I want you to be very careful."

Her fear level escalated. "What did you see?"

"It was a rifle sight--you know, one of those circles with the red cross hairs. First it focused on the outside of the trailer, then it moved inside and focused on you. It seems like a symbol, not an actual gun--at least I hope so--but my impression is that the

murderer is zeroing in on you. Don't let anyone in when you're alone here. I'll come as early as I can tomorrow."

When she told him her plan about going to the meeting, he closed his eyes a minute, searching for guidance. "I don't think you're in actual danger there, but it's not going to be pleasant. You'll have nightmares about it for a long, long time."

"I feel so vulnerable, Ethan. What can I do to be safe?"

"Remember the angels--you can always call on them."

Jail had completely wiped the angels from her mind, but she recalled how the ritual cleared the trailer of the violence of Astarte's murder. Now, she and Ethan did the chants over and over, invoking their protection for her and for all of them as they worked at the trailer. She felt calmer afterwards and was finally able to eat lunch.

Sitting next to her at the table, Ethan fiddled with his cards, looking embarrassed. "Is Robert, uhm, interested in me?"

"Why do you ask?" A good old social work diversion, she remembered.

"He's kind of moony around me. And he comes to work early, so we'll have more time together. Today at the mall, he followed me around like a lost puppy."

Robert was obsessed with Ethan--he talked of nothing else. Even though she adored Ethan too, it was becoming a bit of a bore. Still, since the subject had finally come up, she might as well bite the bullet and ask him. "Are you gay, Ethan?"

A cloud of sorrow passed over his face. "I'm nothing."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not gay. I'm not straight. I'm nothing. I don't seem to have any sexual feelings at all. I'd say I'm like a priest, only priests have sexual feelings, they just vow not to act on them. The good priests, anyway."

"I'm so sorry, Ethan."



"I think it was the aliens." His eyes met hers sadly. "I've heard they put implants into different parts of your brain and body for their experiments. I'm sure they deadened the sexual area of my brain."

This is awful, she thought. He'd rather believe aliens experimented him on *than to remember the sexual abuse he suffered at the hands of his abductor. It must have been horrific, or he wouldn't have complete amnesia about his childhood.*

Tears threatened, so she looked down at the floor and jammed her eyes sideways against the tear ducts to lock them. She'd learned that trick to keep from crying during the painful home evaluations for her foster care job. *I'm not touching the abuse*, she decided, *but it's time I talked to him about finding his folks.*

She said, "I've thought about what you told me, Ethan. I don't believe you're an alien, because you don't have any alien features. I believe that you're human and that you were taken from your home. And, regardless of how or why you were taken, I believe you have a set of heartbroken parents somewhere who've never given up hope

that you'll come back some day. You belong to a family who loves and misses you, and, now that you're out on your own, you should try to find them."

"I'd give anything to belong to a real family."

She told him, then, about Etan Patz. "I'm not saying you're him--it would be TOO strange if you were. But you ARE somebody. Maybe you could get in touch with one of the newsmagazine shows like *48 Hours*, and see if they could help you find out who you are."

"It might just work." He closed his eyes a moment, then his face lit up with a radiance that went beyond the earthly realm. "The angels," he said. "They do watch over this place. I feel them pulling for me, and I sense that they're going to help in the search. I **will** go looking, when this is all over. Maybe I'll even go to New York."

They hugged and cried together. "I'll miss you, Ethan," Jillian said, "but I'd love to see you find your home. And if it doesn't work, you can always come back to us. We'll make a family together."

HOTLINE TO HEAVEN
Chapter Twenty Seven

August 18



Jillian deliberately arrived fifteen minutes late at the Divine Guidance Church, so no one would have a chance to question her. She'd chosen her clothing carefully, finally settling on a white top and modestly long white skirt, and had tied a white scarf over her red hair to make it less conspicuous. When she said Martha had invited her, the lookout posted at the side door directed her down to the basement.

The lights were dim, and varnished paneling further darkened the windowless room. Dust and mildew hung in the air, catching in her throat and hurting her lungs. A group of about 15 formally dressed people stood around, talking quietly.

The woman who'd invited her came over. Once more, she was wearing a homemade white muslin dress. "I'm Martha--remember me? I'm so grateful that the Lord has brought you here tonight. What was your name again?"

"Pamela," Jillian lied, "but you can call me Pam."

Martha claimed her new recruit proudly, introducing her to some of the women, then led Jillian to a seat next to hers as the meeting came to order. The gawky man in the powder blue suit who'd been reading the Bible aloud at the demonstration turned out to be the minister. He led them in a stilted and lifeless version of Onward Christian Soldiers. *Isn't that supposed to be a rousing, joyful song*, Jillian wondered.

The minister reported that last week's demonstration at the metaphysical bookstore was a great success and that many customers turned away rather than cross their line. "If we could gather enough strength for a blockade every day, we could put that den of demons out of business. We need more visibility, to draw additional followers to our cause."

He continued, "It has been suggested that we mount a campaign against that 900 number in the marina, with their witches and soothsayers. Many in our town will support us, for god-fearing people are up in arms about the murder of that harlot who was bearing a child out of wedlock. Her soul will rot in hell, but the others have to be stopped too. We can't have our families exposed to such evil."

As he built a head of steam, condemning wanton sexuality, astrology, and fortune-telling, the crowd moaned and thrilled to the points he was making. Despite her revulsion, Jillian knew she must pretend to agree. She threw in some, "Praises be!" and murmured, "Yes, Jesus" along with them. She even assayed a loud "Amen" on her own, earning approving nods from Martha and her neighbors. *I'm doing well*, she congratulated herself. *I'm passing*.

Someone in the back said loudly, "We have one of them among us tonight."
She turned around, alarmed. Oh, God, no! It was the substitute postman who'd come to the trailer earlier.

He pointed at her. "That's the one. She's one of the Spawn of Satan who works on that Hotline to Hell. The Evil One sent her to spread his filth among us."

He rushed forward and yanked her from her seat by her wrist. "She's spying on us, but she's one of the Devil's own."

The crowd was on its feet, forming a ring around her, muttering angrily. When the preacher began reciting the Twenty Third Psalm, they joined in:

For yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.

The preacher intoned, "I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me."

The congregation responded, "I will fear no evil."

They shuffled in a circle around her, pointing crossed fingers her way. "I will fear no evil. Fear no evil. Fear no evil, yea Lord. I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me. Fear no evil....."



Jillian blinked as the crowd dissolved before her eyes, replaced by a jungle. She stood naked at the top of the flat stone pyramid, a silent crowd below. The main priest, in a huge feathered headdress and robe, lifted a knife to the heavens and called on the Feathered God to bless the sacrifice. Two lesser priests brought forward a beautiful youth dressed only in a loin cloth.

He looked at her, pleading silently, with Robert's eyes. She stood, helpless, as the priest cut out the youth's

heart and threw it to the cheering crowd to eat.

As they clamored for more, the head priest asked her if she were remorseful for preaching against the letting of the blood. She shook her head adamantly, knowing somehow, someday it had to stop. He raised the knife again, and she struggled, slipping on the bloody steps as the lesser priests forced her forward.

She floated above her lifeless body, clinging, still, to her faith. She told herself, one day human sacrifice will be no more than a footnote in the history of worship. My death will mean something if it causes even one person in that crowd to think about this terrible waste.

Her vision cleared, and she was back in the church basement. Panicking, she shoved the minister aside, burst out of the circle, and raced up the basement steps, past the lookout, and out the door. She jumped into the car, making sure all the door locks were down, and sped to an overlook on the bluff a few blocks away. Her heart pounding, she sat there a long time, trying to compose herself.

What's happening to me, she wondered. What was that scene with the sacrifice all about? It seemed Mayan, somewhere in Central America. Maybe, with all I've been through lately, I'm finally losing my grip on reality.

An inner voice whispered, "That was you in a past life."

"Is that you, Lady Jane?"

"It doesn't matter. Call me your Inner Knowingness--isn't that what you've always called me?"

"Was it really a flashback? I've never had any past life memories before."

"Have you not? What about those troublesome dreams you had as a child--the ones with everyone in old or exotic dress?"

She remembered, then, that she'd had several years of terrible nightmares, starting at age seven. She marveled, *those were past life memories, were they? By comparison, this lifetime seems like a piece of cake. And my Inner Knowingness was a spirit guide all along. Never thought I had any--not gifted that way. Not me.*

Drained, she drove home and undressed for bed. She was still so badly frightened, she had a hard time dropping off to sleep.

She was a pre-Reformation Catholic priest, in a long black robe and collar. Around the walnut paneled room, the cardinals sat in silent judgement. As expected, the voting had gone against her.

The vulpine bishop leaned forward and hissed, "We have already given you far too many chances. You must stop this heresy now. Stop questioning the supremacy of the pope, and stop advocating the priesthood of all believers."

Midge's eyes glared out of the bishop's face, as he told the waiting guards in silver breastplates, "Take him to the dungeon. If he survives until the New Year, perhaps he can be persuaded to recant."

The dungeon was pitch dark and freezing, water dripping from the stone walls. As the guards marched off and silence descended, the rats began moving in....



She shook herself awake, blood pounding in her ears. *No wonder I'm so freaked about by rats, she thought. Was that another past life flashback? Was Midge really the bishop? If it was, no wonder Midge and I took an immediate dislike to one another. We've had run-ins before.*

She remembered then that her dad had taught her how to wake herself instantly if she didn't like what was happening. Finally, with his help, the nightmares had tapered off, gone for good after his death. In those bereft years after he died, she'd believed he stood over her while she slept, like a guardian angel, to keep away those awful, gory dreams. Maybe he really had--maybe it wasn't just wishful thinking on her part after all. She fell asleep again, secure in the knowledge that she could wake up again if she must.

She was in a field of bright yellow mustard blossoms. She was in a clearing, a loud throng around her. At the center of the clearing was a burning pyre. A hooded figure, Ralph's eyes glittering through the mask, held a long staff in one hand and waited silently as the guards led forth a young woman with flaxen braids. He read the charges aloud, of the many spells she was supposed to have worked against women in childbirth, livestock, and heretofore faithful mates.

*As the crowd howled for her death, he raised the staff and signaled the guards. They bound the girl and threw her on the flames. As the fire began to singe her hair, she looked entreatingly at Jillian with Astarte's eyes. **Ma soeur! M'aidez.** Help me, sister.*

***Elle ne sait jamais se tair.** She never knows how to keep quiet. As flames consumed her sister, Jillian's heart wrenched in her chest, the smell of burning flesh rising in her gorge.*

The hooded man raised his staff once more and pointed at Jillian. The guards moved forward and bound her while she struggled, then carried her to the fire.

Jillian jerked herself awake again. You see, she realized, **I was** a witch before. *No wonder I've always felt such sorrow and fear at the bigotry against them. This is horrible, one flashback after another. My current situation has to be triggering them. I've never been in jail before, never had a death threat from a religious maniac, never been reviled by a bunch of born agains--at least not in this life. How many past lives could there be where I was persecuted for my beliefs?*

Inner Knowingness whispered, "A great many. You followed the path of questioning established religions many times, for you always sought your own truth and your own relationship to the Divine. You have spoken out, often and none too prudently, about abuses of power by the priesthood, whatever the religion might have been. Once a troublemaker, always a troublemaker."

It was a while before she was able to stop shaking. She curled up in a ball, repeating again and again, *For yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.*

She smiled at the irony. The people at the church tonight had used the Twenty Third Psalm against her, but it WAS a great comfort. After she chanted to invoke the angels, putting Michael at the foot of her bed to guard her, she finally dropped off.

The icy drizzle continued into the night. Her gray hair was sodden, and her bones ached. She was herself, still in this lifetime, but perhaps ten years into the future. She was immersed in a massive and prayerful crowd at the mall in Washington, DC. Armed troops hovered on the edges of the throng, ready to move in at any sign of disturbance. A vigil was in progress, one of many around the country, while a Constitutional



Convention met to draft a major revision of the Constitution, stripped of key individual rights.

She'd marched with the gay contingent to show support, though concerned friends warned she'd be photographed and singled out for investigation. She was wearing a loop of ribbon in memory of Robert, who'd succumbed to AIDS several years earlier.

Strangers embraced and wept together as word spread through the crowd that the convention had approved the most conservative of the proposals. The troops snapped to attention and, on command, started moving in...

Jillian quickly shook herself awake, oppressed by what she'd seen. *It was only a dream, she told herself, made up of bits and pieces of my own fears for the future. I worry about a religious backlash with Pluto in Sagittarius. Sagittarius represents religion and law, and Pluto often signifies power and control--talk about a deadly duo!*

I hope it was just a nightmare, because if it was a vision, we're all in deep doo-doo. Not just gays, but feminists and alternative health practitioners and astrologers and all us woowoo types. We'll be back full circle to witch hunts again before you know it. No, it couldn't be a vision--I don't HAVE visions. I'm not even a psychic, for God's sake. I have to stop hanging out with Ethan--this shit is contagious!

She got up then and rocked in the rocker, wishing Beastie were with her for comfort. When Robert came from work at 2:15, she told him about the death threat, her experience at the church, and her past life flashbacks, but not about the future. He consoled her, massaging the knots out of her neck and shoulders. He fixed a light meal of a mushroom omelet and sourdough toast, then gave her steamed milk with honey. With the meal and the security of knowing he was home, she was finally able to sink into a dreamless sleep.

HOTLINE TO HEAVEN
Chapter Twenty Eight

August 19

Jillian sat hunched over at her desk at the hotline, playing computer solitaire compulsively between calls to stay calm and keep her mind off her situation. Her eyes burned with lack of sleep, and her body was leaden. Beastie was draped over the monitor, his eyes closed, a paw dangling in front of the screen. When she rubbed his pudgy belly, he swiped at her half-heartedly, then rumbled in contentment.

*He's an old curmudgeon, she thought fondly, but he's **my** curmudgeon, and I love him. What would happen to Beastie if I went to jail--or if the Angel of Death got me? I know Robert wouldn't take him--he barely tolerates him. I can't see Ethan staying put long enough to make a home for him. I don't know anyone in town well enough to ask them. None of my New York friends can stand him. They claim he's the prototype for all the selfish, rotten men I've ever been involved with.*



Each time the phone rang, she jumped, afraid it would be another death threat. She'd hooked a tape recorder and suction mike to the phone, so that if the Angel of Death called again, she could prove it to Lyons. Of course, knowing his cynicism about her, he'd probably think she had Robert or Ethan fake the threat.

In her shattered state, she could barely focus on clients. She thought, after last night, if anyone ever deserved a mental health day, it's me. But if I don't show up--AND perform--Midge will fire me, and I still don't have a lawyer of my own. Mason has called and left messages, but I can't bring myself to return them.

I'm giving crummy service now. Half the time, the charts don't make any sense, I'm so spaced out, and I'm just telling clients what they want to hear. I pride myself on being a real pro, and yet I'm no better at this point than some cynical charlatan. I feel terrible about that, but my career is done for anyway. There's about a ninety percent chance that I'll either go to jail or be murdered in the near future, because I can't for the life of me see how I'll get out of this.

She fixed herself a cup of chamomile tea left over from Astarte's days there, hoping it would settle her nerves. She thought, *it does seem possible that someone in that bunch of fanatics is deranged enough to be the Angel of Death. The substitute mailman is certainly a candidate. He had to be the one that put the devil mask and flyer on our door--no doubt Ralph told him plenty about us. Still, if one of them is the killer, there's no way I can find out which one. My cover is blown--I couldn't go back, even if I could steel myself to do it. And neither Robert nor Ethan would convince them for a moment that they were serious Bible thumpers.*

Trying to get into a more hopeful frame of mind, Jillian asked herself, *if I get out of this mess, what would I want to do with my life? If I could do absolutely anything I wanted, what would I do? What color would my parachute be?*

It would be emerald green, she decided. The one place I'd go, if I could go absolutely anywhere, would be to Ireland. I'd love to see the place and find Dad's family. I know he had brothers and sisters in the West...the Malones of Spiddle, County Galway, they were.

It's too much to hope that I'd have a grandmother, and maybe none of my aunts and uncles would still be alive, but I'll bet I have cousins. When I was growing up, how I envied my friends their cousins and the good times they had when they came to visit. That's what I'd do--I'd look up my Irish cousins.

And why shouldn't I? I don't know where the money will come from, and I'll probably have to go on a shoestring, but when this is all over, I'm going save up and go to Ireland. I'll fulfill my Daddy's dream of going home once more.

She remembered pictures she'd seen, especially the stark beauty of the West--the Aran Islands, where the old Gaelic tongue was still spoken, the stony hills of Connemara, and the awesome Cliffs of Moher, battered by huge Atlantic waves. *I'll see it all, she promised herself.*

She cheered herself, then, by singing the sentimental old Irish tunes her father used to perform. There was *The Last Rose of Summer* and *Galway Bay*. *And who was it, she asked herself, Who Put the Overalls in Mrs. Murphy's Chowder? I really don't recall who did it.*

Then, there was When Irish Eyes are Smiling, which Dad always said was written just for me:

*When Irish eyes are laughing,
All the world seems bright and gay,
But when Irish eyes are smiling,
Sure they'll steal your heart away.*

I loved to hear him sing Danny Boy. That's right, Danny was his brother's name, and that's why he always sang that one. So when I go to Spiddle, I'll look for a Daniel Malone.

Comforted by the songs and by her resolve to go to Ireland, she was able to focus better on the calls. Still, as the morning wore on, she became more and more anxious without knowing why.

She realized, *I'm nervous because I can't bear to face Ralph. That nosey vulture is spreading gossip about me all over town--reveling in his fifteen minutes of fame. He must enjoy my predicament. I don't even want to let him in. Maybe I won't--just not answer when he rings. She sighed. If I do that, he'll complain to Midge, and I can't afford any more problems with her. Worse, he'd decide something terrible was going on in here, another murder maybe, and call the cops. No, I have to open the door.*



Ethan promised he'd come as early as he could. I'll call and ask him to hurry. The line was continuously busy when she dialed, over and over. She asked the operator to check, but the phone was off the hook. He does that when he's meditating, she remembered. I only hope he arrives before Ralph, so he can take over the polite chit chat.

Ralph showed up early, however. She hesitated a long moment before answering, arguing with herself and trying to quell an inexplicable dread. *It's those fanatics last night and all those bizarre past life dreams, she told herself. That's right-- Ralph was one of the executioners. I wonder if I really have known him before.*

She unlocked the door, unwillingly, on the third ring, and pretended to be busy with a call, but Ralph stood there, arms folded, wanting to talk. Finally, she gave up on faking the reading and hung up the phone. Her eyes lit on the cork board in her cubicle. She'd forgotten about the cross she'd kept for him.

"Oh, Ralph, I found something of yours." She unpinned the cross from the board and cupped it in her hand, looking down at it. What a weird thing for a man to wear.

His eyes bulged. "YOU TOUCHED MY MOTHER'S CROSS!" He snatched it from her and put it in his pocket.

"I didn't mean to. You dropped it, is all."

"YOU DARED TO TOUCH MY MOTHER'S CROSS? YOU WHORE OF SATAN!"

"Don't get excited, Ralph. You lost it, but my cat found it. It was under the couch."



UNDER THE COUCH. IN THE ANTEROOM, NOT THE CONFERENCE ROOM. RIGHT WHERE ASTARTE'S BODY HAD LAIN. Jillian's hair stood on end, as everything fell into place.

In all my contempt for Ralph, she thought dazedly, I never once suspected him, but that's why he kept trying to get me in trouble. Astarte would have let Ralph in without hesitation. And the letters Ethan kept seeing in his visions of her--she was trying to say it was Ralph. No wonder he'd fainted the day of the ritual!

The words escaped, unbidden. "You killed her."

"I eliminated her. She was a Whore of Satan. Like you."

She felt disbelief, dismay. "You killed her?"

His eyes were glazed now. The words rasped in his throat.

I warned her to change or die.

I gave her three chances.

She continued to sin.

Then she went to her rest, and peace was restored.

She was struck with sorrow for Astarte's needless death, compassion for this crazed man. "So, you're the Angel of Death."

He nodded gravely. "Yes, I told you before that I was named for Raphael, but you didn't understand. I *am* the Angel of Death. I was chosen to serve God. He needs me to eliminate sin from the world."

"You need help."

"You can't help. I work alone. On His orders. How can filth like you help eliminate sin?"

She remembered Jennie, the young woman from the metaphysical bookstore who'd disappeared. She'd been staying on a boat down in the marina, so Ralph could very well have known her. "What about Jennie? Did you, uhm, eliminate her, too?"

"The Whore of Satan who worked at that hellish bookstore? Yes, God chose me to eliminate her too.

*I warned her to change or die.
I gave her three chances.
She continued to sin.
Then she went to her rest, and peace was restored.
But there is so much sin now, I can never rest.*

His glittering eyes focused on her, and she knew he was moments from attacking. Behind her back, she groped under her desk and hit the alarm button for the security system. She thought, *hopefully, that will bring the cops. Let's just pray the person on the switchboard isn't in the john.*

She moved away from the desk so she wouldn't get trapped, then circled in front of him. He turned as she did, his back to the cubicle.

She said, "I know I'm not worthy, Raphael, but the holy angels can help you. Let's call on them."

She began chanting loudly.

Eee Nu Rah
Eee Nu Rah
Eee Nu Rah
Zay

She followed with the one to summon specific angels:

Gah Raphael Nah
Gah Mik-ay-el Nah
Gah Uriel Nah
Gah Gabriel Nah
Zay

Strengthened, she started over again, even louder.

Momentarily stunned by the sound of the chant, the Angel of Death recovered. "STOP THAT HEATHEN MAGIC, YOU WHORE!"

He reached out, grabbed her throat and began to squeeze. Gasping for air, Jillian struggled, trying to pull his hands off her neck. She pushed him backwards, toward the cubicle, but her throat burned, and her lungs spasmed.

She kept chanting inwardly. *If I die now, she thought, at least the angels will take me. Daddy, Daddy, please save me. Gah Mik-ay-el Nah, Gah Mik-ay-el Nah, Gah Mik-ay-el Nah.*

Beastie, perched on the monitor, began hissing loudly, warning of his usual aggressive response to loud, quarrelsome voices. Jillian continued to fight, pushing Ralph away from her, toward the desk, but his hands dug deeper. Black spots began swimming in front of her eyes.

If the police don't come soon, she thought, I'm a goner. We've never had to use that alarm, so I don't even know if it's working.



Beastie let out a fierce howl and leapt onto Ralph's back. He dug his claws in, yowling at the top of his lungs, and held on tight.

Ralph writhed in pain, let go of Jillian, and tried to wrench the cat off his back. "Get that demon off me!"

Jillian ran to the trailer door and flung it open, pounding down the steps and into the dusty road. She looked back, but Ralph wasn't following, still wrestling with Beastie. She panted as she fled, yelling for help.

A siren flared, and a police car screeched to a halt beside her. As the door flew open, she gasped, "Help me, officer! He's trying to kill me!" She threw herself into the arms of the uniformed cop who sprang out of the car.

It was Dave.

Chest heaving, Jillian told him what had happened. He told her to get into the car, for protection, and radioed for backup. While he waited, he stood outside the car, gun ready, but Ralph didn't emerge, though the trailer door stood wide open.

When a second and a third police car arrived, Dave took charge. *He's good with ranting, raving alcoholics, Jillian thought, but that doesn't mean he can handle a Full-blown psychotic. Please, please, be careful,* she urged him silently.

He put away his gun, but was accompanied by two brawny officers with guns at their sides when he went inside. Jillian waited anxiously, but heard no disturbance, and no one came out for what seemed an interminable amount of time. Unable to contain herself, she got out, crept cautiously to the door, and peeked inside.

Ralph sat on the sofa in the anteroom, sobbing loudly. Dave was beside him, patting his shoulder, while the other officers, guns still ready, stood back far enough to shoot if they had to.

Ralph howled, "MOOOMMY, MOOMMMY, why did you leave?"

Dave told him, "It hurts real bad to lose a parent. I've been there."

Ralph snuffled. "She was all I had, but I was sinful and lusted after women, so she left me."

He howled again, inconsolably. "MOOOOMMY, MOOMMY."

Dave squeezed his shoulder. "You feel awful, I can tell. Why don't you come along with us so you can lie down and rest?"

That's just the way he was with Jimmy, she marveled. Doesn't he worry that he could get hurt that way? But he's tender and real with them, full of concern, and they respond to his kindness. It makes you wonder what hell he went through with that alcoholic father of his.

Dave led Ralph to a police car, an arm around him, and locked him in the back seat. The other cops followed tightly, guns in their hands in case it went sour.

Then Dave came back, furious--now that the danger was past--that she'd left the car. "This guy almost killed you--plus your presence could have set him off all over again. What were you thinking, Jillian?"

"I couldn't just sit and wait. I had to see what was happening."

"You're smarter than that." He shook his head in frustration. "Go home, why don't you? We'll need a statement later, but we'll be tied up with him for a while, and there's no reason for you to stay. We'll take him to the crisis cell at the county jail and get the mental health team to evaluate him. It's obvious that he's completely lost it. Probably been holding on by a thread for a long time--it took such a small thing to finally send him over the line."

"It was probably his mother's death, last November, that set it all in motion." Jennie had come to town soon after that, Jillian realized. She told Dave about her and about Ralph's confession to that killing, too.

"Damn," Dave said, "He was on his way to becoming a full blown serial killer! Good thing we got him when we did."

Feeling a surprising pity, she asked, "What will happen to him?"

"He'll probably wind up at Western State Hospital, in a ward for the criminally insane. He's kind of pathetic, really."

"Go on home," he urged her more gently. "Your nerves must be shot. I'll be off duty in a couple hours, and I'll come over and tell you what happens." He left to tend to Ralph.

Beastie was backed up against the wall in the anteroom, still hissing intermittently, his tail lashing wildly, his fur standing on end.

"Shoo, shoo, old fellow," she told him. "The bad man can't hurt us any more. You drove him away."

She picked him up, trying to calm him, but he scratched her hand. Sucking the blood from the cut to clean it, she crooned his praises until his fur settled down and he nuzzled into her armpit. Then she took her hero home.

HOTLINE TO HEAVEN
Chapter Twenty Nine

August 19

Robert was just getting up when she came home with Beastie. Freshly showered, a thick white terry robe setting off his black hair, he carried a whiff of Givenchy Gentleman with him. "What's wrong, Jill-Jill? You're pale as a ghost!"

She told him about Ralph being the Angel of Death who killed Astarte and about the cross that had triggered Ralph to attack. As Robert gasped and exclaimed in horror, she recounted her near strangulation and how the alarm button had summoned Dave.

He said, "So, Dave WAS your knight in shining armor!"

"No, Robert, it was Beastie!"

When she explained what had happened, he marveled, "There IS some good in That Cat after all! I'll have to remember this the next time the little sneak thief filches my jewelry. Thank God, you're safe! Was it Ralph, then, that vandalized the trailer and left the devil mask?"

"I do think he was the vandal, but I'm pretty certain that substitute carrier pasted the flyer on the door and left the devil mask. We'll probably never know for sure."

"This explains all the mysteries but one," Robert told her. "There's something I've been puzzled about all these months. I've asked Ethan to see what he picks up about it, but he doesn't have a clue either."

"What's that?"

"Who cleans the trailer?"

She thought about it. She'd never once seen anyone cleaning the trailer, yet it was always spotless. "You're right, Robert. That IS weird! It couldn't be Midge. Maybe it's Ethan's ETs." They dissolved into giggles.

He sighed dramatically. "I wonder if they'd take on the house, too. I could use some help!"

"Oh, Lord, I'm sorry! I know I've been a terrible slob lately, but I've just been so miserable. I promise I'll do better from now on."

"Where have I heard that before? HONEY!!! I just hope Dave is as good a wife as I am, or the two of you will PERISH, relying on your domestic skills." He started a batch of French toast for their breakfast.

Leaning against the doorpost watching him, she shook her head dubiously. "Just because I'm cleared of the murder doesn't mean we'll get together."

"Come on, Girlfriend, the cards never lie. We're talking the Two of Cups here! Plus the Ten of Cups AND the Ten of Pentacles."

He whipped the eggs into froth. "I'll probably have to drive all the way to Seattle for material for my dress! But it's worth it--it isn't every day I get to be maid of honor at my best friend's wedding."

While Robert worked on breakfast, Jillian gave in to the impulse to call Joan Cabot. She told her about Ralph's confessions and, at long last, about Astarte's pregnancy, bringing on fresh tears.

"I'd give anything to have known my grandchild," Joan sighed. "I miss Astarte so. Did George Mason tell you? We've decided to use the trust fund to make a movie about her spiritual journey and her death."

"No, when I had dinner with him, he was thinking it should be the story of his life as a redeemed sinner."

Joan laughed through her tears, and it was the same tinkling laugh that had been one of Astarte's charms. Jillian had the distinct impression that Astarte was chiming in, in celestial amusement, from the astral plane.

"Can you believe George?" Joan asked. "We had to talk him out of it, ever so tactfully. But we were delighted with what he'd done with the fund. He presented us with a formal accounting and a proposal on the movie, and we were very impressed with his work. He'll be involved in the project, on the production end."

She added, "Midge says she'd like to invest in the movie too, as a way of remembering Astarte. I'm looking forward to working with her. She's an old hand in Hollywood, and she's such a business whiz, she'll give us good advice."

So Mason didn't embezzle the money, after all, Jillian concluded. She told Joan, "It will be a wonderful memorial to Astarte. Please let me know how it goes."

Joan signed off by saying, "If you ever come to L.A., we'll insist on you staying with us."

Later, Jillian and Robert lingered over the last of their breakfast and a pot of Earl Grey tea and wondered what would happen to the hotline if it was picketed and Midge got out.

"For sure," she said, "I'm transferring over to that line you used to work for as soon as I pay off my debt to her."

"And me right along with you. HONEY!! I'll be glad to see the backside of Midge McCullough for the last time."

Remembering what Joan had said about the movie, Jillian thought, *no, it doesn't sound like we've heard the last of Midge and her business enterprises, even if she does unload the hotline. She'll be a mover and a shaker in this town for the rest of her life-- and she'll probably outlast me.*

Dave arrived then, and she offered him some tea and introduced them. "You two never did meet, since Robert works at night."

Robert shivered in delight at Dave's dark good looks. "You told me plenty about him, but you never said he was such a HUNK!"

She told him, "Behave yourself. Would you do me a big favor and cover the rest of my shift? I'm just not up to it."

He looked first at Dave and then at her, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively. "Of course. You two need to be alone. I'll fill Ethan in on the whole horror story." He asked Dave, "But first, what's happening about Ralph?"



"We took him to the county jail, so the mental health team could have a look at him. They said he was a paranoid schizophrenic in an acute psychotic state. We kept reminding him of his rights, but he confessed to both murders--Astarte's and that Jennie Olson you told me about."

Jillian filled Robert in on Jennie and her disappearance. "Did you find anything of Jennie's in the house?"

"We got a search warrant and found a knapsack that belonged to her. There were two pairs of panties on this weird altar, so we thought one must be hers and one was the pair that was missing from Astarte's body. The DNA tests should confirm it."

"An altar," she sighed. "He surely worshiped a God I wouldn't recognize. What else was on it?"

"An old Bible and Astarte's picture from the newspaper. Then there was an old photo from about 25 years back--one of those tintypes--of a woman with long, curly blonde hair, a lot like Astarte. Lyons knew the woman and said it was Ralph's mother."

"I guess that's how his fixation on blondes arose. I wonder what he did with Jennie's body."

"He had a journal--full of crazy ranting and ravings about being the Angel of Death. It said he'd buried her in his mother's backyard garden. We'll be asking for a warrant to dig up the yard."

Jillian asked him, "Is there any way to find Jennie's folks and let them know what happened to her?"

With a tender glance, Dave said, "You really feel for her, don't you? We already checked, but there's nothing on NCIC's missing persons registry. You have to face the fact that she may not have any folks who care about her--otherwise she wouldn't have been a drifter."

At Jillian's stricken look, he relented. "I know the gals at the Port Townsend marina office pretty well, and I can get them to check the records on that boat slip to see who owned the houseboat she was staying on."

"When I find out, I'll ask the coast guard to radio all the marinas in the San Juan Islands to find the owners. Then I'll go over and talk to them to see what they know about her and where she came from. I'd have to borrow a bigger boat--mine's not the right size to cross that channel safely. Want to go along?"

"I'd love to go. It would make me feel better to know we'd done all we could for her. Then, too, I've been dying to see Friday Harbor." She was moved that he cared about Jennie, too, and the implication of a future for the two of them lifted some of the weight of the past several weeks from her chest.

Robert dressed hurriedly and left, giving her a squeeze and whispering in her ear, "Go for it, Sister!"

When he'd gone, Dave told her, "I didn't want to say this in front of your friend, but that journal was full of future plans. Lofton intended to kill you first and then the two men, saying the Lord condemned wicked sodomites like them to Hell. It's a good thing he snapped when he did."

The revelation brought back the horror of being attacked, which the comforting interval with Robert had pushed aside. Jillian shook uncontrollably and broke down and cried.

Dave put his arms around her. "I'm so glad you're safe." He rocked her until the shaking stopped, then gave her a tender kiss. "To think I almost lost you."

She responded hesitantly, then more avidly to the kiss. Suddenly, surprisingly, she found her Irish temper flaring. "It'd be your own fault if you did lose me! Why didn't you believe I was innocent?" She pushed him away.

Shock, then remorse crossed his face. "You're right to be mad. I've been a moron."

"You've been a world class, state of the art moron! After all we shared, how could you believe I'd kill someone?"

He looked down at the floor, thinking it over, and sighed. "It must be residue from the divorce. I thought Lyons was nuts at first, suspecting you, but when he showed me that receipt from the Castle, I was so jealous, I just lost it. Guess I still need my shrink don't I?"

"You need your damned head examined, all right!" She paced the floor, furious, then gradually calmed down as she remembered how much she'd missed him and what they'd been like together.

Sensing her shift in mood, Dave came over and put his hand on her shoulder. "I've been so miserable since we broke up, feeling like I'd made the worst mistake of my life. But I knew I needed to sort things out, and then the murder investigation got in the way. Please be patient with me. I do love you, no matter how badly I acted. I was just afraid."

When Jillian hooted, he shook his head in disgust at his own cowardice. "Sounds funny for a cop, doesn't it? I can talk down a violent drunk or cool out a raving psychotic without blinking an eye. But, there I was, scared to my eyeteeth by one of the sweetest ladies I've ever met. Yep, I'll be on that shrink's couch for a good long while. Can you forgive me?"

His dark eyes locked onto hers entreatingly, and she began to get lost in them. "Maybe," she said. "Maybe I'll forgive you." *But I'm not so sure I'll forget*, her Saturn added.

Cut him some slack, Venus urged. *This may be your last chance for love.*

Besides, Mars chimed in, *he really IS a hunk!*

Having taken counsel from half the solar system, Jillian surrendered to his embrace. *I forgot what a fabulous kisser he is*, she thought.

She led him hand in hand to her bedroom. They shut the door firmly on Beastie, who spat at them, clearly believing a hero deserved better than that.

They kissed again, at length, and she playfully began to strip him, finding the uniform erotic. Taking off his holster, she told him, "Let me divest you of your office."

As she pulled him down onto the bed, he said, "I don't have any protection with me. Did I leave anything here?"

Deep in a romantic haze, she struggled to remember, then shook her head.

"We shouldn't be doing this, then," he protested. Her fingers told him otherwise. "Come on, darling. Let me get dressed and go get something. I don't want anything to happen to you."

She looked at him suspiciously. "We had the tests before, and we were both HIV negative. I haven't been with anyone since then. Have you?"

"Hell, no. I've been off licking my wounds like a good doggie. But I don't want to take a chance on getting you pregnant."

"I'm over forty, and I've never been pregnant. I'm probably not even fertile any more. What could happen?" *What kind of crazy fool are you, she asked herself. You've never taken a risk like this in your life.*

As she persisted in her explorations, he resigned himself to the inevitability. Not verbal about love making, he suggested self-consciously, "We could, uhm, just use our mouths."

"Don't even think of it. I've wanted this moment for so long, I wouldn't stop for anything."

At the far reaches of the solar system, Pluto shook a finger knowingly.



They surrendered, then, to the pent-up longing of the past several weeks, releasing with little moans of bliss all the tension over nearly losing each other. In Dave's capable hands, Jillian climaxed again and again, before he finally let his own passion burst at the crest of the highest wave of excitement yet. Lying together tenderly afterwards, they dreamily stroked each other's bodies, discovering secret planes and crevices.

It's so good, Jillian sighed contentedly. He's such a delectable man, and because of my hang-up on Gary, we almost broke up for good.

Dave was propped up on one elbow, caressing her hair. He asked her, "How soon can we get married?"

Her heart was so full of joy, it felt like it would burst. "I've always dreamed of a Christmas wedding."

He kissed her eyelids tenderly. "Christmas it is."

Shut up, Pluto, Jillian enjoined. You're just a snowball at the outer edge of the Solar system. What do you have to do with anything?

* * * * *

Note: If you enjoyed this, don't miss the second Jillian Malone novel, *Angel in Peril*. Jillian's life path takes on some dramatic twists—it turns out she should have paid attention to Pluto, after all. She joins a prosperity seminar, led by a young metaphysical speaker, and the seminar turns out to be a hotbed of romantic intrigue and mayhem but also a catalyst for growth for all the participants. To follow Jillian's further adventures, order *Angel in Peril* from Moon Maven Publications:

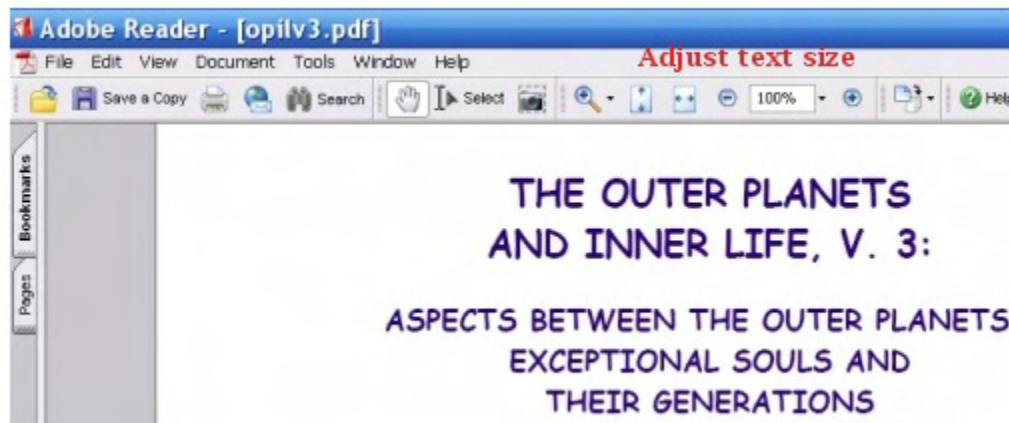
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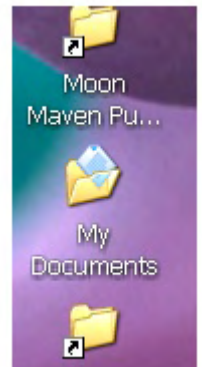
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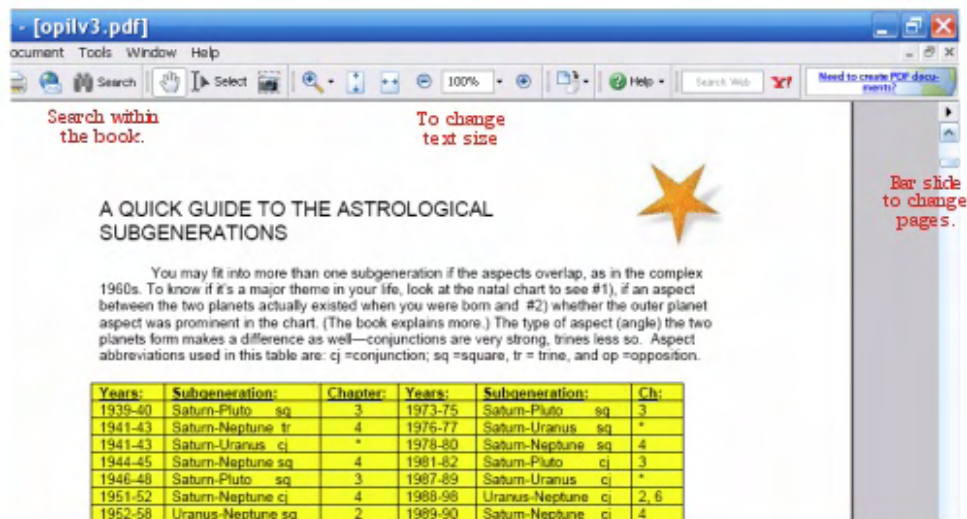
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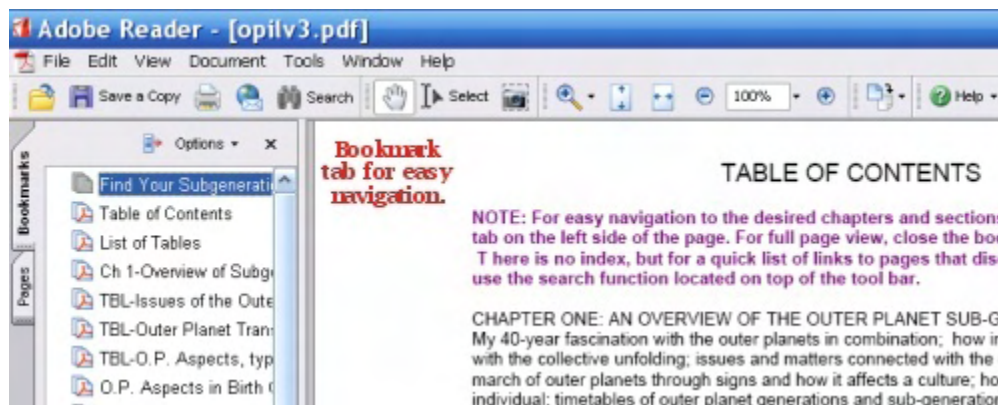
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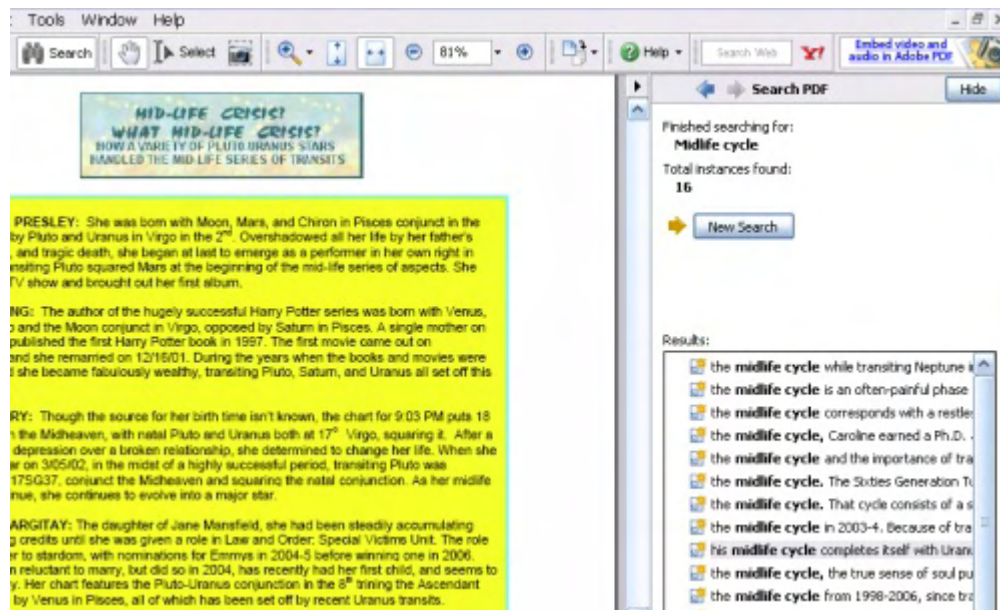


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Donna Cunningham,

LEARN YOUR ASTROLOGICAL



A Glossary of Astrological Terms
by Donna Cunningham



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Donna Cunningham, an internationally respected astrologer with over 35 years' experience, is the author of 19 books on metaphysical topics. Listed in several Who's Who volumes, she has given seminars on astrology around the world and won the prestigious Regulus Award at the 1998 UAC. She also has a Master's Degree in Social Work from Columbia University. She uses this combined approach in her "Dear Abby" type column in Dell Horoscope and her ongoing series of articles in The Mountain Astrologer. Donna still does personal consultations by phone to stay in touch with the ever-unfolding patterns of the Cosmos.

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**Donna's Hard Copy Books from Red Wheel/Weiser:
1-800-423-7087**

Donna wrote many hard copy books, but only the following are in print:

How to Read Your Astrological Chart: Aspects of the Cosmic Puzzle;
Red Wheel/Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1999
Healing Pluto Problems; Red Wheel/Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1986

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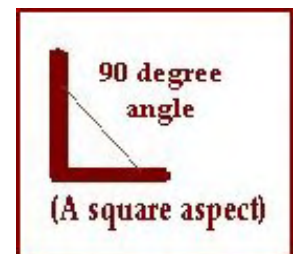
A GLOSSARY OF BASIC ASTROLOGICAL TERMS:
From *An Astrological Guide to Self-Awareness*
Moon Maven Publications, <http://www.moonmavenpublications.com>
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The brief definitions that follow are not meant to be comprehensive, but should quickly orient you to the basic meaning of the astrological terms you come across in your reading. We believe that no student should be left behind! If you're reading a text with advanced material, you may want to print these pages out and use them as a reminder when you come across a term that is not yet familiar to you. When one of the definitions contains underlined words, this indicates that there are also definitions for the underlined words. After the glossary are several tables to help in your studies.

For more in-depth explanations of concepts mentioned in this booklet, you might like Donna's ebook, ***An Astrological Guide to Self-Awareness***. Meant for beginning to intermediate students of astrology, it includes chapter on each of the planets in the zodiac, the twelve houses, aspects, and transits. In its original, hard-copy form, it introduced several generations of students to the foundations of astrology and was translated into many foreign languages. The richly-illustrated 2005 edition has been updated for the new millennium and for easier access by the novice. It is available at: <http://www.moonmavenpublications.com>.

Ascendant: The zodiac sign on the cusp of the 1st house is called the Ascendant or Rising sign. This sign, determined by the precise time and place of birth, is one of the three most important factors in the chart, along with the Sun and Moon. It represents our outer personality, the characteristics people first remark on when meeting us. It also shows the mask we wear in social situations, which may or may not show our true nature. Our physical appearance often reflects the Ascendant rather than the Sun.

Aspects: The zodiac is a circle of 360°, and the angles formed between two planets in an astrological chart—like 30°, 60°, or 90°--are called aspects. The effect of an aspect is to blend the energies of the two planets together in a way that modifies the way they both function. The type of connection between the planets is determined by the nature of the angle. For instance, a square (90° angle) is generally a stressful aspect, while a trine (120° angle) is usually harmonious.



Astrological generations: People born during the time the outer planets Uranus, Neptune, or Pluto were in a particular sign are classed as an astrological generation. For instance, most of those born between 1956-72 have Pluto in the sign Virgo. They are called the Pluto in Virgo generation.

Astrological sub-generations: Within a particular astrological generation, there are

often groups born with two or more of the outer planets in [aspect](#) to one another. For instance, many who belong to the Pluto in Virgo generation also have Uranus in Virgo close by, [conjunct](#) Pluto. I call that a sub-generation.

[Benefic planets, benefics](#): Venus and Jupiter are traditionally labeled benefics by astrologers, meaning that they are benign forces that bring good fortune our way, yet both have their ill effects when misused. (Also see [malefics](#).)

[Cardinal signs](#): The signs Aries, Cancer, Libra, and Capricorn. They are [square](#) or [opposite](#) one another and thus form challenging aspects.

[Conjunction, conjunct](#): A conjunction is formed when two planets stand within range of one another in the zodiac, anywhere from 0-10° apart. When planets are conjunct, their energies and functions are blended, as though they were one. This is a powerful [aspect](#), and when the Sun is conjunct another planet, that planet is very important. The person takes on some qualities of the sign the planet is associated with—with Mercury, for example, that sign would be Gemini.



[Cusp](#): The cusp of a house is the border between it and the adjoining house, e.g. between the end of the 2nd house and the beginning of the 3rd. The zodiac sign on the cusp of a house describes, in part, how you function in that area of life. For example, if you have Libra on the cusp of a house, you will show some Libra qualities in matters related to that house. The term cusp also refers to the dividing line between two zodiac signs, and so to hear that someone is born on the cusp of Aries and Taurus means that the Sun on their birthday was either in the last degrees of Aries or the first degrees of Taurus.

[Degrees](#): The zodiac is a circle divided into 360°, and many of the more technical facets of the astrological chart are based on these divisions. Each of the twelve signs contains 30°, and each degree is further divided into minutes (') and seconds ("). Thus you may note that there is a planet in your chart at, say, 25° Aries 55'.

[Detriment](#): This is the sign in which a planet's inherent characteristics have the most difficulty being expressed freely. A planet is in detriment in the sign opposite the one it rules—e.g. Mars rules Aries, and so Mars is in detriment in Aries' opposite sign, Libra.

[Elements](#): Based on a medieval system, the zodiac signs are divided into four elements—fire, earth, air, and water. Fire and air work well together (air keeps a fire burning, and fire warms up cold air), but they do not complement water or earth. Water and earth complement each other—no crops would grow without both—but they do not blend so well with fire and air. The fire signs are Aries, Leo, and Sagittarius. The earth signs are Taurus, Virgo, and Capricorn. The air signs are Gemini, Libra, and Aquarius. The water signs are Cancer, Scorpio, and Pisces.

Ephemeris: A reference book, calendar, or computer program that gives the daily positions of the planets in the solar system. An ephemeris is used to calculate birth charts as well as [transits](#).

Exaltation: In a traditional method of evaluating the strength of planets in various zodiac signs, *exaltation* is the sign where a planet is supposedly at its best, including Venus in the sign Pisces, Mars in the sign Capricorn, and the Moon in Taurus.

Fall: In a traditional system of rating the strengths of the planets, a planet is in its *fall* in the sign where it is supposedly at its weakest or worst—the sign opposite the one where it is [exalted](#). Since Venus is exalted in Pisces, it is in its fall in Virgo.

Fixed signs: The signs Taurus, Leo, Scorpio, and Aquarius are known as the fixed signs because they work hard to consolidate and preserve the things that matter to them. They can be inflexible and resist change, but without some fixity, we would be forever shifting.

Grand Cross: A rectangular formation consisting of at least four planets in [hard aspect](#) to one another—it involves both squares and oppositions between planets in the same sign type: [cardinal](#), [fixed](#), or [mutable](#). It is considered extremely difficult, especially when the [outer planets](#) are part of the picture.

Grand Trine: A Grand Trine is an equilateral triangle in the astrological chart made up of three planets about 120° from each other. It requires planets from all three of the signs in a particular element. For instance, a Grand Trine in air would include at least one planet in Gemini, one in Libra, and one in Aquarius. The Grand Trine is supposed to be an extremely fortunate combination.

Glyph: A shorthand symbol that astrologers use to represent a planet, sign, or aspect. An example is the glyph for Mars, shown here.



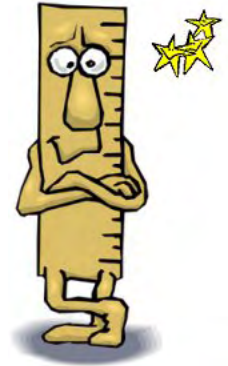
Hard aspect: When two planets are combined by angular relationships that are considered difficult, they are said to be in hard [aspect](#) to one another, meaning their energies are not in harmony. Usually these difficulties are created by tension between the two zodiac signs and [houses](#) involved in the aspect. Hard aspects include the [square](#), [quincunx](#), and [opposition](#). The [conjunction](#) may or may not be a hard aspect, depending on the planets involved.

House, Houses: The astrological chart is a circle divided into twelve pie-shaped wedges called houses. Each house represents a number of related areas of life (e.g. the 7th house represents marriage, business partnerships, and other committed relationships.)

House cusp: The cusp of a house is the border between it and the adjoining house, e.g. between the end of the 2nd house and the beginning of the 3rd. The zodiac sign on the cusp of a house describes, in part, how you function in that area of life.

House Position: The house of the chart where a given planet is placed; e.g. if Jupiter's **glyph** is found in the 2nd house, then that is its house position.

House Ruler: The ruler of a house is the planet that rules the sign on the cusp (beginning edge) of that house. If Neptune ruled the 10th house, this would mean that the sign Pisces, which Neptune rules, would be on the 10th house cusp, also known as the Midheaven. With Leo on the 7th house cusp, the Sun is the ruler, so for more information about this particular 7th house, you would look at the sign and position of the Sun. The ruler of the 1st house (a.k.a. the **Ascendant**) is considered particularly important—in traditional astrology, it was called the Chart Ruler.



Impersonal Planets: The outermost planets in the solar system are Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto. They move so slowly through the signs that they are a signature of the various **astrological generations**. They are also referred to as **outer planets**.

Inconjunct: (150° or five signs apart) This aspect—also known as the quincunx—usually involves two signs that are absolutely at odds with each other and therefore are difficult to reconcile. There is no natural connection between the two signs by **element** or by the cardinal/fixed/mutable division of signs.

Inner Planets: The innermost planets in our solar system—the Sun, Mercury, Venus, the Moon, Mars, and Jupiter. They move more rapidly than the **outer planets** Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto, and so their positions in the chart define what makes us individuals. Saturn is at a pivotal position, between the inner and outer planets, and takes almost 29 years to move through all twelve signs.

Major Configuration: A triangular formation involving three or more planets in aspect to one another. Depending on the nature of these aspects

Mercurial people include not only those with Gemini Sun, Moon, or Ascendant, but also those with many aspects to Mercury in their charts or with several planets in the 3rd house of the chart, the house of communication.

Midheaven: The cusp of the 10th house, the career point at the top of the chart, among the most powerful points in the horoscope. It is determined by the precise time and place of birth and changes by a degree every four minutes, and is so sensitive that transits to that point can correlate with profound changes in our career and status in the world. Both the sign on the Midheaven and any planets that aspect that point are powerful career indicators.

Multiple conjunction: When three or more planets are close together, whether they fall into the same sign or house or not, their energies are blended into a powerful whole. While the **orb** for a conjunction between two planets is usually 8-10°, a multiple conjunction

can be strung together over a wide range, so long as each planet is conjunct the adjoining one.

Mutable signs: Gemini, Virgo, Sagittarius and Pisces are called mutable, in that they are flexible and have diverse interests, so their focus changes often. They adapt more easily to new situations and demands, and yet they can lack perseverance.

Mutual reception: This occurs when two planets are in the signs **ruled** by each other. For example, from 2003-2010, Neptune—the ruler of Pisces—is in Aquarius, which is ruled by Uranus, at the same time that Uranus is in Pisces.

Neptunians: This group includes those with Pisces or the 12th house strongly emphasized in their birth charts because the Sun, Moon, or several planets falls in either Pisces or the 12th house. Also included are people with Neptune aspecting the Sun, Moon, Ascendant, Midheaven or several planets.

Opposition: (180° or six signs apart, plus or minus 8°.) This can be an aspect of conflict, since two very opposite sets of needs and desires are involved, like Libra's desire for relatedness and Aries need for self-development. However, signs opposite each other are compatible in two ways: they are in complementary elements and operate in the same modality (a cardinal sign is opposite another cardinal sign, and so on). When expressed properly, opposite signs complement and fulfill each other.



Outer planets: The outermost planets in the solar system are Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto. They move so slowly through the signs that they are a signature of the various **astrological generations**. They are also referred to as **impersonal planets**.

Out-of-sign aspects: When a planet is at the very beginning or the very end of a sign, it may form an aspect that is easy to overlook to a planet at the beginning or end of another sign. For instance, Mercury at 2° of the water sign, Pisces forms out-of-sign **trine** to Neptune at 27° of the air sign, Libra. Despite the change of signs, Mercury is only 5° past the exact trine to Neptune—that is, within the standard 5° **orb** for a trine. Since the trine would usually be between two signs of the same **element** there is a mixed influence, more difficult to integrate and understand.

Personal signs: According to a system Richard Idemon taught, the first four signs—Aries through Cancer—are called the personal signs, meaning that the people who have these signs strong in their charts tend to be absorbed in matters related to the self. Also see **social** and **universal signs**.

Plutonians: These include people with several planets in Scorpio, a number of planets in the related 8th house of the birth chart, many aspects to natal Pluto, or Pluto near the [Ascendant](#), [Midheaven](#), or aspecting the Sun or Moon.

Progressions: Refers to how the planetary positions unfolded in the days and weeks after birth. In one simple form of progression, called Day for a Year, the positions of the planets on the tenth day after birth correspond to the conditions in your life at age ten. We will not be dealing with progressions because I don't often use them.

Quincunx: (150° or five signs apart) This aspect—also known as the inconjunct—usually involves two signs that are absolutely at odds with each other and therefore are difficult to reconcile. There is no natural connection between the two signs by [element](#) or by the cardinal/fixed/mutable division of signs.

Retrograde: occurs at various times of the year in the orbits all of the planets in the solar system--excluding the sun and moon. In these periods, which can last several months for the slower-moving outer planets, the planet appears to be moving backward from the point of view of the earth. This illusion occurs because while they are on the opposite side of the sun from the earth, they appear to be moving in the opposite direction from us.

Rising Sign: The zodiac sign on the cusp of the first house is called the Ascendant

or Rising sign. This sign, determined by the precise time and place of birth, is one of the three most important factors in the chart, along with the Sun and Moon. It represents our outer personality, the characteristics people first remark on when meeting us. It also shows the mask we wear in social situations, which may or may not show our true nature. Our physical appearance often reflects the Ascendant rather than the Sun.

Rule, ruler, rulership: Each of the twelve signs has a ruler—that is a planet that is most like the energies, urges, and needs of that sign. For Aries, that planet is Mars, for Gemini, it is Mercury, for Sagittarius, it is Jupiter, and so on. See the table that follows the glossary for a complete list. In order to fully understand the expression in your chart of a sign or house, look at the condition of its ruler. (See [house ruler](#).)



Saturn return: These significant eras in our lives occur each time Saturn completes an orbit around the Sun from where it was when we were born. Since Saturn takes around 29 years to complete that orbit, these eras occur when we are between 28-30 years old (the first Saturn Return) and 56-8 years old (the second Saturn Return). These Returns are considered significant milestones in maturity.

[Saturnian](#): These are people with important planets like the Sun, Moon, Ascendant or several planets in Capricorn or in the associated 10th house. They also include those with Saturn on the Ascendant or Midheaven, aspecting their Sun or Moon, or with numerous planets forming aspects to Saturn.

[Sextile](#): (60° or two signs apart.) Complementary elements are usually involved in the sextile—water with earth and fire with air. Planets in sextile, then, can complement or enhance each other in some ways, each one filling in something the other lacks.

[Social signs](#): According to a system Richard Idemon taught, the second four signs—Leo, Virgo, Libra, and Scorpio—are considered primarily social in their functioning, meaning that people who have it strong in their chart are absorbed by relationship issues. See also [personal](#) and [universal](#) signs.

[Square](#): A square is formed when two planets are 90° apart in the zodiac—three signs apart, plus or minus 5-6°. For instance, a planet in Cancer could be square to planets in Aries or Libra, the two signs that are 90° apart. Squares represent two urges or needs in a head-on conflict. Squares are the energizing forces within a person—the needs that drive them on. The needs and desires of the two planets clash, and the individual must work to reconcile them.

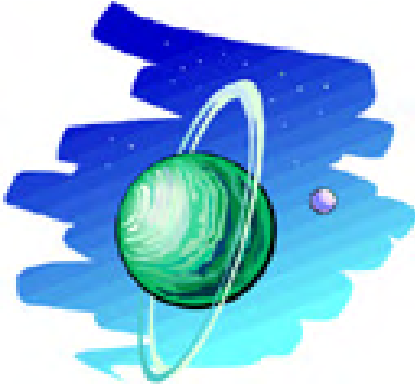
[Stellium](#): A stellium is a combination of three or more planets placed within a narrow range of the zodiac, within the same sign and/or house. This makes the planets involved act in concert with one another, becoming a very powerful influence. The influence is strongest if they are also conjunct.

[Transits, transiting](#): This refers to the current positions of the planets in the solar system and what aspects they form with the planets in your natal chart. You would discover your transits by consulting a reference book called an [ephemeris](#) that gives these positions on a daily basis or by ordering a computerized printout of your personal transits.

[Trine](#): (120° or four signs apart, plus or minus 5°.) Planets in a trine aspect are usually in the same element—e.g., from water sign to water sign or from air sign to air sign. Since they have many similar traits, needs, tastes, preferences, and abilities, the two planets enhance each other and do not create resistance or friction. They work together cooperatively for the same or similar ends.

[T-square](#): A triangular formation consisting of at least three planets. Two of the planets are [opposite](#) one another, while a third forms [squares](#) to both ends of the opposition. An example would be Pluto in Cancer, Saturn in Capricorn, and Uranus in Aries, a signature of the mid-1930s depression era. Tensions between the needs and desires of the planets, signs, and houses involved are difficult to resolve, and so the person is often rather driven, but often highly productive. A t-square usually involves planets in the same sign type—[cardinal](#), [fixed](#), or [mutable](#).

Universal signs: According to a system taught by Richard Idemon, the final four signs of the zodiac—Sagittarius through Pisces—are absorbed by collective or universal issues. Also see personal and social signs.




Uranians: These are people with Uranus strongly featured in their birth charts. Uranus is strong when it is on the Ascendant, Midheaven, in aspect to the Sun or Moon or several planets, or if the sign Aquarius is prominent in the chart because the Sun, Moon, Ascendant or several planets fall into that sign or the 11th house of the chart.

Yod: A major configuration also called an Eye of God or Finger of Fate, this triangular configuration consists of two planets that are sextile (60°) one another plus a planet that forms quincunxes (150° aspects) to both of them. The planet forming the quincunxes is considered extremely difficult to integrate and yet becomes a major dynamic in the person's life.

CHEAT SHEET OF ASTROLOGICAL ASPECTS

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 **Conjunction:** A conjunction is formed when two planets stand close together in the zodiac, say within a range of 0-8 degrees. In most cases planets in conjunction are also in the same house and sign, and so they operate in a similar manner (same sign) and are focused on the same area of life (same house). They are blended together in a way that makes them lose their separateness.

Sextile: (60° or two signs apart.) Complementary elements are usually involved in the sextile—water with earth and fire with air. Planets in sextile, then, can complement or enhance each other in some ways, each one filling in something the other lacks.



Signs that are Sextile to one Another:

Aries: Gemini, Aquarius	Libra: Leo, Sagittarius
Taurus: Cancer, Pisces	Scorpio: Virgo, Capricorn
Gemini: Aries, Leo	Sagittarius: Libra, Aquarius
Cancer: Taurus, Virgo	Capricorn: Scorpio, Pisces
Leo: Gemini, Libra	Aquarius: Sagittarius, Aries
Virgo: Cancer, Scorpio	Pisces: Capricorn, Taurus

Square: (90° or three signs apart.) Squares represent two urges or needs in a head-on conflict. Squares are the energizing forces within a person—the needs that drive them on.



Signs that are Square to one Another:

Aries: Cancer, Capricorn	Libra: Cancer, Capricorn
Taurus: Leo, Aquarius	Scorpio: Leo, Aquarius
Gemini: Virgo, Pisces	Sagittarius: Virgo, Pisces
Cancer: Aries, Libra	Capricorn: Aries, Libra
Leo: Taurus, Scorpio	Aquarius: Taurus, Scorpio
Virgo: Gemini, Sagittarius	Pisces: Gemini, Sagittarius

Trine: (120° or four signs apart.) Planets in a trine are usually in the same element—e.g., from water sign to water sign or from air sign to air sign. Since they have many similar traits, needs, tastes, preferences, and abilities, the two planets enhance each other and do not create resistance or friction. They work together cooperatively for the same ends.



Signs that Are Trine to one Another:

Fire signs: Aries, Leo, Sagittarius
Earth signs: Taurus, Virgo, Capricorn
Air signs: Gemini, Libra, Aquarius
Water signs: Cancer, Scorpio, Pisces

The quincunx (150° or five signs apart) The aspect usually involves two signs that are absolutely at odds with each other and therefore are difficult to reconcile. There is no natural connection between the signs.



Signs that are Quincunx one Another:

Aries: Virgo, Scorpio	Libra: Pisces, Taurus
Taurus: Libra, Sagittarius	Scorpio: Aries, Gemini
Gemini: Scorpio, Capricorn	Sagittarius: Taurus, Cancer
Cancer: Sagittarius, Aquarius	Capricorn: Gemini, Leo
Leo: Capricorn, Pisces	Aquarius: Cancer, Virgo
Virgo: Aquarius, Aries	Pisces: Leo, Libra

Opposition: (180° or six signs apart.) Signs opposite each other are compatible in two ways: they are in complementary elements and operate in the same modality (cardinal is opposite cardinal and so on). When used properly, opposite signs complement and fulfill each other.



Signs that are Opposite one Another:

Aries and Libra, cardinal fire and cardinal air
Taurus and Scorpio, fixed earth and fixed water
Gemini and Sagittarius, mutable air and mutable fire
Cancer and Capricorn, cardinal water and cardinal earth
Leo and Aquarius, fixed fire and fixed air
Virgo and Pisces, mutable earth and mutable water.

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