

The Winds
Of
Heaven and Earth

Book I of Keystone, Lodestone, Clarion

A Novel

STEPHEN M. HOLAK

Copyright © 2013 Stephen M. Holak

All rights reserved. This book excerpt or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the author, except in cases of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, email the author, addressed “Attention: Permissions” in the email subject line at permissions@stephenmholak.com.

ISBN: 1491254610
ISBN-13: 978-1491254615

The publisher and author ask that you not participate in or encourage piracy of this copyrighted work. Please don't scan, reproduce or distribute this book except to use short excerpts for the purposes of critical reviews.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

DEDICATION

For my mother.
You kindled my life-long passion for reading.
Thanks, Mom

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	i
In the News	1
Part I: The Departed No Longer Visible	6
1 Blood on the Chain	10
2 The Dangerous Profession of Godhood	19
3 A Stroll in the Moonlight	31
4 Havana and Onions	39
5 An Accumulation of Threads, A Hint of a Pattern	49
6 Those Strange Coincidences of the Universe	56
7 The Eye of the Storm	71
Part II: A World Indescribably Found	81
8 A Visit by a Devil	84
9 Many Leagues From Nowhere	90
10 Coins, Maps, and Deals	97
11 An Invitation	109
12 The Very Fabric of Nature	119
13 Help From Below	125
14 The Advancement of a Noble Cause	130
15 The Sort of Man That Draws Attention	135
16 Not From Around Here	143
17 An Honorable Man, Albeit a Strange One	147

18	A View From the Top	153
19	A Long Story	163
20	In This Dangerous Audience	169
21	A Secret's Worth	176
	Part III: A Turning of the Wheel	181
	Interlude	182
22	Consequences of Deeds	186
23	On the Basis of Myth and Legend	190
24	Chock Full of Testosterone and Sharp Weapons	193
25	Damocles' Sword Descends	200
26	Layers of an Onion	208
27	Enemy of My Enemy	216
28	The Sound of Steel On Bone	223
29	A Creature of Palatable Menace	230
	Part IV: Haunted By Waters	238
30	A Funeral in the Rain	241
31	Creative Reasonings	246
32	A Rolling Up of the Sleeves	252
33	Pain of the Prophets	259
34	Bloodlines	267
35	Sail Ho	276
36	Plans	281

37	The Mix of Sweat and Fear	285
38	Some Manner of Noble Test	289
39	Two Hundred Heartbeats	298
	Part V: All Things Merge Into One	308
40	Mermaid in a Wishing Well	311
41	Making Bacon, Pigeon Droppings	319
42	Cards On the Table	324
43	Heavy Hangs the Head	328
44	A Mix of Salt and Copper	337
45	Alea Iacta Est	345
46	Embarking On the Impossible	356
47	A Broken Stick	359
48	Departure	363
49	The Weight of Choices	368
50	Confluence	376
51	Below the Curve of a Setting Moon	379
52	Hell Itself	385
53	The Potential of Worlds	396
54	A Favor for a Favor	400
	Epilogue	405
	Author's Note / About the Author	410
	The Dark Paths of the World: A Preview	412

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A novel—and laying the groundwork for a half-million word trilogy—is a lot of work, and it’s not done in a vacuum; I had a lot of help along the way.

Andrew Bussom at the Department of Justice contributed guidelines for FBI investigations in kidnapping cases; his example of how national park crimes intersect FBI jurisdiction inspired the setting of Pu’uhonua o Honaunau National Park in Hawaii for some of the scenes in the story. He also kicked my ass in a few online chess games.

Many thanks to the FBI’s Investigative Publicity and Public Affairs Unit for answering a *lot* of questions in depth and detail. The Unit provided invaluable advice on how the FBI would investigate and question a person of interest—such as Jordan in this work’s first chapter—the interrogation setting, and the practice of the art and science of criminal investigation. Their thoughts and suggestions inspired the FBI agents’ actions in the first chapter of this novel, and in book two of this series, *The Dark Paths of the World*. I’ve applied literary license to the Unit’s advice; the interpretation of the actions of the Bureau’s agents is mine alone.

A Special Thanks

This book would not have been what it is without the ass-kicking my editor, Rebecca T. Dickson whomped on me. She not only made this a better book, but she was on me like white on rice to make me the best writer I could be, yet she finds way to preserve my unique voice. Without her brutal honesty and sharp eye, this would be a much poorer work. You’re the best, Beckster.

The Winds
of
Heaven and Earth

Book I of Keystone, Lodestone, Clarion

Know ye now, Bulkington? Glimpses do ye seem to see of that mortally intolerable truth; that all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore?

—Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

In the News

Young Girl Found Wandering Beach

Police Appeal to Public for Help in Lost Girl's Identification

WILMINGTON, N.C., July 15, 1936 — In a press release today, police reached out to the Public for assistance with solving the mystery of the child found wandering the beach near Kill Devil Hills late last week.

The little girl, who authorities estimate is between 7 and 9 years old was found by avid beachcombers Mr. and Mrs. Wayne Stratford of Nags Head, who were searching on Thursday for interesting flotsam and jetsam in the wake of last week's coastal storm.

The child, who was found dressed in tattered clothing and suffering from delirium, dehydration and mild exposure, speaks no English, hindering the police search for her parents or origins. Local experts as yet have been unable to determine her native tongue, and in the release cast an appeal for linguistic experts in the Carolinas to lend assistance.

There have been no reports of missing children meeting the child's description, the police said. Authorities have nearly ruled out the possibility of a shipwreck; no ships have been reported missing, and no debris indicating the sinking of a craft has been found.

Deadly Storm Hammers Outer Banks

2 Dead, 6 Missing After Sudden Storm

ELIZABETH CITY, NC, March 9, 1982 — Two people are confirmed dead, at least six more are missing and an estimated 10,000 homes and businesses are still without electricity and phone service in the wake of the violent storm that struck the northern Outer Banks Tuesday afternoon. The storm, whose reach was felt twenty miles inland, dumped as much as ten inches of rain in less than four hours in some areas. Winds measured in excess of 80 miles per hour. Local utility companies estimate it may take another two to three days to restore power to all the affected regions. The Red Cross has set up local centers to . . .

A sequence of satellite photographs released by NOAA today shows the storm forming just offshore in the midst of calm weather. It struck within two hours, covering an area one-tenth to one sixth of that of a typical Atlantic hurricane at its peak. Weather officials are puzzled by the storm's sudden formation and violence, which they said was not a hurricane, but rather a local weather "anomaly." Dr. David Stern, a severe weather expert at NOAA, said in a telephone press conference on Wednesday that it was critical to attempt to understand the formation of a storm of this sort, so that future events of this type could be predicted and warning issued.

"Those deaths could probably have been prevented," Stern said, "if we only could have had two or three hour notice to get an alert out. We're working very hard to figure this thing out."

He declined to offer possible explanations for the event, saying weather station data was still being collected, and subsequent analysis and modeling would take time. However, other sources in the agency, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said . . .

Some of the satellite photographs clearly show the formation of a storm eye, which witnesses on the ground confirmed. Reports of stars being seen in the skies overhead—in the middle of the afternoon—during the storm eye's passage have also been corroborated by witnesses. Unconfirmed reports of disorientation, nausea and unconsciousness, possibly caused by a severe drop in air pressure in the wake of the eye's passage, were reported. One woman claimed she regained consciousness more than a mile away from her home . . .

Search Continues for Missing Veterinarian Heiress

By Susan Dolan and Laura Marks, CNN

updated 7:36 AM EST, Sun, March 25, 2007

(CNN) — Authorities continue to search today in the sensational case of a missing pregnant woman who was last seen nearly a week ago leaving her North Carolina veterinary clinic after a routine day at work.

Police again searched the Nags Head, NC, home of Jordan

Parish, 34, this weekend for clues in the baffling disappearance of his wife, Melanie Parish, 33. The couple had announced their first pregnancy at a family gathering just days before her disappearance last Monday.

Coworkers saw Melanie Parish leaving the clinic around 3 p.m. on March 19, but she has not been seen since. Her husband reported her missing Monday evening. Her car was parked in the couple's garage, and her keys, cell phone and purse were found in the house. Police say there were no signs of a disturbance or forced entry, and doors and windows were locked, according to Jordan Parish. Neighbors did not see her arrive home from work, police said, but that is not uncommon in the exclusive beachfront community where the couple lives. Houses here are widely spaced and privacy is coveted.

Melanie and Jordan are prominent figures in North Carolina society, which has led to intense media coverage and broad speculations on the reason for her disappearance. Melanie is the adopted daughter of former gubernatorial candidate and shipbuilding magnate Tyson Whittaker. Jordan is the founder of a highly-successful software consulting firm, and the son of business tycoon Maximilian Parish. Melanie, a gifted veterinarian, reportedly spent a significant portion of her personal and family wealth in the establishment of a string of highly-regarded free animal clinics throughout the Carolinas. Melanie and Jordan were childhood sweethearts who grew up together on the private coastal island co-owned by the two families. Both the Parish and Whittaker families have deep roots in Carolina history . . .

The families' great wealth has given rise to media speculation that a kidnapping for money plot was at the heart of the disappearance, but the families and police say no ransom demands have been received

Police say although Jordan Parish is listed as a person of interest in this case, he is not a suspect at this time.

Reporter Declines to Press Charges in Parish Case Assault

By Jon Stapleton, CNN

updated 2:30 PM EDT, Fri, Aug 24, 2007

(CNN) — Associated Press reporter Ian Winks said today in a statement released by his lawyer that he will not press charges in the alleged assault on him two days ago by Jordan Parish, 34, husband of missing heiress Melanie Parish (nee Whittaker), of Nags Head, North Carolina, who was pregnant at the time of her disappearance five months ago. The alleged assault, captured on a brief video clip, took place near the Parishes' Outer Banks home when Winks attempted to question Parish on his possible involvement in his wife's disappearance. Jordan Parish is an accomplished martial arts expert. Winks is recovering in a nearby hospital and is expected to be released this weekend, his lawyer said. Hospital officials have not released details of Winks' injuries, but unnamed hospital sources say he suffered a broken arm, numerous deep bruises, and a mild concussion.

In the statement, Winks said he sympathized with Parish and understood the enormous pressure the man was under, both by the media and by the continued investigation into his wife's disappearance. Wink's lawyer bristled at the suggestion by a reporter that a behind-the-scenes financial settlement by Jordan Parish, or the Parish or Whittaker families, was the reason for the dropped charges. He said the rumor was "patently untrue," and stemmed solely from "Mr. Winks sympathy for Mr. Parish's situation."

Parish's lawyer, Anthony Milano, said Wink's gesture was greatly appreciated by Mr. Parish, and an apology by him was "likely forthcoming."

Parish, son of North Carolina billionaire Maximilian Parish, first came into worldwide media attention when his wife Melanie, 33, the adopted daughter of another wealthy North Carolina family, the shipbuilding Whittakers, disappeared in March. Jordan became the center of endless popular and tabloid speculation on

the nature of his wife's mysterious disappearance. Originally viewed as a kidnap for ransom, that line of investigation has fizzled after months without a ransom demand. The police have not named Parish as a suspect in his wife's disappearance, although he remains a "person of interest," officials said. Parish's legendary public battles with the media have been popular internet fare this summer . . .

PART I
THE DEPARTED NO LONGER VISIBLE

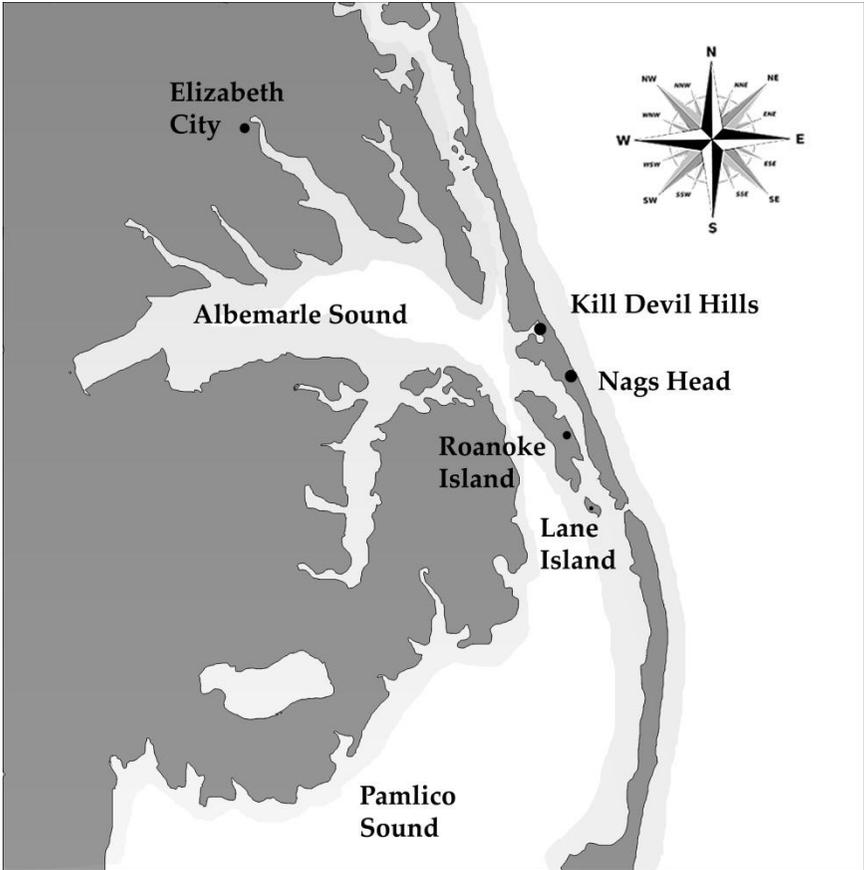
She watched the gap between ship and shore grow to a huge gulf. Perhaps this was a little like dying, the departed no longer visible to the others, yet both still existed, only in different worlds.

—Susan Wiggs, *The Charm School*

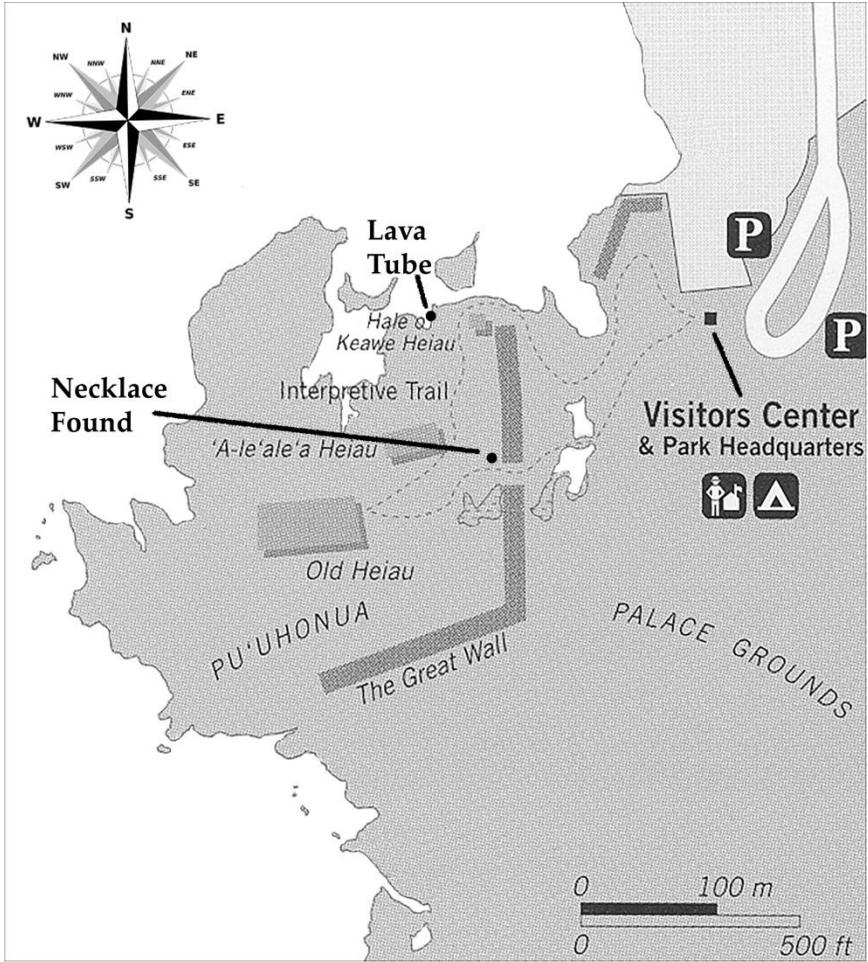
*Lo, Quesetor, thou
Red and angry soul.
Three times drowned, fed on
Wisdom and water.
Carry the cold stone
Of Power and Light.
Veil ripped asunder
By blood not brother;
He follows the storm
Into the dark night
Between married worlds.
To bear the burden.
To lead the child.
To light the dark paths.
To bear the cold death.*

—Kepano of Iele, Appendix I “The Prophecy of the Clarion, Translated,”
Walking with the Clarion, 3020 A.C.F.

THE OUTER BANKS: NORTH CAROLINA



PU'UHONUA O HONAUNAU NATIONAL PARK



1

BLOOD ON THE CHAIN

Separation

*Your absence has gone through me
Like thread through a needle.
Everything I do is stitched with its color.*

—W.S. Merwin

Demons chased Jordan Parish down the beach. He picked up the pace, accelerating to a sprint, but the hot breath of the monsters never left the back of his neck. They dogged his steps as he hurdled a tidal pool and scattered a cloud of protesting seabirds. They drew even with him as he ran along the tideline and played tag with surf that raced up the sand and drained back away into brown whirls of seaweed and foam. There were three of them: anger, loneliness and frustration, and they were inescapable.

Jordan ran to blunt the sharp ache of his wife's disappearance. He ran to dull the anger. To give vent to frustration over six months of stalled progress in the investigation to find her. He ran each day until his chest heaved and legs wobbled, until the drenching sweat finally stopped and a red tunnel of heat exhaustion and dehydration began to close in from the edges of his vision.

He hurdled another pool and landed short, spraying brackish water and wet sand up his legs and spattering his T-shirt. He stumbled and fell to one knee, chest heaving. *Fuck this. Enough.* He rose and angled away from the surf in a slow trot, cresting a series of dunes before bounding up the weathered wood steps leading from the beach to the access road. A low golden glare of late-afternoon sun nearly blinded him as he turned toward

his house. He shaded his eyes with a hand and cursed again, settling into a cautious jog along the rock-strewn road.

Glare hid the black SUV parked across his driveway until he was nearly on top of it. *God damn it.* Security in his exclusive Nags Head gated development had been good lately—since his infamous scuffle with a reporter a few months earlier—but not good enough today. Apparently some newshound or heckler slipped through.

Jordan began lining up a rock for a surreptitious kick in the direction of the SUV's grille when he noticed the white government tags. He jogged on by—tried to peer through the heavily-tinted glass and gave up—slowed to a stop and wiped sweat from his eyes with the sleeve of his T-shirt.

A few seconds later the SUV's driver and front passenger doors opened, and a man and woman dressed nearly identically in light-colored polo shirts and dark slacks climbed out. The driver was a smiling, a trim black woman with close-cropped graying hair. The man was thirtyish, tall, blond and stocky, wearing a frown. They held up badges that caught pieces of sunlight and left Jordan blinking away spotted after-images.

"Mr. Parish? FBI," the woman said. They stopped a few feet away and held their IDs out until Jordan nodded. "I'm Special Agent Iris Parker, and this is Special Agent Curtis Spenser. We're from the Elizabeth City field office." When Jordan didn't reply, she asked, "You *are* Jordan Parish?"

Jordan gave a derisive laugh. "You don't recognize me?"

Agent Parker smiled, and slipped her badge into a pocket. "A polite formality," she said, "given the media saturation the case has received."

A trickle of sweat stung his eye, and Jordan wiped his face with his shirt. "What can I do for you guys? I assume you haven't found Melanie, so . . ."

The male agent raised an eyebrow. "I'm interested in what makes you say that, Mr. Parish."

Jordan gave him a thin smile. "Mr., ah . . ."

"Spenser. Special Agent Spenser."

Jordan nodded and paused for a moment, watching a long-legged bird run down the beach before snapping his gaze back to the FBI agent. "You didn't find Melanie, Agent Spenser. Special Agent Spenser. Otherwise," Jordan said, gesturing emphatically at the access road "there'd be a fucking conga line of media stretching back to Charlotte, along with every law enforcement official and politician in the state looking for a soundbite. So, I can only guess that you're here to get your piece of my ass." He took a deep breath and sighed. "What do you want?"

"Some evidence has been found. We're involved now. We want to talk to you," Spenser said.

"Evidence." Jordan watched the sun's disc slip toward the ocean. This *was* news. The police had spent hundreds of hours in the past six months combing the Parish house, Melanie's car—and, more recently, the crack of

his ass—since his wife vanished, without finding so much as an atom of insight into her disappearance. So much time had gone by that the idea of anything coming to light seemed alien. A gust of ocean breeze brought a chill along with a few grains of sand, and he shivered in his wet clothes.

"Evidence," Jordan repeated. "Physical evidence?"

Agent Parker nodded. "Yes." She cocked her head to one side. "Mr. Parish, we'd like to question you."

"Me?"

Spenser made a show of looking around. "You see anybody else here named Parish?"

"For what? What kind of questioning?"

"We need to bring you in, Mr. Parish," Agent Spenser said, "to question you concerning evidence possibly implicating you in the murder of your wife, Melanie Parish."

~ ~ ~

"What the bloody *hell*," Agent Parker said, smacking her hand on the steering wheel for emphasis, "were you *thinking*, Curt?" Her eyes flicked to the rearview mirror. Parish sprawled in the back seat with eyes closed, his long red hair—still wet from a quick shower—leaving dark marks on the old college sweatshirt he had thrown on. The custom SUV's soundproof glass barrier kept him from overhearing their conversation. "Do you have an indictment hidden up your ass? *I* don't. His lawyer is going to shit all over this."

"What? I didn't tell him he was under arrest, Iris," Spenser said, "I said—"

"I heard what you said. And I know what you're going to say. Having the latitude to make a judgment call out in the field over how to convince someone to come in for questioning is one thing." Parish had flushed a deep, angry red at Spenser's announcement and muttered, *Whatever. Let's go.* "But that sort of TV-drama shit . . ." She gave him a hard look. "It's unprofessional. Questioning him at home was the plan. We are a *team*, Curt."

Spenser shrugged. "I can't help it." He punctuated his words with a slap on the dash. "He's such a smug little fuck. He probably did do it. Just the way he looks at you—intense—like a green-eyed Charles Manson or something. Like you're a bug, and he knows something you don't. He's just . . ." He pointed at the mirror, and as if on cue, Jordan opened his eyes briefly and glared at them, then closed his eyes again. "See what I mean? He just looks like a guy ready to explode. Reach out and choke you. Dangerous. And a recent history of assault."

"Alleged assault. And that was settled."

Spenser snorted. "Settled. More like paid off. And the reporter, you saw that video."

"All the more reason not to poke the bear."

Parker struggled not to smile at the image of the seven-second video clip that had gone viral: Parish climbing out of his car. The camera zooming in on a freckled face, masked by long, dark-red locks. Parish pushing back his hair, disconcerting, brilliant green eyes locking menacingly on the camera. "*Mr. Parish, Mr. Parish, where's your wife? Did you kill her, Mr. Parish? Did you chop her up and feed her to the sharks—*" A blur of motion and the camera angle tilts crazily, and then speckled white noise.

"Broke his nose," Spenser said.

"Can't say I blame him. How would you have reacted if your wife was missing—your *pregnant* wife—and some insensitive bastard ambushed you with that sort of shit? Wouldn't you been tempted to punch him out?"

"But I wouldn't have."

"Hmm," she said, her tone conveying her opinion. She glanced at Parish again, mentally comparing him to the image she reviewed this morning taken by local officials shortly after the investigation opened. *He looks thinner in the face now*, she thought, *the months have taken a toll*. The physical description listed him at five feet eleven-plus and one-hundred-eighty pounds. Clearly he had lost ten pounds or more. Dark circles hung under his eyes. She noticed a few threads of silver glinting among the copper locks when they had stood in the late afternoon sun.

"What do you think, Iris? Now that you've seen him."

"Not for me to judge without —"

"Aw, come on."

She threw him a quick look. "You're asking me," she said slowly, "do I think he could be responsible?" She gave a shrug. "Sure. Wife disappears right after she says she's pregnant."

"But what do you *think*?"

"I think," Parker said after a moment, "that he had opportunity. I have a hard time with motive. From every indication, they both wanted a baby very badly. All the interviews with friends and family confirm that. You've read the files, Curt. Everyone who was at the party where they announced their pregnancy described both of them as 'glowing with happiness' that night—"

"Could've been an act."

"And money's obviously not a factor." The Parish's financial data, a large portion of the case files, showed Jordan's software consulting firm thriving. No debt, overflowing accounts, and recent large charitable donations, even without factoring in that the couple's families were two of the wealthiest in the Carolinas. "So what's the precipitator?"

"Another woman?"

"That what you think?"

Spenser shrugged. "Happens a lot. But I'll grant you that something probably would have come up by now on that angle. That's too hard to hide. But still possible."

"Kidnapping for ransom made the most sense. Clear-cut, absolute sense. But." No demand had ever been received. "So," Parker said, "we have opportunity. No motive and no evidence."

"We have evidence now."

"Perhaps," she said. "So, what's your motive? You sticking with the other woman angle, Colombo?" she asked.

"Fit of anger. Bad golf game." He tapped on the dash for a moment. "I'll get back to you. But I still think he did it," Spenser said. "He's too much of an asshole not to have done it."

Parker rolled her eyes. "Heaven save the U.S. legal system from Special Agent Curtis Spenser's anatomically-based form of justice."

A ghost of a smile crossed Spenser's face, but his eyes were fixed on the rearview mirror.

~~~

Anthony Milano stepped into the outer interrogation room at the FBI's Elizabeth City field office. The young agent who met him in the lobby closed the door behind him.

The two agents at the far end of the dim room turned from the one-way glass and faced him. "Mr. Milano?" said a black woman with short gray-speckled hair, "I'm Special Agent Iris Parker, this," she indicated the burly blonde man next to her, "is Special Agent Curtis Spenser."

Behind the two FBI agents the window framed Jordan, sprawled in a chair, feet up on a table, eyes closed. A half-empty water bottle rested next to a clenched and white-knuckled fist. "How is he?"

The male agent—Spenser was it?—smiled. "Ready to chew nails. But we," he glanced briefly at the other agent, "urged him to wait until his legal representation arrived."

"Good advice." Tony cleared his throat. "I just saw before I headed over here that you posted Melanie on your website."

The image swam in Tony's head: a blood-red "Missing Person" banner blared above the three recent pictures of Melanie that the Parishes or Whittakers had supplied to the local police soon after she vanished. Dark eyes that seemed to say *find me* looked out from a plump brown face framed with dark brown hair, the adopted Melanie's Pacific Islander heritage. Below the images her physical characteristics were listed, followed by a brief description of the case.

Despite the months he had to get used to her disappearance, seeing

Melanie's images on the FBI page below the garish banner made his stomach twist. *Poor Jordan. And now this.*

"Yes," Parker said, "we posted it as soon as we became involved."

"On that. Why is this now a federal case? You guys only get involved if the missing is under twelve or if there's an interstate aspect involved."

"Or if the crime happened on federal grounds, or involves government property," Parker said. "We generally monitor though, and provide assistance if we can from our other entities—like the FBI laboratory and the like. Until a few days ago the Bureau was in a passive mode on this case since none of these situations applied. But we were in the loop with the locals and watching closely given the, ah . . ."

"Politics involved?" Tony finished for her. Not only were Jordan and Melanie's families some of the wealthiest in the Carolinas, Melanie's father, Tyson Whittaker, had made an unsuccessful run for governor in the last election.

Parker nodded. "And media attention."

"So is he a suspect? Or just a person of interest? When he called he was . . . uh, raving," Tony almost smiled at how coarsely Jordan had phrased it, "about being arrested for killing Melanie. Which is ridiculous, of course."

Parker and Spenser glanced at each other. Spenser said, "You're what the two most powerful families in the state sent?"

"Curtis." Parker gave him a dark look before addressing Tony. "You're not a criminal lawyer, are you, Mr. Milano?" Parker asked.

"No," Tony said uncomfortably, "I do corporate stuff, lemon law, things like that. I'm a friend of Jordan's, a friend of the Parish family. My father is Max's—Jordan's father—main legal counsel. The family doesn't know about this yet—this is a favor to Jordan. I'm here to sort this misunderstanding out. I'm sure he doesn't need a criminal defense attorney."

"A criminal attorney would know that 'person of interest' is just a polite euphemism for 'suspect,' Mr. Milano," Agent Spenser said. "It doesn't have a legal meaning."

"It's just a . . . more benign term, Mr. Milano," Parker said, in an attempt at diplomacy. She threw a frown at Spenser.

Tony bristled, and took a deep breath. "I understand," he said. Maybe he was out of his depth, and Jordan needed more than a simple favor from a friend. "Is he under arrest? Charged with anything?"

"Not yet—"

"No," Parker said. "Right now, we just want to talk, ask some questions."

"What is this evidence?"

Parker gestured toward the inner room. "Let's all do it together."

"Fine. Can we get to it, then, so I can get him out of here?"

“Of course,” Parker said. She grabbed a laptop from a table. “This way, Mr. Milano.”

Tony fell in behind Parker. As they headed to the inner interrogation room, Spenser said in a low voice, “You might not want to get your heart too set on him being out of here tonight, Mr. Milano. Just saying.”

~~~

The door opening pulled Jordan from the White Room—a mental haven of discipline and focus his martial arts teacher had helped him construct inside his head to overcome Jordan’s tendencies to anger and impatience. He swung his feet off the table and sat up as Agent Parker entered, followed, to Jordan’s relief, by Tony Milano. The short, round, balding and bespectacled Anthony Milano’s disarming appearance served him well in the courtroom, effectively disguising one of the sharpest legal minds in the state—Jordan often thought Tony was wasting his time practicing corporate fraud and lemon law when criminal defense would offer him a more satisfying challenge. *But he looks seriously uncomfortable. This is not good.* The asshole cop Spenser followed, shooting Jordan a grin. He ignored him and stood up to shake hands with his lifelong friend.

“Tony. Thanks so much. Did you talk to these people?”

“Yeah. A bit.” Tony pushed his glasses higher on his nose and looked at him like a small sorrowful dog. “We can go, but . . . I recommend we sit with them and look at what they have and, uh, get some clarity on this.”

Jordan stared at Agent Parker. “They didn’t even read me my Miranda Rights. Isn’t that some sort of violation?”

“Actually no,” Tony said. “They only do that if they’re arresting you or discern that you’re about to incriminate yourself.” He glanced at Parker. “Right?”

“That’s right, Mr. Milano.”

“Wait,” Jordan said. He glared at Spenser. “So I’m not under arrest?”

“It was a misunderstanding,” Tony said.

“I apologize if we gave you the wrong impression,” Parker said, throwing a look at Spenser, “but we do have some things to talk through that we feel are important to the investigation.” She gestured at the table and chairs. “Please, sit.”

Jordan glared at Spenser. *You fucker.* He took a deep breath and sat down.

When they had all crowded around the small table—Tony and Jordan on one side and the agents on the other—Parker turned the laptop to Jordan. It was one of the photos the families had given the police right after they reported her missing. “This picture, Mr. Parish, the most recent you had of your wife at the time, I believe?”

"Yeah." Jordan took a quick drink of his water to clear his throat. "That was taken on Saturday at Chase's party—she disappeared the following Tuesday."

"The necklace she was wearing? That was hers?" Parker pointed to a heavy silver chain around Melanie's neck that dangled down to just above the cleavage exposed by her low-cut yellow dress, where it ended in a blunt five-pointed star cut of some whitish-gray stone.

Jordan nodded. "An old family heirloom. She's worn that as long as I've known her." Six months had dulled the painful edge of absence to a constant, nagging ache. At times when he focused on the transitions of his feelings, he felt guilty that the pain wasn't sharper, deeper, even though he knew the adjustment and growing acceptance was a normal psychological progression.

That pain was now back, in spades. Jordan welcomed it. "What about it?"

"And you indicated in your initial report that she was probably wearing it the day she turned up missing."

"Yeah. She always had it on."

Parker nodded. "Her coworkers at the clinic and surveillance videos from there confirm it. We think we catch a hint of it from the security cam at the gate to your community, but it's not completely certain. What is the significance of the stone, or whatever it is?"

"I'm not sure," Jordan said, "it's just an old heirloom of the Whittakers. They were early colonists in the Carolinas. Maybe it had some significance back in the Old World." He shrugged. "Not sure."

"Why are you asking him this?" Tony said. "Has it been found?"

"Yes." Parker turned the screen back toward herself and tapped some keys. She spun it back to Jordan and Tony. "Take a look."

Side-by-side images of the necklace displayed on the screen. On the left, the necklace was partially buried in a sandy soil near a dark, rough stone wall. The other image was a close-up against a white background. Some of the chain links looked bent or mangled. The stone was missing in both pictures. The warped, empty star-shaped setting remained at the end of the chain.

Jordan found his voice first. "God," he said, leaning forward to get a closer look. "It's . . . been through . . . hell." He shook his head to clear it. "Where?"

"Hang on, Jordan," Tony said. "So, obviously, you found this in another state or on federal property, then?"

"Actually . . ." Agent Parker looked at Spenser.

"Both," Spenser said.

"Both?" Jordan leaned forward. "Where?"

"Pu'uhonua o Honaunau National Historical Park," Agent Parker said.

Tony frowned. "Poo-what? Where's that? It sounds Native American or something."

"Not really," Spenser said. "It's on the Big Island."

Jordan glanced at Tony but he seemed just as puzzled. "What big island?"

"Hawaii," Agent Parker said.

The room was silent for a long moment, until Agent Spenser glanced at Parker and said, "Not only that, but our evidence unit found blood on it." He locked eyes with Jordan. "Your blood, Mr. Parish."

THE DANGEROUS PROFESSION OF GODHOOD

Magical places are always beautiful and deserve to be contemplated ... Always stay on the bridge between the invisible and the visible.

—Paulo Coelho

A change in the pitch of the aircraft's engines broke Jordan's reverie and signaled the beginning of the decent into Hawaiian airspace. Far below his window, puffy scattered clouds floated above a deep blue ocean, like sheep grazing on a serene azure meadow.

The flight was direct into the Big Island's Kona airport. Jordan felt a mild disappointment they wouldn't be passing over any of the rest of the island chain on their way down. On his last visit to the Islands with Melanie, right after college graduation—their "pre-honeymoon" as she liked to call it—they had been taken by the stunning panorama of the approach to Honolulu: white high-rises like bones scattered over the tans and green of the islands, the brilliant emerald shallows, the dark blues of the deeper channels. He shook his head. A dozen years had passed in a flash. *And six months has passed more slowly than those dozen years.*

He turned away from the window.

Next to Jordan, uneasy flier Tony Milano spent most of the flight in a drugged slumber. Aside from a groggy change of planes in San Francisco, his position had pretty much remained the same over the fourteen-plus hours since they departed Charlotte. Head back and mouth slightly open, with an occasional snore or gurgle escaping his mouth.

Chase Whittaker, Melanie's brother and Jordan's best friend since childhood, sat hunched over his laptop next to Tony, his bulk spilling into

the aisle, reviewing what looked to be blueprints or engineering diagrams. He wore a brightly colored Aloha shirt. Three or four empty beer cans bulged from the seat pocket in front of his tray table.

Jordan glanced briefly at the unread book on his tray table before leaning his head back and closing his eyes.

After the FBI's revelation about his blood on Melanie's necklace, Jordan had slumped back in the interrogation room chair as if Agent Spenser had hit him with a fist.

Tony had spoken first. "That's ridiculous."

"If you have an explanation of how it made its way to Hawaii with your blood on it, Mr. Parish," Agent Parker said, "we'd like to hear it."

"Chase," Jordan said, images rushing into his mind like light spilling through clouds clearing after a storm. He turned to Tony. "Where's Chase?"

"Chase? What? I don't get it—"

"Tony, where the fuck is Chase? Did he come with you?"

"Yeah. He's in the lobby. They would only let me—"

"Does he have his phone with him?"

"How would I know? Yeah, probably. Why?"

Jordan turned to the FBI agents. "Get him. Chase Whittaker. He's Melanie's—"

"We know who he is, Mr. Parish," Parker said. "I'm afraid we can't—"

"Just fucking get him. You asked me if I had an explanation. I don't about Hawaii," Jordan said, "but if I'm right, I think I can clear up the blood thing." He smacked the table. "Will you just *get* him, for Christ's sake?"

~~~

Chase Whittaker burst through the door with a booming "What the fuck, guys? Oh, hey, Scully and Mulder." The two FBI agents stood, and even the tall Spenser seemed disconcerted by Chase's six and a half foot frame. The dozen pounds or so that the former college football star had put on in his mid-thirties made his presence even more intimidating. The effect was diminished a bit as Chase crossed the room with the familiar slight shoulder-hitch-right-foot-drag that still plagued him four years after Iraq. A maniacal devotion to physical therapy had reduced the limp remarkably, but Jordan doubted that Chase would ever again join him for one of his daily runs.

Chase slid into a chair and glared at the FBI agents. "You guys are smoking some serious crack if you think this man," he pointed at Jordan, "had *anything*—"

"Chase, can it." Jordan held out his hand. "Give me your phone."

“My phone? I’m lost.”

“Just fucking let me see, okay?”

“Sure,” Chase had said, fishing in his pocket. He slid it across the table to Jordan. He grinned at the agents. “iPhone, eight gigs. It’s sweet. You see one of those yet?”

Agent Parker leaned forward. “If it’s a voicemail or image, it’s likely—”

“Even better,” Jordan said, swiping through the icons on Chase’s phone, “I have a video. If he didn’t fucking delete it. Ah, here it is.” Jordan tapped it and set it on the table. The agents and Tony stood up and leaned over it as it began to play. “Night of the party,” Jordan said, “where we announced.” A Saturday night in March, six months ago. Melanie vanished Monday afternoon. “The one,” Jordan said glaring at Chase, “that I’ve been asking you for since forever.”

“Sorry,” Chase said, shrugging.

The video showed a good-sized group huddled around a table, in poor light, but good enough to make out faces and the filled champagne flutes clustered on the table. Jordan, Melanie, his father Max, Chase’s dad, Tyson Whittaker, Jordan’s grandmother, Lena, Tony and his father, Anthony, and a few cousins and other friends.

*“Toast time,” Tyson Whittaker says, reaching for a flute and raising it high. “A toast to the happy couple.”*

*“Toast! Toast!”*

*The group reaches in and grabs glasses. As Jordan leans in, he stumbles a bit.*

“Someone stepped on my foot there,” Jordan said.

*He puts out both his hands on the table to catch his balance. A ‘crunch’ and Jordan yelps and gasps. “Motherfucker!” He glances at his grandmother and says “Sorry.” He turns to Melanie and hold out his hand. “I cut myself, big time.”*

*Melanie grabs a napkin and pulls his palm near her face, cradling his hand in the napkin. The video zooms in close. Blood wells from Jordan’s hand near the heel. “You have a piece of glass still stuck in it, honey,” she says. She plucks out the shard and sets in on a tray. As she leans over to set it down the chain of her necklace settles onto Jordan’s hand.*

*“You got blood on it, Melanie,” Lena says. “Here.” She moves forward with a napkin and holds up the chain and wipes it. “Don’t want to stain your pretty dress.” She smiles. “Not that you’ll fit into it again anytime soon.”*

Jordan reached over and stopped the video. He held up his hand to show the small white scar on the heel just below the thumb.

“I think that’s a wrap, folks, on the how. Let’s talk about the where.”

~~~

The FBI was puzzled over how Melanie’s necklace had covered nearly five thousand miles from North Carolina to Hawaii. It would have been

virtually impossible to transport a kidnap victim unseen from the East Coast to the Hawaiian Islands. If Melanie had voluntarily made the trip, then she did it without using a credit card or showing up on any airport security surveillance video. One working theory was transport by sea. But that line of inquiry led to why? Why would someone kidnap a woman in North Carolina and go through the enormous trouble of smuggling her to Hawaii? And how would that victim have passed unseen through a small national park visited by over a thousand tourists each day? And why take her there in the first place? An edge-case theory proposed a tenuous link to her Pacific origins, her dark Polynesian looks.

But given the logistics involved and the lack of a reasonable motive, the dominant belief was Melanie, if she still lived, was somewhere on the eastern seaboard of the United States.

The FBI, TSA and other law enforcement agencies were working to uncover the necklace's forensic trail, poring over scans and security video in the hopes of uncovering an image of someone wearing it, and tracing that individual to the missing woman.

No one smart enough to pull off a sophisticated kidnapping was stupid enough to flaunt that thing in public. Not to mention the chain wasn't very good silver. And the star-shaped stone that had been in the setting wasn't any sort of precious gem. Who would want it? Something in his gut told him Melanie had gone to Hawaii, voluntarily or not. Something happened at the park there. Jordan just didn't have a why, how, or what to go along with his feelings. He knew Melanie as well as he knew himself. They had been apart no more than a dozen days since they were children. She was still alive somewhere. He knew it. He had to do *something*. Hawaii was a place to start.

The FBI hadn't forbidden Jordan from visiting the scene of the necklace discovery. They couldn't. He wasn't an official suspect and the park in Hawaii was no longer a crime scene. But again they didn't exactly encourage him either. Jordan knew immediately he had to go.

Chase and Tony tried to convince him otherwise. "They found the necklace," Tony said. "They're analyzing evidence. They're combing the scene. They have experts, forensic tools, procedures. They're the freakin' *FBI*. What more you gonna do that they can't?" Jordan couldn't be swayed, and after the smoke cleared, they insisted on going with him.

Agents Parker and Spenser (Spenser still clearly viewed him as responsible for Melanie's disappearance) passed them up the food chain to the Charlotte office. A three-hour drive and, as much as he hated to admit it, the Parish and Whittaker family names got him an audience with the Special Agent in Charge. The AIC pulled a host of other nameless officials into a conference call. In the end, after endless circular arguments and sidebars, Jordan stepped out, made a few calls, and flung his family's weight around again. Fifteen minutes later the red-faced Agent in Charge agreed to

coordinate a meeting with the FBI office Kailua-Kona.

The plane shuddered as it descended through the thin clouds, and Tony gave a startled snort and woke for a moment. He closed bleary eyes until Chase elbowed him in ribs.

"Hey," Chase said, "you'll want to stay awake for the landing." He grinned wickedly and winked at Jordan. "I heard the wind gusts are so strong here that sometimes planes miss the runway and wind up in the water."

Tony's eyes popped open.

"The good news is," Chase continued, patting Tony's arm, "the water's as warm as a bathtub." He held a foil snack bag open at Tony. "Macadamia nut?"

~~~

Special Agent Samuel Kamakau pointed at the misty cotton blanket of low clouds shrouding the highlands of the island interior as he drove the Jeep south along the road that wound from the town of Kona to Pu'uohonua o Honaunau Park. "Magical, isn't it? Sun will be up soon, but it will be a while until it clears the high areas and burns that off."

"Sure is," Jordan said from the backseat of the Jeep without looking up. *Whatever*. He was more interested in where they were going.

"Wouldn't mind living here," Chase said. "Summer all year 'round, fishing, tourist girls to play with, umbrella drinks—what's not to like?" He nudged Agent Kamakau. "You wouldn't think of living anywhere else, would you Sam?"

Kamakau shook his head. "Nope." He shook his hand in the *shaka* sign. "*Kamaaina*, bra."

Kamakau offered to drive them to the park this morning in a non-official capacity, a favor to Chase. The bewildered Jordan watched the two men freeze in astonishment when Jordan's group pushed into the agency's Kona office. The men howled and engaged in a few mock football block moves before embracing and slapping each other's backs so hard Jordan winced in empathy. Chase and Kamakau were on a first-name basis from their college football days—Chase at Fresno State and Sam in the same conference for his hometown U of H. The bond was apparently cemented by Kamakau separating his shoulder while attempting to block the furiously pass-rushing Chase in some meaningless game in the mid-90s, an incident the two men remembered fondly. Chase had called shotgun this morning to continue their reminiscing on the way to Pu'uohonua o Honaunau from their Kona hotel, where the FBI agent had picked them up in the pre-dawn.

Jordan unfolded a handful of printed web pages and strained to read them in the early morning light. His slim notes on Pu'uohonua o Honaunau

National Historical Park, where the necklace had been found, twenty-some miles south of where they were staying in Kona. Most of the websites he found during his quick research last night in his Kona hotel room were tourism or park pages, no more than a few paragraphs, and a Wikipedia entry. Nothing of much help, and certainly nothing to indicate why Melanie—or the necklace—would have been there.

"Over there," Kamakau waved to the right of the Jeep at the water. "That's Kealakekua Bay, where Captain Cook dropped anchor in the 1770s." He smiled. "They were in the middle of a harvest festival and thought he was the Fertility God Lono."

"I bet they did." Chase laughed. "Good place to be a fertility god."

"Not really. After he left, he had to turn around when a storm damaged his ships. When he came back, they killed him."

"Why would they kill their god?" Tony asked from the seat next to Jordan.

Kamakau shrugged. "They got a little suspicious about a god's ship needing repairs after a little wind and rain."

Chase ran a hand through his crew cut. "Dangerous work, being a god."

The sun was up, but still on the other side of the highlands when Agent Kamakau pulled the Jeep into the parking area near Pu'uhoanua o Honaunau's visitor center. A khaki-uniformed park ranger emerged from the center and waved at them. Jordan hopped out and strode impatiently across the gravel as soon as the Jeep crunched to a stop.

"The park doesn't open for an hour yet," Kamakau said, "but you have a personal guide waiting for you, *bra?*"

Jordan stopped in his tracks. His face flushed hot and he whirled on the FBI agent. "I didn't setup anything." He waved a hand toward the ranger. "She's just happens to be here, that's all. I don't need that shit, man. I'm just trying to find my wife."

"Whoa, *bra*." Kamakau held up his hands. "I didn't mean it the way it sounded. Calm down."

Jordan glared at Kamakau. "How did you mean it, then? *Bra?*"

"Take it easy, Gordo," Chase said, "Don't get all—"

"I meant that—"

"Let me tell you something, Mr. Kamakau. No, let me *ask* you something." Jordan unclenched his fists and took a breath. "Are you married? Do you have any kids?"

"I'm married. No kids."

"If your wife went missing, what would you do? Can you imagine it? Is there anything you *wouldn't* do? Any stone left unturned, any resource you wouldn't use? No matter how distasteful or how shameful?" He pointed a finger at the FBI agent. "I do just fine on my own. But my family has money, and they have connections, and as much as I dislike throwing

names around I won't hesitate to do what I have to do to find my wife. And neither would you."

"Jordan," Tony said, "everyone's just trying to help you. Chill."

"Jeez, Gordo," Chase said, "just because someone peed in your Wheaties this morning doesn't mean you have to pee in everyone else's. And remember," his voice took on a gentler tone, "she's my sister too."

Jordan turned away from the FBI agent and stared out at the breakers. He needed to get a better grip on himself. He was just making himself look more volatile—and guilty. The real kidnapper or kidnappers were out there. The police needed to be looking for them, not at him. "I'm sorry, Agent Kamakau, I'm just a little worn down by all this and tired from the flight. Let's just get on with it."

"Sure," Kamakau said, but the friendliness in his voice from earlier was gone. "I understand."

The park ranger had stopped a few dozen yards away to watch the confrontation. Jordan began walking over to her.

"Ma'am, I'm Jordan Parish." He extended his hand. "My wife's missing and a piece of jewelry belong to her was found here. If you can spare a few minutes for us this morning I'd appreciate it."

The ranger, a short, slim Japanese woman with gray-streaked dark hair gave him a brief, wary look and took the offered handshake. "Stephanie Yukida, National Park Service. Sorry to hear about your wife, Mr. Parish, and I was here when it was found. I hope I can help."

"Thank you." Jordan glanced around. "Can tell me about it? Show us where you found the necklace?"

The other three men introduced themselves and shook hands with Ranger Yukida. She indicated the grounds with a broad sweep of her hands. "There's a lot to see here. It's over one-hundred eighty acres. I'm going to assume that you're mostly interested in the area where we found the necklace—"

"That's right," Jordan said.

"—but I'll give you an overview of the whole thing." She took a breath.

"We established this in 1961, and we get over a half-million visitors a year," she said in a well-rehearsed tone. "The primary draw is the *pu'ubonua*, the refuge area, but it's really much larger complex of archeological sites. The *pu'ubonua* was a place, up until the early 19th century, where someone who broke a law or a *kapu*—"

"Whatever," Jordan broke in, waving a hand. "Ranger . . . Yukida, we came about the necklace. The history is good stuff, but it doesn't help us much."

Her smile faded. "In fact, Mr. Parish, we found the necklace just inside the opening in the wall over there." A cool professional air had replaced her friendly tourist tone.

Tony gave him his *what the fuck?* look. Jordan shrugged and looked away. He really wasn't interested in anything that didn't help him understand what happened to Melanie.

Ranger Yukida let them toward the temple, and stopped just inside the opening in the lava rock wall. "There." She pointed at a spot on the sandy soil about three feet inside the wall within the temple grounds. "That's where it was found."

Jordan recognized the area from the picture agents Parker and Spenser had shown him a few days ago. He felt a little flutter in his stomach. "Who found it?"

"It's actually a bit of a strange story," Yukida said. "An older couple was standing right about here," she moved a few feet in front of the spot and turned to face the reconstructed temple, "taking pictures, when the husband felt something nudge his ankle. It was a sea turtle." Yukida laughed, and turned around to face them again. "It nearly gave the old gentleman a heart attack. He yelled and must have jumped three feet back." She removed her NPS ball cap and scratched her head. "They *never* come out of the water and up here. Don't know why it did, or how nobody noticed it making its way here, but anyway, when the turtle began to move away the wife saw something partially buried where the turtle had been, and it turned out to be," she looked at Jordan, "your wife's necklace. Although we didn't know it at the time.

"I turned around when the husband yelled. I was about thirty yards away standing over there." She waved her hand in the direction they had come from, "and saw her bend down and hold it up, along with a dozen other people, so we know they didn't put it there, it was laying there waiting to be found. How long, nobody knows. We thought it might be valuable, so we took some pictures and posted it on our lost and found board and website."

"And the setting was empty when you first found it?" Chase asked.

Yukida nodded. "Yes."

Jordan thought Chase's question odd. He had seen the FBI's images at the same time that Jordan had. Had Chase forgotten? But Tony interrupted before Jordan could pursue the thought.

"Where is it now?" asked Tony.

"TEU has probably still got it," Kamakau said, "DC."

"TEU?"

"Trace Evidence Unit. Looks for hair, fabrics, fiber, soil, you name it. Anything that can help link evidence to a person or place. They're pretty good."

"Yeah. We've heard," Tony said, grinning at Jordan.

"Not funny," Jordan said.

Tony's smile faded. "I'm curious: how did this get connected to a missing woman? I mean, you guys couldn't possibly have been scouring

Hawaii for clues to Mrs. Parish's disappearance."

Kamakau nodded. "Good question. That was just a piece of pure luck, the kind that happens more often than you might like to think in criminal investigations. Sue Robinson, another agent who works with me in the Kona office, has this thing for jewelry."

"Go figure," Chase said. "A woman with a thing for bling."

Jordan nudged him. "Let him finish."

"Yeah. Anyway," Kamakau said, "Sue was here the other day with friends from the mainland, and she saw the picture on the lost and found board, and thought she might have seen it somewhere else a while back. After a little digging in the office the next day, she found the missing persons data originally posted by the North Carolina police to the FBI—with images of Melanie Parish, and here we are."

"Here we are," Jordan said. He was silent for a moment. "It *is* a pretty unbelievable chain of events."

Yukida smiled. "See, Mr. Parish? The ancient Hawaiians were right about this place." At that moment, the thatched roof of the temple behind her caught the first rays of the morning sun and glowed in a soft golden light. "Magical things happen here."

~~~

Yukida gave them a brief overview of the rest of the park, which included the temple, a hiking trail, and some royal fish ponds, along with several other reconstructions of ancient Hawaiian buildings. She pointed out something still hidden in the shadows at the base of a sea cliff. "A lava tube. Big attraction." Yukida gestures at the park entrance. "The park's opening in a few minutes. Is there anything else I can show you before I have to leave you?"

Jordan started to shake his head then looked at the park ranger. "Yes. Walk with me a minute, would you?" Agent Kamakau gave him a strange look. Jordan ignored it. He led the woman in a slow walk back in the general direction of the refuge area.

"Sorry about my . . . impatience."

"I understand, Mr. Parish."

"I'm trying to figure out why my wife would have come here, what would have brought her here," he said to the tiny Japanese woman. "I know everyone thinks she's captive back east, or dead—and that I did it—but I think she came here, to this park for a reason, that somehow this place is important." He looked over at her, but her face was expressionless. "You don't know me, and you didn't know my wife, and you're not law enforcement and you're not family, but you know this place. I'm interested in your thoughts. Whatever comes to mind. Please."

Asking her had been spur of the moment, a gut thing. For a few seconds he thought she wasn't going to answer, or that she would shrug and say, *Beats me, I'm just a park ranger*, but she suddenly looked at him and smiled.

"Was your wife religious, Mr. Parish? Did she have a spiritual side? Was she interested in a higher power? Did she show interest or discuss with you things of supernatural or paranormal nature?"

Jordan was thrown off by the question. "You mean did she go to church?"

"Not—" She smiled. "Please, whatever you were about to say."

He rubbed his goatee. "Yeah, she did—it was one of the few things we didn't see eye to eye on. I'm more of a science and technical person, I don't believe, never did. I think it's . . ." *bullshit and mumbo jumbo* ". . . well, I wouldn't go. She asked me a few times and then never mentioned it again. But she went most Sundays." *And if I could have every one of those days back, I would spend every minute with her, even in a church.*

"And magic?"

"Magic? I don't think she believed," he said. "We saw movies and such like *Harry Potter*, but she never expressed much about anything other than the story. Why?"

"Your wife was a person of science too, Mr. Parish, wasn't she? A doctor, I think I read?"

"A vet. She was a veterinarian." The little flutter in his stomach returned. "She is. A darn good one."

"And yet she went to church regularly. Why was that?"

"Lots of people of science and education go to church, Ranger Yukida."

"But you didn't approve."

"Yeah, well," Jordan said. He chuckled and smiled, "Sometimes we had some, uh discussions about that . . ."

"Discussions?"

"Ok, arguments—mild ones, nothing major—when I would try to reason to her practical side, she said she didn't necessarily believe in the doctrine. She was Catholic. But she said she was comforted by the experience of people banding together and reaching out for something that was greater than themselves. She liked the ritual."

Yukida let a silence grow for a moment as they strolled. They were nearly back at the wall of the refuge area. "I have a PhD in Cultural Anthropology," she finally said. "I've had plenty of teaching offers over the years, both here and from mainland schools. But I turn them down. And every day, I tend to this place, and answer the same tourist questions, over and over. And I stay. Do you why?"

Jordan shook his head. "No. Why?"

"Because I *want* to be here. This place is special."

"What do you mean?"

"There are places of magic in the world, Mr. Parish. Places where this world touches others. You may not believe that." She pointed at the dark lava stone wall. "This place is one of them. I have been here long enough to know this, as surely as I know that the ocean over there is cold and deep. The ancient Hawaiians believed that the strong *mana* here came from an accumulation of the power of the bones of the buried kings. That may be so," Yukida said, "but I believe this place held magic long before a human set foot here." She stopped and turned to him. "Possibly your wife knew that. Perhaps in her distress she needed to reach a place of power, a place of magic, for some reason. And came here."

"That's—" He drew a breath. "I respect your beliefs, but personally, I think that's bullshit."

"Of course."

Jordan scuffed at some sand with the toe of his shoe. "But," he said, frowning, "she didn't believe in magic, I told you." At least he didn't think she did. He thought he knew his wife as well as he knew himself, and the little gap in his understanding, if it was one, was beginning to disconcert him. He caught the edge of irritation in his voice and felt a little ashamed. Yukida was only being kind. She didn't deserve his ill-humor. "I'm sorry."

"Mr. Parish, it may be that you didn't know your wife as well as you thought—think—you do," the ranger said, a shocking echo of his thoughts, "but it's more likely that you misunderstand. She did believe."

"What do you mean?"

"She said she liked the comfort of reaching out with others to experience something greater than ourselves." Yukida smiled. "Sounds like magic to me, Mr. Parish."

~ ~ ~

Yukida shook his hand and wished him luck before striding off to her job of opening the park for the day's visitors. Jordan watched the diminutive woman walk away for a moment, contemplating her words, and then turned to where Chase, Tony, and Kamakau were waiting near the entrance to the park. He could feel Kamakau's stare. He took one last look back at the spot where Melanie's necklace had been discovered, and waved and started walking toward the trio.

Jordan heard a sudden flapping and a squawk behind him and turned to see a large green-blue and gold bird settle on a rock near the base of the wall entrance. It was a macaw. He had picked up enough animal knowledge over the years to recognize the bird. Melanie was always bringing home injured or abandoned animals to foster, their cats had started out that way. A lump formed in his throat. He missed her so much.

"Don't go near it," Yukida shouted across the sand, "they have a nasty

bite. It's probably someone's escaped pet—they're not native birds. I'll call it in to a gamekeeper. Stay away."

The bird looked at Jordan, and seemed to meet his eyes. "Good bird," Jordan said. "Polly want a cracker?"

Staring back at Jordan, the bird said "Polly does *not* want a cracker." It preened at its wing feathers, and then looked back at Jordan. Jordan was startled for a moment, and then laughed. A pretty well-trained bird. Melanie had said tropical parrots like African Grays, macaws, and Amazons were extremely intelligent and trainable. "And where's your owner? Where's your home?" He had come to share Melanie's empathy and sympathy for animals.

The parrot picked some more at its feathers, and then said. "Jordan Parish, be here at midnight."

Jordan went cold. This could not be happening. The stress of the past six months had finally tripped some circuit breaker in his brain. He had lost his attachment to reality. Or someone, perhaps Chase, was playing some elaborate joke on him. No, there hadn't been time for that. "You know my name? How is that possible?"

"Midnight. Alone. Do you understand?" The avian voice sounded remarkably like a young woman's. The bird was really talking to him. How was that possible? They weren't *that* smart. Jordan's legs suddenly felt weak, and he went to one knee in the sand. "Why?" he whispered. His throat felt tight and his voice came out hoarse. "Why should I be here at midnight. For what?"

The bird spread his wings and looked at him. "How the hell should I know? I'm just the messenger." In a blur of feathers and a whirl of sand, it took off into the perfect blue morning sky.

A STROLL IN THE MOONLIGHT

The world is full of magic things, patiently waiting for our senses to grow sharper.

—W.B. Yeats

Jordan downshifted and slowed, looking for a suitable off-road hiding spot for the Jeep. The night was Kona Coast tropical warm. A fat moon a few days short of full shone overhead, just beginning its slide west toward the dark waters of the Pacific. The cold silver light provided more than enough illumination to survey the roadside terrain. Pu'uohonua o Honaunau was roughly a mile down the road. An easy jog but far enough to disguise that someone was trespassing on federal land at night.

There. A gentle dip just off the highway partially screened from the road by low tree and shrubs. It wasn't perfect and the rental Jeep, unfortunately, was white. But in an area with no streetlights, it wasn't going to be easily seen in moonlight if another car came by.

He pulled over and killed the headlights, watching for lights coming up the south, or from the north where he had turned off Hawaii Belt Road. A faint yellowish glow from the town of Kona stained the northern horizon. Moonlight sparkled silver on the ocean to the west. To the south and east, low clumps of lighter vegetation stood out like ghosts here and there against the dark lava-rock background. Nothing moved on the roads.

Satisfied, he pulled off the road and parked. Jordan threw the keys under the seat, retrieved a finger-sized flashlight from the glove box and jumped out. He brushed through dripping wet shrubs and stepped onto the blacktop. A drenching afternoon thunderstorm had blown in around sundown. Fortunately for Jordan's plans, the skies cleared within a few

hours and by nine a perfect tropical evening was in place.

Jordan started his GPS watch—11:42, plenty of time—and eased into a comfortable jog down City of Refuge Road toward the park.

The ride back to Kona this morning passed in a blur, a whirl of thought. An attempt to make sense of what had just happened—reconstructing and analyzing events—was like running post mortem diagnostics on a software systems crash.

No one could have known he was going to visit Pu'uhonua o Honaunau that morning, at least not far enough in advance to train a bird to recognize him and deliver a specific message at the only moment he was out of earshot of others, if in fact that was even possible at all. Parrots were smart and trainable, but he doubted they were *that* smart. Yet the bird targeted and spoken directly to him. *It knew his name.*

There are places of magic in the world, Mr. Parish. Places where this world touches others. This place is one of them.

Jordan had gone through a phase in his early teens when he had voraciously read all of Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes books and stories. The master detective had a line something like, "if you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth." Here it seemed more the reverse: When he worked to eliminate the improbable, the impossible was what remained. Jordan preferred Occam's Razor, a guiding maxim he used often in his systems design work. "All other things being equal, the simplest solution is the best." However, in this case he had the problem of the simple answer being flatly impossible.

A few minutes later, he rounded a curve in the road and saw the vertical rectangle of dark lava rocks painted in white with the park's name. Jordan jogged past the monument and cautiously entered the park. Empty.

He pressed the illumination button on his watch, 11:58. Anyone meeting him at midnight would wait at least a few minutes before deciding he wasn't coming. He crouched behind the tree for another minute, listening. The surf whispered and the palm leaves overhead rasped in the light trade winds. Nothing.

Jordan straightened and headed cautiously to the logical place for a meeting: The entrance in the rock wall, where the parrot had spoken to him this morning.

At night, Pu'uhonua o Honaunau displayed a different character. The dark lava rock wall absorbed moonlight ominously, like a black hole, while the sands glowed softly and the ocean breakers a few yards distant glinted silver in the moonlight. With the ghostly eyes of dead kings watching him, the night didn't seem as warm as it had a few minutes ago.

If any place could be said to be magic . . . well, this isn't all that bad a candidate. He shook his head.

He waited, listening, slowly turning in place, but heard nothing but the

murmur of the surf and rustle of palm fronds in the breezy tropical trade winds.

12:02. He sighed. What was he thinking, listening to a parrot? Melanie's disappearance *was* taking a heavy toll—

Thruuummmm. Jordan ducked. Something small and throbbing had whirred by his ear. He spun in place, looking around. A bat, maybe? Too small to be the parrot. Were there bats in Hawaii?

Something buzzed his head again, and then slowed about a foot in front of his nose, wings beating so rapidly they were invisible. A small bird of some kind, perhaps three or four inches long, with a disproportionately long beak for its body, hovered before Jordan so perfectly, so motionlessly, it seemed to be standing on a ledge of air.

In the low light it was impossible to discern its colors. Jordan thought perhaps it was a hummingbird of some kind. But he knew next to nothing about birds, except for the sorts most people kept as pets and that Melanie worked with.

They eyed each other for a few seconds. Jordan slowly stretched out an arm and moved a finger toward the bird.

Just as slowly, the bird backed away from his finger, maintaining its distance. He lowered his hand, and the bird moved closer again. Then he took a slow, short step forward. The bird moved back the length of Jordan's step. Jordan jumped backwards. The bird moved forward. Jordan laughed. *What is it about the birds in this place?*

Slowly, the bird began to drift away. It turned and moved a few yards to the east, stopped, and rotated to face Jordan. It repeated the behavior. The bird waited.

It wanted him to follow it.

Strange things were going on here.

He followed. It led him slowly, rotating every few seconds to check Jordan's progress. They angled away from the place of refuge, roughly north and east across the sands, toward a shallow cove backed by a low cliff.

As Jordan approached the cliff area, he saw the deeper blackness against the dark lava rock of the base of the cliff and realized where the bird was leading him. Yukida had pointed out a lava tube in this area this morning during her brief overview of the park. They hadn't approached it closely at that time. It looked now as if Jordan was going to get a tour from a very different guide.

The tube was more oval than round, flattened from the top and wider on the sides. An area of shallows—more or less a large tide pool—fronted the tube, the waters virtually motionless in the moonlight.

Jordan took the small flashlight from his shorts pocket and shined it into the pool. Ankle-deep clear water covered a sandy bottom with rocks

and broken shells. The briny seaweed smell reminded him of tide pools he, Melanie and Chase had explored as children, searching for small fish and crabs, an occasional starfish and other treasures trapped by the tides. Melanie would bring a small net and a bucket and try to collect the creatures and release them back into the ocean before the smaller pools dried up. Chase would argue it was part of nature's cycle and the sea birds and scavengers would feed on the dying fish, while Jordan would struggle to find arguments to support both sides. He pushed the thoughts aside, but the small lump in his throat did not go away. He looked up from the pool and blinked moist eyes. He needed to focus on the here and now.

The bird hovered near the tube opening. Jordan played the light over the entrance. He would have to get his feet wet to get to the tube, which looked like it was just high enough for his head to clear with a slight crouch. Yukida had mentioned tourists climbed into it all the time, so it was unlikely to be dangerous. But exploring it in the dark was probably not a good idea. He considered coming back in the morning, but how would he explain to the others, and how would he get to examine it away from the eyes of the tourists who were likely to be in there at the same time? And what the hell was he looking for? The hummingbird seemed key to that mystery, and he couldn't chance it not being here in the morning. He would have to go in now.

Jordan debated removing his running shoes and socks, unhappy with the idea of jogging back to the Jeep in wet shoes. But he didn't know enough about the bottom of the cove or the surface inside the tube. He couldn't be sure not to step on a broken shell or sharp coral fragment and cut his foot open, which would make getting back to the Jeep much more inconvenient than wet shoes.

He sighed and walked slowly into the warm water, testing the footing. His running shoes gave a good grip. He shuffled his way to the mouth of the tube and shone the flashlight inside.

The tube widened a few yards in, high enough to stand upright once inside. It also sloped upward from the entrance, which meant he would be out of the water once he climbed inside. Jordan shone the light deeper into the tube. The bird was hovering about ten yards in, waiting for him.

He braced his hand on the rough lava rock surface and clambered up over a slight lip and into the tube. He straightened. The damp ceiling of the tube just brushed the top of his hair. The ceiling was uneven, so Jordan bent over slightly to avoid whacking his head on some protrusion.

"Okay. Where are you, little guy?" Jordan played the light around. The bird hadn't moved. It was still hovering a few yards deeper in the tube, watching him. He shuffled over the smooth worn surface toward the creature, reminding himself to stay hunched over.

The bird drifted toward the right-hand side of the tunnel, as if to focus

Jordan's attention there. He moved to within a few feet of it. The bird now hovered so close to the wall of the tube that its beak disappeared into a small crevasse in the rock. Jordan moved closer and shone his light on the crevasse. The bird floated away.

The fissure ran six inches vertically and about two wide. He shone his light into the crack. It went back four or five inches, but appeared to be empty. He glanced at the bird. It watched him expectantly.

This is fucking crazy. But there had to be something to this. The hummingbird or whatever it was had led him here, a lot of trouble to go through just to find an empty crevasse in an old lava tube. Jordan shook his head. *How quickly the mind adjusts.* He had more or less accepted that a pair of birds led him to this point, a potential link in the chain of events explaining his wife's disappearance. *My reference point in reality has shifted significantly in the past eighteen hours . . .*

The hole was too small for Jordan to illuminate with his hand inside. He would have to reach in blindly and feel around. His heart jumped a bit of the thought of something living in the fissure taking umbrage at his fumbling hand, but he cautiously inserted his hand into the opening anyway.

Nothing. His fingers touched the back of the damp opening. It was nothing more than rough lava stone. What was this all about then? He started to withdraw his hand.

Was something loose in there? Had he imagined a slight movement at the far back part of the fissure when he released the pressure against it? Jordan pushed against the back part again, moving his fingers up and down.

Something *was* loose. He withdrew his hand and shone the light in. A fragment of lava rock blocked the back of the fissure. He made his hand as small as possible, and began working the rock with a single finger. After a few minutes he managed to pry the small rock loose and out of the fissure. He shone his light in the small opening again.

A light brown-colored . . . *something* lay wedged in the back of the crevasse—it looked like a piece of cloth or scrap of clothing. He reached in, drew it out, and held the small, damp, cloth-wrapped bundle in the glow of the flashlight.

It weighed no more than a few ounces, tied with what looked like leather shoelaces. Jordan fumbled with the moisture-swollen knots for a minute, but found it awkward to work with the flashlight in his mouth. It was no use. The wet, knotted leather was too tight. It would have to wait at least until he got back to the Jeep and he could hold it in his lap and work it for a while.

But all doubt had dissipated. *This was why he was led here. This is what he was meant to find.* He put the small bundle in his pocket and turned to make his way back out the entrance to the tube.

Thruuuuummm. The hummingbird or whatever it was buzzed his head again. It darted over to the tube's opening, looping in figure-eights, clearly agitated. He shrugged, started for entrance again, but the bird darted straight at his eyes and stopped short, bringing Jordan to a halt.

What the hell?

It moved away and did a few more tight loops near the entrance, then swooped out of the tube and dove to the left.

Jordan heard a soft hiss, like a quick intake of breath. The tide pool rippled in the moonlight, concentric circles emanating from the hidden side of the cove just past the entrance.

Someone is out there. Someone is waiting, just outside the entrance. The bird was warning him.

Motherfucker.

Jordan stood frozen, sorting through possibilities. No one arriving since he entered the lave tube would know he was there. Was someone hidden and watching the entire time? A setup? Planted evidence, an attempt to implicate him in his wife's disappearance? And how the hell did the hummingbird and the macaw figure into this? That was just way too elaborate to be plausible. And in any case, the bird was clearly trying to warn him. *I'll believe in magic or witchcraft before I'll believe that law enforcement would set me up with trained birds. Not them. Who then?*

He crouched near the tube exit. They couldn't know he was aware of them. He had a moment of surprise on his side, but that was his only advantage.

How to use it?

Jordan crept to the ledge near the front of the tube and braced himself to jump. He gauged about where the lurker would be, and leapt.

He splashed into the shallow pool and rolled. A broken shell stabbed his forearm and he winced in pain. Jordan rolled to his feet, coming up facing the tube. He glimpsed movement and flashed his light at the area, hoping to momentarily blind whoever was waiting for him.

A wet blur of motion as something dark lunged at him. A glint of metal flashed at his head and stirred a few wisps of his hair. Jordan sidestepped and backed out of the pool, ready to run. Then what he saw froze him in place.

A dark-clothed, hooded figure stood in the tidal pool, brandishing a curved blade over a foot long that flashed menacingly in the moonlight.

Jordan said, "You know this means I drop my visitor survey rating from four stars to two, right?"

The figure stood silent, motionless.

"Who are you?" asked Jordan. "What do you want?"

The attacker shuffled toward him through the water.

Jordan turned and ran.

Another figure stepped from the shadows of the sea cliff.

Clothing rustled behind him as the first assailant closed.

Years of training took over. Jordan whirled, caught the descending arm and used the attacker's momentum against him. The figure thudded face-first against the cliff and staggered. Jordan put all he had into a vicious kick. It landed squarely on the base of the attacker's neck. His head smashed rock and he slumped to the sands.

Jordan faced the other attacker.

Dark, close-fitting clothes, the glint of a knife. Moonlight illuminated the tip of a beard in the shadowed oval of a hood.

"What are you supposed to be, some sort of fucking ninja? Get out of my way, or you'll wind up like him," Jordan said, gesturing at the figure crumpled on the sand.

The man said nothing. He just swayed slightly from side to side, in some sort of balanced waiting position, his knife weaving like a cobra readying a strike.

Jordan sighed. He plucked a shell fragment from his forearm, which began to bleed freely. "Whatever." Then he exploded into motion.

Jordan tried a disarming chop. The man easily blocked it. The knife flashed in a short arc. Jordan's chest stung as it slashed through his T-shirt and scored a shallow cut on his chest.

Jordan froze in shock. Shock morphed to anger. "Motherfucker." He spun a low kick to the knees, but the assailant caught his ankle and twisted, leaving Jordan on his butt in the sands.

This is suicide. Fighting someone with a knife also adept in hand-to-hand combat. I'm overmatched.

He grabbed a handful of sand and shone the flashlight in the assailant's face. Jordan sprang to his feet and flung the sand directly into the attacker's eyes.

"It's a discretion-valor thing, bud, sorry," Jordan said as he rushed past the man and sprinted for the road.

A quick glance back showed Jordan that the attacker had recovered and was already in pursuit. Jordan accelerated. He was a distance runner, not a sprinter. He needed to stay in front of his attacker long enough for his superior endurance to win out.

He cut through the parking area and on to the road and risked another look. The attacker had closed to about thirty yards. Jordan's wet shoes were lead anchors, his thighs burned heavy with lactic acid. He pushed on, down City of Refuge Road.

Jordan could hear the man's ragged breath in counterpoint to his own gasps for air. Fifteen yards, he judged blindly. He couldn't risk a look back. Tripping or stumbling would be fatal. Jordan blocked out everything and focused on placing one foot in front of the other as fast as he could.

The sounds of the man's pursuit faded. Jordan glanced behind. The pursuer had fallen back, continuing behind him halfheartedly. Relief flooded Jordan and he eased off the gas a bit. After a half-minute, he jogged to a stop and turned. The man stood in the middle of the road, slightly hunched over, chest heaving, staring at Jordan. Jordan bent over with hands on his rubbery thighs and fought the urge to vomit.

The man raised his knife over his head in some sort of threatening gesture, where it flashed in the moonlight.

Jordan raised a shaky right arm, and flipped him the bird.

~~~

Jordan hadn't started his watch. He had to find the Jeep by approximation and guesswork. He ran—actually more of an exhausted shuffle—a little past the area before doubling back, but the Jeep wasn't very well hidden and he had no trouble finding it on the second pass.

He tossed the cloth bundle on the passenger seat, scooped the keys from under the seat and hopped in. It started on the first try. Jordan floored the gas and swerved out onto the road.

Fifteen anxious minutes later, eyes flicking to the rearview mirror every few seconds to check for headlights behind him, he crested a rise and saw the welcoming amber glow of the town. He pulled off the road, but left the engine running.

It took him a good five minutes to work loose the knots in the leather ties around the cloth bundle. Once it was untied and Jordan began to unwrap the layers of cloth, he got a feel for the size and shape of the hidden object. Long before he unwrapped the last layer, he knew what the bundle held.

He held it up in the moonlight. The five-pointed star-shaped stone from Melanie's necklace glowed softly in the silver light.

Jordan stared at it for a long moment before putting the Jeep in gear and swinging out onto the road, racing for the lights of Kona.