

Tye Dye
Voodoo

Monique Jacob

PROLOGUE

Winter Solstice, British Columbia

Phineas Marshal swiped his sleeve across his forehead and peeked over his shoulder at the dim windows of the cabin.

Yeah, they were still watching. He swung the hatchet once more and the wood split with a satisfying crack. The two slivers fell to the ground and he huffed out a misty breath, dropping the hatchet to the frosty ground.

Enough stalling.

He gathered an armload of kindling and glanced at the sky as he trudged to the cabin. Dark clouds were thickening and crowding out what was left of the light; there was more snow on the way, and soon. Phin wished he'd thought to double-check the forecast before coming out.

Not that it would have changed their timetable. They'd been packed and waiting when he'd arrived, and eager to be on the road before dark. It had taken the four of them most of the short winter afternoon to find the

cabin. He'd had no idea so many roads could be carved into such dense forest.

The cabin door opened as he climbed the rickety steps, and he went in to stack the wood in a pile beside the sooty fireplace. The three women stood in a tight cluster nearby, shivering in the cold room as he built the fire.

"You can just light it and go, dear," said the one called Dora. Or maybe it was Doris, or Norma; he couldn't seem to get them straight. They all had those old lady names. They looked alike with their wrinkly faces and short white hair.

"Does he have to go so soon, Cora?" one asked in a shaky voice. She was shivering the most, and slumped over her cane as if it hurt just to stand. "It really is very cold outside. He could at least warm himself at the fire before he leaves, couldn't he?"

"It will be dark in less than an hour and he's got a long drive ahead of him, Fran," Cora said, gently taking her friend's hand, careful of her swollen knuckles. "We all agreed. Let the boy go. The snow's going to be heavy tonight. We don't want him to have an accident." She led Fran to a rough wooden bench facing the fireplace and helped her to sit. "We'll be okay dear, we always have been."

"I'm just a little nervous, that's all. Cold too. But then I'm always cold these days." Fran rubbed her gnarled fingers together and held them out to the fire that crackled and snapped as it devoured the dry slivers of wood Phin added to it.

The third woman hung back near the door, watching quietly as she clutched her overnight bag tightly to her chest. She hadn't said a single word the entire two-hour trip. Just stared out the car window with a vague smile on her face while her two friends chattered in the back seat and argued about the route they were taking. Phin thought she might be younger than the other two but it was hard to tell. Anyone older than his parents got lumped together as simply old.

He took his time feeding the fire, building it up slowly, allowing it to nearly consume an entire piece of kindling before adding another. It was true that he was anxious to get going before a storm moved in. Even clear of snow he'd barely find his way back through the winding roads that had brought them to the cabin.

But.

Could he just leave these three old ladies out here alone? They'd assured him that they'd be all right and that others would be up to join them soon; they did this sort of thing all the time.

Phin shook his head to clear it and carefully set two split logs onto the grasping flames, watching the wood turn black at the edges. Why should he care anyway? Adults knew what they were doing, right? It was none of his business. He'd promised not to ask any questions, just drive these ladies to their cabin and then leave.

"His mother will be worried if he's late getting back from Cricket Lake. She knows how bad the snow can get this time of year," Cora said to Fran, who was peering nervously into the cabin's shadowy corners. Fran sighed

with relief as the fire surged and the light spread, reaching toward the edges of the room.

“I know, Cora, I know. I’m just cold and tired. And maybe a little hungry too. Did Delia bring those sandwiches in from the car?”

“I have them, Fran,” Delia said, finally leaving the doorway and stepping closer to the fire. Her nose was red with cold. Her stiff fingers were clumsy as she rummaged through her bag for the packet. She sat next to Fran, setting the sandwiches on the bench beside her. Neither woman made a move to unwrap one. Phin watched them as they stared at the fire, their eyes reflecting sparks from the flickering flames, and he wondered if they’d forgotten he was there.

He was excited about the drive home, even in a snowstorm. Christmas was in four days and he wished he could make the drive last longer than the day or so it would take to get back to Vancouver. He patted his pocket for the tenth time in so many minutes, assuring himself that the keys to the Buick were still there. He realized, as he felt the hard metal edges and heard a muffled jingle, that this simple act of checking for keys, one he’d seen his father do every day, was for him the very essence of being grown up.

He could hardly believe he now owned the Buick. He’d never really owned anything, just his books, model cars and clothes. Now that he and his mother lived in such a cramped apartment, there was no room for anything except the basics. He’d probably have to park the car down the block where he couldn’t see it from their windows, but he’d be checking on it constantly.

His Aunt Riva – actually his mom’s old school friend – had kept him busy all last summer, fixing the sagging porch on her house, sorting through endless boxes of old magazines and broken bits of dishes, and a dozen other odd jobs around the place. He’d been grateful to be away from home where his parents were tearing his life apart with their messy divorce. By the time he’d come home at the end of August, their house had been sold, his mom was mostly settled into a small two-bedroom apartment and his dad was nowhere to be found. He was glad he’d missed the whole ordeal.

The only drawback to being out of the city for the summer was that there hadn’t been many other people his age. Just a bunch of old ladies, drinking tea and whispering as they huddled with Riva, playing with weird cards. There’d been a couple of teenage girls around, but they hardly counted, being only twelve or thirteen. They’d giggled more than they’d spoken and Phin had dismissed them as silly children. They were certainly nothing like the curvy girls at his school.

The cabin was warming up fast and Phin was getting uncomfortable in his heavy jacket and scarf. He walked over to the window to check the light, not surprised to see thick flakes of snow sifting past the glass. He was glad he’d managed to wrestle the heavy chains onto the car’s tires before leaving Cricket Lake. He’d need them to get safely back to the highway through the unplowed rural roads.

When Riva had called last week to tell him she wanted him to have her old Buick Special, he couldn’t even pretend to politely refuse it. The car was a

classic – though not much older than he was – and his hand had trembled when he hung up the phone.

His mom had tried to forbid the trip, but Phin had stood his ground, arguing that he'd need a car next year when he went to college. She had made him promise to stay with friends in Chilliwack overnight, leaving the trip back to Vancouver for daylight hours, but he planned to keep driving as long as the highway was clear.

"I imagine the snow's going to be heavy tonight," Delia said, as she peeled the plastic wrapping from a sandwich. "Should be lovely and quiet. It'll be nice to sleep soundly for a change."

"So who else is coming?" Phin blurted out, unable to resist asking any longer. He may only be a kid to these women, but it seemed crazy to just leave them here. They barely had enough wood cut to keep the fire going a couple of hours. What if the storm got really bad and their friends didn't show up?

"Oh, I imagine someone will appear," Delia said, then looked at Fran in confusion. "Is someone else coming?"

"It's all right dear, we've talked about this before. Everyone who needs to be here will come." Fran frowned at Phin, who looked away and busied himself with the fire.

"But the boy is leaving, right?"

"Don't worry, he isn't staying. He isn't part of this."

Delia smiled at Phin in relief. "That's good then. You'd better go now."

Phin hesitated. None of this seemed right, but he wasn't sure what to do about it. He could leave and go back to Riva, tell her about the storm and the bad roads, but she'd been very clear about going straight home and keeping this a secret. Was it worth losing the car, just to find out that there really was a solstice ritual planned? He'd learned to be wary of rituals, discovering that he was better off not knowing what women did when they gathered in groups.

He'd been wandering through the woods one evening last summer, having left Riva and two of her friends drinking tea and talking in code so he couldn't follow their conversation. The sun had just set. The full moon cast an eerie blue glow onto every leaf in front of Phin as he walked. He'd heard in the village that there were two baby owls living in an old tree stump that were just learning to hunt. He'd been to the clearing only once before, but it was just beyond the oak stand, past the three boulders that looked as if someone had stacked them on purpose.

He'd heard the voices before he saw the women. He hoped they hadn't disturbed the owls. Their voices were barely above a whisper, chanting something in another language. He peered through some low branches; he didn't want to just burst into the clearing and startle them.

His breath caught and he nearly choked, stupefied at the sight of six naked women standing around a small fire, holding hands. He was surprised he hadn't smelled the smoke but that thought dissipated as he realized he could see everything. They were truly naked! His face got warm as he stared. He'd seen nude pictures before but the real thing was unbelievable.

And then he noticed their faces. Each one of the women was at least as old as his mother. He squeezed his eyes shut, but it was too late. His mother's face was now superimposed on all six women. He sputtered out a weak giggle, then turned and ran, hoping they hadn't heard him.

He hadn't recognized any of the women, since his mother's face had so quickly covered theirs, but for weeks afterward he couldn't help blushing whenever any of Riva's friends were around. After that day he'd vowed to avoid women in packs.

Cora walked with him to the door and patted him on the shoulder. "Don't you mind her, young man," she said quietly. "Delia just gets things mixed up sometimes. You go on. We'll take care of her."

"You're sure you'll be all right?" Phin whispered to her. He didn't feel quite right about leaving them, but the Buick beckoned and he let Cora push him gently out the door.

He swiped his arm over the front and back windows of the blue hardtop and dropped into the driver's seat, kicking sticky snow from his boots before he slammed the door. He rolled his window down partway so his breath wouldn't cloud the windshield. He couldn't help grinning at how eagerly the car roared to life. He loved the deep rumble of its powerful eight cylinders. He had to navigate the rutted driveway in reverse and even with the chains on the tires the car kept slewing towards the ditch. He went slowly. Those old ladies wouldn't be much help if he got stuck and needed a push.

The snow was falling more heavily. It would be very dark soon, probably in less than an hour. He hoped to get to the main highway before then. That meant he had to fully concentrate on the trip ahead which, thankfully, would distract him from listening to the frantic voice at the back of his mind demanding he not leave the women behind. Phin paused for a last glimpse of the cabin, squinting past the wipers that barely kept up with the snow. He could just make out three shadowy figures watching him through the cabin's dirty window. Moments before he rounded a curve and lost sight of them, one raised a hand in farewell.

PART ONE

Twenty-five years later

ONE

Late Spring, Cricket Lake, British Columbia

Phin ducked into the narrow lane that led to the back of the house. He was nervous about going in the front door. The kitchen entrance would be less conspicuous. He hoped. Stiff branches from an overgrown cedar hedge forked into the laneway, forcing him to press up against the house as he eased by. The house was smaller than he expected, more like a run-down cottage than the tidy bungalow he remembered. It had once been dark blue with white trim but had faded over many years to shades of watery grey.

Phin hitched up his pack, settling it more comfortably on his back. The padding had leaked out of the frayed straps and the rough fabric chafed his shoulders, more so this time since he'd stuffed everything he owned into the thin canvas sack. There hadn't been much to take – a couple of changes of clothes, his few books and his carving tools. He'd left the rest in the damp basement room he'd been renting by the week. Let the manager deal with it.

Phin was sure he'd soon find someone else desperate enough to take the overpriced room with the leaky plumbing.

He stopped at the house's sagging porch and watched a pair of sparrows stuff bits of fluff into a crack in the eaves before squeezing themselves into their home for the night. There were many such cracks, probably with an assortment of critters living in various parts of the house, he thought as he climbed the creaking steps.

A real fixer-upper. Phin hated fixer-uppers unless they were the next contract. He wouldn't know if this one would pay off until after he'd put a lot of work into it. The paint was peeling, the roof dipped in one corner and several windows were cracked. Riva had really let the place fall apart. He ran his hand along the railing. It wobbled and creaked, offering no support whatsoever. He leaned his weight on it and the nails pulled out of the wall, shrieking in protest. Phin gave it a hard yank, and let it drop to the rotted floor.

He tried the door. It was locked. The lawyer who had finally managed to track him down two weeks ago hadn't given him a key. In fact, the man had been in a big hurry to get the papers signed and out of his sight. Phin figured the lawyer hadn't been paid much to start with, and hadn't appreciated the time spent tracing the whereabouts of his client's heir.

It had been a wet spring so far, the winter rains dragging on far into April. The house would probably be damp and cold. It was likely that the power would be off as well, so no lights or heat. He looked back the way he'd come. The lane was empty and rapidly filling with shadows as night crept in.

He could just see the edge of another house where lights glowed in the window facing him. Phin wondered if the same family still lived there – mostly women from what he remembered.

There was a bed and breakfast across from the bus stop, just off the highway where it crossed Main Street. It might be better to go back and stay there for the night, come back tomorrow. At least he'd get a warm bed and food in the morning.

No, he'd come this far, might as well get it over with. The window in the door was made up of four smaller panes of glass and two were cracked. Phin jabbed his walking stick at one, clearing out the shards. He was going to have to replace the window anyway. He reached through the gap and turned the deadbolt.

The door was stuck and the wood squealed when Phin put his shoulder against it and shoved. He stumbled into the kitchen, boots crunching on the broken glass. He ran a hand along the wall until he found a switch. The room filled with light immediately and he heaved a sigh of relief. He hadn't realized until that moment how exhausted he was. He eased his pack off his shoulders, groaning as his stiff muscles protested. A long hot shower would take care of most of those aches.

The kitchen was pretty much as he remembered it. All the cupboard doors were missing, exposing stacks of dishes, boxes and jars of dried goods. It was one of the jobs that Riva had given to Phin the summer he'd spent here when he was seventeen. He'd thought then that it was a stupid thing to do, that everything would always get dusty and have to be cleaned more

often. But she'd insisted, saying that most kitchens are full of closed doors, as if they have something to hide. He had just done as he was asked.

He opened the fridge on the off chance that there might at least be a jug of juice. To his surprise, the fridge was almost full. At least three casserole dishes vied for shelf space with several plastic containers holding what looked like potato salad and something bright orange that might turn out to be dessert. He pulled out three containers at random and set them on the table.

Phin wondered who could have known he was coming, feeling self-conscious as he peered out the kitchen window. Had a neighbour noticed the lights had come on in Riva's house? A caretaker with the key to the back door he'd just busted into? The gloom outside had deepened and a thin drizzle now beaded the glass. He shivered, glad he'd made it before dark.

He pried the lid off one of the containers. It looked like potato salad, though it seemed more yellow than he thought it should be. His mother had sometimes put a bit of mustard in hers for zing so it was probably alright. He scooped up a big forkful and shoved it in his mouth. He hadn't eaten since lunch and his stomach growled in anticipation just as his taste buds detected something not quite right. His half-starved momentum kept him chewing a couple more times before swallowing quickly.

"What the hell?" he muttered. He sniffed at the bright yellow salad, then drew his head back sharply. "Curry? I hate curry. Who puts curry in potato salad?" He slapped the lid back onto the dish, and opened another plastic tub.

Cold chicken. As he sank his teeth into a drumstick, he realized he'd been fooled again. The drumstick not only had a funny taste, it had a funny shape. Rabbit, maybe? He'd only had it once before. He didn't mind the taste, just seemed weird when you expected chicken. He shrugged, then froze mid-bite at a sudden noise from another room.

Was there someone else in the house? What if he'd made a mistake? Could the place have been sold? He quietly set down the food, picked up the walking stick he'd left leaning against the wall and crept toward the living room. Maybe the lawyer had been wrong or worse yet, lying. It hadn't made sense that Riva had left the house to him, someone she hadn't seen in over two decades and not even a relative. So now he'd not only broken into a stranger's house, but also helped himself to their food. Why else would the fridge be full?

That would be just his kind of luck. He was always on the edge of disaster, at dead-end jobs and in seedy apartments. He'd never managed to feel like he fit anywhere, though he had to admit he hadn't tried very hard. He'd just always preferred his own company and shied away from forming ties. He had no siblings and his mother had died when he was a teenager. He hadn't seen his father in more than ten years, had no idea if the creep was still alive. Didn't care.

Phin held the stick close to his side, ready to raise it if necessary, but not wanting to appear dangerous if he turned out to be the one trespassing in someone else's house. The feel of the smooth wood calmed him, the gnarled root at the top fitting comfortably in his palm. The wood was carved,

the rough designs merging in a jumbled geometrical pattern that completely covered its length. It was the third one he'd made.

He'd grown tired of whittling tiny dogs and horses, something he'd done most of his life, ever since his father had given him his first knife when he was a boy. He'd always been able to sell his tiny creatures for extra cash, but lately had been longing for something bigger, something more substantial. His hands had tingled when he'd run them along the rough bark of the four-foot long alder branch he'd brought home from a walk in the forest last fall. His knife had etched deeply into the wood, the broader strokes and cuts much more satisfying than the small nicks and scratches he'd ventured before.

He inched along the hallway, listening intently for another sound. He'd made enough noise coming in that anyone already there would have heard him.

There was a shelf running the full length of the hall, just about eye level. A thin layer of carpeting had been glued to the wood. As he came to the end of the hall and into the living room he flicked a light switch. Two floor lamps at opposite ends of the room showed him that the shelf continued along the length of the wall to his right. Several gaps were cut into it and connected with diagonal ramps leading to other, lower shelves.

They were bare, so not for books. Phin tried to picture what sort of use they might have but could only think of rolling a ball along one shelf and down a ramp to another. It would be tricky to get the ball rolling straight enough so it wouldn't fall off after picking up speed on the ramp. Riva hadn't

seemed the sort to make a game so elaborate but the entire living room had had a makeover.

Twenty-five years before, the room had been filled with comfortable overstuffed furniture, dozens of plants and Riva's clunky, floor model television. Now the room looked like some sort of fortune-telling den. Every lamp was draped with a colourful scarf, every available surface cluttered with assorted candles, books and spun glass figurines. There was even a crystal ball sitting on a velvet-covered table. He noted that the windows had been hung with heavy drapes that looked as if they could easily conceal someone. He poked at the cloth with Earl, raising a cloud of dust. He pulled all the scarves off the lamps to brighten the room but saw no one hiding behind any of the delicate furniture that had replaced the comfy sofas he remembered.

He pushed aside a beaded curtain that covered the doorway to the tiny room he had slept in that teenaged summer. It had been converted into a study, with three walls covered in books from floor to ceiling. A tiny desk held a phone and a laptop computer with a scratched cover.

Phin backed out of the cramped room. He turned around abruptly at a low rumbling sound and nearly poked his eye on the corner of the carpeted shelf. The rumble rose to a snarl as he came face to face with a huge orange cat lying on the shelf. He yelped and stumbled backwards, bumping his staff against a small table covered in miniature glass animals.

The table tipped over and the glass figures shattered as they hit the floor in a jumbled heap, their tinkles mingling with the startled hiss of the cat. It turned and disappeared around the corner. When had Riva gotten a

cat? There hadn't been one when he was here last. Phin hated cats. It would have to go. No wonder his eyes felt itchy, he thought, as he rubbed them fiercely. At least the noise he'd heard had only been a cat, not someone coming home to find a prowler eating his leftovers.

He kept an eye out for the cat while he pushed the broken bits of glass against the wall with the toe of his boot. He'd sweep it up when he found a broom. He'd only been in the house half an hour and had made two piles of broken glass already. Feeling wearier than ever, he dragged himself back into the kitchen to finish the container of cold rabbit, wishing whoever had left it had thought to stock the fridge with beer as well.

TWO

Phin climbed out of the shower stall, mindful of the shifting tiles under his bare feet. Mildewed grouting made a blackened frame around each stained ceramic square. The entire stall would have to be ripped out and re-tiled. He made a mental note to add the chore to his list, which had grown long in the twelve hours or so since he'd arrived. There was hardly any part of the house that did not need mending, replacing or painting. There were water stains on nearly every ceiling and most of the carpeting was worn thin.

At least there was plenty of hot water, he thought, as he swiped his hand across the misted mirror over the sink. He scowled at his watery image while he towelled himself dry. His black hair and beard – shot through with more silver than he cared to see – were both long-past needing a trim. Phin wondered if Riva had any sharp scissors in the huge sewing chest that hulked in the corner of the bedroom.

He'd wandered the house all night, reluctant to climb into a dead woman's bed. So he'd snooped and poked around, getting used to the idea

that he now owned all this junk. He was sure that Riva had never thrown away anything in her life. Every closet in the house was crammed to the ceiling with unlabelled boxes and bags of old clothing. He'd groaned when he realized what a job it was going to be to prepare the house for selling. He'd have to rent a truck to haul away countless loads of junk then spend the rest of the summer making the place presentable.

He had found a stack of flattened cardboard boxes under the bed and had already filled two of them with candleholders and incense burners. He'd also collected the several dozen glass figurines she'd had on display all over the house and covered the kitchen table in a glitter of miniature animals. He'd carefully wrapped each one in a tissue and nestled them all into a third box.

Phin raked his fingers through his hair and tied it back with a short length of leather. It hung down to the middle of his back, dripping on the floor as he padded to the kitchen.

He rummaged through the kitchen cupboards, hoping to find some coffee, but came up with only herbal tea or roasted coffee substitutes that smelled like roots. Grocery shopping was going to need its own list. Maybe the hardware store would let him run a tab for supplies while he fixed the place up. There'd be more than enough from the sale of the house to pay off the bill later.

He set the kettle on the stove and threw two pouches of black tea into a mug. It would be bitter, but at least he'd get some sort of caffeine jolt. As he waited for the water to boil, he stared out the window into the yard.

The greenhouse he'd helped Riva build twenty-five years ago was still standing at the back of the property, though several of its glass panes were cracked. He could see plants inside, leaves plastered against the glass and bright blotches of color. He wondered who had been watering them since Riva died. Probably some neighbour, maybe the same one who had put food in the fridge.

Phin's stomach growled at the thought of food and he opened the refrigerator door and peered inside hopefully. He pulled out another plastic container. Some sort of meatloaf. Dumping the congealed mass onto the counter, he found a sharp knife and cut off several thick slices.

Sliding them into a cast iron frying pan, he lit a second gas burner and set the pan onto the blue flame. Soon, a gentle sizzling and a tantalizing meaty odour filled the small kitchen. Phin poured boiling water over his two teabags and set the table for one. There were plenty of dishes, most of them delicate, all of them covered in dainty flower patterns.

He flipped over his meat slices, took a sip of his tea. It was scalding, very strong. He hadn't found any sugar, only honey and molasses, so he up-ended the honey bottle over the mug and squeezed a generous dollop into his tea. He stirred it and took a tentative sip. Still too bitter, now too sweet. He'd never liked honey, but he was eager to get at least some sort of

caffeine trickling through his veins, so he steeled himself and drained the mug in several burning gulps.

The meatloaf smelled wonderful, so he cut a huge bite and crammed it into his mouth. He chewed twice and stopped. It was crumbly and tasteless, but he choked it down as he reached for his mug before remembering that it was empty. He filled it with tepid water from the tap and washed down the dry lump of meat sticking in his throat. He dug through the fridge until he found a small bottle of hot sauce. He doused the rest of the meat on his plate with the red sauce, and salted it heavily before taking another bite. Didn't help. Now it tasted like salty spicy cardboard.

Phin was scraping the rest of it into the garbage can when he noticed the orange cat sitting in the corner. It watched him with narrowed eyes and flattened ears.

"I should feed it to you," Phin told the cat. "This stuff is so bad it would even scare you off." The thought of feeding the hot-sauce-laced meat to the cat struck him as funny. He snickered as he put the empty plate into the sink. "You don't look like you've been starving, but if no one shows up to feed you by dinner time I guess I'll have to toss you something." The cat twitched its ears as another cat sauntered into the room. It was larger than the orange cat, its long jet-black fur making it seem bigger than it probably was. They rubbed their faces against each other then sat side by side glaring at Phin. He eyed them warily as they stared at him, unblinking. Two cats. The lawyer hadn't mentioned one cat, let alone two.

He'd have to discourage these two from staying. The shelves and ramps that they used for running throughout the house would have to go too, though it would take days to tear it all out and repair the damaged walls. Giving the animals their own raised highway had probably kept them from being underfoot all the time but he'd tolerate them even less at eye level.

The black cat sauntered toward Phin, its velvet nose delicately sniffing the air and its claws clicking on the linoleum. Phin balled up a towel and threw it at the cat. It scampered off with a hiss, the orange cat following close behind. Stupid cats. He'd call them Stupid One and Stupid Two, though he couldn't think of any reason why he'd ever need to call them at all.

Phineas heated up the kettle again for more tea. It hadn't satisfied his craving for caffeine the way a strong cup of coffee would have, but it would have to do for now. He was still hungry, so he took a package labeled lasagna out of the freezer and put it into the microwave to thaw. He paced through the house while he waited, assessing how much work had to be done. He'd need at least four more large boxes just for the junk in the living room.

The microwave dinged to let him know breakfast was ready. His mouth watered at the thought of lasagna, dripping with cheese and tangy with tomato sauce. But when he peeled off the lid, he smelled bacon. And eggs. He picked through the layers with a fork. Cheese, noodles and tomato sauce, just as he'd expected, but underneath the noodles were fluffy scrambled eggs. Under the eggs were slices of bacon layered over more noodles.

It might look strange, he thought, but it smells great, so he carried it into the living room and cleared a space on the scarred coffee table. He sat on the sofa he'd dragged up from the basement, put his feet up, and ate breakfast as he tried to make sense of the woman he'd known only briefly, so long ago. Riva's house had seemed normal then, as far as he could tell, anyway. There may have been candles but nothing like what confronted him now. A quick count had given him at least three dozen candles in holders and half as many incense burners, though some were disguised as ornaments.

Phin got up for another look at a trio of colourful dragons. The three ceramic bodies twined sinuously around each other, their wings folded back and their snouts pointed upwards. They howled at the sky like a pack of wolves. An incense stick poked out of each snout. When lit, the three dragons would appear to breathe smoke. Cool. He'd keep it, though it felt strange to think of the dragons as already his, like everything else in the house.

He'd never really owned anything of great value. Now he had a whole house. It was like finding a treasure chest, something he'd dreamed of as a child. He picked up a photograph in a tarnished silver frame. It was of a much younger Riva than he remembered, many years before he'd met her. She smiled radiantly at the camera, her plump cheeks surrounded by blond curls, holding tightly to a striped cat that hung from her arms with a look of resignation on its whiskered face.

Phin frowned at the photo, reminded again of the two cats roaming the house. He could feel them watching him. He set the photo down with a

clatter and went to inspect the aquarium against the far wall. He'd heard its pump grumbling all night but now a buzzing fluorescent tube had joined in, tinting the water pink. It sat on a tall wrought iron stand that brought it up to nearly eye level. Phin peered through the glass at the plants waving in the current of the pump. He didn't see any fish; nothing moved but the greenery.

A locked cabinet sat next to the fishless tank, tall and narrow with chipped filigreed edges. The lock was flimsy and snapped open easily when he jammed his pocketknife into it and twisted. Two shelves held several dozen leather-bound books which, when he flipped through a few, turned out to be journals. Each was dated and signed inside the front cover in Riva's tiny, cramped script. She'd evidently started writing them in her teens and the last entry was only a few months old. He put them back for later.

Phin carried the rest of the bacon-and-egg lasagna back through the kitchen and out onto the porch. The sun was high and warm on his face as he surveyed the neglected yard. Sparrows flitted through apple trees that showed signs of insect damage. They probably hadn't been pruned for years and the stunted leaves and sparse blooms had lost the battle with the local caterpillars. At least the birds would be fed. He wondered if the cats hunted the birds. The trees fed the caterpillars, which fed the birds that the cats then killed and ate. Fair enough.

The greenhouse at the back corner of the yard drew Phin's attention again. The glass panes were misted with condensation that blurred the splashes of yellow, pink and purple peeking out among the greenery.

He left the empty dish and headed for the tiny potting shed that sat against the leaning fence, halfway between the porch and the greenhouse. Its latch was broken and rusted, with the door gaping open. Dirt-encrusted clay pots cluttered most of the available floor space and a variety of rusted garden tools hung from hooks on the unpainted walls.

Next door, the greenhouse door swung open easily and he stepped into warm, moist air, pungent with damp earth and a tantalizing jumble of flowery scents. Planters and pots of all sizes jostled with plastic yogurt tubs and an assortment of chipped crockery. They all brimmed with vegetation; Phin recognized tomato, squash and several tangled pea vines among the colourful clusters of flowers.

Long twisted rags sprouted from each pot like aerial roots. They hung over the sides and drooped into one of many pails of water sitting under the benches and tables. He prodded one of the hanging bits of cloth and found it sodden. The pails would only have to be topped up every few days, probably by the same caretaker who had fed the cats and left provisions.

The greenhouse was even more rundown than it had looked from the outside. Nearly half the glass panes were damaged, their wooden supports starting to crumble, spongy where he chipped at them with a fingernail. One good windstorm and the whole thing would probably come crashing to the ground.

Phin was deciding whether the greenhouse was worth salvaging when he spotted a leaf at the back of the greenhouse that looked familiar. He

battled his way to the back, squeezing past damp leaves that smacked him in the face.

A smile slowly spread as he gazed at the two marijuana plants sitting side by side on a narrow shelf. Their leaves drooped in the humid environment and they looked half dead. They were not going to thrive in eight-inch pots. They needed space for a good root system if they were going to get big enough to grow buds.

He picked up the two pots and cradled them to his chest as he fought his way back through the greenery and out the door. He scanned the yard, looking for a likely place to perform a transplant.

On the other side of the yard, facing the shed, was a rectangular patch of weeds. It was surrounded by identical weeds, but was set apart from the rest by being slightly elevated and enclosed by planks of wood set on edge, like a low box. Phin set the two plants down, and went back to the potting shed for a shovel. Rusted or not, it would still turn soil. He also rolled out the wheelbarrow, its wheels squeaking loudly enough to silence the birds for several minutes.

The day was growing even warmer, and he took off his shirt before starting to pull out the knee-high weeds. Some of them came up easily, their shallow roots barely keeping them upright in the first place. Others were more resistant, but it felt good to be working outdoors instead of organizing a house full of old-lady-fortune-teller junk.

When he'd cleared the patch of the biggest weeds, Phin wiped sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand, smearing dirt on his face and in

his hair. He moved the overflowing wheelbarrow off to the side, picked up the shovel and began to dig.

THREE

Dee Berkeley walked along the dusty sidewalk leading up to her best friend's house. Make that her late best friend. In the month since Riva had died, Dee had dropped by daily to feed the cats but now her steps slowed as she chided herself for still thinking of the little house as Riva's.

She shifted the plastic bag she carried from one hand to the other so that she could wipe her damp palms on her work pants. The bag bumped her legs as she walked, radiating warmth from the dozen freshly baked rolls inside. They'd come out of the oven not twenty minutes ago and she'd taken her break early to deliver them while they were still warm.

Mabel had been certain that Phineas had arrived last night and had suggested the rolls. Dee couldn't decide if she wanted Mabel to be right or wrong. When she'd heard that Phin had inherited Riva's house, she'd waited for days for him to show up. Then the weeks had dragged by with no sign of his arrival and everyone had gone about their business again. The lawyer had appointed Dee caretaker of the house until the appearance of its new owner.

She'd heard nothing until last week, when the lawyer called to let them know he'd finally found the heir to Riva's estate.

Some estate, she thought, as she picked up her pace again. The roof leaked when it rained, none of the doors closed properly and the furnace only worked on cold and dry days, not cold and wet. Riva had also been certain that termites had begun to eat her house from the inside out. Riva's house was no prize, but it was familiar and Dee missed the cats.

For the past week she'd been a wreck, waiting for Phin to show up. And now her heart was racing and her palms were slick with perspiration again. She took several calming breaths. She'd been wavering between giddy joy and terror at the thought of seeing Phineas Marshal again. She had to keep reminding herself that they were now mostly strangers. That she was a grown woman still obsessed with a teenage crush from twenty-five years ago.

"Get a grip, girl," she murmured. She brushed a loose strand of hair off her forehead, wishing she had at least taken the time to go home and change before marching out here. Her clothes were stained and floured from her morning's work. The ovens had been going full force for hours before the sun came up. Their relentless heat had wilted her hair and left a deep flush in her cheeks that she was sure was still a bright glowing pink.

A breeze came up and she lifted her chin and fanned her neck with her free hand. The wind rustled the new leaves and excited the birds in the branches into a frenzied chatter. Dee wondered if Phineas would change the house or the yard much. Would he cut down Riva's trees?

She was close enough now to see the front edge of the house, with its roof missing an entire corner of shingles. They'd blown off three weeks ago, when a freakish windstorm had torn up shingles from half the neighbouring houses. She would point it out to him so he could have it repaired. She wasn't used to talking to men, especially a man she'd been having dreams about since she was practically a girl.

Dee wished, as she had every day for the past several weeks, that Riva was still alive and that she would be waiting for her in the little house. Though Riva had been more than twenty years Dee's senior they had always been close friends, more like sisters than neighbours. Everyone had been amazed that the house hadn't been left to Dee, but Dee was the only one who hadn't been surprised. She'd realized, with more than a little embarrassment, that Riva had ensured the return of the only man who'd ever meant anything to Dee.

The last time she'd seen Riva they'd been sitting in her kitchen, drinking tea and talking about the future. It was an ordinary visit, one of hundreds just like it, until they'd finished drinking their tea and looked into each other's cups at the moist leaves left on the bottom. They'd laughed hysterically as they both insisted they saw a tall, dark stranger. They'd joked about dark strangers before. In fact, any blob of wet tea leaves that vaguely resembled a man was fair game.

Riva had taken out her tarot cards and shuffled the deck. She'd read the cards for both of them, again seeing the dark stranger in Dee's cards.

Her own reading had been murky and confused, showing only dark, with no strangers. Two days later she was dead.

Dee could hear a rhythmic thumping now, coming from the other side of the house. She peeked around the corner just as the thump became a ringing clang followed by a string of muffled curses.

He was wearing cut-off jeans and scuffed work boots. Perspiration ran in rivulets down his broad back, carving channels through the dust he'd raised while digging in the garden. His long black hair was tied back, but most of it had come loose and was either waving around his head in the breeze, or clinging to his damp shoulders in sweaty clumps. He squatted over the garden with both hands deep in a hole he'd dug, prying out a rock. He finally wrenched it out with a grunt and stood to set it in on the pile, turning in her direction.

She pulled back quickly, but he hadn't noticed her. His face, above an unkempt beard, was streaked with dirt. A scrape over his left eyebrow had stopped bleeding but had left crusted blood mixed with the dirt.

Was this Phineas? She tried to compare him to the boy she'd known so many summers ago, but her mind couldn't link this dirty caveman to the handsome, bashful boy she remembered.

Phin pressed his hands to the small of his back and stretched, feeling the strain in every muscle. He inspected his hands, wincing as he gently poked the swollen, red blisters forming on his palms. Black dirt was deeply lodged under his fingernails and his knuckles were scraped from wrestling

large rocks out of the soil. He rubbed the back of his neck with one hand, turning his head left and right to ease the tension. He ached all over, feeling old and out of shape. He was thirsty, too, but knew that if he stopped now to go inside for a drink, the pull of a hot shower would be too alluring and he'd abandon the project for another day.

He'd cleared the entire plot of weeds and had turned over the soil, breaking up the biggest chunks of dirt and hauling out an enormous pile of rocks. More than enough space. Time to plant.

He glanced at the two little plants sitting patiently in their pots. He imagined their relief at finally getting to spread their roots in a real garden. It would be worth every blister and strained muscle to watch them grow into mature marijuana plants. They were surrounded by the many pots and flats of vegetable and flower plants that he'd hauled out of the greenhouse. He stretched again, feeling several joints crackle in protest.

Phin had no idea if Riva's friends had known about the illicit plants she'd kept at the back of the greenhouse, so he planned to surround them with the tomato plants and flowers to disguise their distinctive leaves.

He'd seen several bags of soil conditioners and fertilizers in the greenhouse and wondered if he should mix them in before planting. His mother had kept a big garden out behind their house when he was growing up. Every autumn they'd loaded several large buckets into the truck and driven to the beach, where the tide had deposited huge mounds of sludgy seaweed on the shore. They'd used rakes to transfer it from the sand into the buckets, and Phin had had to fight the nausea that threatened to overcome

him each time he'd accidentally touched the slimy, green-black leaves. His mother had revelled in the scents of the sea, deeply inhaling the reek and rot of the coast, claiming that it invigorated her innards. This had always made him laugh, as she knew it would, and took his mind off his stomach.

At home, they'd spread the seaweed thickly on the flowerbeds and the huge vegetable patch that would, at that time of year, have been harvested down to bare earth. His father had complained for weeks that the truck and the yard stank of rotted fish and brine. He threatened every year to pave over the entire property. Phin's mother would simply blow him a kiss and prepare him another fabulous dinner made from food she'd grown that summer.

She had been stunned the day Phin's father had come home from work early to declare that he wanted a divorce. He'd already made arrangements for a realtor to come appraise the house for sale.

It was early spring and her mail order seed packets had arrived the week before. She'd spent an entire afternoon packing soil into tiny pots. Phin's job had been to press a tiny seed into the moist dirt of each pot.

His mother had inspected each one daily, checking the moisture of the soil, watching for mould. This had always been a magical time for Phin when he was younger as she named and described each one for him, drawing a little picture of the plant and taping it to the front of its pot. She'd kept up the habit even though Phin was seventeen that year and had protested that he knew the difference between a tomato plant and a zucchini.

None of the seeds had sprouted yet when Phin's dad made his announcement. They were still days from surfacing. After his father had gone upstairs to pack a bag, Phin had watched his mother sadly drop each little pot into the garbage.

Phin scowled at the jumble of plants. Too many plants. He would never fit them all into this plot. Everything about Riva's house took so much effort. She'd collected and hoarded as much junk outdoors as she had inside.

Deciding that nobody needed twelve tomato plants, he put half of them beside the house, along with all the big gangly plants that he knew would run riot if given the slightest room. Phin hated all squash-type vegetables and wasn't taking the risk they would take over the garden. He carefully set the two marijuana plants in holes near the front of the garden so he could watch them from the kitchen window. He planted a tomato on either side of them with a couple more behind. Anyone looking closely would spot the deception, but it would do for basic camouflage at a distance.

He jammed an old trellis he found in the shed into the centre of the plot. He'd transplant all the bean and pea vines around it and then fan out from there, alternating vegetable plants with yellow and purple flowers. He wasn't certain how much room each plant needed but could always pull out a few later if they got too big.

And then he spotted the cat.

It was a different cat again from the two he had seen indoors, a scruffy grey tom with pale grey eyes. It boldly marched right up to the

opposite corner of the garden patch and dug its own little hole. It kept Phin in its sights while it dug, not even looking away when it squatted awkwardly.

Another stupid cat. Phin's field of vision narrowed to the spot where the mangy beast was digging up his hard work. Without taking his eyes off the cat he bent down, scooped up a pebble and let fly with the accuracy of a childhood spent pitching for little league. As the pebble bounced hard off its forehead the cat gave an ear-searing screech, staggered a bit and sped away. Phin picked up another pebble to throw at its retreating back but a shout from behind stopped him short.

Damn! Someone had caught him throwing rocks at their cat. Not a good way to meet the neighbours. He dropped the pebble at his feet and sheepishly turned toward where the shout had come from.

She must have come from the front of the house just in time to catch him with the rock in his hand. Oh well, he thought, good thing I'll be selling this place and moving on soon.

He watched her approach, swinging a plastic bag that she held tightly in her fist. The other hand was fisted too, with a finger raised and pointing at him. She was dressed all in white, blouse, pants and shoes, as if it were a uniform. She could have been a nurse, or maybe she'd been cleaning one of the nearby houses.

The woman surged towards him, backlit by the afternoon sun, her face hidden in shadow, light brown hair highlighted and sparkling as it flew behind her in the sunlight.

“What kind of person throws rocks at defenseless animals?” she shouted as she neared. “Would you react the same way if you’d seen a child digging in your yard?”

“Whoa, lady,” Phin said, throwing his hands up as her pointing finger came close enough to jab him in the chest. He backed up a few steps, mindful of the plants behind him. “I’m really sorry,” he tried again, bringing his hands down when he saw she had stopped her advance. “It just seems there are cats everywhere, in the house, in the garden, and I can’t seem to shake them.”

“So that gives you the right to throw rocks at their heads, is that it?”

“Yes. I mean no! I’m sorry if I hurt your cat, but can you try to keep it in its own yard?”

“This *is* its own yard.”

“But that would mean three cats living here. Who the hell keeps three cats?”

“Well, there are actually five cats here.” She put down the bag she’d been carrying. Phin couldn’t ignore the delicious aroma of fresh-baked bread wafting from the bag. His stomach growled loudly, but she didn’t seem to notice as she kept her sights on the tree behind which the cat had disappeared.

“What do you mean five cats living here? In this house? My house?”

“There were nine that hung around the house all last winter, but four of them went feral as soon as the snow melted and we hardly see them anymore.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “I’ve left a bunch of notes on the

fridge about the cats' feeding schedule and all the phone numbers to call to put the house bills in your name."

"I'm supposed to feed them? Not a chance. I'm allergic to cats. I hate cats."

She faced him squarely with her fists pressed to her hips, as if barely keeping herself from using them on him. Her chest heaved as she breathed deeply, either from her walk or because of her anger. Phin couldn't take his eyes off her blouse buttons as they stretched to their limit with each breath, offering a view of white lace and creamy skin. He realized he was staring but his brain was still trying to register the reality of five cats. Then his stomach growled again and he was able to tear his gaze away, grateful for the distraction. He shook his head and smiled as he thought of the bread distracting him from the breasts that were distracting him from the cats. All this and he still didn't know the woman's name.

"I'm glad someone thinks this is funny," she said. "Some of these cats are delicate creatures. If they get sick, you'll be responsible." She brushed past him and walked towards the back of the yard. "Hercules, come on out sweetie," she called as she approached.

"Hercules?" Phin asked, still eyeing the bag on the ground. He wondered if she had brought it for him and whether it would be rude to peek inside.

"That's his name. Riva named all the cats after constellations. The others are Pegasus, Orion, Castor and Pollux. They're all males, except Peg."

"It was easier just to call them all Stupid," Phin muttered.

“Didn’t that damn lawyer tell you about the cats? They’re attached to the house. They live here. He assured us that you’d be told about them and that you’d look after them.” Her eyes were pale blue marbles as she faced him, their pupils mere pinpoints in the bright light. Her skin glowed a moist pink in the heat.

“The lawyer told me there’d be a caretaker. Is that you? I’m Phineas Marshal.” He held out his hand for her to shake, but immediately drew it back when he realized how dirty it was.

“I know who you are,” she said tartly, eyeing his dirty hand. “I’m Dee Berkeley. We met when we were kids, teenagers I guess. You were here that summer. I think your parents were divorcing?”

Phin tilted his head and studied her, trying to see her as she would have been twenty-five years ago. He didn’t remember anyone his own age when he was here, but there was a small clutch of younger girls that had giggled and squealed every time he’d passed anywhere near them. The neighbourhood had been predominantly female back then, though none his age had shown themselves, if they’d existed. “You’d have been about twelve or thirteen then, right?”

“Definitely thirteen,” Dee said with a wry smile. “I’ll never forget that year. You probably never heard about it, but that winter three older women just disappeared from the area. My grandmother was one of them.”

Phin’s heartbeat lurched and he pressed a hand to his chest. Three older women. Disappeared in the winter. Never seen again. He hadn’t realized he was staring until Dee looked at him curiously.

"Are you all right?"

He sucked in a deep breath, trying to appear calm. "It must have happened almost exactly when my mother died. She was hit by a bus the winter after I was here, just after Christmas."

"Omigosh! I had no idea. Riva never mentioned it. We never heard about you again after that summer."

"Yeah, it was pretty crazy. My parents had divorced that summer. That's why I'd been shipped off here while they figured themselves out. They sold the house before I got back then I went to live with my mother in an apartment downtown." Phin started to relax as he realized she didn't know he'd come back to Cricket Lake that winter. The three women had lied to everyone. They'd known that he'd be eager to believe their story. That he'd be happy to take his new car and go home and forget about them.

And he *had* forgotten, at least for a while.

The morning his mother was killed – less than two weeks after he came home with the car – he'd been shovelling the walkway around their apartment building. The owner was an aging man who had been happy to give them a break on the rent in exchange for work around the place. He'd given Phin a key to the tool room along with a list of ongoing chores to keep up, only asking him to keep a log of the hours worked. It was easy work and didn't interfere with his other job at the corner convenience mart where he worked Saturdays for an actual paycheque.

It had stormed all night and the snow lay in soft, shin-deep drifts, with a slick layer of ice underneath. Cars had been sliding into one another since

the sun had come up. Phin had stopped noticing the scream of police and ambulance sirens as they threaded their way through the bogged-down traffic.

He'd called his father that evening, two hours past the time his mother had been due home. He'd been reluctant to contact him as they hadn't spoken since summer but he had been desperate and didn't know what to do. His father had been drunk, as usual, but had made several calls and found her at the Merciful Sisters Hospital. She'd had no identification on her when the ambulance had arrived, so there'd been no one to call. Her purse was found later, buried in a snow bank at the scene of the accident.

"What did the police think happened to your grandmother and her friends?" Part of him was curious to know more about the disappearance. A smarter part wished he would just shut up.

"Who knows? There were stories about kidnappings, but who'd kidnap three old ladies? No one contacted us for a ransom, anyway. And my grandmother wasn't really all that old, the youngest of the bunch, really. She was only sixty-eight, but the other two were in their eighties at least." Dee squinted at the sun, checked her watch. "Oh no, I've got to get back to the bakery. I've already been gone too long. Brent will have a fit." She strode to where she'd left the plastic bag and thrust it at Phin.

"Ah, thanks," he said, smiling as his stomach clenched and growled again. He peered into the bag, closing his eyes as he inhaled the warm, rich scent of bread. "Did you bake these?"

"Yeah, I've worked at the bakery in town most of my life. It's a dump and a fire trap but the only one we've got." She cupped her hand over her eyes and looked back at the house. "That reminds me, we had a bad storm a few weeks back. You might want to check the roof for leaks."

"Uh, sure," he said. "Why haven't you left town for a better job?"

"When my grandmother disappeared, my mother took it really hard. She kind of went around the bend so they put her in the hospital for a while. My Aunt Mabel stayed with me. When mom came back, she was different. She got very clingy, never wanting me out of her sight." Dee sighed and tucked her hair behind her ears. "So I stayed after I graduated from high school, kept working at the bakery. Look, I really have to go. Enjoy the bread. There's strawberry jam in there too. Mabel made it."

"Thanks. Um, is the grocery store still in town? I need coffee, badly," he said, laughing.

"Yeah, still there," she said, turning to go. "I'll bring your spare key tomorrow."

Phin didn't mention that it was likely the only key, or that the first thing he'd done when he arrived was break in. He watched her stride toward the house, heading for the lane. Her hips swayed as she walked, mesmerizing him as he stood there clutching the plastic bag full of fresh rolls.

"Oh, almost forgot," she said, turning back suddenly, "the cats always use this patch as their toilet. They just chose it long ago, and Riva didn't bother to stop them. You might want to find another place for those plants. Bye." She waved and disappeared behind the house.

Phin reached into the bag and pulled out a warm roll. He bit deeply into it, rolling his eyes as he chewed. It was heavenly, probably the best bread he'd ever tasted, though his empty stomach hardly made him impartial. He'd keep most of them for later when he could slather them with the jam. He swallowed and surveyed the stretch of dirt he'd turned over.

According to Dee, the cats had been shitting in it for years. That would explain some of those smaller rocks. Well, so what? Manure was supposed to be good for plants, wasn't it?