



CHAPTER 5

The unpaved road was deep in snow and ended at a stand of bare trees facing west. Beck looked left and right, searching for signs of life. There was nothing here. There had been a street sign after all. It was a short, vine-covered, marble plinth set three-quarters of a mile back from the road. Chiseled into the stone was the word *Desolo*, and he had followed the rough, unused trail to a dead end.

Sunlight glanced off the pallid bark of the birch trees, casting long bars of shadow on the pure white ground behind them. He looked closer, feeling the presence of something behind those trees.

Beck stared and felt a twinge of misgiving. He had been wrong. Somehow, the name of the road had been left off the new maps. He had finally found it by dragging an old, folded tax plat from a file cabinet in the county assessor's office two doors down from his office. It gave the location of a Desolo Road in Irenic two miles past the bridge, just before the long, deserted stretch of rural highway that led to Amsterdam and beyond.

The tires of the Ford spun on the ice as he backed up, then turned the steering wheel hard to the left and edged past the stand of trees. There was a long, gray impression in the snow behind the trees and another thick stand of birch about ten feet back, running north to south where they would cast the longest shadows at morning and sunset.

Clever. Two stands of trees right next to each other, spaced by depth, approachable from the road only in a straight line. Anyone coming down this road would think they saw a dead end and turn back, unless they thought to try going around the first stand. It would work especially well in winter, where that narrow access road could be a depression, a ditch, or maybe even a dried-up stream bed.

Beck worried his lip with his teeth and wished for a cigarette. Whoever they were, they had taken care to appear invisible, and that fact said things that put his instincts on alert. He jockeyed the car around the first stand and steered the tires onto the access road, which seemed surprisingly smooth under the snow. Soon, he could see the house.

It was an estate, a Georgian mansion set back about a half mile from the road in a shallow, bowl-shaped depression like a miniature valley. If it had been on a hill, his instincts would have been eased. But no one would build such a large structure on low ground this close to the river. The risk of flooding was too great. That is, he thought, unless what they built needed to be hidden. Then it might be worth it.

The access road ended at a wrought iron gate, spear tipped and black with age. A tall black fence ambled for several hundred yards north and south and curved around the back of the house, enclosing several acres of field and forest. An odd gatehouse stood just outside the front gate, a tiny white hut with rounded plaster walls and a domed roof surmounted by a tall minaret cut from white stone. The minaret was anchored to the apex of the dome like a finger pointing to heaven, the doorway below it a curving arch cut into the wall. Inside it was empty. A squat, black security camera and intercom were mounted on a pole nearby.

He pulled up to the closed gates and stared at the house through the icy windshield. It looked like a block of bricks from here, topped with a mound of snow. He got out of the car and approached the tall gate that was adorned with a necklace of icicles glistening in the gray light. When he drew nearer, he saw that the gate was not wrought iron, but hollow steel bars incised with many circular cuts, like the finger holes of a flute. The points that Beck had thought were spears seemed to be welded mouthpieces, as if the gate were an immense pipe to be played by the wind. The gate would function like a massive carillon, transforming wind to sound. A molded bronze plaque was affixed to the main gate. It was small, about eight inches in diameter, and in its center was a tree with its bough engulfed in flame. Around the short trunk coiled a snake, its single eye impaling him to the spot. It was his talisman.

Beck's hand went to his neck, feeling the shape of the charm against his skin, and he tried to swallow in a throat gone dry. *Change*, the wind whispered. *Shift. The end of everything.*

The eye of the snake was incised with sharp, clever little lines, so cunningly wrought that for a moment Beck imagined he saw intelligence winking at him from the pupil. He looked away from it, disturbed. The sky was the color of ash and seemed to muffle all sound. Beck flashed his badge at the security camera. "Hello in the house!" he called. His voice seemed deadened and without tone. The opaque fish eye of the camera stared back at him indifferently.

It was too quiet. No birds. No traffic. No sound at all. He felt the heavy silence closing in and settling on his shoulders like claustrophobia. A thought crossed his mind that he was trapped, caught between the layers of cloud above and the layers of snow beneath. A narrow, tunneled realm where he moved like a restless ghost bound to an empty world.

Beck peered inside the gatehouse, not liking it. It reminded him of something out of place. "No guard," he said. He was lonely for any sound, even for his own voice. He jammed his cold hands in his coat and approached the gate. It was locked.

"Hello?" He was unnerved at how loud he sounded in the stillness. He pressed the buzzer on the intercom and waited, then tried again. The mansion crouched in the shallow valley, the square black panes of the windows seeming to stare balefully up at him. The hairs on the back of his neck rose and he pushed the gate.

He looked back at the house, which—it now seemed—did not merely recline in the belly of the valley, but hulked there like a sullen beast brooding at being deprived of warmth and light. An ashen cloud passed overhead and the light faded abruptly. Beck shivered. Whatever familiarity he had once associated with this thing's shape was gone now. It was not a house, it was a living thing, malevolent and vindictive. In a moment he would back away and run to the car.

Get a grip. It's a house. Everything looks spooky in upstate New York in winter. It's a spook paradise.

He blew on his fingertips to warm them, his eyes watchful on the house, then jumped violently as the arm of the security camera swiveled and creaked. It turned to focus on him and the flat bolt spanning the two halves of the gate suddenly pinged and withdrew into its housing. The gates snapped open a fraction of an inch.

Beck faced the cold camera eye and felt a snake of apprehension slithering up his spine. Whoever had opened the gate could see him, but had not answered. He thought about calling Sean for backup before he went in, suffused with a prickly sense of hyper-awareness that made him feel three feet smaller and twenty years younger. Something told him he had been very wrong to come alone.

Jesus Christ, how much of a baby are you going to be today?

Sean's voice, not his. That's what he would say if Beck called him. To hell with that.

Beck dragged the gate apart wide enough for the car to pass through, then drove down the icy, curving driveway. The house grew larger through the windshield.

Beck stepped out of the car and looked to the front doors. Someone had to be in there. The gate hadn't opened by itself, after all. What were they waiting for? He found his eyes wandering up to survey the house.

The mansion was three stories of timber and brick with iron bars defending the windows like black teeth. Green Lebanon cedars, hatted with snow, stood guard in a line at the front of the house, and decorative brick quoins stamped with a complex design framed the building. The hipped roof, sloping and topped with a central dormer, seemed ready to ambush intruders with an avalanche of accumulated snowfall. He found himself staring at the quoins. The pattern was an ennead, the nine-pointed star of the goddess in ancient mythology, but there were differences.

The center of this star was an eye like the one on the gate. *It's like I've seen it before, or drawn it, but I can't remember.* Unconsciously, the fingers of his right hand twitched as he mentally sketched its outlines. *So familiar...*

Beck jumped when the front doors opened and disgorged a tall young man, dressed somberly in a casual black sweater and trousers, onto the portico. He had hair like a newly-minted copper penny.

Beck noted at once the resemblance to the boy on the boat; the same sweetness of face, the disarming innocence around the mouth, the same copper-red hair. The red-haired man's blue eyes had depth and life in them, and Beck made the comparison between them and Paul Rossetti's dead stare.

The man smiled at Beck and those eyes struck hard, as if they were drilling holes in his face. "*Salvete,*" he said. His voice was deep, spiced with a Mediterranean accent, "It's snowing. Come inside and get warm."

And then he laughed lightly as if at a poor joke and motioned for Beck to follow him. He ushered Beck through the pedimented doorway and the dim foyer, moving with a catlike, commanding assurance, gliding rather than walking. Beck found himself hurrying after him.

A burst of scent seemed to ooze from the walls, a bright, stinging smell like a freshly-cut apple. Beck repressed a shiver. The smell gave him an odd chill, like a bad dream long forgotten. Beneath his feet a vast expanse of cold checkerboard terrazzo led into many shadowy hallways that branched out like veins into the depths of the mansion. He smelled a wood fire burning somewhere in the house. Several, perhaps.

From far down the corridors the sound of several voices floated in the air, muffled and ghostlike. The high arched ceilings were laden with baroque cornices, and white stone busts directed their blank stares to the center of the room from recessed niches. A fall of fresh, out-of-season wisteria spilled over the edges of a gargantuan Chinese vase. The aura of the house was heavy and oppressive, filled with an idleness almost sultry in its inertia.

Beck began to speak as they walked. "My name is..." He stopped, listening to the way the sentence echoed and rolled in the cavernous hall. Somewhere he heard the click of heels on the terrazzo, and then the upswell of voices ceased as if they held their collective breath. The man stopped as well and turned, his expression one of polite interest.

"I'm Chief Merriday, with the Irenic police department. I'd like to speak to the head of the household."

He looked at Beck's offered badge and touched it, then rubbed his fingers together. "Nicolo."

Without a word, Nicolo turned and moved down a high-ceilinged corridor. Beck had no choice but to follow. The light faded a few feet into the corridor, and he stumbled. Nicolo reached without looking and steadied him. Beck jerked back from the touch.

"Careful," Nicolo said. "Not much light here. Not much at all. *Caligo numquam perit.*"

Darkness never dies. Beck started and stared at him. Always a quick study, Beck had learned Latin first from the Mass and later from Father Dane's library. But Nicolo had no way of knowing that he understood, or that he had heard those words very recently.

"How do you like our home, Chief Merriday?"

"Very nice," he said automatically.

"Of course, you're seeing it in the dying season. We don't like the bare winter as much as the summer months, so we tend to stay indoors, where we can be near our fires. When the green days return, we will build our fires outside and listen to the night under the moon."

Just a pack of regular nature boys, Beck thought, and Nicolo chuckled. Beck had an uncomfortable feeling that his thoughts had been heard. They suddenly halted before a large wooden door. Nicolo rapped once.

“Enter.”

The voice was from the other side, muffled and deep. Nicolo pushed the door open and held it for Beck to pass. “*Sumus quod sumus, frater*. We are who we are. I hope to see you again, sweet brother.”

Beck pondered the phrase as he continued to stare at Nicolo. Nicolo smiled, an expression of gentleness and warmth which seemed to emanate from the man’s entire body. Beck felt the pull of the man, the fondness that seemed to be trying to reach into him, testing, demanding a response. He opened his mouth, looking into Nicolo’s face, wondering what he was going to say, but needing and wanting to ask why it was all so familiar.

“Why is it all so familiar?”

Startled, Beck turned to see a tall man silhouetted in the ashen light streaming through an enormous elliptical window. The window was interrupted by two curved horizontal steel bars and resembled nothing so much as a large, lidless eye gazing out into the world. There was even a ring of iron welded between the two curved bars, like a pupil. Beyond the window was a low, thick wall of rough stones encircling a sunken garden, now dead and cold and hung with ice.

The man who had asked the question was framed against the eye window, his face to the waxen sunlight, watching the snow drift into the stone court. He was dressed in plain trousers and a dark oyster sweater was stretched across broad shoulders. He turned.

“Nothing ever really feels new, does it?”

Beck gaped at the room. It contained only a few pieces of nondescript furniture: a desk, chair, and a wide daybed in the corner covered in eggshell linen. Everything extraordinary was in the walls.

The walls were painted a soft gray and decorated from floor to ceiling with raised plasterwork to represent a far sky. From behind the billowing clouds emerged the tapered wings of birds curved in flight, if indeed they were birds; only their wings were visible, their bodies hidden behind the gusty clouds. Stars—raised beads of plaster tipped with silvery dust—arranged in the patterns of constellations glittered in the background. All of these things were so modestly rendered, their coloring so subtle, that the eye could ignore the walls and let them fade into the background, yet when he turned his head, the shadows on the plasterwork shifted back into primacy and wings surrounded him. He imagined he heard the cooing of doves. There were no lights on in the room, only the somber glow falling naturally through the bare windows. The fanciful room seemed incongruous in this foreboding place, as did the man waiting patiently for him to speak.

Beck found his voice. “Are you the owner of this house?”

“House?” The voice held amusement. “This place is called Desolo.”

Forsaken, he named it. “Then I’m looking for the owner of this place.”

“You’ve found him. Please come in. Close the door, Nicolo.”

Nicolo bowed himself out of the room. The man at the window smiled. “My name is Tamiel.”

Beck paled. *Tamiel*. He felt something deep stirring inside him, a dark well of memory that rippled at the sound of the name, as if a stone had been dropped into its waters, concentric shockwaves that struck down into nerves and flesh. He tried to hide it, inhaling deeply and striving for composure. What the hell was that?

Tamiel's voice, like Nicolo's, was soft and cultured, the accent distinct but unfamiliar to Beck, though he was an expert in recognizing and identifying such. The man was tall, about Sean's height, and Beck guessed his age to be anywhere between thirty-five and forty-five. He had trouble pinning it down. Tamiel's hair was a deep black, his face sharp-planed to the point of delicacy, the bones long, the jaw pronounced and strong. But the sum of him was more than these things. He was beautiful.

Truly beautiful. Not feminine, not weak, Tamiel seemed above conventional descriptions. He did not look like anyone Beck knew, yet he did not look foreign or exotic. Beck found himself staring. Observing this, Tamiel raised his dark eyebrows and a curl of amusement touched his mouth but not his eyes, which remained cold but interested. They were startling eyes, a pale, icy blue ringed with black.

Beck realized he was staring and stopped, embarrassed. For the third time, Beck flashed his badge. Tamiel did not look at it.

"I know who you are, Beck. I wanted to see you. That's why you were allowed to find this place. No one sees us unless we want to be seen."

Allowed? "What's that supposed to mean?"

Tamiel turned back to the window. Beck saw that the snow had begun to thicken, sheets of white slanting in the dim light. He wondered how bad the storm was going to get.

"Why is it so familiar?" Tamiel repeated, ignoring Beck's question. "The snow, the cold, the ice on the trees. I had never seen snow before I came to New York, yet it did not seem strange to me. It was like remembering a dream. Isn't that odd?"

"I don't know," Beck said, wondering why he bothered to answer trivialities. That wasn't what he came for. "I suppose movies, books, television, that sort of thing. We pick up the images without realizing it, so when we do encounter a place we've never seen before, sometimes it feels like we've been there."

He saw that Tamiel was smiling, but it was like flowers on a tomb, sadness and beauty laid upon stone.

"Television," Tamiel echoed. The skin around his eyes wrinkled.

"I'm here regarding Paul Rossetti."

Tamiel laid one hand on the cold glass of the window, as if testing its temperature. They were unusually long hands, fine-boned and white, with fingers so long that they seemed like talons. "You have bad news about Paul." It was not a question.

"We suspect so, yes. I need you or someone who knows Paul to come into town to make a visual identification." Beck considered telling him about the second unidentified body found at Brenda Marger's place, but decided against it. It was best to hold as much back as possible and see what leaked out before playing the hand. He had tripped up more than one criminal that way.

"Identification." Calm and clipped. "You mean of the body."

Beck nodded. "Yes. I'm sorry. But remember that we're not certain it's actually Paul Rossetti. There was no ID. We're still running on clues right now." He strove for a hopeful tone. "This could all be just a big mistake."

Tamiel bent his head in silence for a moment. He folded his arms across his middle and turned, his gaze focusing on a point above Beck's head. "There is no mistake. The body is Paul's."

Beck waited a long moment before asking, "And how would you know that?"

"You came here with questions. Ask them."

Beck's jaw tightened. It was not that he had lost the advantage in the interview, he had just never had it.

"All right. Did Paul Rossetti live here?"

"He did when he was alive."

A strange thing to say, but people often did or said bizarre things after being informed of a death. Beck ignored it. "Are you his next of kin?"

Tamiel visibly hesitated. "No. Nicolo was his brother. His older brother."

"Could you call Nicolo back in here please?"

"That's not necessary. Nicolo already knows that Paul is dead."

Beck took out a small notebook and began to write. "How could he know that?"

"The same way I did. Oh, don't bother with your little book, Chief Merriday. I didn't kill Paul. Neither did Nicolo."

"Then my original question stands."

"I can't help you."

Beck checked himself on what he was about to say, the threat of law he was about to brandish. Too often it was a mistake. Outside, a dun-brown rabbit loped over the snow. He temporized. "Let's try this again. Who would want Paul dead?"

"Almost anyone. He was young and beautiful. That is excuse enough for many."

Beck caught on the word *beautiful*. "How long did you know him?"

"Most of his life."

"Friend of the family?"

"You could say that."

A thin shadow—a bird or hawk—swept over the ground outside and the rabbit bolted for cover, hind feet throwing skirls of snow.

"What exactly was the nature of your relationship with Paul Rossetti?"

"I told you. He lived here."

"In what capacity?"

Tamiel waited a moment before replying. "I don't take your meaning."

Beck moved closer to Tamiel, watchful of the man's expression. "What did he do here? Was he a guest?"

Tamiel tilted his head to the side. He seemed amused at the line of questioning. "Are you asking if Paul was my lover?"

"Rent boy, is the term I had in mind."

Tamiel chuckled quietly. It had a shining sound to it, bright tones just beyond the edge of hearing. "No. Nothing like that at all. Are you disappointed?"

Beck's mouth tightened in discomfort. "I'll need to speak with Nicolo before I leave."

"Nicolo doesn't care for questions."

Beck slipped the notebook back into his pocket, fighting down a surge of irritation. Getting angry wasn't going to help anything.

But he's annoying as hell. He acts like he knows something without really saying anything, and he knows that I know it and he's taunting me with it.

"We can do this now," Beck said deliberately, "or we can do it later from a jail cell."

Tamiel smiled again, that tired expression of loss. "I'm afraid I can't allow that."

So much for the temperate approach. Beck took another step closer to Tamiel. "I remind you that I'm a... a police..." he stuttered, then his vision swam as a surge of dizziness overcame him.

Beck swayed on his feet and felt something *push* at his body, an invisible wall like a hammer sheathed in velvet, soft to the touch but steel underneath. It was not painful, but it was relentless. It pushed him back step for step and pressed him down to the floor. He tried to resist it, his breath growing hot in his lungs as his knees collapsed. He gasped for air. A low sound like distant thunder was in his ears.

Footsteps. Tamiel flowed down on one knee beside Beck and touched his neck. A strong arm slipped around his shoulders and helped him to stand. He leaned heavily on it. Tamiel's voice was in his ear, so close that he felt heated lips brush his skin.

"Questions?"

The hand on his shoulder seemed to burn through the layers of fabric. Beck struggled to breathe and craned his neck to look at Tamiel. *It's him doing this*, Beck realized. *Somehow, it's him*. "What's happening?"

Slowly, with deliberate intent, Tamiel scrutinized him, starting at his face and moving downward, then back up until he reached Beck's eyes. The examination was intimate and ruthless, and Beck involuntarily shied from it, knowing that in doing so he lost the last shred of his authority. Tamiel pressed his hand to Beck's cheek and moved his fingers in a gentle caress. Beck froze in panic.

"Do you believe in fate?" Tamiel asked. "That we are destined to play a role in life? That we cannot rest until that part is completed?" Closer still, and whispered: "That we will return even from death to finish it?"

"No," Beck quavered, listening to the thin and frightened sound of his own voice. "I don't believe in fate."

"You will."

Tamiel released him. Beck stood on his own, wobbling like a newborn colt.

"Nicolo will show you out."

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