

GEOFF
LOFTUS

THE
DEVIL'S
VACATION

A JACK TYRRELL NOVEL

The Devil's Vacation

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The Devil's Vacation is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual people is unintentional and coincidental. A serious attempt has been made to portray accurately the details and geography of Block Island, but the needs of the story may have driven me to exercise poetic license, including with some actual places. I hope the reader will excuse this.

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The Devil hath power
To assume a pleasing shape.

William Shakespeare
Hamlet

“The demon’s target is not the possessed;
it is us the observers . . . I think the point is
to make us despair...to reject our
humanity: to see ourselves as ultimately
bestial, vile and putrescent; without
dignity; ugly; unworthy.”

William Peter Blatty
The Exorcist

Put on the whole armour of God,
that ye may be able to stand
against the wiles of the devil.

Ephesians 6:11
The King James Bible

1

“It’s so beautiful,” Kim said.

We were standing at the starboard rail of the ferry’s main deck, looking into the sunset as it silhouetted the Block Island’s North Lighthouse and the rolling sand dunes of the national wildlife refuge.

“An astoundingly great postcard shot,” I replied.

“I’m already in love with the place.”

“Thank God.”

“Was my liking Block Island make-or-break for our relationship?”

“Well,” I hesitated. “I haven’t really thought of it that way, but—”

“Yes!” she laughed.

“Probably.” I put my arm around her, pulled her close, and kissed her. We snuggled against each other, dressed in what I thought of as ferry-wear: shorts and sweatshirts. The July weather was mild, but the boat moved at 16 knots, and the breeze could be a little chilling.

“Let us go then, you and I,” I recited, gesturing grandly toward the island, “When the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized upon a table—”

“What?” Kim interrupted, laughing.

“Let us go then—”

“I heard you—what the heck is that?”

“It’s the opening lines of a poem, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* by T.S. Eliot.”

“This is what I get for dating an English major.”

“Yup. My father used to say that to my mother when they were going out for the evening.”

“Very romantic. Especially the reference to the etherized patient.”

I hugged Kim again and kissed her cheek. We both returned to admiring the view. The granite, Gothic lighthouse was too far away to be appreciated in all its grandeur, but the combination of the sunset, the ferry engine’s steady rumble, and the splash of the boat’s bow wave was transcendent.

Every time I had made the ferry crossing—and my parents had first brought me here when I was still in diapers—a surge of joy went through me as if I was returning home.

I glanced to my left, southward, toward the island cemetery. Where my late wife, Maggie, was interred. I couldn’t really see the cemetery, but Maggie was not out of sight, out of mind.

I looked again at Kim and felt a pang of—guilt? Guilty because maybe I shouldn’t be bringing Kim to the place where Maggie was buried? Guilty because I had moved on and not lost myself in mourning?

Tyrrell, I thought, when it comes to matters of the heart, you are a first-class idiot. You’ve made amends to Maggie. By righting wrongs, you continue to make amends. Right this moment, you’re enjoying the island

scenery roll by and the company of a beautiful woman who's foolish enough to love you deeply. I smiled and pulled Kim close, and she snuggled against me.

As if this idyll were too good to be true, my internal radar pinged. And it pinged hard.

I slowly turned all the way around, looking in every direction on the ferry. There was no danger at hand. Nothing but a few sleeping dogs, overweight, middle-aged tourists, and twentysomethings who had started their partying on the ferry. I looked back at the North Light.

“What’s the matter?” Kim asked, concerned.

“What? Nothing. Just squinting into the sunset.”

“When Clint Eastwood squints like that it’s never a good thing.”

“Yeah, well, he’s not on the ferry.”

“What’s wrong?” she insisted.

“I don’t know.”

“Your internal radar?”

“Yup.”

“Oh . . . that’s never good.”

* * *

EVENING – NORTH LIGHT WILDLIFE REFUGE

A WOMAN AND MAN CROUCHED BEHIND A SHORT DUNE. The beachside of the dune was sandy, but it was topped with dune grass and beach heather. The woman stared intently at the ferry as it steamed south

toward Old Harbor.

“What’s the matter?” the man asked. He was a bit over six-feet tall with broad shoulders and a deep chest. He had high cheek bones and blue eyes that were little more than slits. He was wearing a T-shirt, jeans, and hiking boots. The T-shirt fit snugly over the muscles of his torso. “You’re watching that ferry as if it were carrying plague-infected rats.”

The woman, Applegate, slowly shook her head, “Ah, the plague,” she observed. Her voice was richly husky, and her English-accented words were delivered deliberately. “Those were the good old days. The plague drove thousands to despair. Unfortunately, there’s nothing as rewarding as that on the ferry.”

“Then what’s bothering you about the damn boat?”

“A man named Tyrrell is on that ferry.” She was tall and lean, a striking middle-aged woman with brilliant blue eyes and salt-and-pepper hair. She was not dressed for the beach. She wore a royal-blue silk blouse that made the blue of her eyes more vibrant with tan slacks and sandals.

“Tyrrell?” asked the man. “Is there something special about him? Does he work for—?” He pointed skyward.

“Yes. He’s one of the Chairman’s most effective operatives.”

“Oh, goody.”

“His background closely resembles yours: combat veteran and former law enforcement.”

“Oh?” the man grinned wolfishly. “Does he happen

to be a homicidal maniac?”

“No,” Applegate shook her head. “But nobody’s perfect.”

“Are you worried that I can’t handle him?”

“I never worry, Mr. Cooper. I am certain that I will enjoy your ... handling of him.”

“What if he’s the one who does the handling?”

“I will endeavor to enjoy that, too.”

“Seriously?” Cooper grinned. “But what will you do if I can’t take care of him?”

“Surely you don’t admit such a possibility exists.”

“Sooner or later, everyone runs into someone they can’t handle. What are you going to do if Tyrrell is the guy I can’t take out?”

“I will develop a new plan.”

“What’s the deal with Tyrrell—why do we have to worry about him?”

“As I said, he works for the Chairman.”

“Oh.” Cooper mulled over that information. “Does he have a partner like you?”

Applegate almost purred in response, “Please do not flatter yourself. You and I are *not* partners. But I understand your meaning, and yes, Tyrrell is working with someone like me.”

“Only from the other side.”

“Yes.”

“Have you and Tyrrell’s ... uh, ‘co-worker’ tangled before?”

“We’re familiar with each other.” Applegate

looked to the west, checking the position of the setting sun, slid down a couple of feet to the base of the sand dune, and stood up. She brushed sand from her slacks as Cooper joined her, also sliding down the dune and standing at the bottom.

“Time for us to do what we came for,” she said.

“Are our victims here?”

“They are only seconds away.”

As if on cue, two voices became audible. Applegate and Cooper both stood a little taller, just enough to allow them to peer over the dune. A tall, dark-haired man and a sandy-haired woman with a freckled face were walking up the beach on the other side of the dune. A young couple, clearly romantically involved, walking over the uneven footing of the rocky beach. Because of the rocks, they struggled to hold hands and laughed as they failed to meet the challenge.

The waves surged in, crashing against the steep beach then pulling out with a rumbling sound as the rocks rolled against each other. Overhead, seagulls wheeled and dipped, cawing in a harsh avian language. The woman stopped walking and pointed out at the Atlantic where seals were bobbing in the water fifty yards or so from shore.

“Now,” Applegate said firmly.

Cooper ducked around the side of the dune and moved quickly and quietly over the stones of the beach. The couple’s attention was focused on the seals.

The man began to turn, slowly taking in the panoramic views of the island’s north end.

Cooper pulled a hunting knife from a leather sheath on his hip.

Still turning around, the man exclaimed, “Look at that sunset—hey! What the fu—” He never finished as Cooper sliced the blade across his throat.

The woman had turned and screamed, backing away. She stumbled on the wet stones and fell. The surf rushed around her as Cooper pounced on her, slashing her throat.

“Very well done,” Applegate said as she joined Cooper. Blood gave a red tint to the white foam of the surf.

Cooper looked down the beach as it trailed toward the parking lot at Settlers Rock. “Are you sure no one saw us?”

Applegate closed her eyes for a few seconds then opened them and looked directly at Cooper. “No one has the faintest idea of what you did.”

“What the hell are you doing when you close your eyes like that? Some sort of scan?”

She smiled, “I am able to assess our situation in a way that is beyond your perception. We need to continue; we’re not quite finished.”

* * *

As the ferry slowly cruised into Old Harbor toward its pier, Kim and I stood at the rail, enjoying the last of the sunset behind the Surf and National Hotels. They were a

pair of Victorian-era wonders at the corner where Dodge Street curved into Water Street, the main boulevard of the village area.

“We should go below and squeeze into our rented vehicle,” I said.

“Squeeze?”

“A crew member guided me into a nice tight spot when I backed the car onto the boat. You’ll see.”

“Lead on! I’ll squeeze away.”

As I led the way below to the car deck, Kim asked, “Any more radar pinging?”

“No. It stopped after we passed the Clay Head bluffs.”

“Maybe it was a false alarm.”

“Yeah,” I shook my head, climbing down a steep, stairwell to the car deck. “But it’s usually not wrong.”

“I was afraid you were going to say that.”

“Not to worry. We’re on vacation. Which I apparently need since my internal radar isn’t working properly.”

Our rented Nissan Rogue was parked near the bow, and the tapering curve of the hull created space on the passenger side. Kim was able to open her door and get in easily. My door was much closer to the next car, and I did my best impression of an anaconda slithering through the narrow opening of my door. I should have gotten in on Kim’s side and clambered over the center shift console. Then again, small SUVs are not designed for guys 6-foot-2-inches tall to maneuver themselves over the center console.

After a considerable amount of contorting and groaning, I succeeded in getting to the driver's seat. I started the Rogue just in time for one of the crew to signal me to drive off the ferry. Once on dry land, we threaded our way out of the parking lot and made a quick left turn on Water Street, the main street of the island's little town. At the southern end of Water Street, just past the Empire Theatre where the large board on the front wall listed *Despicable Me 3* and *Spider-Man: Homecoming* as that week's movies, we came to the white statue of Rebecca at the Well and headed up Spring Street.

"Was that the movie theater I just saw?" Kim asked.

"Yup. Built in the 1890s as a roller skating rink. Now it's a big, wooden barn with a movie projector at one end and a screen at the other."

"And what's with the statue?"

"That's Rebecca at the Well—I think it was put up as part of the temperance movement on the island."

"How'd that work out?" she asked impishly.

"Can't speak for anyone else on this island, but I'm planning to go to an AA meeting this evening. Okay if we grab dinner afterward?"

We climbed Spring Street to the south away from Old Harbor.

"And what do you suggest I do while you're at the meeting and I'm starving?"

"Go window-shopping in town," I slowed the Rogue as we drove past the pale-gray, shingle-sided front

of the 1661 Inn and pulled into the small parking area. As I stopped in a space, I said, “You can peruse all kinds of T-shirts and hats. There’s also a great bookstore called Island Bound.” I stopped the car and turned off the engine. “Or you can find someplace to sit and enjoy staring out over the ocean. Or you can people watch in town.”

We both climbed out of the SUV and walked to the back liftgate.

“Maybe I should grab a drink at one of the bars. There’s a symmetry to my consuming alcohol while you recover from it.”

“True,” I said, grabbing our suitcases.

Kim closed the liftgate, and we walked toward the front door.

I resumed, “You might want to consider the impact a gorgeous woman like yourself will have in any of the bars here.”

“Oh?” she sounded skeptical.

“The instant an inebriated, single male realizes that you are all by yourself, he will approach you.”

Kim held the front door open for me, saying, “Don’t you think I can take care of myself?”

“Well . . . ?”

“You gave me a bunch of self-defense lessons, and after you got me started, Harry tutored me.”

“Harry?” I said as we walked to the front desk.

“Excuse me?” the woman behind the desk asked.

“Sorry. A reservation for Tyrrell.”

“Yes.”

It only took a few minutes to check in, and then, following instructions from the woman at the desk, I carried our bags down the hall and turned toward the back corner of the building where our room was located. Inside, we found modern furnishings, a big bed, pale-gray walls with white trim and molding, and a door that led onto our own little porch with a sweeping vista of the Atlantic Ocean.

I put our suitcases on the handy luggage racks the inn provided and asked again, “Harry?”

“Yes. Harry’s been giving me private self-defense classes,” Kim grinned, “He tells me he is an excellent teacher, and you know he never lies.”

“Hmm.”

“You don’t approve?”

“Far be it from me to tell you what to do.”

“Wise words. Remember them.” She pulled her toiletries from her suitcase and took them to the bathroom. Emerging, she said, “I think I’ll have a snack while I’m sitting at the bar.”

“What about me?”

“Your meeting, your problem.”

We walked down the Spring Street hill back to the statue of Rebecca at the Well. Kim stopped and took in the view. The lit-up fronts of the pretty Victorian buildings on our left, standing in silhouette in the last vestiges of twilight. The ferry dock immediately in front of us, and ranging north in a long crescent the white breakers of the waves on the dark beaches.

“This is amazing.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Thank you for bringing me here.”

“Thank you for coming.”

We kissed and went our separate ways. I went to the right, walking past a few parked cars and SUVs, along the front of Harbor Church. The church was, like so many houses and buildings on Block Island, gray-shingled. Its nave jutted out from the hill toward the harbor. A rounded tower stood on the left side, and the tower and nave were connected to a large house behind them. I climbed the sharply sloped driveway on the tower side of the building. I glanced over my shoulder and saw Kim striding along Water Street, headed toward the many shops on the left of the road.

I circled around to the rear of the church, the large house portion of the structure, and entered the kitchen through the back door. I could hear people chatting in the front room, which was a cross between an old-fashioned parlor and a doctor's waiting room. Instead of old magazines—in the smart-phone era, did waiting rooms even have magazines anymore? I have to admit that I hadn't looked at an actual magazine in a long time—there was AA literature and brochures and books on spirituality. I walked to it and saw a couch, some upholstered chairs, and a few metal folding chairs. The room would cozily hold about a dozen people—a far cry from the multiple dozens of people who often attended Manhattan meetings.

There was a young Black couple, honeymooners

according to my quick take on them, a sixtyish white guy with white hair and a short beard, and a fortyish white woman with the weathered face of someone who was not religious in her application of sun block. Everyone was dressed in sweatshirts or windbreakers and shorts.

And . . . there was a white man of my height and build, roughly my age, maybe a bit older, who sported an orthopedic boot on his left leg and supported himself on a pair of metal crutches. He was wearing a pale-blue Block Island-themed T-shirt, a forest-green windbreaker, and a pair of tan cargo shorts that fit together very well with the black ortho boot. There was something vaguely familiar about him, but I couldn't quite recall why I felt as if I recognized him.

Everyone said hello to me, and we all exchanged names. The big guy with crutches was Mark. How the hell did I know this guy? It was like the hundreds of times I'd struggled to recall an actor's name and then finally, *voilà*—a bolt from the blue would hit, and I would remember it was Diane Keaton.

The meeting got started and since it was not a huge group, we went around the room, each person sharing in turn. When it came to Mark's turn, he identified himself and said he was an alcoholic.

"Some of you already know this," he went on, "but I have now discovered that I have other problems with alcohol besides drinking too much of it." He pointed at the boot on his left leg. "This is the result of getting hit by a drunk driver on Tremont Street in Boston. The inebriated

idiot tried to pull into a parking space at ridiculously high speed, banged right over the curb, and slammed into me and a couple of Emerson College kids. Nobody was killed, thank God, but I'll be on crutches for the next two months."

"Oh no," another man grunted, "please don't talk about it for the next two months."

Everyone laughed.

Mark was laughing, too, then said, "I'll only do it when you're here to enjoy it."

More laughter. Then Mark continued, "Anyway, at the hospital, one of the doctors gave me a prescription for a narcotic painkiller, but I just gave it to my wife and asked her to toss it. My leg hurts, but it's nothing that ibuprofen and Tylenol can't handle.

"This whole thing has been a real demonstration of powerlessness for me. We just never know when something crazy is going to happen, something that we can't do a damn thing about. Just have to accept what happens and then take appropriate action afterward."

There were more shares, and if I had been paying attention I'm sure I would have gotten something out of each one of them, but all I could think about was how do I know this guy Mark? And ... finally ... just as we were closing the meeting with the Serenity Prayer, I realized who he was.

After the meeting, people lingered, chatting, and I made it a point to introduce myself to Mark. "I'm Jack," I said offering my hand.

He took his right hand off his crutch handle, pinching the top cushion of the crutch in his armpit, and shook my hand. “Mark.”

“Pardon me, but are you Mark Sheridan?”

“The one and only,” he admitted.

“It’s really nice to meet you.”

“You, too,” he replied grinning. “I don’t know what you’ve heard, but I do not leap tall buildings in a single bound, and I stay away from drinking one day at a time.”

I pointed to his foot, “Given the orthopedic boot, I hope you would leave the building hopping to Superman. Once the boot’s off, I don’t know....”

“I’m guessing you know all about Alex Kessler, right?”

“The Dark Saint? Well ... I know what was in the news.”

“I have always hated that name.”

“The Dark Saint?”

“Yes. It makes Kessler sound legendary.”

“Okay sorry. But you, you *are* a legend.”

He shook his head, still grinning, “A legend with a busted foot. A legend who needs to go meet his wife so he can be driven home in the style to which he is becoming accustomed.”

“Actually, I’m supposed to meet my fiancée.”

“Why don’t we walk down the hill together. You can catch the legend if he topples off of his crutches.”

“I would be honored to do that.”

I stepped through the back door of the church and held it open as Mark hobbled through it—hobbled was too strong a word, he was as graceful as one can be on a pair of crutches. We walked around the church and down the long driveway. Mark had to slow down on the slope to prevent himself from overbalancing.

“You in law enforcement?” Mark asked.

“I was. Marshals Service.”

“That’s impressive.”

“Why did you ask if I was in law enforcement?”

“Most people don’t know who I am—even when they hear my name. But when you introduced yourself, you asked me if I was, well ... me. You knew about me. Law enforcement types tend to know that.”

“You got me there.”

“You said ‘was.’ You’re on the young side to have retired.”

“I left the Marshals on long-term disability when I was shot. Before I was in the Marshals Service, I served in the Army in Afghanistan. After I recovered from the shooting, it seemed like a good time to do something a wee bit more serene, so I started a nice little, high-end, security-consulting business.”

“High end? Is that as lucrative as it sounds?”

“It can be.”

“Did getting shot have something to do with your getting sober?”

“In a long, torturous road kind of way. It was ... the beginning of my bottom.”

Speaking of bottoms, we had reached the bottom of the slope and turned left where a pair of extremely attractive women were waiting by parked cars. I didn't know the blonde, but the redhead was the love of my life. Turned out that the blonde was Laura Sheridan née Schiller. Introductions were made all round—although the women had already introduced themselves to each other just as Mark and I had.

“Why don't you two come to our place for coffee?” Laura asked.

“Our car is up at the 1661,” Kim said.

“We can give you a lift up there,” Laura replied, “and then you follow us back to our place. Okay?”

“Sounds good,” Kim said.

And with that, we were done. The women had settled everything quickly and efficiently. The men had had the good sense to keep their mouths shut.

Laura pointed to a red Subaru Outback, and we all stepped toward it when we heard a wailing siren from behind us. We turned and looked north along Water Street. Emergency lights reflected off the fronts of the National Hotel and Harborside Inn, racing toward us.

“Uh, oh,” Mark said.

A Ford Explorer police cruiser pulled to a stop and blocked the parked cars. A man in his mid-thirties with olive skin and dark hair and dark eyes stepped out of the vehicle.

“Sorry to bother you, Chief,” he said as he walked to us. He looked to be a little under six-feet tall.

Mark replied, “No problem.” He added, “Chief,” with special emphasis. He gestured toward us, “You know Laura, and this is Jack Tyrrell and Kim Gannon. Jack was a Deputy U.S. Marshal.” Gesturing toward the younger man, Mark said, “This is Chief Joe Esposito.”

Esposito nodded his hello and spoke directly to Mark. “We have a problem. We could use your help.”

“What’s up?”

“There’s been an incident at the North Light.”

Even though Esposito was talking to Mark and not me, I felt my stomach lurch nauseously.

Mark closed his eyes and slowly shook his head. “Oh ... shit.”

“Yeah,” Esposito responded in a soft grunt.

Mark snapped out of his reverie and said, “Laura, could you please take Jack and Kim up to the 1661 and stay with them?”

Esposito said, “I’ll drop the chief there later.”

“After you’re ... done?” Laura asked. “Thanks.”

“Uh, pardon me for interjecting myself,” I said, “but I might be useful to you. I do have a wee bit of pertinent experience.”

Mark looked at me and turned to Esposito. “Is that all right with you, Chief?”

Esposito gave me the once over. “No offense, but were you any good as a Marshal?”

“Deputy Marshal,” I clarified then shrugged. “Pretty good, I guess. Until I got shot.”

Kim spoke up, “Don’t let him fool you with the humble act. He received multiple commendations in the Marshals. And won a Silver Star in Afghanistan.”

“Ms. Gannon is my PR representative,” I smiled.

“She’s very good. Very effective.” Esposito grinned. “Okay, you’re in.”

Laura and Kim got into Laura’s Subaru while Esposito, Mark, and I climbed into the police Explorer. Esposito hit the emergency lights as we pulled a U-turn, roared past the statue of Rebecca, and headed north on Water Street. We whipped past the buildings on our left, most prominently the Victorian-era Harborside Inn and National Hotel. To our right, the water in Old Harbor was calm inside of its long stone jetties, and one of the ferries sat moored for the night, ready to take passengers to the mainland in the morning.

Esposito banked hard to the left as Water Street made an almost 90-degree turn into Dodge Street, where another Victorian-era structure, the Surf Hotel, stood. A

few seconds later Esposito slowed but did not halt at a STOP sign, turning right onto Corn Neck Road for a straight shot up the island to the North Light.

Mark asked, "Have we got a murder at the North Light?"

Esposito replied, "We have two."

"What?"

"Two."

"Are the bodies ... displayed the same way as Kessler's first victim?"

"Yeah."

We rushed past the long beach house at Fred Benson Town Beach. There were sand dunes on our right hand, to our left was an extension of the Great Salt Pond that wrapped around a ridge with a few houses. Usually, I loved driving north on this road during the day or night, absorbing the sights of the island. Tonight, I dreaded it. Not the drive. The destination. And what awaited us there.

Esposito sighed then said, "It's a man and woman. Both had their throats slashed."

"Oh my God," Mark grunted.

My internal radar pinged again, loudly and slowly. More like the bells of a church tolling a funeral than the sharp electronic alert of radar. There was no immediate threat to me, as there usually was when my radar went off. It was the same feeling I had had on the ferry. Something was happening. I shook my head to clear my thoughts.

"I don't mean to intrude," I said, "but have you requested resources from the mainland?"

“Yes, I have. Due to the echoes of the Dark Saint murders, the response has been excellent: The state police have chartered a ferry on an emergency basis and will be arriving within the hour,” Esposito replied. “Ten patrol vehicles, twenty troopers. A criminal forensics team is flying to the airport. They’ll be driven to the North Light as soon as they land, which will be any minute now.”

The police Explorer was climbing the long, gentle slope of Corn Neck Road. Its red-and-blue emergency lights reflected off of trees and stone walls. Beyond the walls that lined both sides of the road were houses.

“Didn’t the FBI assist in the Dark Saint, sorry, the Kessler investigation?” I asked.

“You really know all about what happened, don’t you? Did you read that stupid book?” Mark asked.

“Yes. And every news account I could find. What about the FBI?”

“They’ll be here tomorrow morning. Special Agent Joanne Agar will be in charge of their team,” Esposito answered.

“I served with Joanne in Afghanistan,” I said. “She’s very, very good.”

Mark twisted around in the front seat so he could look at me. “You seem to be very well connected.”

I thought of my partner and guardian angel, Harry. And our boss: the Chairman.

“You have no idea,” I replied.

Esposito pulled the Explorer into a right-hand curve and passed the Hodge Wildlife Preserve on our left,

then crested the long slope we had been driving up. The road plunged down a much steeper slope toward the wide, still water of Sachem Pond, the sand dunes of the national wildlife refuge, and the North Light.

Corn Neck Road ran along the eastern part of Sachem Pond then wound around its northern edge to the parking lot at Settlers' Rock. The rock was a granite marker with a plaque commemorating the first English settlers on the island, who arrived in 1661. Of course, the island's natives, the Manisses, had been there long before.

Esposito slowed way down as he drove across the parking lot. Ahead of us, about a half-mile away, the North Light flashed. I was struck by the thought that the light was warning us about more than shallow water just north of the island's tip. Esposito braked almost to a stop, downshifted, and drove slowly onto the sandy track that ran along the beach and then wound through sand dunes until it reached the lighthouse. We could hear the waves breaking on the beach at Cow Cove to our right.

The Explorer jolted over the uneven ground, the headlights flashing up and down over the dunes, the dune grass, and the beach heather a dense, dune-hugging bushes. Flashlights darted here and there throughout the wildlife preserve that made up the entire northern tip of the island.

"Are those people looking for signs of the actual murders?" I asked.

"Yes," Esposito responded. "But so far, nothing."

"You won't find any," I said. "It's too far to have carried the bodies."

“Oh?” Mark asked. “You think the killings took place much closer to the lighthouse?”

“Yes. And on the beach.”

“But Kessler killed right next to this track we’re on. Not on the beach.”

“I know. But whoever did this is not following exactly in the Dark Saint’s footsteps. If the victims were killed at the beach, all signs of struggle and blood would have been washed away as the tide came in.”

“True,” Mark agreed. “But the murderer would still have had to get the two bodies up to the lighthouse. And that’s not an easy thing to do.”

“That’s for sure.”

Not an easy thing to do, I kept thinking. One man, even a very powerful man, would have had to take two trips to carry each body all the way from the beach to the lighthouse and then climb all the way to the top. Not to mention the killer would have had to deal with the lock on the door. And escape the notice of anyone who might have been out for a late-evening stroll on the beach. And, returning to the starting point of my thoughts, the killer would have had to do it twice.

“There are two killers,” I said.

“I hate to say it,” Mark nodded, “but I was thinking the same thing. One killer would have spent way too much time going back and forth with the bodies. Way too big a chance of getting caught.”

“Yeah, but if he or they got caught,” Esposito said, “why not just kill the witnesses?”

“Have you found any other bodies?” I asked.

“No.”

“And with the people you have searching the dunes, is it possible more bodies wouldn't have been found?”

“Not likely. If there were any more victims, we would have found them by now. Unless the killers tucked their bodies inside the lighthouse.”

“No one's gone inside yet?” Mark inquired.

“No one. I assigned an officer to stand guard at the front door of the lighthouse. No one has gone inside. We might not have a crime scene out on the beach or in the dunes, but I was damn well going to preserve whatever's in the lighthouse.”

“Good work,” Mark said.

“I had a good teacher,” Esposito replied.

We bumped our way up the small slope to the base of the lighthouse and parked near the lighthouse door, at the southern end of the building.

The North Light was built in 1867 out of granite. It had a high-gabled roof with the light tower at the northern end of the structure, as if it were looking toward the Rhode Island and Connecticut shorelines. There was something haunting and lonely about the lighthouse, standing on the northern tip of the island, surrounded by water, sand dunes, and beach grass.

We climbed out of the Explorer and walked to the young officer stationed at the door that led inside to a small museum on the lighthouse's first floor.

“Chief,” he said to Esposito. Turning to Mark, he repeated, “Chief,” smiling awkwardly as he did.

“Billy,” Mark answered, “I’m not the chief. You can call me Mark.”

“I know that, sir.”

Mark smiled, shaking his head.

“It’s tough being an island legend,” I commented, “isn’t it?”

He grunted, “Hey—you stop a legendary serial killer, and you never have to buy your own coffee.”

“Sounds like a good deal.”

“It is when you drink as much coffee as I do.”

“I can identify with that.”

We both smiled.

“If you two are finished discussing coffee,” Esposito broke in, “could we check out the crime scene?”

We both muttered, “Sorry ... sure ... of course.”

Esposito led the way to the north side of the structure, the light above us flashing every five seconds. When we reached the front, mainland-facing side of the building, Esposito turned on his heavy-duty flashlight to illuminate the lighthouse tower. A man and woman were tied onto the iron railing of the lantern gallery. Their arms were outstretched as if they were on crosses, their legs dangling below. Even from our vantage point almost fifty feet under the bodies, I could see that the man was tall and lean. Dark hair. In a T-shirt and shorts. Bare feet. The woman had much lighter hair, maybe a sandy blonde. It was hard to tell in the night. Like the man, she was in a T-

shirt, shorts, and had bare feet. Both of their heads were tilted forward, their chins down, but it was obvious that their throats had been slashed. There was blood all over their chests.

The three of us stood there for ten or twenty seconds, saying nothing. I was vaguely aware of the sound of the waves breaking on the nearby beach.

“Oh my God,” Mark grunted, finally breaking the silence.

“Shit,” Esposito muttered.

I said nothing. A chill passed through me. My internal radar had pinged hard as Kim and I steamed past the North Light on the ferry. Had that been the time when these two people... What the hell had happened here?

“Who found them?” I asked. “And when?”

“A young couple came up here for sunset cocktails,” Esposito replied. “Anyway, that’s what they called it. Sunset cocktails. They were going over to the west side—which, of course, is right over there—” he pointed to the western beach, about a hundred feet away “and they saw this.”

“So they found the bodies just before sunset?” I asked. “Around 8:00PM or a little later?”

“Yeah, about then.”

“Even with two killers,” Mark was thinking out loud, “how the hell do you get two bodies up from the beach, unlock the door, climb all the way up there, and then rope-up the bodies like that, and no one notices? I know there aren’t usually a ton of people up here at that time, but

there are always a few people taking in the late-day scenery. And we know our sunset-watching couple must have been here at almost the same time.”

“Maybe there was more than two killers,” Esposito wondered. “That way they could have moved faster. They probably dealt with the lock before the killings. May have had one end of the ropes already tied to the railings. That would have cut down the time they were exposed to view.”

“Maybe,” Mark agreed weakly. “But getting up the last sets of stairs into the watch room and then the lantern room is a one-person job. There’s not enough room for two people to carry each body. And then the two murderers got out on the gallery and tied two bodies to the railing without being seen. That’s one hell of a magic trick.”

A *magic* trick, I thought. Oh, shit. I took a few steps back from the front of the lighthouse, so I was out of the wash of light from Esposito’s flashlight.

“Harry?” I whispered.

Harry appeared as if out of nowhere. He didn’t materialize. He didn’t fade into view, or pop into view. He just *was there*. You never would have guessed that we were at a beachside crime scene by Harry’s appearance. He looked like a handsome Black man, early forties, a bit shorter than I was, and wearing a suit. I said he “looked like,” because Harry was not a man at all. He had no gender, race, or age. Harry was an angel. To be specific, he was my guardian angel.

Yes, I said angel.

“How can I help?” he asked softly.

“No one else can see or hear you, can they?”

“No.”

“Is this ... is this what I think it is?”

“I am not a mindreader. What do you think it is?”

Mark and Esposito were still staring at the horror above them. I glanced back toward Settlers Rock. A vehicle was making its way along the sandy track that led to the lighthouse; its emergency lights and headlights flashing through the night.

“Read the room, or rather, the crime scene, Harry. Is this some kind of intervention from ... the beyond?”

“The beyond?”

“Is this the work of ... of someone like you. But ... from the other place?”

“The other place? That’s a quaint expression.”

I sighed in frustration. “Okay, is this the work of someone from hell?”

“Yes.”

“Oh my God.”

“A thoroughly appropriate response.”

The emergency lights were flashing off of the side of the light house as the vehicle closed in.

“You and I need to explore the metaphysics of this situation—”

“But not now,” he said and disappeared.

I couldn't begin to comprehend the horrible gravity of this situation. A spirit from hell was loose on the island?

The vehicle, another police Explorer, stopped next to Esposito’s, and a team of uniformed people climbed out.

The rear lift gate opened, and they immediately began unloading their equipment from the vehicle. Esposito handed me the flashlight and walked back toward them.

I joined Mark, who was transfixed by the awful sight above. He turned to me as I stepped next to him.

“I never thought I’d see this again. Not on this island.”

“I can’t imagine what this is like for you.”

“It’s not just me. And, monstrous as these murders are, it’s not just about the victims. The entire island can be hurt by this. These killings could smash the tourism business for years.”

“Islanders could lose their homes, their savings, their businesses. I get it. It’s an island-wide disaster.”

“Exactly.”

“Unless we catch whoever’s doing it. Just like you did with the Dark Saint.”

Mark grinned tartly, “If it comes to that, you can be the one who jumps off of the Mohegan Bluffs directly on top of the killer. My legs can’t absorb another crashing impact like that.”

“If anyone is required to leap off the bluff and smash into the bad guy, you may depend on me.”

“You’ve got the job as far as I’m concerned.” He looked at me, “I’m sorry to complain, but my leg is killing me. Would you mind if we head back to the vehicle?”

“No, it’ll be a relief to stop looking at the bodies.”

As we reached the rear lighthouse door, the one that led into the museum, we found Esposito talking to the

forensics team.

“Okay, I know you all know the drill, but let me be overly specific about all this: We need lots of photos. We need to collect any and all fingerprints, footprints, and epithelial cells. Any bits of fiber. Any anything. Tomorrow we’ll get elimination prints and DNA samples from everyone who works at the interpretive center here at the lighthouse. Please be especially thorough when you process the lantern room and out on the gallery. Okay?”

The four members of the team—all of whom were dressed in latex coveralls with see-through head covers, gloves, and booties—nodded, grabbed their gear, and headed inside the lighthouse.

Esposito turned to us, shrugging, “Did I leave anything out?”

Mark replied, “I don’t think so, but you should keep the lighthouse secure as a crime scene for a couple of days at least.”

“That way we can always check again,” Esposito nodded. “I sure hope this killer—or killers—screwed up and left something that will lead us right to them.”

“Trust me, they didn’t screw up,” I said. “Anyone capable of killing two people out in the open and then moving their bodies up here and staying out of sight the entire time—someone like that doesn’t screw up. If any evidence has been left behind, it was done deliberately.”

“Like Alex Kessler?” Mark asked.

I hesitated, then, “Yes. But this ... this could be worse.”

“You don’t think it’s a copycat, do you?” Mark asked.

“No. Not a copy cat. More of an *homage*.”

“A what?” Esposito asked.

“Our killers aren’t trying to copy the work of the Dark Saint. They’re paying tribute to him.”

“I’m sorry, but I have to sit down,” Mark said and hobbled on his crutches over the rough ground to the nearest Explorer, yanked open the door, and sat in the front passenger seat with the door open. Esposito and I followed him. “Okay,” Mark sighed in relief, “It’s an *homage*, not a copy. What does that mean for us?”

“Are you saying it’s not a copycat because of two killers?” Esposito added.

“Two killers and two first victims,” I answered.

“So the copycats are ambitious,” Mark said. “They’re expanding on their Dark Master’s work.”

“Maybe,” I agreed. “Maybe. But ... if this is an *homage*, the killers don’t have to stick to the timeline and location used by the Dark Saint. In fact, sticking to his pattern would make it ridiculously easy for us. We’d know when and where they’re going to strike next. It would be simple to catch them at the next attempted murder.”

The two men pondered that for a moment. Esposito stared at the ground, idly toeing a short tuft of dune grass. Mark looked past me into the night sky. Then he turned back to the lighthouse, focusing on the light tower.

“Do you think they were sending us a message?” Mark asked. Both Esposito and I twisted around to look at

the light tower.

“What message?” Esposito asked.

I said. “The killers are taunting us, telling us they’re not copycats. They want us to know that they’re much more than copies of the Dark Saint.”