



Sister Satan

By
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The Birth of Rachel

Lauren swirled once more and screamed, then screamed and swirled yet again as the ripping and gnashing continued, driving her into a tortured frenzy.

“Someone’s tearing me apart!” she shrieked.

The odor of decay permeating this strange place swirled with her until a black oblivion mercifully released her.

When Lauren came to, she was lying face down on the taffy brown and pink carpet in her room. Although shaken from her dream, it appeared as though everything around her had returned to normal, except...

“*Mommy! Daddy!*” Lauren cried out.

Someone posing as her—an exact duplicate—sat naked and cross-legged on the bed. The sight of someone else wearing her face, her features, drove Lauren close to madness. Only it wasn’t Lauren. No, Lauren still lay on the floor! It was like looking into a mirror, only there was no mirror between them.

Prologue

While Papa Werner drank from the bottle again, the boy remained completely silent. When the old man choked and rust-colored liquid mingled with thick sputum escaped from his lips, the boy dared not comment. A feeling of disgust knotted his stomach, and yet he showed no emotion. Instead, he lowered his gaze and picked at a piece of lint caught in the threads of his blue coveralls. He was trying not to dwell on his fears—Papa Werner was drinking! He wanted to run for cover, to hide.

“More pie, Ute?” He looked up at his mother and avoided staring at Papa Werner. She was standing next to the old man, her small frame dwarfed by his dominance: Naomi Krauss, a pathetic shell in a faded housedress, but a good mother nonetheless.

A pie pan heaped high with homegrown apples and covered with the brownest, tastiest crust ever was balanced precariously on one palm, while a nervous smile drew up the corners of her mouth. The boy surveyed the pie and choked back a mouthful of saliva. Lord, Mama’s pie was

something else and yet he turned down the offer. Even at the age of ten he'd learned not to take seconds when Papa Werner was drunk.

“Get outta here with that shit and leave the boy alone, bitch! Drink is what he needs. Make a man outta him. Pansies eat pie!” he said, his tone carrying as much venom as a rattler’s.

Naomi Krauss moved quietly back to her place at the stove. A dark scowl marked her pale countenance with heavily etched lines.

“Man’s gotta have a drink now and then,” he slurred, his tongue thick from the liquor. “But she don’t understand, that whoring bitch!” He pointed menacingly at Naomi. “This here’s my reward, you slut!” Something dark and threatening sharpened his tone.

Werner Krauss had spent the better part of the day boarding up for the winter. First he’d wiped down the plow, being extra careful about the plowshare. Didn’t want old sneaky rust eating cancer spots in it, so he covered it with a tarp. Then he checked the silos for leaks. As he’d told the boy often, he couldn’t chance moisture getting in and ruining his wheat, his corn. The last chore he performed was to repair the barn roof after fixing up a stall for his prize heifer.

The boy knew that for most of his fifty years, Papa Werner had been making these same fastidious preparations, locking out winters that were harsher in these parts than anyone not familiar with the area could imagine. Now the old man was bone tired and sore, but Mama said it was

the best kind of tired; Papa Werner was weary from doing the Lord's work. And the Lord in turn had rewarded them with a bountiful harvest, which should have made their way of living nothing to compare with the Depression overtaking most of the country. However, Papa's drinking was keeping them poor. Damn him, the boy cursed silently.

Papa Werner drained the last of the bottle and staggered to his feet. He blinked his eyes several times in succession to clear out the cobwebs distorting his view, and made a drunken attempt to reach the liquor cabinet. After managing to get about as far as where Naomi was standing, he stopped momentarily to focus on her, then lifted one meaty hand that reminded Ute of a club and shoved her roughly. Papa Werner was a huge man—a head taller than the frail Naomi—and as dangerous as a wounded grizzly when angered. This sudden threat to his mother frightened the boy badly.

“Get me another bottle, bitch!” Papa's eyes were chunks of cobalt blue ice sluiced by a sting of death.

The boy experienced a numbing sensation in his spine and waited for Naomi to refuse, knowing well the way this generally went. While he waited, he spent the next few torturous moments playing the game—taking his mind off reality to drift back to happier times. It was easy. All he had to do was think real hard and suddenly he was five or six, sitting on Papa Werner's lap while Papa told stories. Mostly they were strange stories Ute barely understood. Like when Papa talked about heritage and heredity and relatives in the old country with strong powers.

Mama used to say such talk was ungodly. People shouldn't ought to use spells and chants to control other people. But Papa would laugh and remind Ute of his inheritance "You can do it, boy," he used to say. "All it takes is practice and hard work up here." Then Papa Werner tapped the side of his temple with a forefinger to emphasize his point. And yet as far as the boy recalled, papa had never done anything strange or exciting. Maybe because he drank so much, he couldn't.

"Werner! Stop! Oh, God!" His mother's cries of pain suddenly penetrated his childish fantasies, bringing him back to the present. Papa Werner had her pinned to the wall with one great paw of a hand while repeatedly pummeling her quivering form with the other. Ute could see red welts beginning to show on her neck and arms; she was bleeding from the nose and mouth.

Tears stabbed at his eyes and something constricted his throat as a too familiar feeling of hatred replaced the fantasies of a moment ago. He wished he wasn't a little boy. If only he was bigger, he'd show Papa. He'd bloody his mouth and punch his face.

Then the idea came to him. Ute shut his eyes tight and thought about that thing called heredity. Whatever it was, it meant he had the same powers as the Werner's in the old country—if Papa hadn't been lying. And if he did have powers, he'd never have to watch Mama take another beating. Then again, how could a small boy work up enough force to zap a grown man, especially a huge ox like his father! Besides, Mama wouldn't like it. She was always

telling him not to listen to Papa Werner's stories because they were the devil's work.

He covered his ears with his hands to shut out her screams, her pleas for mercy, yet he could still hear. Oh, Mama, I have to do something, he thought, even if I get sent straight to hell afterward! So he concentrated real hard like Papa had said, so hard in fact that his head began to ache right down the middle. He repeated Papa's words over and over, "You can do it, boy. You can do it."

That's when he saw the glow, strange crystalline lights emanating from the interior of his brain—swirling, floating, engulfing his mind, consuming his body. Must've been the "aura" that Papa had mentioned, he thought, while admiring the colors bursting inside of his skull—icy hot colors, all aqueous and stark, driving him into an oddly euphoric state. Then he began striking the table repeatedly with his tiny fists, as visions of what he'd like to do to Papa Werner became the only thoughts in his mind.

Later on he remembered Mama shaking him hard and screaming for him to stop. Papa Werner lay on the floor, most of his face hidden from Ute's view, but blood covered Papa's clothing. And Mama kept telling Ute that it was wrong to have done it, that it was the devil's work. Fear coated her expression, too.

But Ute didn't listen to her because he knew different. If this heredity thing he'd used on Papa meant the end of Papa Werner's drinking and beatings, it had to be something good. From then on, he never forgot his heritage.

Part One

He that diligently seeketh good,
Procureth favour,
But he that seeketh mischief,
It shall come unto him.

Proverbs 11:27

Chapter One

Lauren Anderson closed the pages of the weathered tome and glanced at a blue sky beyond her room sluiced with storm clouds. Later on there would be a full moon; a night charged with thunder, lightning. The conditions were perfect. She was, however, torn by mixed emotions, wondering how she'd explain the presence of the 'sister' she'd created once the act was complete.

She shook away her misgivings, knowing it was too late to turn back. Her mind was set, especially after tonight. Alex and Kate wanted an evening out again and were going to have it without a moment's thought to her being stuck home with the boys. This was Lauren's eternal curse for having been the first born, the perennial baby-sitter, built-in, free! She was fifteen now, and capable, so they were forever partying it seemed.

Lauren lay belly down across the foot of her bed, her hands toying endlessly with the ruffled spread, a dull glaze creeping over her brown, almond-shaped eyes. Lauren really wanted to go somewhere with Jill, her best friend.

The two had made plans to go to the movies and the Coke shop afterwards. But it didn't pay to plan a damned thing when in the end—always in the end and at the last minute—Lauren had to baby-sit.

To be truthful, though, Jill was acting strange lately. They'd pick out a movie and be halfway to the theatre only to have Jill change her mind. Jill was getting boy crazy and nearly always wanted to hang out on the grounds of the high school where boys clustered nightly. Lauren was a year younger and not really into that scene yet. She liked boys but Kate had warned her about spending too much time around groups of boys whose hormones were in high gear. Lauren sighed. Maybe it was just as well that she was stuck home where she wouldn't have to argue with Jill about her choice of places to go. Besides, she hated having to depend on the whims of others to dispel her loneliness. At times like these her thoughts often settled on her status as the only girl in a family of four children. Her parents had certainly been poor planners in that area—leaving Lauren with little choice but to chase Jill like a lost puppy. Not fair.

Having a sister around would insure constant companionship, alternating turns at baby-sitting, as well as sharing the other menial chores reserved for girls. Lauren scanned the interior of her room, thinking how nice it would be to have a companion to share this large, ultra-feminine bedroom. A sister would be perfect! What's more, if she had a sister, they'd stay up late nights talking, telling stories about boys they liked, or the proper ways to apply makeup.

They'd trade jewelry and double date. But *most* of all, she reiterated, they'd share this monotonous task of watching the little brothers for hours on end.

"Grandfather Ute," she murmured, "You had so many strange powers. You could make things happen just by thinking about them. Why couldn't you conjure up another girl for your Kate? Why is everything left up to me?"

There was a way to do it, a most wonderfully easy way to create the sister she'd never had by following a ceremony in the heavy leather-bound tome borrowed from special section at the library. Yes, she thought, and the time was now—but only if every needed condition was met. And yet, dare she take the risk? Grandfather had taught her and the boys a lot about the powers associated with their heritage, but what if something went wrong? Did she have the power to correct it?

The smell of fresh blossoms and honeysuckle drifted past curtains fluttering at the windows, and she turned onto her side to inhale the sweet scent, her mind now torn by a pang of indecision. After emitting a pathetic moan of self-pity, she sighed and stared at a setting sun beyond her room. Dark storm clouds floated overhead, reminding her now as when she was a child of many different things—a Spanish galleon riding the crest of a huge wave, a leering clown's head. A soft rapping noise on the door behind her diverted her attention. It had to be Kate coming to give last minute instructions.

"Come on in, Mom," she murmured, trying to make her words sound as pleasant as possible.

The corners of Kate's mouth crinkled into a smile as she peeked in at Lauren. "Hi, doll. We're going. Stacey and Brad are waiting out front. Dinner's in the oven and there's a phone number on the dining room table if you need me."

"Let's see what you're wearing." Lauren rolled off the bed and faced her mother, making a feeble attempt to appear interested while Kate stepped inside. Kate wore her new lime colored dress, the one that accentuated her black, shoulder length tresses and put a sparkle into her amber tinted eyes.

"Do you like it?" Kate held out the skirt and waltzed on her toes for Lauren's benefit. "Daddy just loves it."

Stacey Carter would hate her for looking so good, Lauren thought, and managed to smile as they embraced. "Have a good time, Mom. You and Daddy deserve it," she said, and experienced pangs of remorse at her own selfishness because her parents really didn't go out much. It just seemed so when she was left alone. "And don't worry. I'll be okay. I'll watch the boys good."

A few moments later while Lauren stood by the front door and waved good-bye the realization hit her that deep inside she admired her parents. Her mother, tall and slender despite having borne four children; her father, also tall, with a flat washboard stomach and a powerful chest, even though the ripe old age of forty loomed in his immediate future. Even her friend Jill thought he was sexy—something else to be proud of. Sexy fathers were a rarity in this town. Matter of fact, anything exciting or unusual was

a rarity in this town.

Harrison, New York, was eighty some odd miles out on the northeastern portion of Long Island, between Riverhead and Orient Point, far enough removed from New York City to warrant being called a rural area, but still too close for Lauren to be satisfied.

Seven years ago they'd moved to this one-motel, one-hospital, one-everything town to escape the concrete and apathy of the city, yet they hadn't run very far since New York was a mere hour and a half ride by car. Besides, finding this house hadn't been easy. Sometimes it'd felt as if they'd covered the entire island inch by inch. She recalled riding in the back seat of the station wagon with the boys kicking and jabbing at each other in sweltering heat all the way from Manhattan to Riverhead on the eastbound side and then back again, heading west, scanning the landscape for houses, model homes, foreclosures, anything.

Her father had found a map of Nassau and Suffolk counties, which then enabled them to ride the smaller, less defined roads that had confused them before. And so it had gone until that glorious day when Kate flipped a coin—heads, Sunrise Highway, tails, Route 25. The tails side came up and they drove into a world of fishing villages, where big, sturdy boats took tall, broad-shouldered, tanned men back to the sea. A world also of potato and sod farms, where one could gaze at the horizon and see nothing but the Lord's bounty for miles on end. Where the sky was bluer than blue, with clouds that weren't the industrial gray they'd grown accustomed to seeing in the city.

It then seemed to them as if the world must surely stop here, as if God in His infinite wisdom had laid down His quill at this point. The eastern tip of Long Island had been the part He'd saved for last, the twelfth hour on the sixth day.

Once the location had been chosen, her father had driven the station wagon up one road and down the next, endlessly searching for the house she knew he'd find. He wanted a two-story white frame with bay windows downstairs and triangular windows like the cutout eyes of a Halloween pumpkin upstairs where the bedrooms were. A house with real wooden cabinets in the kitchen and a sizeable back yard so they could sit in the family room at night and watch birds and squirrels through an immense picture window. And they'd found it all right, right here in quaint little Harrison.

Lauren leaned her head against the doorpost and continued to stand there long after her parents' station wagon rounded the corner and drove out of sight. It was so peaceful, so still. She could have stayed on this very spot for an eternity and never minded. In a little while the boys would be home for dinner and they'd generate enough noise between them to set off a pounding in her head.

Yet, as she stood back and reveled in the peaceful surroundings something struck her as being odd: it was too quiet. Missing were the sounds of children laughing and playing, of dogs barking, not even a bird chirping as it hopped across the lawn searching for grubs. She noticed that the trees lining the block, that had been dancing and

swaying in the breeze only moments before, were now still, along with everything else, their branches motionless. The softly scented breezes she'd been enjoying had died down leaving an eerie stillness that neither moved nor breathed. Lauren felt uneasy because it magnified her loneliness.

If only she had a sister...

She walked back into the house and headed for the kitchen, turning on the radio and making a grab for the phone receiver simultaneously. She'd ask Jill to come over, possibly spend the night. A rock tune was bleating in the background as she counted the rings and waited for Jill to pick up.

"Jill? Lauren. Want to sleep over?" She listened impatiently as Jill declined the invitation. "Come on. Don't be such a pain. Your homework can wait." She hadn't meant to sound so pleading. Jill wanted to know if they would play some records and dance, maybe invite some boys over.

"Oh sure!" Lauren answered sarcastically. "Just like the last time, remember? My mother's stereo got busted. I'm still hearing about that. We can play the radio. It's the same thing." And what about inviting boys over? Jill wanted to know. Lauren wasn't in the mood for boys tonight, but she wanted Jill to come over. "Only if they bring their own beer. They drank my father's beer the last time, too! Honestly, Jill, don't you know any nice boys?" Of course Lauren knew the answer in advance; except for Jill's brother Daryl, Jill didn't know any nice boys.

But Daryl was older than their usual crowd so he never hung out with them, and now Jill wasn't coming either.

Lauren vowed to never call Jill again. For want of something better to do, she angrily slammed four place settings down on the varnished surface of the wooden table in the dining room, unconsciously forgetting the place mats. Then she checked the casserole her mother had left in the oven, poking it with a spoon. A lump of tuna and buttered noodles dribbled over the sides of the utensil, and when she noticed it, Lauren carelessly scooped it up with her fingers and dumped it back into the dish.

Dammit, there would be a full moon tonight!

Her mind was made up: she would go ahead with the experiment. Then she'd never again use Jill to fill the lonely void in her life. After popping the top off a bottle of Coke, Lauren went out to stand in front of the house with one hand shoved glumly into the back pocket of her jeans, and waited for the boys to come home.

Within minutes the sound of several voices permeated the air around her. Although those voices came from the next block over she recognized them at once. Her brothers were on their way home, and the loudest of all was Shaun, doing his usual bitching. She leaned back against the frame of the open door and waited.

All up and down the block tulips were springing up, yellow, red, lilac; the grass was starting to lose its brownish winter pallor. Even Stacey Carter's azaleas that dominated the front of her two-story house were budding as if the cold and frost of the past few months hadn't really touched them.

Lauren noticed a squirrel in Stacey's yard. Stacey's

house was situated diagonally across the street to the right of their house, giving her a clear view of the animal's antics. Hunched down on its hind legs, busily licking its front paws, it scampered across Stacey's lawn, scampered past the wooded area directly across from Lauren to stop in front of the old Pringle sisters' house. Then it stood up again and sniffed at the air before making a hurried dash for the backyard.

"Careful, squirrel. Those old witches'll have you for lunch." It was only a half whisper but she meant it sincerely.

The Pringles were spinsters that her mother often referred to as maiden ladies to add status to their lack of husbands. Lauren felt they'd never married because no sane man wanted either one of the dour old prunes. Most of the children on the block were frightened of them with their old-fashioned ankle length dresses, high collars and stern demeanors. Lauren was well familiar with their harsh words, as well as the cane old Sara used both to walk with and as a weapon to welt the legs of neighborhood children who wandered onto her property.

Quickly diverting her attention before memories of the Pringles made her shudder, Lauren watched the squirrel fleetingly. then wondered why it was the only creature to be seen on the block.

It sure was a strange evening.

Chapter Two

“Can I have some of your soda, Lauren?” Shaun was the first to come screeching to a halt in front of the house, throwing his bike down as he got off, closely followed by Peter and little David.

“You’ll blow the tires doing that,” Lauren scowled, only because Shaun’s actions had abruptly wrenched her from thoughts of the deadly silence hovering over their block. She stiffened and thrust her soda at him. “Here, take a sip. Just don’t dribble in the bottle.”

“I’ll spit in it if I want to!” He stormed past her into the house. “Casserole again? Goddamn, I hate casserole!”

Lauren followed him inside. “Stop that cursing. Just ‘cause Mommy isn’t home! And go wash up, it’s time to eat.”

“I ain’t eatin’ it!” he bellowed with outrage.

“The hell with you then! Go eat peanut butter and jelly for all I care.” She wondered at times like these if someone had switched babies on Kate when Shaun had been born. He was so different from her other two brothers. They’d

gobble down the casserole as though it was their last meal ever. But not Shaun—the bold, the belligerent, the inventive one. As the oldest of the three boys he had to be different, forever dreaming up all sorts of mischief—being careful not to be repetitious, of course—and then he’d talk the other two into being accomplices. Shaun was definitely the one to watch!

An hour later Lauren gratefully sat down between Shaun and David in the living room and inhaled deeply of the languorous stillness that had tempered their moods, their attention fixed on a situation comedy on television. David was falling asleep on the carpet in front of the set, his brown eyes closing for a minute or two then opening with a start as he vainly fought to stay awake. She found herself murmuring a silent prayer of thanks, for if David went to bed now, it would be one down, two to go.

“Come on, babe,” she whispered. “Go take a bath and I’ll tuck you in.” She’d always had a soft spot in her heart for David, the last born, the baby—seven years old already. Peter was—what, nine? Shaun was eleven and Lauren was fifteen. Where had all the years gone? She had such vivid memories of her brothers as beautiful, lively babies.

Even Shaun, miserable as he was now, had been a chubby, healthy specimen, quick with a smile. Yet, there’d been something strange about the boy as she recalled. His happy moods had been mostly offset by dark spells of gloominess during which time he’d close himself off from the rest of the world and just sulk for no apparent reason. Even now there were times when he’d harbor the strangest

of ideas, wanting to do crazy things. However, when she gave it some thought, some of the ideas stemmed directly from Grandfather Ute. Perhaps Shaun remembered more of his stories than the other boys did.

Shaun had been watching her then, and as though he'd read her mind, uttered an odd request. "Hey, Lauren. Let's do something spooky. Let's have a *sians*." His eyes grew bright and glazed with excitement.

"The word is '*séance*', and let's not and say we did." Lauren leaned forward to extract a cigarette from a small silver box on the coffee table. "Honestly, where do your brilliant ideas come from?" She tapped the tip of it on her thumbnail as she spoke, knowing full well where his ideas had come from.

"I'm telling Mommy if you light that cigarette!"

"And I'll cut your tongue out if you do!"

"Hey, come on, man. Keep it down. I'm try'na watch this!" Peter moved from the sofa to the floor to get closer to the television set.

"Well... then let's do something besides watch that thing. We seen everything that's on and it's boring," Shaun slouched half down on the end of his spine. "Saw a *séance* on television last night. Looked like fun."

"Mom will take that set out of your room if she finds out what you're watching."

"You telling her, Lauren?" He narrowed his eyes.

"I'm not a snitch. So cut your old eyes at someone else." The nerve of him implying that she'd tell Kate, when Kate would damn well find out on her own.

“You know what I heard today?” Peter came to life as the credits rolled across the screen, signaling the end of his program. “I heard it was Jill’s brother who burned old man Cobb’s barn down last week.”

“Who told you that?” Lauren blew a smoke ring and watched it billow upwards. “Whoever did is a liar. Daryl was home eating when it happened, and he has his mother and sister as witnesses.” If his mother was sober for a change. Alma Copeland had a terrible drinking problem and was mostly considered unreliable. Besides, Daryl was too nice to have committed such an ugly crime.

“But it’s true, he was seen by old man Cobb himself.” Peter snapped off the set and drew his knees up to his chest to untie his sneakers. Then, as if he’d changed his mind about his previous statement, he stopped and thought for a minute. “You know, it wasn’t old man Cobb who seen him. I remember now, it was Errol Travis.”

“Errol Travis was wrong. It’s not possible. Jill and her mom and Daryl heard the sirens and smelled the smoke because we were talking about it only yesterday. You remember how breezy it was that night? That smoke drifted for miles. Well, later they found out it was Cobb’s barn burning, so Errol Travis is nuts.” Lauren paused and flicked her ashes, then trained her eyes on Peter for emphasis. “Daryl couldn’t be at home and out burning down Cobb’s barn. Nobody can be in two places at the same time.”

Shaun’s face lit up as if he’d been given the answer. “He could’ve if he had an alter ego.” He smiled and crossed

his legs nonchalantly. The expression on Lauren's face froze. "You didn't know I heard you and Mommy that night you were talking about it. I was over there," he pointed over his shoulder, "Standing right outside the kitchen door, listening. I seen those books you got from the library."

Lauren wanted to grab him and twist the wise guy expression into a grimace of pain. Always poking around where he didn't belong! "What were you doing in my room looking at those books, Shaun? You've been told a million times to stay out of there." She lit up another cigarette, noticing the trembling of her hands when she struck the match. "And, buddy boy, wait till I tell Mom you were snooping! Just wait. Your bottom'll burn for a week."

"Wasn't snooping. I couldn't sleep and came down for a drink..."

"And you just happened to stop and snoop when you overheard us talking. Besides, you've got everything all wrong as usual. Mom was helping me with my homework. We had an assignment in Social Studies class on early American customs and beliefs. The teacher found a few pages in our books on alter egos, so the weirdo told us to study that. I didn't understand it so Mom was helping me. Did you hear that part, Shaun, or just what you wanted to?" She stubbed out her cigarette and rose abruptly to head for the kitchen. "Anybody want another Coke while I'm out there?" The subject was closed as far as she was concerned.

"Hey, Lauren, what'cha so nervous about? Your hands was shaking when you was putting out that cigarette and then you run from us. Changed the subject like you was

afraid of something.” She heard his voice growing louder and suddenly he was standing in the doorway behind her with a smirk on his round, cherubic face. “Afraid I’ll tell about the books?”

“Don’t care if you do.” She snapped on the radio to drown out anything further he might have to say, but his voice rose above the rock tune that was playing.

“If you tell me about the alter ego, I promise to keep the books a secret.”

“Thought you knew it all. What’s left to tell?”

“Mom was talking low, couldn’t catch it all.” He reached over and lowered the radio as a news report on a Mid-east crisis began.

“Shaun, I don’t want to be responsible for putting things in your head. But...” She could feel herself wanting to give in. He was right. There was little else to do except supply their own form of entertainment. Besides, if she told him he’d keep his mouth sealed about her books. Shaun kept his word when it came to Lauren and his brothers.

“Oh, all right.” Although she still sounded only half convinced, she told him to get Peter and sit at the table and wait for her. There was one last thing she had to do: she had to be certain that David was in bed and wouldn’t overhear. He was still young and subject to nightmares.



“Mom explained to me how the idea of alter egos originated in tales of folklore.” They were seated around the

table in the kitchen with the lights out and a single candle burning to heighten the effect. Lauren sipped at her Coke before going on. “Seventeenth century settlers believed that everyone possessed a good side and a bad side. Alter egos were the bad side, dwelling way down inside you, safe from exposure.”

“Where was Daddy all this time?” Peter was hunched over the table fingering his Coke. “He wasn’t home, was he?”

Shaun was clearly annoyed. “Do you think Mom’d be telling Lauren about this if he was home? You know how he feels about ghosts and spooks and all.”

“He was on the road in his truck. Anyway, we were doing my homework not discussing the supernatural. It was a serious thing, so how could he bitch?” Lauren paused as another thought crossed her mind. Her sister would only be a spirit! But her family would grow accustomed to this newcomer. What other choice would they have?

“Go on, Lauren. Why’d you stop?” Shaun was growing impatient with the interruptions.

“Now,” she began automatically as if spurred on by his words, “according to ancient folklore you called forth your alter ego if you wanted harm to befall someone and hadn’t the courage to act on your own. In your sleep, of course, the ego would appear in spiritual form to do all the evil bidding you wished. Just thinking evil thoughts would thereafter control the alter ego.”

Shaun and Peter exchanged a wary glance.

Lauren continued, “There’s a story in one of the books

upstairs about some settlers who found out about alter egos the hard way. Jeremiah Brown brought his family here to America in the year 1694, with his wife, his five sons, and his daughter. Also he had a young manservant he'd bought in the market before leaving England. James Cheevers was his name and he was just sixteen years old—two years older than Brown's daughter Ruth. James and Ruth fell in love at first sight. After a few months they became lovers and they managed to keep it secret, for a little while at least."

Peter let out a nervous giggle.

Lauren didn't miss a beat, "But old man Brown found out about them, and he and his five sons took turns beating on James because he was a slave and dared to make love to Ruth." Lauren's eyes sparkled with the excitement of the story. Her face was half-shadowed in the glow of the candle, adding a ghostly pallor to her skin.

"Now, just try and imagine what they did to him. They took a long, sharp bladed knife and drew it ever so easily across the side of his face, leaving a wide, meaty gap of hanging, bleeding flesh before cutting off his ring finger to warn him they'd never allow him to marry Ruth."

"I don't think I wanna hear anymore." Peter's sudden outburst startled both Lauren and Shaun.

Shaun turned on him. "Can it or go to bed, you baby."

As Peter's eyes scanned the darkness around them for signs of movement, Lauren continued.

"Old man Brown and his sons hung James' severed finger around his neck on a rope with instructions that they'd

kill him if he ever took it off. Then, against Ruth's wishes, they sold him to a farming family many, many miles from where they lived.

“The family that bought him told afterwards how James had brooded and seethed for weeks. And sometimes they'd catch him late at night talking to the moon out in front of the house, just like I'm talking to you now, and playing with the finger on the rope around his neck as if he was possessed or something.”

There was a sudden movement outside; a shadow of some sort had passed in front of the kitchen window. But as long as it had taken Peter to blink his eyes in alarm, it had disappeared. And although he wasn't sure now it had ever really been there, he kept a steady watch on the window while Lauren finished her story.

“Late one evening, on the night of a full moon, the farmer that bought James chained the boy up as usual and went to bed thinking that everything was fine. But it wasn't, because sometime during the night the family heard their dog howling and yelping, as though he was after someone. The dog slept out in the barn with James. When they investigated further, James was right where they'd left him and everything seemed fine except they couldn't quiet down the dog. The farmer thought the dog had flipped because he kept running in circles and at the same time he was biting and snapping at the air. In desperation, the farmer chained the dog up right next to James.

“The next day someone found old man Brown and his family; all were dead but Ruth and her mother. And damn,

the way they died! Someone had tied them to a tree and literally peeled the skin from their faces. There they were all bone and rot, hollowed out eye sockets—a real mess. And the funniest thing is that all were missing their ring fingers. They'd been ripped straight off their hands, just twisted and ripped. Gory stubs were hanging where the fingers had been.

“Now for the strange part. Seven fingers were found near the six bodies. And although when it was investigated and they found that James' finger was gone from around his neck, they never could prove he did it because the farmer and his wife testified that he'd been chained up along with the dog all night long!”

Lauren folded her hands across the table and waited for the questions she knew would come, but the boys surprised her by not asking any. They seemed to have understood and were silent; each absorbed by inner thoughts as the light from the candle flickered, casting their silhouettes on the wall like ghostly apparitions.

“You're not gonna try it, are you?” Shaun's eyes took on a strange expression as he faced her with the question.

“No.” Lauren squirmed in her chair and tried to avoid his steady gaze because this kid knew her better than anyone. “Those books upstairs... that's only curiosity. I wanted to read more about it.” She wondered if he'd swallow her feeble excuse.

Silence again, then, “Jill's brother could've done it. He could've burned down old man Cobb's barn and been home eating dinner at the same time.” Although Peter didn't

sound quite sure of himself, he went on. “Maybe he knew how to become an alter ego.” He shrugged his thin shoulders awkwardly.

“You can’t become one, it’s part of you.” Lauren was patient when she explained it to him. “The good splits from the evil.”

“So, he could be sitting home eating, his good side, while his bad side was burning down Cobb’s barn.”

“Yes, he could have,” she answered Peter once again, “But there’s a ceremony to be performed in order to do this, which I doubt Daryl’s smart enough to accomplish. And besides, the alter ego usually comes forth when you’re asleep.”

“What do they look like, these things?” Shaun questioned her this time. “Do they have fangs?” He stuck his front teeth forward, curving his hands into claws before raising them over his head in a menacing gesture.

Peter turned to Lauren and did his best to ignore Shaun’s antics. He was also trying hard not to look at the window again. “Do they suck your blood and then eat your body?”

“Peter, you’re talking about vampires and ghouls. It’s not the same thing.”

“Then how do they kill?”

“I really don’t know, Peter. Except that they draw their strength from the hatred of the person they’re split from.”

“Wow!”

“Oh nuts, this is boring. I thought it’d be scary. Let’s watch something on TV.”

“You go ahead, Shaun. We’ll be there in a few minutes.” Lauren was exhilarated from revealing her secret. Peter’s enthusiasm to hear more prompted her to stay in the kitchen. “Can you imagine having the power to get even with someone? If I could do that, just once, some people I know would live to regret messing with me.”

She could see it now. Her alter ego, or sister, would roam at night and grab someone like Harold Banks for instance. Rotten Harold who used to torment her about an overbite before she’d had her teeth straightened. Oh, how he’d teased, calling her “snaggle tooth”, then “tinsel teeth” once she had braces put on, and she’d invariably wind up in tears. Well, old Harold would have his face slapped real good if she had anything to do with it, or he’d get a good swift kick in the behind without ever knowing who was responsible. Oh, that would be delicious. Of course she’d have to refrain from mustering up thoughts of dangerous acts in her quest for revenge.

She didn’t want anyone hurt too badly, just a little.

Peter glanced toward the living room and kept quiet until he heard the muffled tones of the television. “First one I’d use it on would be Shaun.” Lauren was shocked; her brothers were very close. “He picks on me all the time, teases me, beats me up to get his own way. Just because he’s bigger and faster. And he picks on David too.” His lips were tautly drawn over his teeth in a scowl unlike any she’d seen before.

“You have to remember, Shaun’s a little immature for his age. Doesn’t Daddy say it all the time? I get angry with

him sometimes. But he's still our brother." Lauren could see she was getting nowhere with him since the scowl remained. "Come on now, Peter. Isn't it getting around bedtime for the two of you?" She grabbed the empty Coke bottles and wiped down the table. Peter hadn't moved, prompting her to make light of their conversation. "It's just an old wives' tale. You know, about the alter ego. And Shaun'll grow up soon, you'll see. Come on now. Bed."

But Peter persisted. "There's one more thing. These egos, you never said before, what do they look like?"

Lauren returned to her seat and fingered the washcloth as she tried to answer him. "If it comes from you, then it's a part of your being. So I guess it would have to resemble you or whoever it came from."

"Then how do you tell them apart from regular people, Lauren?"

Lauren sighed heavily while suddenly wishing she hadn't given in to Shaun and told the story. "There's just no way of telling the difference, except perhaps the evil shows through."

Chapter Three

Lauren showered quickly and stood silently by an open window in her bedroom. She stood under the light of a full moon, allowing herself to succumb to its legendary powers of enhancing psychic strength. Her lean young body was draped in a thin, sheer gown, yet beads of moisture dampened her back, but she took no notice.

Her brothers were fast asleep and the house was peaceful except for the incident minutes ago when she imagined she'd heard someone come in the front door downstairs. There had been a distinctive noise, like a hollow bang, followed by footsteps. But it was nothing because she'd gone down and looked. She had to be certain there would be no intrusions.

The view from the window was magnificent. The dark clouds that had threatened a storm hours ago were gone, replaced by a clear sky, and as she gazed up she saw the many stars and constellations pointed out to her as a child; Pegasus high overhead with Aquarius not too far behind, and Aries, Pisces, Delphinus. Grandfather Ute said they

were named after gods of Greek mythology, and Pegasus had lingered on in her memory as her favorite.

Pegasus and Chrysaor were winged steeds created when droplets of blood from the severed head of Medusa had fallen into the salty waters that were the domain of Poseidon, god of the sea. Such was the love Poseidon carried in his heart for Medusa, he was compelled to pay homage by hurling the droplets of her blood into the sky to produce the eternal glow of Pegasus and Chrysaor.

Oh, Grandfather, I loved your stories, she thought, but where are you now when I need someone to hold my hand and run with me? For you alone knew how to escape, to fly among the stars, to dance between the planets, to stroll the rings of Saturn. "Where are you now, Grandfather Ute?" Her voice was soft and meek.

"And Grandfather," she spoke softly once again. "I know it's wrong, what I'm about to do. I've read your Bible and believe in your God, and by everything that's holy it's wrong. But I must do it. I must! I want a sister so badly. You can see I'm lonely, can't you? I mean, it's true I have the boys, but it's not the same. And with my sister, she'll be kind and good, and if I'm real lucky, she'll stay!"

Lauren made a cautious sign of the cross, head to chest, shoulder to shoulder, opened the tome on the sill in front of her and turned to the earmarked passage:

‘Cius, Acarius, Volanum. Rosemary and the blood of a mouse. And they mix all of these exceedinglie near an open shutter in the first hour

of darkness on the night of a full moon. And they dip a branch of oak deep down in the mixture that the force of the ointment may grow...'

The blood of a recently deceased field mouse had been mixed with rosemary and other assorted ingredients in an obscure wooden bowl that now rested gingerly on the sill beside the open book. Obtaining the “branch of an oak” had been the trickier part. She’d had to deftly remove a branch from the split oak out front without anyone noticing. Since her brothers were constantly underfoot, this particular task had taken several days, working minutes at a time. But now all was in readiness, and the timing was perfect for it, the night of a full moon.

“*Cius, Acarius, Volanum...*” Lauren chanted three times in succession while stirring the mixture with the clumsy stump of oak branch until it was slowly transformed into a thick, red, globular paste. It had a putrid quality to it that disturbed her. She imagined that she resembled an old hag laboriously mixing soup, or whatever it was that old hags mixed in those large iron cauldrons.

After the third try she’d nearly given up when a beautiful, terrible thing occurred. She turned to leave the window, to abandon her quest for an alter ego, and discovered she was no longer in her bedroom, but in a large ballroom with blue brocade walls. A sea of amber softness caressed her bare feet instead of the taffy brown and pink carpet she’d chosen for her last birthday. High overhead, huge crystal chandeliers that might have stood six feet tall

if laid on the floor dotted the ceiling as far as she could see, for such was the size of the room. And there was music, eerie lilting tones that beckoned so hypnotically that she lifted the edges of her nightgown to sway with the melody, although she wasn't quite sure it was proper to do so. "One, two, three. One, two, three." An elegant waltz. Too bad the waltz was now extinct, she thought; Grandfather loved to waltz.

"Dance, Madame?"

Lauren turned at the light tapping sensation on her shoulder and saw an assortment of ghastly looking creatures where only seconds before there had been vast emptiness. Although winged and cloven-hoofed, they were almost human: their faces exaggerated caricatures of humans. But oh Lord, their eyes blazed like searing red coals in a campfire, and their lips were thick and bulbous!

Grandfather's gargoyles, she thought as her legs trembled slightly. She was frightened and closed her eyes with such determination that her face contorted into a grimace, knowing that when she reopened them she'd be quite alone again. Grandfather said it always worked for him. And when the time felt right, she fearfully raised one lid as slowly as she dared, both eyes mooning wide with the shocking revelation that they were still present, silently watching her. Something icy hot gripped her spine, she wanted to turn and run, but her legs were paralyzed, useless.

"Mommy... Daddy... This isn't happening. I'm asleep, that's it. And soon, I'll wake up and laugh about all this."

“Allow me to introduce myself, Madame,” the largest of the gargoyles approached her, “My name is Mephisto.” He bowed graciously. “And you now find yourself in the pit of Acheron.” When once again he rose to tower above her, Lauren was deeply troubled by the unfaltering glow of his eyes. They were like red-hot magnets, drawing her closer, beguiling her, burning through to her soul. He repulsed her, and yet the chill of fear had left her body only to be replaced by a strange calmness, a feeling of euphoria.

“Come dance with us, lovely Lauren.” He sounded so kind, so pathetic—the poor, lonely creature. As his arms encircled her, she became faintly conscious of a foul odor that reeked of horse droppings. But where were the horses, she wondered?

“Dance with me, Lauren. I, as your master, command it!” His words were so kind... so pathetic. The echo of his voice loudly assaulted her ears, but she danced nonetheless—one, two, three, one, two, three, waltz, swirl—with her body dwarfed by the immensity of his proportions.

His eyes were still hot and gleaming and his lips... tiny worms... were no longer thick or bulbous in appearance, but rather looked soft and inviting. She wanted to kiss him, but his lips were moving... tiny, white worms.

Oh, it was *so wonderful* to be waltzing like this with a gentleman of such prominence, and even more *wonderful* to imagine that he was able to recognize her obvious maturity. He wanted to kiss her and how could she resist, except that the creatures were laughing as though she was somehow acting peculiar, and she could still smell feces along with

an underlying odor of ammonia.

“One, two, three. Dance, my lovely. Enjoy it.”

Lauren was once again conscious of the music—haunting, lilting—was it a flute or a piccolo? But then it didn’t really matter because it was *so wonderful* to be dancing with, and to want to make love to, this handsome gentleman whose face was badly decayed. She stood on tiptoe to brush his face with her lips, but she couldn’t kiss him because she was now faintly aware of the pain. Her insides were burning, yet it wasn’t time for the monthly curse. Besides, the pain was much too severe to be part of her menstrual cycle.

“Dance, my lovely. Why do you stop?”

Oh, it hurts too much, she thought; sharp, digging pain... and my bones hurt... feels like I’m being... torn apart...

“It has begun. Praise be!”

“Praise nothing, you jerk. It hurts!” Large piles of animal droppings surrounded her, and rotting faces... tiny, white maggots. She wanted to vomit, to scream. The pain had grown more intense. Her skull ached and her backbone was being crushed. The sound of bone gnashing as though being ground into powder filled her ears. Then there was their laughter. Over it all she could hear the unearthly howling of someone, something, screaming in pain.

Lauren swirled once more and then screamed, and screamed and swirled, as the ripping and gnashing continued, driving her into a tortured frenzy.

“Someone’s tearing me apart!” she shrieked.

The foul odor of decay swirled with her until a black oblivion mercifully released her.

When Lauren came to after what seemed like hours of unconsciousness, she was lying face down on the taffy brown and pink carpet in her room. She was still shaken from her dream, but it appeared as though everything in the room was back to normal again, except...

“Mommy! Daddy!” Lauren cried out.

Someone posing as her—an exact duplicate—sat naked and cross-legged on the bed. The sight of someone else wearing her face, her features, drove Lauren close to madness. Only it wasn't Lauren. No, Lauren still lay on the floor! It was like looking into a mirror, only there was no mirror between them.

This was no longer a childish game. This wasn't fun. She'd changed her mind about wanting a sister.

“No sister, no sister! Oh, please, no!” She saw death and despair flashing in the reddened orbs that passed for eyes; saw it clearly when it smiled and wisps of dark smoke issued forth on its breath. God, this was grotesque! She shrieked, *“Oh, Mommy! Please come home!”*

Lauren remembered later that when it climbed off the bed and approached her, stiff-legged and still naked, a hideous leer plastered across its rosy lips, Lauren screamed like a wild banshee

“I'm you, Lauren. Don't be frightened,” were the only words that penetrated her shrill screams. *“When you were writhing in pain, that was me being born.”*

It was close to her now, reaching, touching and it

wasn't a spirit as she'd expected it would be.

“Lauren?” the clone of herself asked.

Lauren found the creature to be composed of solid flesh and bone, outwardly like herself in every detail, and that fact terrified her beyond all reason. She threw back her head and howled like an animal in pain, “*Grandfather!*”