



The den's fireplace emitted a healthy roar as the Ducharme family took their seats at a small table and started in on dinner. Barbara was pleased everyone was too busy tearing into the food to engage in even the smallest conversation. She wanted them on full stomachs before broaching the difficult subject of her interest in Satanism, and so far that part of the program was going to plan. She had only brought a couple of cans of Spam, a box of Ritz crackers and one container of bean dip for the occasion, but none of it ever stood a chance.

They had all worked very hard getting their designated areas of the house in clean and serviceable order. The den that now served as their dining room had looked like an abandoned pawnshop when they first arrived. More than a hundred tchotchkes needed arranging and rearranging before there was a minimum of space to move freely. Amidst the items were appliances that may have come in handy had the electricity been working, but like the rusty old generator the Kens had discovered in the back of the property they were doomed to remain husks of former utility and nothing more. So no radios, no TV, and no cell or landline phone service to alert them if the world had somehow ended while they were gone. All they had was the lighter, the wood, a few days worth of food, a dozen or so oil lamps, one incomplete deck of cards, and each other.

Barbara was determined to make it to the attic, but now that the sun had set, she didn't want to go alone. Before she could invite

company, she felt everyone needed to air out their issues. Again, it was an impulse born entirely of her new surroundings and possibly her earlier study of the needlepoint. If that section of the house—the one that had been delineated with the strange thread—held some volatile energy, she needed to be sure she wasn't dragging any excess baggage in there with them.

Her study of Satanism had taught her to release violent and destructive energies through something called “psychodramatic ritual”, which basically meant throwing a fit. In order to get her family to cooperate, she was going to have to explain where in the world she got such a crazy idea. She had sworn only yesterday never to speak of her outlandish ruminations, but somehow she had found the courage to try. If they reacted harshly, it could all go horribly wrong. On the other hand, it could be just what the situation required.

“Everyone?” she started, as unassumingly as she could. Amanda and the Kens paused mid-chew, bits of food dropping from their chins and fingers.

“Has anyone here ever heard of...,” she tried to make it sound casual and innocent, “Satan?”

Their reaction wasn't what she expected. There were nods, mostly, and more chewing, but none of the gasps and groans that she had played out in her head. Not wanting to lose the impetus of the moment, she reached under her chair and produced a bottle of wine. She had procured it earlier from the basement, a place that held far less drama than she had hoped, but finding the wine had increased her confidence in the map. And there was more: the bottle had beckoned her by being the only one with a finger streak drawn into the dust. She assumed it was her grandmother's—an attempt at contact beyond the grave, perhaps. Nothing could be discounted,

but she gleaned nothing else unusual while down there and returned none the wiser. Still, the idea that she was meant to share the wine with her family came from more than just an assumption; she had been directed by an instinct both maternal—and to borrow from the Satanic lexicon—infernal. Therefore, her pouring wine into each of their glasses was more than just a gesture of familial camaraderie; it was as if she was taking the first of many steps towards shattering a false mirror.

Amanda immediately lifted her glass and sipped. Kenny was next, testing the dark, red liquid with a sniff before using it to wash down a forkful of Spam. Ken Sr. took it down in a single gulp and held his goblet out for more. She refilled his glass halfway and placed the half-empty bottle in the middle of the table where the fire ignited its ruby hues. Bolstered by their cooperation, she continued.

“I suppose some of you have noticed we’ve been missing a few decorative soaps around the house, lately.”

They looked at her blankly, as if swirling her statement around in their heads.

Amanda broke the silence: “I just thought they were being used.”

“Me, too,” said Kenny.

Barbara looked to her husband, whose nod made it unanimous.

“Well, you’re all right in a way. They were being used...only, probably not how you think.” She took another sip of wine and said, “I’ve been sending them to someone. A man. He’s an artist and he uses them to carve things. They’re beautiful and he’s sensitive and I think there are some people in jail that shouldn’t be there. Anyway, now you know.”

Ken Sr. swallowed a mouthful of wine and said, “You’re

sending soap to someone in jail?" His tone was calm and not the least bit accusing.

"Yes. And there's something else." They surrendered their utmost attention and it seemed to Barbara as if the fire popped more loudly than before. Before she could chicken out, she said, "I've been studying the basic tenets of Satanism put forth by Alistair Crowley, and I must say they make a lot of sense."

Her audience continued to stare, excavating the insides of their mouths with their tongues.

"Now, before you all start in, I want you to know that it has nothing to do with stabbing people with pitchforks or taking over the souls of little girls or anything like that. Satanism extends the philosophy of treating people with respect and basically becoming your own god. Well, there's a little more to it than that, but that's the gist."

"Who's Alistair Crowling?" asked Amanda.

"Crowley," corrected Barbara. "He's the founder of the Satanic Church."

"Is he in prison, too?" asked Ken Sr.

"No, he's dead," said Barbara, "but others have taken over his teachings, most notably a man by the name of Anton LaVey."

"Is he in jail?" asked Kenny.

"No, he's dead, too, but that's not the point. Aren't I getting through to any of you?"

Ken Sr. wiped his mouth with his napkin, reached across the table and took his wife by the hand.

"Barbara, it's just that...it's a lot to take in at once. I'm sure everyone here is trying their best to understand."

"I know, I'm sorry," she said, reaching for her glass. "I'm a little nervous, I guess."

"Why?" asked Kenny.

"I'm afraid of what you all might think of me." She could tell they were waiting for more. "Do you remember that map I picked up from the bank today?"

They nodded.

"Well...I believe it's been speaking to me. Not with words or anything, but I'm getting messages from it. I know that sounds insane, but I need you all to believe me."

"Okay," said Ken Sr., looking to the children, "say we believe you. Now what?"

She went on about the needlepoint and how it was drawing her to the attic. It made her anxious to be speaking so honestly, but it also felt good in a way. She still wasn't convinced her family wouldn't shun her eventually, but because they seemed willing to listen she couldn't stop herself.

"So once the dishes are cleared away," she went on, "I thought we might all go together."

"I'll go," said Kenny. "I heard Satan worshippers sacrifice animals."

Barbara pointed a cold finger at him. "That's not true, so put it out of your head." She withdrew the finger and placed it inquisitively on her chin. "Now, anyone else?"

"Yeah, sure," said Amanda with a shrug, "why not?"

"Okay, that's two. Honey?" Barbara squeezed her husband's hand.

"Umm...will it take long?" he asked.

Barbara's heart sank a little. "I don't know. I'm not sure why we're being asked to go."

"Just seems a little silly for us all to go if you don't know why we're going." His voice was mild as milk.

"Honey, please," she implored. She felt close to tears but didn't want

to start crying. He clearly didn't catch how important it was to her, and she didn't want him to think she was making a scene just to get attention.

He pushed away from the table, slapped his thighs and said, "Alright—let's get it done." At that, he began to rise and Barbara held fast to his hand.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"We've got to do something first," she said.

"Oh Jesus, now what?"

"Please, Ken. It's important."

He settled back into his seat and gestured for her to continue.

"We're all a little...tense," she said, "and I have a feeling it's because we're holding in some disruptive energy that maybe we should get off our chests." She tried to gauge the aptness of her statement by their reactions, and to her surprise all tipped their hand one way or another. "Right. You see, it's important to get it out before we proceed."

"Why?" asked Amanda.

"We'll get to that later, but for now I'm asking you to trust me. Can you do that?"

Kenny stood up out of his chair. "I'm sorry I've been breaking a lot of stuff around the house. I don't know why I do it but I can't help it. I've also been touching myself a lot lately. I can't help that either. I'm sorry if it's been a problem."

He sat down as suddenly as he stood, and looked directly into the remnants of his Spam.

Barbara stifled a gasp, but it would have been more from his abruptness than from anything she didn't already know.

"Thank you, Kenny. But before we go on, I want you all to know my intentions are not to work a confession out of anyone."

"Now you tell me," whined Kenny.

"You didn't really give me a chance, honey." She looked at the other two and asked, "Anyone want to go next?"

Amanda coughed a little and laid her hands on top of the table. "Kill them."

Silence.

"That's what my fingernail polish spells," she explained. "According to the medieval rune alphabet, anyway. I don't know why I do it, either, other than it makes me feel better—like I'm casting a secret spell on the world. I do it on my customers' nails, too."

Barbara was intrigued by her use of the word "spell". The definition and context was obviously very different from the way she had been using it lately, but words held tremendous supernatural power if employed correctly. Before she got too lost in the thought, she asked, "Why so angry, Amanda Jean?"

"The video, right?" asked Kenny.

Amanda slammed a hand down in front of him. "I will cut off your balls and feed them to the squirrels if you say one more word, do you hear me?"

"Sorry, I just thought we were—"

"Shut it!"

"Alright, alright," said Barbara, trying to restore peace. "Like I said, this isn't a confessional as much as a chance to release a little anxiety. Well done, Amanda."

"Thanks," she said quietly.

Ken Sr. jumped from his chair as if imitating his son and dug madly inside the front of his bark-stained trousers. Just when Barbara thought he might pull a muscle, he withdrew a handgun and laid it on the table.

"Thank God or Satan or whoever," he said, "damn thing was starting to give me a rash."

The fire popped a few more knots and Barbara said, "I'd be happy to have a look at that later, dear." Then she fanned her face, got to her feet and asked, "Would anyone like dessert? I think there's an unopened box of Entenmann's chocolate popems still in the car."