

## I

The Cliffside Walk in Black Stone Bay was one of the most popular attractions the town had to offer, but that was in the daytime, when the sun shone down on the jagged black teeth thrusting from the waves, and when a person could easily see where each foot was settling down.

Currently, it was just after two in the morning, and while a lot of people might have been hassled by the police for being out on the long run of private property that late, the issue never came up with the owners, all of whom the police knew very well.

Besides, neither of the men was making much noise aside from speaking softly.

“You’re certain this is the property you want?” Albert Miles spoke with genuine regret. “I’ve grown very fond of the old place over the years.”

Jason Soulis smiled and nodded his head. “Oh, yes, Albert. I am certain.” He cast his dark eyes over the waters of the bay and nodded again, slowly, as he drank in the fresh salt air. “It’s as perfect for me as any location I’ve seen could be, don’t you think?”

Miles grinned, looking more like a stocky old trucker than a multi-millionaire. He would have probably been perfect cast as the stodgy old grandfather in almost any 1960s sitcom. He dressed in flannel and jeans, because that was his preference.

Jason Soulis on the other hand, dressed in a gray pinstripe suit and wore a thick coat over it. The air was very cold as it came off the ocean.

“Well, I suppose a deal is a deal. Still, I’m going to miss this spot.” He looked at the estate behind him and sighed. “Lots of fond memories.”

“Well, of course you can visit, Albert.” He lifted one eyebrow and let his lips play at a hint of a smile. “There’s nothing to say you can’t come back and chew the fat with me from time to time.”

Albert Miles looked at his long time associate and chuckled. “You’re still planning to go through with everything, aren’t you?”

The smile stayed on Soulis’s lips but left his eyes. “What on Earth would you know about that?”

“Remarkably little, actually. What you do is only of minor concern to me, Jason. You know that.”

“Let’s try to keep it that way. We have been friends for a long time and I value that.”

“Relax, Jason.” Albert Miles pulled out his pipe and fumbled with a match for several second before he finally got it lit. Soulis watched, but

otherwise made no moves. “Who warned you in Ohio?”

“That’s very true.” The man nodded and eased up on the tension in his face. “You could have just left well enough alone and eliminated me if you wanted me gone.”

Miles laughed openly. It was a friendly sound, a jovial noise and it helped relax Soulis even more. “Jason, my good man, I have no reason to want you hurt. What you seek from the world and what I seek have never been at odds.” He put his hand on Soulis’ shoulder that, considering the man’s idiosyncrasies, would have left many people dead a few moments later. “We’re friends, Jason. I know that isn’t easy to accept. I’m in the same situation as you along those lines, but we are friends.”

Soulis leaned against the narrow railing that separated the two of them from the cliffs below. At this particular juncture, the water was almost a hundred feet down and the jagged rocks that rose from the waves looked as deadly as they were. More than one person had been shredded against the black stones, torn apart by the pounding seas as it battered the coastline.

“Forgive me, Albert. It’s not always easy to trust someone.”

“Oh, hellfire, Jason, I wouldn’t trust me as far as I could throw that old house you just got from me.” He was still laughing, but it had muted down to a chuckle. “I’ve killed more friends than most people have.”

“True enough.” Soulis smiled again. “I suspect we both have.”

“Side effect of living, my friend.” He shrugged. “Live long enough and you make enemies more often than you make friends. I like to keep the few I have, whenever possible.”

“True.” Soulis pursed his lips and nodded again, his eyes drawn to the waves that slammed themselves blindly against the rocks. He smiled when he noticed the motion of the waves and that they hid something below the surface.

“I have another favor to ask of you, Albert.”

“Just feeling frisky tonight, aren’t you?” Miles was in a good mood. He hadn’t made a single demand for payment on any new favors. Not yet, at least. But he might. Soulis knew the man that well.

“I need a contact here in town. Preferably a young lady.”

“There’s a college girl I know of,” Albert Miles stayed silent for a long time before he answered. They had always had that sort of conversation and the long stretch before he got a response didn’t offend Jason Soulis in the least. “She’s a rare beauty, and might have certain...talents you are looking for. But I’m also rather fond of her.”

“You’ve sampled her talents then?” Soulis’s voice was lightly mocking.

“What? Heavens, no. Not along those lines. I haven’t had sex in forever.” Albert Miles sounded offended.

“My apologies, Albert. I forget myself.”

“Not at all.” His friend leaned against the railing to his right and looked down at the waves as they pulled back with a whispered moan. “You never met my wife. You couldn’t possibly know how wonderful she was.”

“It has been a long time, Albert. Don’t you still feel the need to be with a woman?”

“Of course I do.” He chuckled and then puffed away at his pipe for a moment. “I just don’t listen to that need very often.”

“I do. Mostly it’s force of habit.”

“Then Maggie will be perfect for you. She is a wonderful girl.” He looked at Soulis and winked. “I also hear she is very imaginative and quite accommodating.”

“Well, then I shall ask you for the proper way to contact her. I have a few needs that I must take care of before I can settle in properly.”

“I already thought of that. You’ll find her picture and her current address in the upper right hand drawer of the desk in the den. You’ll also find the name of the man who will procure her for you.” Miles puffed away contentedly on his pipe for a moment and then winked. “Don’t you worry, Jason. We’ll get you situated in town.”

“Where will you be going, Albert?”

“I have several irons in the fireplace.” He shrugged. “There are things I need to take care of in Europe. I might go there for a while. I haven’t really decided yet.”

“I think I like the feel of this place. I think I shall like it much more than I did Ohio.”

“Well, really, what is there to do in Ohio, anyway?”

“You might be surprised.” Jason leaned out over the edge of the railing and studied the waves as they crashed. There were secrets under those waves, and he knew he would be exploring them soon.

Albert Miles reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a ring of keys. They tinkled together softly as he tossed them in the air and caught them several times. When he bored of the game he threw them toward Jason Soulis, who caught them effortlessly.

“There you go, old man. All yours.”

“Will you be staying the night?” He pocketed the keys.

“What? No. No, we’re friends, Jason, but I don’t feel quite that foolish tonight.”

Albert Miles chuckled to himself as he walked away. He did not look back and Jason Soulis did not watch him go.

## II

Matt Casey was unaware that he was being watched. He probably wouldn't have cared either way. He was running on a serious high and the only thing he much had a desire for currently was anything that could keep his high going.

Of course, that required money, and Matt was running low. He had paid his tuition over at the Winslow Harper University earlier in the week and that had pretty much drained the coffers until his father sent his next allowance check. He'd paid, because he knew good and damned well that if he didn't maintain good grades his parents would cut him off. He wasn't quite far gone enough to want to try living on the streets.

But he was getting there.

Beside him, his best buddy and roommate, Louis, was grinning ear to ear and looking at things that only he could see. From time to time he came back to the real world and asked what they were going to do next. If he asked again, Matt was pretty sure he'd have to cave his skull in. Lou was a bit of a downer when he started asking too many questions.

"What are we gonna do next, Matt?" Yep. There it was, that need to snap his friend's neck. He held it in check.

"We're gonna get more money, is what we're gonna do."

"How? Dude, we're all tapped out."

Matt closed his eyes and tried counting to ten. He made it to seven before he forgot what he was doing, but by then he'd grown calmer again.

"Lou, old buddy, old pal, just shut the fuck up and let me think."

"Oh. Yeah. All right. It's all good."

They were standing in the shadows of Parminter Street's alleyway, the only source of light near them coming from the liquor store across the street. If he could just focus for a minute, Matt knew he could remember the reason that he's chosen this spot. There was a good reason. A damned fine reason.

That damned fine reason walked out of the liquor store a minute later. Margaret Preston, Maggie to her friends. And to her clients. She was dressed just the way he liked to see her, like she was all money.

Maggie had dark, curly hair pulled back into a ponytail and small, expensive diamond stud earrings in her ears, and a face that had visited his wet dreams more than a few times. She was hot, and she knew it, but she was also unavailable for dating.

Her dates had to pay for the privilege. And they had to play plenty for it, too. He knew a few guys who'd scraped up the cash, and she was supposed to be a pretty amazing lay. Normally when he saw her at school, she was dressed as casually as possible and looked like the girl next door. He'd heard she dressed for whatever was required of her when she was

working, and apparently that meant that she was supposed to dress like a high-stepping bitch tonight. Her pants were black leather, supple and tight in all the right ways, and her shirt was a little pink baby-doll T with the word *Princess* stretched across her impressive breasts. Her shoes were dark leather short boots with just an inch or two of heel, and designed for walking all over a man. Matt figured he could spend a week or two nailing her and never have a reason to get soft. Something about the good-girl-gone-bad look always did that to him.

Not that he wanted her just for the pleasure of sticking it to her. He had other plans. He wanted her for the wad of cash she probably had stuffed into one of her too-tight pockets. If what he'd heard was true, a night with her cost enough to pay the rent for his house for about a month. Not a bad trick to turn.

"Dude, that bitch is hot..." Louis was giggling. That couldn't be a good sign. He reached over and pinched Lou's arm hard enough to leave a dark red mark. "OWWW! What the fuck?"

Maggie turned sharply, her dark eyes hidden in shadow, and her sweet mouth stuck in the sort of pout that made him think bad things about what he'd like to do to her.

Before Lou could open his stupid mouth again, Matt slapped a hand over it and pushed him as quietly as he could into the darkest recess of the alley. Lou struggled for a second and then relaxed, his breath and spit covering Matt's palm.

"You shut up, Lou. You shut right the fuck up. You ain't gonna fuck this up."

"mumm wumph umf?" *Fuck what up?* Even when his mouth was open and free to flap away, Matt could always understand Lou, which was pretty damned impressive considering how often he slurred his speech. Understanding him while he was gagged didn't cause a problem.

He moved out of the way so Louis could see Maggie again. "She's our meal ticket tonight? Get me?"

Lou watched the girl for a second or two, as she finally decided she hadn't heard anything to worry about and started walking again. He nodded enthusiastically. Both of them had talked about how much they would like to use her as their sperm bank on more than one occasion.

"Wn munna fug erm?" *Are we gonna fuck her?*

"Maybe. But not if you screw this up, so keep your fucking mouth shut."

He watched Maggie walking, mesmerized briefly by the shape of her ass as she swayed softly down the sidewalk. It wasn't a forced sashay, just the way her hips were designed to work.

Maybe, hell. He had every intention of peeling her out of those pants and having a party. She might scream, but he could arrange for that to be

muffled. Just let her chew on Lou's thing for a while, or make her eat a few pieces of newspaper.

Either way, he was going to get what he wanted from Maggie. The right drugs always helped him feel good about taking what he wanted and she probably had enough money on her to keep him guilt free for at least a week.

Maggie Preston turned a corner, taking the short cut through the park back to the apartments where she lived.

With several urgent gestures and a warning to stay the fuck quiet, Matt led the way. The hunt was on, as it were, and adrenaline mixed with his high and a serious case of blue balls to make him feel down right predatory.

Halfway down the alley, he forgot all about all of that. Maggie had company. Tom Pardue was standing next to her and grinning like a baboon.

At thirty-five years old, Pardue tried his best to look like he was twenty. He had thin blond hair, more than a few acne scars and a face that bore a strong resemblance to a chimpanzee's. He was also the man to talk to if you wanted to pay for Maggie's services.

Okay, so he dressed like a loser; normally doing his best to look like he belonged at the beach and ready to catch a few waves, with oversized shorts and baggie shirts that failed to completely hide the fact that his muscles were like steel. If the rumors were true, he also carried a weapon or five almost all the time.

Tom was also the number one source of fun when it came to getting a good high, and he knew both Lou and Matt as members of his regular clientele.

It looked like the two of them were going to have an argument. Maggie had her arms crossed over her chest and Tom had his hands planted on his hips. There was no way in hell to get close enough to hear what they were saying, but the expressions on their faces made it clear they weren't having a social moment.

The argument started getting heated, but in a quiet way. They hissed whispers at each other and Matt put a hand on Lou's shoulder to make sure he kept his mouth shut. Excitement mixed with disappointment. On the one hand, he wanted to get his hands on Maggie and her cash. On the other hand, it might be fun to see what Tom did to her if she gave him too much lip. Just thinking about being the one to put her back in her place was giving his desire for her a major boost.

Tom's phone let out an annoying little chirp and spoiled the moment. He held up one finger to shut Maggie's mouth while he answered and then spoke quickly, turning in Matt and Lou's direction. Matt hauled Louis back again, his heart thudding hard. Tom didn't like peepers. He didn't

like them enough to hospitalize a few of them in the past.

Not really a plan that suited Matt's desires.

A half a minute went by without a word being heard, and with Lou getting edgier and edgier. Lou never took it well when he had to behave himself and also he might be seeing things again.

Matt shot him a look: *What? What is it this time, Louis?*

And Lou pointed with his right hand to the tops of the buildings around them.

Matt swallowed his little yelp before it got out. The buildings looked wrong in the darkness. It took him a second to realize that the roofs of the structures were moving.

They were covered with crows. Hundreds of the carrion eaters were perched along the edges of the buildings and looking down at Matt, Lou, Tom, and Maggie. Four people to scores of birds.

Matt felt his skin crawl. He didn't have a problem with crows, thought they were kind of neat, actually, but there were so damned many of them and they were all silent. It wasn't natural.

As he looked up, several of the birds turned their heads and looked down at him, inspecting him like they would a tender piece of dead rabbit in the road. It was unsettling.

"What the fuck, dude?" That was Lou, but his voice was soft and nervous.

"I dunno. Weird shit, Lou. Really weird."

Before either of them could say anything else, Tom came stomping out of the alleyway, his phone to his ear. He didn't notice them. He looked far too busy handling whatever crisis was coming over the phone for him.

Tom looked back into the alley and pointed a finger at where Matt guessed Maggie was still standing. "This isn't over. You get your ass home, and I better not have to double count tomorrow, you understand me?"

If Maggie made a response, it was hidden by the walls of the alleyway.

He risked a look down the alleyway when Tom stomped his way toward the campus. Not much of a reason to drive this time of night. Everything was close by in Black Stone Bay. Maggie was leaning against the wall, and lighting a cigarette. His lips parted in a small grin. He'd never have guessed she was a smoker.

"I wonder what else I'll find out..."

Matt started walking, and Louis was right behind him. This was going to be fun.

## III

Maggie leaned against the wall and willed her hands to stop shaking. He was being an asshole again, which was one of his specialties. She took a drag off the Salem in her mouth and blew the cloud away, barely taking the time to savor the burning nicotine. She didn't really even want a smoke, just a good reason for her nerves to calm down.

Now and then Tom liked to accuse her of a few misdeeds, knowing full well that she wasn't stupid enough to steal from him, just so he could rough her up. It was his thing, his fetish. And while she supposed she had to accommodate the man to keep him happy, she did not have to like it. She'd had enough of the rough and ready for one night. Lance Brewster was one of her regular clients and while he was normally a gentleman all the way through the proceedings, he was currently having arguments with his soon to be ex-wife. That meant he had to take it out on someone, and with what he paid Maggie, he figured she was a good whipping post.

Bad move. As of now, Lance wasn't getting any ever again. Not unless there was a lot of groveling going on. She wasn't a hooker, she was a call girl. She could always decide not to answer a call. And there wasn't a damned thing anyone could do about it. Not even Tom, who had tried more than once to convince her to do things the same as all the other girls working for him.

"Not gonna happen, you prick." She threw down her cigarette and crushed it under her toe. "Not for you or anyone else. I pick, I choose and if that changes, I don't play any more."

She reminded herself that this was strictly temporary. It helped to remind her of that fact at least once a day. This was a means to an end, nothing more. It sure as hell wasn't her career for the future.

One year to go and she would be done with the university. Then she could have a life. A real life. Damned near anywhere she wanted.

Someone giggled down in the alleyway, back toward the liquor store, and she looked that way as causally as she could. Two guys, both of them students at the school. They were looking her way and trying to be sneaky, but neither of them was acting very sober. Okay, to be blunt, they were wasted.

And she wished Tom was still there, just like that. He was a known threat. He was not two losers hopping on the sort of stuff that made their eyes all glassy and their hands twitch.

Her hand slid into the left hand pocket of her leather pants and she caught the top of her pepper spray canister. Then she turned away and started walking, her skin crawling, knowing full well that they intended to do something.

Never show them fear. That was a lesson her father had taught her a

long time ago. He told her that fear was like a wounded animal to predators. It made them twice as hungry and dangerously stupid.

So she walked with her back to them and prayed she'd be able to hear them coming closer. So far, no problem, because they were both doing their best to whisper—and failing.

“Damn, Matt, lookit that ass”

“Dude! Shut up!” Neither of them was speaking loudly, but at two-thirty in the morning they may as well have been using bullhorns.

Maggie turned and faced them when they were only fifteen feet from her, crossing her arms and hiding her hand on the trigger for the pepper spray. “Hi. Matt, isn't it? What can I do for you?”

She looked him dead in the eyes, not allowing herself to blink. And he blushed. He actually blushed.

“Hi, Maggie. Yeah. I'm Matt. This is Louis.”

“I know both of you.” She looked from Matt to the other one, a skinny dark-haired boy who couldn't stop smiling if his life depended on it. “Louis and I go to the same church. I see him there every week with his mother and father, isn't that right, Louis?”

Matt was doing the schoolboy crush thing, which was kind of cute. Louis was looking very, very embarrassed, as if he'd just realized he was walking the streets without his pants on.

Subtext was everything here and she knew it. She had identified both of them and pointed out that it wasn't a casual thing. She could tell people who they were if they tried anything stupid.

Louis finally nodded and looked away from her. She'd just won the battle with him, if she could do the same thing with Matt, they wouldn't have to get sprayed and she wouldn't have to risk getting the crap beat out of her or worse. They were high as kites, but they weren't so far gone that they didn't understand there could be bad consequences if they did anything to her.

At least that was what she was counting on.

Matt nodded his head, and looked at Louis, who looked away from his friend like a kicked puppy trying to find an escape from its master's shoe.

“You guys have a great night. Be safe. There's a lot of weirdoes out.”

And off she went, heading back toward her apartment. Listening carefully. She heard only silence, and that was a good thing.

#### IV

Matt spit on the wall as soon as she was out of view. “Fucking bitch.”

“Dude. She knew us. There's no way in hell we can do anything to

her. She'd point fingers and I am not getting busted again. I barely got out of it the last time." Louis was sounding a lot more sober and more like a wimp with every passing second. Matt was feeling a lot more sober, and that wasn't making him happy either.

He clenched his hands together until the knuckles creaked and he could feel his nails biting into his palms. "Yeah? You want to go a week or two without any money? 'Cause right now? We're almost broke."

"So we'll find someone else, dude. Or we can hock something. Let's just go." Lou was whining. One mention of his sainted mom and he became a pussy.

"No. I want her. She's got cash and I want to fuck her."

"Dude, she's Tom's girl." Louis was trying to talk reason, a sure sign that he was coming down fast. In half an hour he would be ready to go to sleep.

"Lou. Tom's not here. I won't tell if you won't. She's going into the park, Louis. Into the park. There's no lights out there and there's no patrols or any of that shit. I say we do this." He stared hard at Lou. The thing he liked about Lou was that he was a good follower. Matt could normally browbeat him into doing almost anything. Especially if it involved getting high or getting laid. This situation had both as benefits.

"Lou. When else are you ever going to get a chance to nail Maggie Preston?" He was winning the argument. "Dude, whatever we do to her, we just gotta make sure she isn't gonna talk about it later."

"Yeah?" He could almost hear the drool forming in his buddy's mouth. He had him.

"Let's go. We don't do this right now, we might never get another chance."

They started moving, silently this time, truly silently, remembering that this was a one-time chance, a one-time deal. And remembering what their goals were. Sex and money: the greatest motivators known to man.

## V

She heard them as they came for her again and felt her stomach rime over with frost. They were running hard and she doubted that they were just going to talk this time.

Maggie ducked down low and tried to hide behind a bush only a few inches shorter than she was, cursing the pants she was wearing and the way they cut into her midriff. Hard to breathe when your pants are trying to strangle you.

Matt, the one with the scary eyes, was in front again and close enough

that she could get him with the spray, but he was going too fast. The only good news was he had to slow down to veer her way. The bad news was that he'd spotted her.

"Come on, Maggie, we just want to play." He was panting hard from running, but he was doing his best to look cool and relaxed. His face was too flushed to actually carry it off.

"Don't you come near me, Matt. I'll hurt you. I shit you not." Her voice was level and calm. She was good at holding things in. Always had been.

"You and what army?" He was laughing. So she took aim at his snotty, happy expression and sprayed red liquid over his eyes and into his nose and mouth.

Matt screamed, rearing back and covering his face, doing exactly what he shouldn't have been doing and rubbing furiously at the pepper, smearing it across his flesh and into his pores.

"Oh! Oh, fuck it burns!"

Maggie didn't wait around to see if he was okay. She got to running, putting her years on the track team to good use and hauling her ass for home at top speed.

Louis had different ideas. He came at her instead of going to help his friend. She was hoping they were close enough that Louis would worry more about him than about trying to get to her. She had miscalculated.

"Louis! You let it go and I won't have to tell Father Wilson what you've been doing!"

"You can't tell him if you can't open your mouth anymore." He didn't sound right. He wasn't even breathing hard. He should have been, if Matt was any indication, but he wasn't. He sounded like he could go a couple more miles without getting too tired.

She was just preparing to take aim with the pepper spray when he tackled her, sending her sprawling and practically riding her down to the ground like a toboggan. His hands were all over her arms, pinning them, and his sweating, heavy body pressed her into the dirt and grass.

"What are you gonna do, Maggie? Tell Father Wilson that I didn't pay for a suck and fuck?"

More than the snide tone in his voice, the words hurt. She'd done her best to keep anyone from learning what she did for a living. Most of her clients wouldn't have considered talking, but someone had loose lips.

Louis ground himself against her ass and used his left hand to start pulling at her shirt, keeping both of her wrists pinned with his right.

"Get off of me!"

"Fuck you, you tease." He grunted, his breath spraying the side of her neck as he groped her and then slid his hand lower, fumbling first at his own jeans and then going for her pants.

The sound seemed to come from everywhere at once, a loud screaming cry, a thunderous cackling laughter that froze both of them where they were.

Maggie looked around and saw only the night and the darkness, and then she saw Matt standing up, swinging his hands at the sky and screaming.

“Louis! Help me! Help, oh God, help me it hu-urts!” Whatever was happening, it wasn’t a joke. Maggie could hear the pain and fear in every word the creep spoke and she wasn’t alone. Half a second after the screams started, Louis pushed off of her and stood up. The sick bastard had already gotten his jeans open and had meant to take what he wanted by force.

He zipped his pants, narrowly missing cutting into his own penis with the teeth of his zipper, and then ran back the way he’d come. “Matt! I’m coming!” She couldn’t see his face. That was just as well, she never wanted to see him again. He hadn’t actually done it, but he’d been willing to rape her and she hated him for making her powerless.

Back toward the alley and the campus, she saw Matt fall down, screeching and begging as something tore at his flesh. She saw the wounds appear, saw the gashes open on his skin as something in the darkness tore at him again and again. His face appeared briefly in the darkness, his eyes wild and tear-stained. Then the seething black mass covered him again, shifting, sliding around. When next his features appeared for an instant, his left eye was nothing but a black pit crying crimson tears down his cheek.

Louis had almost made it all the way back to where Matt lay on the ground before he was swallowed by the obsidian cloud. His screams were loud and thunderous, agonized bellows as he vanished into a flurry of black, swirling insanity.

Maggie sat up, barely breathing, and looked on as the fluttering darkness kept tearing at the two of them. Her eyes adjusted and revealed what she hadn’t seen clearly before: crows. Maggie’s heart stuttered in her chest as she let herself absorb the information her eyes sent to her brain. There had to be close to a thousand crows hovering over and covering the two men, ripping at flesh with sharpened beaks and plucking away soft bloody gobbets to eat. They tore and clawed and chewed and the two would-be assailants died while Maggie watched.

She started to be afraid and then forced it down, pushed the emotion away. It wasn’t appropriate, not now. Emotions were for later, when she was safe.

She didn’t stay to watch. She left, her eyes constantly scanning the skies and making sure that none of the birds came for her.

None did. They focused solely on Matt and Louis. By the time Maggie reached her home a few blocks away, the bones of the men had been

picked clean. Then, working with an unsettling precision, the birds gathered the grisly remains of their feast and lifted them into the air. It took a lot of crows to carry a human femur, but they managed it, settling a few times to recover their strength before they continued on.

By three in the morning, the remains had been taken away. The black birds dropped the debris into the ocean, scattering bones along Black Stone Bay and watching them sink into the waters.

By four in the morning, a stray dog had managed to devour what little was left of blood and evidence that there had ever been a crime.

By five, Maggie had convinced herself that she'd been slipped something in her drink. That Lance Brewster was starting into the wonderful world of drugs and that she now had one more reason not to see him again.

By six, just as the sun was getting ready to rise, Maggie drifted into sleep, completely unaware of the man who looked into her third-story window and watched her as she relaxed into a peaceful dream.

He made sure her dreams were peaceful.

He smiled and watched her as she curled into a loose fetal position, looking far younger than her years.

Jason Soulis nodded to himself and spoke only to the wind. "Yes, Albert. I think she'll do perfectly."

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