

CHAPTER I

THE STAG

It wasn't a windy night. There was no thunder or lightening in the sky but even if there had been an ice storm, it would not have mattered. Faith was in a very good mood. After two attempts, she had finally passed her driver's test.

In her first three tries, the test administrator had given Faith poor marks for breaking too late and stopping in the intersection. During today's test, Faith had remembered to brake earlier so the car would not skid to a stop beyond the crosswalk.

In light of the auspicious event, Faith and her mother had stopped to celebrate at her mother's favorite watering hole. Faith had tried to act drinking age but her appearance sank any hopes of achieving that illusion. Not that she was unattractive. Faith was "Girl Next Door" pretty, yet she was also under

developed and a bit boyish for being almost eighteen. So, Faith settled for a virgin strawberry daiquiri while her mother enjoyed one too many gin and tonics.

Comfortably behind the wheel of her mother's hybrid sedan, Faith carefully navigated towards their home along the narrow Louisiana country road that snaked through thick woods on either side.

Now fully licensed to drive, Faith dreamed of freedom, maybe even driving as far as New Orleans to party with her best friend Mina. It was only a three-hour drive but Faith's passenger might not agree to such a road trip, at least not yet.

In the passenger seat sat a busty woman about forty-five. She was Faith's mother, Ruby. She hummed a little song as she twisted her dark hair around her fingers.

"Mom, I told you not to have that last gin and tonic."

"Life is not about saving for a rainy day. I fully intend to skid past the pearly gates thoroughly used up." Ruby replied with just a hint of tipsy.

"When you go, will you leave me your boobs?"

"Faith, I wish you would not get so obsessed with your looks. You really need to learn to be comfortable in your own skin."

"But that's the first thing boys notice, your boobs, and right now I'm pretty much invisible." Faith said with a pout.

Faith lifted one hand and rubbed her face. She could feel the pressure building at the corner of her cheek. It was the ache of a zit trying to push through her well-scrubbed teenaged skin. Faith pulled the rearview mirror toward her and

peeked at her reflection, but Ruby reached out and pushed Faith's chin forward again.

"Oh Pumpkin, all you have to do is learn to love yourself and that will draw people to you like a magnet." Ruby thought for a bit then added. "Besides boys are dumb and ruled entirely by their weenies."

"Maaawwwm," Faith whined.

Talking about these things always made Faith uncomfortable but at the same time, it was the only way she would learn about the opposite sex. The only man in her life was her Grandpa and as much as she loved him, he wasn't exactly what Faith considered a man's man.

"I'm just tired of people thinking I'm still in Jr. High School."

"You are a late bloomer."

"That phrase only applies if I bloom." Faith retorted as she rolled her eyes.

"Trust me. In twenty years you'll be thanking the gods." Ruby said with an all too knowing grin.

"And why should I have to wait twenty years? Why can't I have it all now?"

"Remember when you tried to hard boil that egg in the microwave?"

"Yupper. It exploded like a gremlin." Faith chuckled. "Took me more than six hours to get all the bits out of the vents."

"Exactly. Don't rush into things. Especially adulthood." Ruby patted Faith on the thigh. "My god what I wouldn't give..."

Faith glanced at the clock in the dashboard. It was ten minutes until eight. The sun had set but the sky still had yet to turn completely black.

Faith pressed her foot on the gas pedal. The little car squirted around a tight corner causing Ruby to thump her head against the side window from the G-force.

"Why are you suddenly driving so fast?" Ruby asked rubbing her head.

"We're going to miss Americas Next Top Model."

"What did I just get done saying?" Ruby grumbled.

"It's not about me. It's about them."

"You can't believe everything you see, Pumpkin. There's so much airbrushing done to those photos."

"Yeah, but don't you get some satisfaction watching those skinny bitches get booted off the show?"

"I have to admit, I love it when they cry." Ruby chuckled and nodded her green light.

Faith stomped on the gas pedal with a smile. The little car raced around a long sweeping corner. Faith glanced at the rearview mirror again. She was happy when she didn't see the zit in its full glory but there was something more pressing Faith didn't see, something that would change her life forever.

As the car swung around the corner, the headlights froze a huge twelve point stag in the middle of the road. Faith slammed her foot on the brake pedal too late. The front bumper dipped and undercut the stag's leap to safety. The force of the collision threw the stag onto the hood. Its massive antlers smashed

through the windshield filling the small car with tiny glass missiles.

Faith's world went black.

There was a high-pitched ringing in Faith's ears that sounded like a woman's scream. Faith shook herself awake. Her eyes were wide open but she was still stunned. She blinked hard. The high-pitched ringing suddenly cut to an eerie silence. Faith stared out the broken windshield.

There's a stag on the hood, she thought to herself amused. *How could this have happened?* Those were the same words her mother had said three years ago when she learned Faith's father had been killed by friendly fire in Afghanistan.

My mother... Where was she?

Faith suddenly snapped solidly awake. Faith turned to find Ruby's head resting between the stag's antlers. Faith unbuckled her seat belt. As she tried to move, a searing pain shot up her thigh and lower back. Her scream seemed to explode from her bowels. Faith grabbed at the pain and discovered blood soaking her left thigh. A white thighbone stuck out the side of her torn jeans. Faith's stomach flip flopped and she grabbed at the steering wheel with both hands to steady herself as the waves of nausea swept up to her throat. Faith groaned in sheer agony but managed to pull both of her legs up into the seat underneath her. With great care, Faith threaded herself over the top of the antlers and reached for her mother.

The antlers twitched.

"Mom. Lean back." Faith whispered.

The antlers twitched again.

Faith froze. She turned her head slowly and glanced at the injured stag on the hood.

The stag lay so close; Faith could smell the acorns and grass that it must have been feeding on just moments before. Its rear legs were completely shattered. Bright red blood oozed down the hood of the small car.

Faith kept her eyes on the stag as she tapped her mother on the shoulder, then the stag's eyes fluttered opened. The huge animal was slowly coming conscious. It blinked hard.

"Easy boy. Easy." Faith cooed trying to soothe the injured beast.

The stag's eyes rolled towards Faith's voice. Its nostrils flared as it snorted. The hot breath of impending death billowed out into tiny mushroom clouds.

"No!"

The stag bellowed a deep guttural bleat as it thrashed its huge head. The stag's antlers cut off Faith's scream as they thumped her against the roof of the car. The stag was trying to get up but all four of its legs were broken. The antlers slapped her mother back and forth like a dog shaking a chew toy. The razor sharp points sliced across Ruby's throat. Arterial pressure splattered bright red blood across the windows.

CHAPTER II
THE CABINET

"Timmy! Where are you?" Evelyn cried.

Her hair was a rat's nest. Her eyes were rimmed red. Mascara filled tears stained her cheeks making her look Goth, but she was not a teenager. She was Evelyn Puck and her list making, soccer mom, garden club world was completely out of control.

As Evelyn searched behind the curtains, she glanced out the window. It wasn't a windy day. There was no thunder or lightening in the sky, and yet a dark furious storm had engulfed the Puck's countryside home.

"Mommy isn't mad. Just come out. Now."

Evelyn tried to keep some semblance of calm in her voice even though she was at her wit's end.

Evelyn raced back and forth across the room. She searched behind the sofa and peeked under the writing desk. She yanked open the coat closet door. Evelyn ripped out every coat and sweater cutting her fingers on the hangars. She patted the walls as if a secret door would appear where none had ever existed before.

The phone rang. At first, Evelyn paid no attention to it. *After four rings, the machine will answer*, she thought. However, the caller hung up before the message started. The phone rang again. This time Evelyn turned toward the sound and lifted the cordless handset.

"Hello?" She said hopefully. Evelyn was praying to hear some good news. Maybe the neighbors had found Timmy wandering the street or maybe the nanny had taken Timmy to a doctor's appointment and Evelyn had simply forgotten about it. However, it was none of these. The voice of the caller was familiar and as soon as she heard it, she felt a sliver of hope.

"Oh Charles, I still can't find him anywhere," Evelyn sobbed.

She listened to the voice that she knew belonged to Charles Puck, her husband for almost eighteen years. His unwavering soothing voice always reassured her but this time his words made no sense at all.

"You can't be serious?" Evelyn questioned with mild annoyance and yet she could tell by the tone of his voice, Charles was genuinely sincere.

Pinning the phone between her ear and shoulder, Evelyn turned and walked to a red Chinese cabinet.

It had a blood red lacquer finish and hand painted gold edging. It stood

about seven feet tall and five feet wide. A simple brass pin shaped like a dragon secured the two doors at its front. It was in good shape but not pristine. Its sides were discolored a ruddy brown from exposure to flames or high heat. Its four simple unfinished legs appeared to have been rebuilt many times. The design was Chinese from what time no one could be sure, but it was old, very old. It stood bathed in a triangle of warm yellow light from a fall sunset. It would have fit better in a boudoir, but like the many other things the Pucks had collected in their world travels, they chose to display it in their living room.

The wall facing the cabinet had mirrored paneling from the floor to the ceiling that reflected the entire room. The rest of the house was a modest design yet filled with tasteful furniture. The sofa was fine Italian leather covered with Japanese silk pillows. The side table had a white marble top with a tiger maple base shaped like a lyre. The setting was warm, quiet and serene except for the frazzled woman standing in front of the red Chinese cabinet.

Evelyn wasn't sure what she would find inside but her husband's words compelled her against her better judgment. She pulled out the brass dragon pin and opened the doors. It was empty except for the ornate mirror that covered three quarters of the cabinet's rear panel. She had kept the cabinet closed for years and Evelyn had forgotten all about the mirror inside. The frame was made of polished metal cast in the shape of a silver winged dragon that twisted and crawled around the large mirror ending with its tail between its teeth.

Charles barked a command in her ear but Evelyn was not paying attention.

"What? What did you say?"

Charles repeated his command and Evelyn stepped aside. The dragon mirror now faced the mirror-paneled wall unobstructed. Like windows nested within progressively smaller windows, the two mirrors generated endless reflections.

"Okay. What now?" Evelyn snapped impatiently. Yet even though his words still made no sense, Evelyn followed her husband's next command. Evelyn walked her fingers across the reflective surface of the dragon mirror. She counted out loud so he could hear her progress.

"Nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen." She stopped as her finger touched the thirteenth reflection. Nothing happened. "Okay Charles. I'm still watching."

Why was Charles wasting my time with this exercise in madness? But, just as her frustration turned to anger, a wave swept across the surface of the dragon mirror like a pebble being dropped into a still pond. Her curiosity got the best of her and Evelyn reached forward and touched the mirrored surface. To her surprise, her finger poked through the shiny surface as if it were made of silver Jell-O.

"Mommy?" an oddly thin and distant voice called out.

"Timmy?" Evelyn cried. "Timmy, are you in there?"

Something fluttered across the reflections. Evelyn leaned in scanning the mirror for any signs of the boy. She could make out the shape of a face but it was not her son that peered back.

Something with the unnatural yellow eyes of a viper was observing her. It had black diamonds for pupils that enlarged with menacing interest. When the

creature blinked, an opaque nictitating membrane closed like a great white shark's before a bite. Evelyn's briefly rising hopes came crashing down. This hideous creature peering out of the mirror was not her seven-year-old boy.

Evelyn's surprise now flashed to fear as the mirror bulged and rippled.

Evelyn dropped the phone. Instinctively she backed away but she could not tear her eyes from the hideous thing pulling itself out from the mirror. Her left thigh bumped into the desk and it triggered a memory.

Charles kept his back up piece in the drawer, didn't he? Evelyn yanked open the middle drawer. Pouring out the contents onto the desktop, she located his revolver. She opened the cylinder. It was empty. For all his logic and preparedness, Charles had kept the gun handy yet safe from Timmy. *Where in the hell are the bullets? The side drawer.* Evelyn pulled hard on the small drawer but it was locked. Evelyn flipped the revolver over in her hand and using the butt like a hammer, she pounded the drawer until it popped open. Her hand closed on the cardboard ammunition box. She tore it open scattering the bullets across the floor. Dropping to her knees, she fumbled with the copper-jacketed hollow points Evelyn strained to keep focus and she finally got the .357 loaded.

No time to waste, Timmy or not, this thing growing in the mirror was not of this world this she was sure. She aimed the revolver like Charles had taught her. She took a deep breath then pulled the trigger. The bullet sank into the gooey reflective surface with no effect. She fired again.

An arm covered in scaly lizard skin flexed but did not bleed.

Evelyn's fear raged into panic. She turned and fired three times into the

mirrored wall. Each bullet struck high but instead of smashing the mirrored wall, the high velocity bullets only left three small holes.

Slowly and with great trepidation Evelyn turned back towards the cabinet. Horror raged across Evelyn's face.

A wicked bony hand with razor sharp claws at the end of each finger pushed its way out from the dragon mirror.

How did Charles know how to do this? Why wasn't he here? What did this thing have to do with Timmy's disappearance? These things flashed through her mind in a blink of an eye.

The glint of headlights swept across the mirrored wall. Evelyn glanced out the window. Flashing red and blue lights illuminated a car accident down the road. Evelyn could just make out a sheriff's cruiser and an ambulance but they were still too far away to be of any help.

Running won't save me, was Evelyn's last conscious thought. In one final desperate act, Evelyn lifted the gun barrel to her mouth.

The blast blew a hole the size of a grapefruit out the back of her head. Blood and brain matter dripped down the mirrored wall and covered the 13th reflection.