

Excerpt from Blind Persuasion

Chapter One

January 1980

Darkness! Winter was always dark and gray even on the sunniest of days. In the darkness, foreboding thoughts crept into the recesses of a person's mind and soul. Maybe it was because the trees were barren; their charcoal black branches a shade darker than the gray puffs of clouds that billowed upward, away from yet another gray shape that formed the foothills of the mountains beyond. The darkness became the playground for the demons that feared the light. The only saving graces were the festive complementary colors of red and green. These warm colors brightened the mood, decorated the buildings, and adorned most people for the month of December. It was a stark contrast to the bleakest month of the year: January. The joyous refrains became an echo among the inhabitants of this quaint town nestled in the foothills of the Smokey Mountains. The bitter darkness made the labors of the town's inhabitants seem harder than usual. This especially harsh winter weighed heavily on a few souls in particular. The cold, blustery winds whistled outside their windows giving their demons a voice. Oh, the darkness: Only those who suffer in its demoralizing anxiety can understand the toll it takes on them.

A man walked the lonely streets of this small North Carolina town. His new parka was zipped up all the way and its hood shielded the man's face from the cold. While he had been seen about town to buy the basic necessities such as food, personal care items, and libations to ease the pain of what some folks assumed was a broken marriage or refuted lover, he never spoke of his problems. In fact, he never spoke at all. He showed up in their town a month ago and quietly rented one of the vacant houses out by the nearby lake.

He didn't bother anyone and he made it clear he didn't want to be bothered. His beard was wild and unkempt. His emerald-green eyes pierced through all the black hair that was getting long and in need of attention. He appeared older than he truly was.

Speculating on the man's misfortunes became the favorite pastime of the locals. Whole dinner conversations revolved around the latest theory or rumor invented earlier in the day. The only fact that everyone knew about this man was that he was not from "these parts."

At one point, some people thought that the man had left as mysteriously as he had arrived. They had not seen him for a number of days. They even admitted that not having him around made their lives boring. But they were wrong! Eventually the man emerged from the lake cabin once again. He walked through town as if he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. Walking to the local store, he was aware of the finger-pointing, gasping, and whispering that his appearance generated.

The mailman reported that the stranger had received some mail a few days ago. It was a very nondescript envelope addressed to "Smith." The mailman declared that he would call him "Smity," which seemed appropriate. Others only laughed at the mailman's attempt to humanize the odd, lonely man.

The man reached the local store in the curious little town. He wasn't going to buy much. After all, he had to walk the seven miles back to the cabin he was renting. Grabbing a small basket he made his way through the store. He picked up some skim milk, pasta, and sauce, and then at the end of the aisle he eyed some small backpacks. Realizing he could purchase more food and make fewer trips into town, he tried a black one on over his coat. While it was not as comfortable as he would have liked, he decided he could make it work. He tossed the pack into his basket and moved on to the soup aisle, opting for the dry mixes. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that he was being watched. Inquisitive eyes were observing his every move. This made him uncomfortable, so he hurriedly selected some beef and frozen vegetables. He also wanted to stop at the liquor store on his way back. He made his way to the cashier to pay for the items.

"Hello," the cashier greeted him in her cheerful southern accent. The man gave her a quick smile, barely noticeable beneath his beard and moustache, as he set everything on the black conveyor belt. The young, pretty, dark-haired clerk looked at the man, trying to make eye contact. She thought she felt sorry for him. Maybe it wasn't her sorrow she was feeling, instead feeling sorrow emanating from him. She decided to be brave and ask, "Sir, are you all right? Is there anything I can do to help you?"

At first, the man was taken aback by her forwardness. He looked at her, their eyes meeting, and he could tell she was genuine in her concern. The clerk took notice of his bloodshot eyes. The man forced himself to say the first words he had spoken to anyone in six weeks. He tried to smile and disguise his voice. "I'm fine. Thank ya. Y'all don't need to worry." He cringed. His attempt to mimic the southern accent was horrible. Inside he was actually laughing at his pathetic attempt. The clerk wasn't sure if he was mocking her. The fake accent left her confused and speechless. She returned scanning the items only speaking to finish the transaction. He opened the backpack and placed the items inside, adjusted the straps, and slung the pack over his shoulders. Giving a nod to those standing in shock after hearing him speak, he started for the doors and walked out of the grocery store.

His next stop was the liquor store for the libations that would provide temporary relief from his pain. He grabbed a bottle of gin and a bottle of scotch from the shelf. After paying cash, he placed the bottles in the small pack and readied himself for the long hike back to his cabin.

It would be dark by the time he returned home. He didn't mind walking and he wasn't in a hurry to get back. He knew what waited for him in the darkness. It was surprising to him that he was still haunted by nightmares. They were not the same nightmares from his past though. These nightmares were a mix of future and past events. In them, a woman he had pulled into his world

was killed. Each night when she was shot, he awoke in a cold sweat. He couldn't understand why he was dreaming of her death. Nicole Charbonneau was safe and the Serpent was dead.

As he walked up to the house in the dark, he took the key out of his coat pocket to unlock the door. After going to the kitchen to unpack the groceries and start his dinner he smiled as his mind took him back to the beach house. He closed his eyes envisioning Nicole unpacking the groceries. Seeing her made him happy if only for a few minutes. He cherished those images. His smile faded as he recalled his current nightmares and wondered if he had failed her in some way. Why was he having these nightmares? He knew she was safe; he had saved her. So why did the torment continue?

Sean shook his head wondering if his mind would ever accept the truth and whether he would ever be able to sleep well again. Taking off his coat, he threw it on a nearby chair. He then removed his gun and holster. He set them on the counter and decided on soup for dinner. He retrieved a small pot from the cupboard and began to read the instructions on the dry soup bag. As he was preparing the soup, the phone rang. He turned the burner on the stove down and walked across the kitchen to answer the phone which hung on the wall.

"Hello."

"Sean, it's Charlie." Charlie Dawson was calling from London to check on his agent. "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine, Charlie. Did my dad put you up to this?" Sean asked.

"No, Sean. As per your wishes, I've not told anyone where you are. I'm calling from my home," Charlie answered. "I thought you'd be back home by now. If there are any problems, we'll be happy to help you. You do know that, don't you?"

Sean smiled. "I know, Charlie. I can't put my finger on it, but I'm just not ready to come home yet. I'm working through some things here and it is just taking longer than I thought it would."

"What things are you working through?" Charlie asked with a hint of concern in his voice.

"For one thing, I'm not sure I want to continue to be with SIS," Sean replied. He was somewhat surprised that came out of his mouth. He had never thought about leaving the Secret Intelligence Service before.

Charlie sat quietly for a moment, wondering if Sean was going to elaborate. When he didn't, Charlie gave a bit of a sigh and responded, "Well, there are other jobs available that I think you would excel in, so don't be too quick in that decision."

"I understand. I know that I don't want to be in the field again. I think I've paid my dues if you know what I mean."

“I do indeed.” With his next question, Charlie’s voice took on a hesitation that revealed his concern for Sean. “Are you still having nightmares, Sean?”

There was a long pause. He sat down. He wasn’t sure he wanted to tell Charlie, but his solitude wasn’t helping either. “Yes,” Sean said quietly, embarrassed to admit it. “It isn’t the same nightmare though. Now I dream that it is Nicole that has died. I dream I failed in keeping her safe.”

Charlie smiled. “You didn’t fail. Nicole is quite safe. In fact, if you have access to a television there, you might want to turn on the news.”

“Why?” Sean asked.

“You’ll be able to see that she is on the arm of our friend, Senator Bobby Jenkins,” Charlie said with the sound of a smirk on his face.

Sean sat back in his chair, not sure how he felt about this turn of events. “Charlie, I’ve got to go. I’ve got something on the stove and, well, I’m not that great of a cook to begin with,” he said standing up.

“Please consider coming home, Sean. We’re all here to help you.”

“Thank you, Charlie. It’s good to hear your voice,” Sean really did have to admit that hearing from Charlie seemed to help. “Goodbye.” He hung up the phone and said out loud to no one, “So, Nicole, that does make a lot of sense. Senator Jenkins is one lucky fella.”

He walked back to the stove to stir the soup that was about ready to eat. “Maybe it is time to catch up on the news,” he said to himself.

He walked over to the living room and, for the first time in over a month, turned on the television. He made trips between the kitchen and the living room. After pouring a bowl of soup, he sat down at a small table and tuned in for the six-thirty news. There was a small part of him that hoped the senator would be on the news with Nicole on his arm so that he could see her with his own eyes. What he didn’t understand was the pang of jealousy he felt toward his old friend Bobby Jenkins.

As he watched the news, it seemed in his absence from the world that very little had changed. There was a follow-up report on the beheading in Mecca and a lot of talk about whether or not the US would attend the Summer Olympics in Moscow. One report though, Sean watched with more interest. The IRA had prematurely detonated a bomb on the Dunmurry train outside of Belfast. The bombing killed three people and injured five. With that report, the news was over. Sean drank the last bit of soup from the bowl and walked over to turn off the television. While he had been hopeful he would see Nicole on the screen, he was not sad that he didn’t see her. Maybe Charlie misinterpreted what he had seen. Maybe Nicole and Jenkins were just friends.

Sean put his hands to his head trying to squash his thoughts. “Why in the world would she ever be interested in you?” Sean shook his head.

He knew it was time to get on with his life. He needed to understand his feelings and gain control of the demons that still haunted him. He walked back to the kitchen where he cleaned up and put the remainder of the soup in the refrigerator. He caught his reflection in a mirror that hung in the entry of the cabin. He almost didn’t recognize himself. He had lost a considerable amount of weight and his face was gaunt. The facial hair did him no favors. He was startled at how he looked and how he had let his demons control him. He needed to get tough with himself again. He couldn’t return home looking like this. The site of him in the mirror made him realize that if he wanted any chance with Nicole, he had to pull himself together. It was time to kick his demons to the wall and out of his life forever. He began to search the house for some paper and a pen. He wanted to write down his thoughts. After he was satisfied that he had captured his fears and any demons that were lurking around him, he burned the paper in the fireplace using matches he had found in a drawer in the kitchen. He watched the paper turn to ashes. The orange flames turned to smoke that rose into the chimney. Sean envisioned his demons leaving him with the smoke.

Then he searched the cabin for a pair of scissors, deciding it was time to get rid of the long hair and beard. As he cut each snip of hair, he knew he was beginning the long journey back from his personal hell.

{II}

“Happy New Year, Bobby and Nikki,” Mrs. Louise Barker said as she opened the door to their lovely home. Senator and Louise Barker were famous for their New Year’s Day parties in Washington. It was an affair that everyone wanted to attend. A select number of prestigious insiders counted their blessings to be among the chosen. The party was a bright beacon keeping the gray doldrums of January at bay, if only for a few more days. Louise always had a theme for her parties, and this year she decided that she would usher in Mardi Gras a full seven weeks early. She had the house decorated appropriately with beads and masks, a band playing New Orleans jazz and a fortune-teller. She had even hired magicians and drama students to wander around and engage her guests. It certainly felt like you had walked into a house party on Bourbon Street the night before Ash Wednesday.

“Happy New Year to you, too,” Jenkins answered as he gave Louise a kiss on the cheek. “You have outdone yourself this time,” he added, smiling at all the noise and commotion emanating from the other rooms.

“Happy New Year, Louise,” Nicole greeted her with a hug and kiss on the cheek.

“Larry is in the great room down the hall, Bobby. I’ll take your coats.” Louise was an elegant lady, a quality that Nicole envied. “Nikki, you simply must visit the fortune-teller I’ve hired.”

Nicole was unbuttoning her coat and stopped to look at Louise. “Why?” She blurted out. The tone in her voice caused Louise’s smile to fade. Nicole noticed the tone, a tone that showed her aversion to the thought that someone could actually predict what was going to happen in the future. She quickly followed her contemptuous question by firmly stating her belief—or disbelief. “I mean, I really don’t believe in that sort of thing.” She removed her coat and handed it to Louise.

“I have my reasons, my dear, but mainly because of your circumstances in the past year,” Louise replied. She paused a moment to rephrase what she was about to say next. “Well, let’s just say things are looking up and you have so much to look forward to this year compared to last year.” She smiled. “I would think you would love to know just what is in store for you.”

Nicole tilted her head in confusion. What happened to her last year could not have possibly been foretold by a fortune-teller. She flipped a lock of curls from her face while forming her next response. She smiled uncomfortably and answered, “Well, I really don’t believe that someone can tell me what my future holds. Had someone told me that I would have lost Carol at the end of the year, I would have taken her up on that vacation she showed me just prior to her death.” Nicole paused. *But then, I would have never met Sean.* She shook her head, mainly to get the thought of Sean out of it. She smiled, turning her doubtful gaze to Louise. “In any case, I do believe that I control what happens to me and I don’t think I’m that predictable.”

“You are more predictable than you like to think, my dear,” Jenkins chimed in. He put his arm around her and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Nicole returned his look with surprise. “I would love to see if this fortune-teller could guess what did happen to you.”

Nicole felt a need to defend herself. “I consider what happened to me to be abnormal. What are the odds of having another assassin threaten my life or anyone else for that matter? Other than trying to determine if I’ll return to law, I don’t have any earth-shattering decisions coming up in my life. Really, Bobby, I’m not that predictable.” Nicole gave Jenkins the look that let Jenkins know when he was treading on thin ice.

Jenkins smiled at the look he did not fear. He then gave a chuckle as Nicole tried to make the look more menacing. “See, even receiving ‘the Look’ from you is predictable!” Nicole’s mouth curled into a smile as she couldn’t stay mad at Jenkins for very long.

Louise smiled at them both. “Oh, I think there might be one or two earth-shattering decisions in your near future.” She winked at Jenkins, who suddenly became embarrassed and started to blush. “See what I mean?” She and Jenkins laughed as Nicole smiled. Nicole suddenly felt uncomfortable with the thought that she and Jenkins would marry in the coming year. Jenkins’s embarrassment made her believe that Louise wasn’t far from the truth. “Now I really want you to

see that fortune-teller.” Louise said as she handed the coats to a butler who appeared from the adjoining room.

“I’m not making any promises,” Nicole answered. “I’ll see you later.” She turned away from Louise taking Jenkins’s offered hand. Neither of them spoke as they walked down that hallway to the great room. Jenkins was too embarrassed and Nicole didn’t want to start the conversation. She didn’t want to get married; it was far too soon. She still had a lot to process with all that had happened before Christmas. Nicole still didn’t know what she wanted to do with her life now that it had changed so drastically. She smiled as her eyes caught Jenkins gazing at her just before entering a room full of notable guests.

Larry Barker, the tall, distinguished, senior senator from the state of Texas, stood out like a sore thumb. Barker was in his late sixties and had the respect of both sides of the aisle. He was known for his negotiating skills, even if some of those negotiations required heavy persuasion. These persuasions were typically accompanied with some kind of dirt acquired from snooping into his opponent’s background. Jenkins was sure Barker had a secret room somewhere in the house that contained information on just about everyone. At times, Jenkins wondered just what information Barker had on him. It didn’t matter though, as Jenkins didn’t plan on crossing his mentor anytime soon. They worked as a team, which brought both men credence from others in Congress.

When Barker saw Jenkins and Nicole enter the great room, he broke away from his conversation to greet them.

“Hello, Bobby,” he said, extending his hand, which Jenkins accepted and leaned in to give Barker a quick hug as well.

“Happy New Year,” Jenkins answered.

“You too,” Barker responded. He turned to Nicole and opened both arms to give her a hug. “Happy New Year, Nikki,” he said as he took her in his arms.

“Happy New Year,” Nicole answered breathlessly as Barker’s hug squeezed all the air out of her. As he let go, she cleared her throat and gave a bit of a chuckle. “I don’t think I’ll ever get used to those bear hugs.”

“Well, seems I’ll have to give Bobby some lessons. He should be holding you tight every chance he gets,” Barker responded with a sly grin.

Nicole didn’t like Barker’s hugs. She actually found them quite annoying. At the risk of embarrassing Jenkins, she answered, “I actually like the way that Bobby holds me. It doesn’t ruffle the feathers.”

Jenkins's smile was accompanied by a quick shake of his head. Barker was taken aback for a second, but then he gave a smile and a quick punch to Jenkins's upper arm. "Good for you!" Barker said following it with a hearty laugh. "You do have your hands full with this one, Bobby."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," Jenkins answered.

"That's hard to believe coming from a southern gentleman."

"I consider myself a modern southern gentleman," Jenkins corrected Barker. "I'm very secure in the fact that women are equals. Nikki provides valid counterpoints to any number of topics we discuss." Jenkins looked at Nicole and smiled. "I find her insights enlightening."

Barker smiled at Jenkins. "I suppose that is the new way of handling things." Nicole furrowed her brow.

"I suppose it is." Jenkins replied while he had the chance.

Barker thought that women should be seen and not heard. While his wife provided her opinions, typically it was with other women and not in the presence of her husband. Nicole began to wonder if Louise ever had any input to Barker's decisions. She recalled a time at a dinner party when she voiced her opinion to Jenkins on legislation that was being discussed. Louise gently took her arm and steered her away from the conversation. It was clear now why she was taken away from the discussion and it saddened Nicole to realize that her opinion was not welcomed.

"Nikki is very astute in the field of politics and I do appreciate her point of view," Jenkins continued, smiling at Barker. "I have had a number of private conversations with your wife and find the same is true. I know behind closed doors, you listen intently to what Louise has to say. Times are changing and we need to embrace that change if we are to be the party that represents all people."

Barker laughed. "You got me there." He raised his glass in a salute. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I see more people have arrived. You know where the bar is."

When Barker was out of earshot, Nicole gave Jenkins an appreciative glance, acknowledging him defending her.

"Thank you," she said.

"Are you feeling alright?" Jenkins inquired.

"Yes. Why?"

"I was expecting you to answer first." Jenkins smiled at her. "It's not like you to back down from a fight."

“I guess I’m not up for it this evening. My mind went back to a party a few weeks ago and how Louise led me away from a conversation when I started to voice my opinion.” Nicole gave a crooked frown with her lips. “I should choose my battles more carefully I suppose.”

“Just remember, your feistiness is what attracted me to you,” Jenkins said. Nicole smiled at him just as two senators’ wives walked up to her. Jenkins smiled back and excused himself, leaving Nicole as he was called over to join Barker and Senator Daniel Mercer, who were deep in conversation. “What happens to be on the minds of you two gentlemen?” Jenkins inquired as he joined them.

Senator Mercer was the first to speak. “Larry and I were wondering how the investigation into the assassination is going. Is there any chance that you’ll be able to make some kind of announcement in the coming weeks?”

“We are still investigating some leads. I’m not very comfortable with announcing anything until I have a few more facts confirmed.” Jenkins was stalling.

“The sooner we can put this behind us the better, Bobby,” Barker replied. “This is an election year and we need to focus on the congressional races and, of course, the White House. If there is some evidence that can help our chances, then we need to use that to our advantage. The party has to decide and put its collective weight behind a front-runner.”

“I understand your concerns. I want to have another look at where we stand before I commit one way or the other.” Jenkins’s mind was churning. The internal battle of whether to show Barker and Mercer the Sipes confession tape began again. He needed to sit down and determine the pros and cons of any action he would take. He needed to make this decision, but not without some careful thought and confirmation.

“Have you given anymore thought to our suggestion about declaring your candidacy?” Barker asked. “If there is an indication that some committee hearings on the assassination are needed, that would be a perfect avenue to show your leadership.”

“I have been considering it,” Jenkins answered. “I was thinking of throwing my hat in the ring if only for the experience of running a presidential campaign.”

“Good,” Barker said, turning to smile at Mercer. “I think we need to confirm your candidacy and quickly. The Iowa caucus is crucial and only twenty days away. I took the liberty of drawing up the necessary documents after our last discussion.”

“I think you need to call a press conference tomorrow, Bobby, to make it official,” Mercer added. “We’ll be happy to stand by your side.”

Jenkins swallowed. He understood the importance of the Iowa caucus, and he had led the press to believe he would officially declare after the holidays. He wasn’t sure he liked the fact that Barker

had taken liberties. He had not discussed a presidential run with Nicole and he wasn't sure what her reaction would be.

"I suppose the sooner the better," he said.

"Yes," Mercer responded. "Have Chris call the press together at one o'clock tomorrow. We'll announce on Capitol Hill." Jenkins smiled and nodded his agreement, making a mental note to call his aide, Chris, in the morning. Jenkins snatched a quick glance to see Nicole sitting at the fortune-teller's table. "...And you know that Nikki would make a wonderful first lady," Mercer finished.

Jenkins realized he hadn't heard a word Mercer had said. There was an awkward silence in the air when Jenkins turned his head to see both Barker and Mercer staring at him and on the verge of laughing. "I'm sorry gentlemen. I didn't hear what you said."

Barker took the initiative this time. "Daniel was commenting how Nikki would make a wonderful first lady."

Jenkins began to blush slightly as he again looked over in Nicole's direction. "I believe we are a bit far away from that happening. Excuse me, I'd like to get something to drink," Jenkins walked past Nicole on his way to the bar.

"This is Nikki," one woman said. "She says she doesn't believe in this stuff."

"I have many who don't believe at first," the fortune-teller answered, smiling at Nicole. She looked at the two women escorts and said, "If you will excuse us, I will do Nikki's reading now." The two women walked a short distance away. The fortune-teller looked at Nicole, smiled again and said, "You have a number of people here who want to talk to you."

Nicole gave a brief chuckle. "Really, I kind of doubt that."

"You have a lot of doubt, but you never used to be that way." The fortune-teller, who was more of a medium than a predictor of the future, picked up one of her tarot decks. She began to shuffle the cards. She set the deck down and picked up a pen and piece of paper. Reaching over she grabbed a business card and handed it to Nicole. "This has some information about me in case you ever want to get in touch with me again. What was your full name at birth?"

"Nicole Rae Charbonneau. Rae is spelled R-A-E." The fortune-teller asked her to spell her last name. She asked for Nicole's birthday. Nicole watched as the fortune-teller wrote down numbers and added them together. Nicole decided she was doing some kind of numerology.

"You are Hierophant, which is a counselor," The fortune-teller declared. "What do you do for a living?"

"Guess," Nicole answered snidely.

“I read cards and listen to my guides. I do not read minds,” The fortune-teller replied. Her tone was becoming a bit more serious.

“I’m a lawyer but not sure I want to go back to that profession,” Nicole answered, resigned to the fact that answering sarcastically would only prolong the experience.

The fortune-teller smiled. She picked up another deck and shuffled it. Returning to the first deck, she commented, “You have a number of people watching over you. Your parents are on the other side.” The fortune-teller was still shuffling the cards. “They are proud of what you have achieved and especially with something that has just occurred or ended?”

Nicole’s brow furrowed as she listened to the fortune-teller. “Did someone tell you what happened?”

“No. I’m just passing a message on to you. But your parents have passed some time ago. This was in some kind of accident.”

Nicole sat back. She scanned the room. No one in the room knew how Nicole’s parents had passed. “OK, I’ll give you that one.”

“Give me that one? I’m not sure I understand.”

“No one here knows how my parents died, or when for that matter.”

The fortune-teller smiled. She didn’t feel a need to convince Nicole that she was a true medium. She had her share of nonbelievers in the room this evening. She decided to move on with the reading. She removed the Hierophant card and laid it on the table that was between them. She covered the card with two cards. The Eight of Swords and the Two of Pentacles were now facing Nicole. “There is something to which you are blind. There is something of importance that is being kept from you.”

Nicole looked at the cards and then at the fortune-teller. “By who?”

The fortune-teller pulled the Two of Cups. “It’s someone close to you. It is someone who you have been with as a friend or a lover.”

“Considering I’m dating a senator, there are probably a lot of things he is keeping from me. As for my friends, my closest friend was killed. I don’t have many friends.”

The fortune-teller paused for a minute. “Carol wants to say hello.”

Nicole was shocked. She turned pale at the mention of her best friend’s name. “That’s not funny.”

“I didn’t intend it to be funny. She wanted to make sure that you knew she was here. She just spoke to me when you said you don’t have many friends.”

“Who told you about Carol?” Nicole demanded.

“No one told me.” The fortune-teller looked at Nicole. “Carol really wants you to know that she appreciated that you were by her side when she passed.” Nicole was still pale and in shock. “And she is laughing now because of the look on your face. I take it Carol was a bit of a prankster in life?”

“Yes, you might say that,” Nicole answered. “Is she okay?”

“She’s fine. You being there when she passed helped her. She felt your love for her. She is watching over you.” The fortune-teller placed the Four of Cups on the table. “You are to be given a gift.”

She pulled two more cards and laid them next to the Four of Cups. The first card was the Seven of Swords and the other was the Devil card. She watched Nicole as she started to retreat from the cards, both of which seemed ominous to Nicole. The fortune-teller put her fingers on the Seven of Swords.

“This card is indicating that there may be some kind of betrayal associated with the gift. The Devil card represents hopes and fears in either direction.”

“I don’t understand,” Nicole said leaning forward now. “Can you tell me what the gift is? Is it something bad?”

The fortune-teller shuffled the deck a few more times. She pulled the Hermit card and laid it on top of the other three cards. She took the Four of Cups and placed it directly below the Hermit card. “There will be a need for an investigation. During this investigation, you will see someone close to you in a different light. A side of him or her will be exposed.” The fortune-teller then drew two more cards from the deck. It was the Queen of Wands and followed by the Temperance card; she laid them on top of the spread.

“A lot depends on the decision that someone close to you needs to make. If this person decides in a way that you can’t abide by, you will need to escape. You’ll feel trapped and feel a need to get away.”

“You can’t tell me who this person is?” Nicole almost sounded desperate.

The fortune-teller sat for a minute concentrating and asking her guides for assistance. She shuffled the cards once more until she came upon the card she was directed to pull from the deck. She laid the card on the table. Nicole looked at the card and needed no explanation. She immediately stood and walked away from the table. The fortune-teller had placed the Lovers card on the table.