

B R U J O

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

HE MET CHRISTINE at a law school party. In a crowd of jeans and sweaters, her soft silk blouse and tweed skirt had an icy charm that hit him as he came through the door. Wavering between the cold green of her eyes and the heat of her auburn hair, he couldn't move for a couple of long seconds.

Class, he thought at last, but she's not for me. He pushed his way past her to the patio doors and a waiting beer keg.

He'd just been promoted off the night shift at the station, and he was ready to pick up his social life again, or at least to find the place he'd put it down nine months before. So when his friend Reynando had suggested the party, he'd agreed, not believing it would lead to anything.

Fall was early in Santa Fe this year. The night air was clear and cold and smelled like burning cedar logs. The junipers at the edge of the flagstones stood like sentinels against the wind.

Billy pulled his jacket a little closer and thought, this is a waste of time. I've lost any knack I ever had for getting along in a situation like this. These are not my people. They're all too liberal to snub me because I'm a Chicano, but they haven't really got anything to say to me, either.

He was working on a plausible excuse to go home when he felt a hand on his arm.

"Excuse me, are you Billy Trujillo?" Billy nodded to the cold green eyes.

"I'm Christine Perry. I was just talking to a friend of yours. He said you do the public affairs show at KESQ?"

"Uh-huh." The girl's hair was put up with silver combs. Instead of listening, Billy was thinking about what would happen if he pulled one of them out.

"I really don't know much about the Chicano community," she went on. "I've got a Chicano client at Legal Aid now, and I keep finding myself coming up against my own ignorance. Maybe we could talk sometime, and you could give me some insights."

It was not a clever variation on the old what's-it-like-to-be-Chicano line, but Billy was hypnotized by her high cheekbones and her fine white skin.

"Uh, sure," he mumbled, an inner voice telling him, you're blowing it, *pendejo*, do something.

"Okay, then," she said, starting to turn. His awkwardness was infecting her, and in another second she would be gone.

"Uh," Billy said, and she looked back at him. "How about right now?"

"What?" she asked, smiling.

"Right now. Let's go somewhere else, get a drink or something. And talk."

She brought her right hand up and rubbed her left shoulder. It made her look like she was trying to protect herself from something. Then, finally, her smile got a little bigger. "All right," she said.

HE KEPT HER UP past midnight at a little fajita place on Cerrillos Road, trying to get her to relax. He turned his bitterness about the station into jokes, telling her all the ways a Spanish language station kept up the racial stereotypes of low riders and Schlitz beer.

She had a hesitant laugh, as if she'd learned it out of a book and didn't quite know how it should sound. But she got the hang of it after a while, and when he dropped her off that night, she said she would see him again.

In the next two weeks they went to dinner a couple of times, once to a movie, and then Billy got up his nerve and took her dancing. That night, when he took her home, he kissed her for the first time. It was very light, and he pulled away quickly. After a second or two he realized she still hadn't gotten out of the car. So he kissed her again and took a bit more time with it.

When he finally stopped for breath, she said, "Why don't you take me home with you?"

CHRISTINE LOVED the house. It was nothing special, just the standard Santa Fe stucco, with the flat roof and the rounded corners and the fake timbers sticking out along the front. But she loved the sickly pink color and the picture window that turned the corner and the tiny patch of grass in back.

It was her idea to move in with him. "If we're going to spend every night together anyway, there's no point in my paying rent on another place."

They were lying on big pillows on the floor of the living room, Christine surrounded by loose-leaf study guides for the bar exam.

"How romantic," Billy said, smiling to show her how pleased he really was.

She shrugged, "Just a thought."

"No. Let's do it. Really." He picked up her hand from where it lay on the cushion and held on to it.

She nodded and went back to her reading, forgetting him as completely as if he'd disappeared. She had a bad habit of losing him that way. At the moment he couldn't have cared less. She wanted to live with him, and that was something real and meaningful. No matter how cold she was sometimes, no matter how many practical reasons she always found to explain what they'd become. A couple, he supposed, was the proper term. Lovers didn't seem to fit, exactly, though Billy still had hopes.

IT LASTED six months.

They seemed to go from casual dating to advanced marriage without ever going through the moonlight, flowers, and exotic underwear stage. Billy got home from the station around seven, and on Tuesdays and Thursdays Christine would have some sort of dinner ready. The rest of the week she had classes until late, and they would go out for hamburgers or pizza. In the evenings Billy would watch TV or read, and Christine would study.

Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday nights they made love.

She never discussed her feelings, never said she loved him, and it left Billy unsure about what he was feeling himself. He was still awed by her beauty, by the stylish clothes she wore, by her knowledge of classical music. In bed she

was passionate, sometimes playful or aggressive, but afterwards she turned over and went to sleep.

There were nights he lay beside her and dreamed of ways to break her down, to startle her or amuse her or overpower her into some kind of admission of love.

Nothing more than idle fantasies, really.

THEY GAVE HIM the afternoon salsa show at the station and dropped hints that he was in line for program director. But the cultural level of the programming was still about that of an episode of the *Cisco Kid*.

One Monday he sat in the production studio, putting the standard formulas on tape again for another boring dance (“*¡un baile fabuloso!*”) featuring some third rate singer “*¡y su conjunto fantastico!*” He wrapped it up with the traditional “*¡les esperamos,*” we’ll see you there, then kicked the echo all the way in and boosted the blaring accordion track up to ten.

He cued the cart up again, ran it through over the headphones, then labeled it and dropped it in the stack with the printed copy. He stared at the yellow fiber chunks that had been gouged out of the acoustical tiles on the wall for a while, then got up to look for a cup of coffee.

Reynando stopped him in the hallway. He had a man with him, wearing a suit the color of fresh milk. It matched the corona of hair that stood up across the back of the man’s head.

“Billy, this is Rene Castillo, you know, the anthropologist? He was in town and wanted to see the station.”

Why anybody would want to see a lot of outdated equipment jammed into a condemned building was more than Billy could understand, but he didn’t say so. He’d read a couple of Castillo’s books on Chicano culture and been mildly interested. He shook hands with Castillo and asked him for an interview.

“I’m sure we could work something out,” Castillo said. He glanced at his watch and added, “In fact, I was just about to go to lunch. Why don’t you come along, and we can talk about it.” Suddenly he gave Billy a long, searching look, and added, “That, and other things.”

CASTILLO TOOK HIM to La Plazuela, in La Fonda on the square. All through the meal he would suddenly look up at Billy and stare at him as if he were an X-ray plate on a lighted screen. People who took life with that kind of intensity usually moved Billy to sarcasm. He made an effort to be polite out of respect for Castillo’s work.

Finally he asked, “Why do you keep looking at me that way?”

Castillo didn’t answer. Instead he took a ring box out of his inside pocket and set it on the table. Inside was a lead-colored rock about the size of a large marble. It was bumpy and covered with what looked like fine gray hairs, and Billy suddenly realized what they were.

“Iron filings?” he said. “Some kind of magnet?”

Castillo nodded. “It’s a lodestone. It’s very powerful in *los encantamientos*. The witches, the *brujas*, would feed it iron filings to make it stronger.”

“Where did you get it?”

“From a *bruja*.”

“I thought all that had died out. I thought it was just something people made up when they didn’t like their neighbors. “

“Sometimes. But there are a lot of them who really believe they are sorcerers, and they get some amazing results. They’ll tell you all about their initiations, kissing the tail of a goat and the tongue of a snake, and all that. They’ll offer you potions to cure the sick, to make somebody fall in love with you, to bring harm to your enemies, anything.”

The whole discussion made Billy nervous. “How did you get involved in this?”

“It’s pretty fascinating, just on its own. But what got me started was the fact that these superstitions, and folk tales like the Crying Woman, seem to be about the only thing that Chicano communities across the Southwest all have in common. You can trace pieces of it back to the Toltecs and Yaquis, but you can also see where the Christian influence twisted everything around. You’d be surprised how much it’s a part of all of us, all Chicanos.”

“That figures.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’ve been trying to find some kind of really wonderful cultural heritage or something. Something noble and splendid. Not kissing goat’s tails and all that. I just don’t feel, I don’t know. Like a complete person or something.”

Castillo smiled at him. “Yes, I think I understand.” He took the lodestone out of the box, rolled it around in his fingers, then held it out toward Billy.

Billy looked down to see that his hand was reaching toward Castillo’s, without conscious thought. He started to pull away, then relaxed, letting his fingers come lightly to rest on the metal.

He’d expected something cold, but the stone was warm, felt almost alive, and a sensation of heat shot down Billy’s arm and spread across his chest. He jerked his hand away and felt the warmth spread across his face.

Castillo watched him with the intensity of a stalking cat. “You have the power,” he said.

“Oh, no,” Billy said, his hands pushing back against the edge of the table. “Don’t start on me with that kind of crap. I don’t believe in it. “

“You don’t want to believe in it.”

“Have it your way. But put that ... thing ... away.”

Castillo dropped it back in the ring box and slid it into his pocket, but refused to look away from Billy’s eyes. “It’s not a matter of training, you know,” Castillo said. “It’s a talent. Either you have it or you don’t, and you have as much of it as I’ve ever seen. The lodestone just focuses it, gives it form and direction. Like a voodoo doll, or any other prop.”

The mention of the voodoo doll made Billy wince inside. “You don’t understand. I don’t want it. I don’t want to know about it. Even if it was real, and I won’t even grant you that, I don’t want to know.” Billy was sweating and he could hear his pulse rattling against his eardrums.

“You may not have a choice,” Castillo said. “The *brujas* are a very jealous society. Where a religious man would see a convert, they see only a rival. “

“What does that have to do with me?”

“Just be careful,” Castillo said, “That’s all. Just be very careful. “

HE WAS NINE years old. The girl’s name was Cielita, “Little Heaven.” When she showed up at his grade school, halfway through the year, the boys all fought for her attention. Billy was shy, but he saw her watching him during class, and one day he walked her home. She let him hold her hand, which was soft and cool and made him uncomfortable because his own was hot and sticky. When they got to her house he tried to kiss her on the cheek, but she pulled away from him and smiled as she ran to the house.

One afternoon he showed her some of his magic tricks. She kept asking him questions like, “What’s that in your hand?” and wanting to see the wrong side of the special handkerchief. Finally, when he was finished, she said, “That’s not bad. But it’s not real magic.”

“What do you mean, real magic?”

“You know, spells, and like that.”

“That’s not real either.”

“It is so. My mother told me.”

Billy put his tricks in his paper bag and started for home. Cielita ran to catch up to him. “You’re not mad, are you?” she asked.

Billy shrugged.

“I really like you, you know. You’re my second-favorite boyfriend.”

“Who’s first?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do. You better tell me.”

“David.”

“David? David Fernandez? But he’s ... he’s real stupid.” Billy couldn’t believe she really liked David Fernandez. Suddenly he couldn’t stand to be around her any more, and he ran all the way home.

For the next week Billy watched his rival. David had long, greasy hair, combed back in a ducktail like the *pachucos* wore. One day, right before recess, David was combing his hair, leaving three or four greasy strands on top of his math paper. When Billy walked by on the way to the playground, he could still see it lying there. Without really thinking about it, he put a couple of pieces of it in his shirt pocket.

He didn’t know much about what Cielita called “real magic,” but he’d heard some things. He borrowed a little finger-sized doll from one of his sisters and tied David’s hair to it with a rubber band. Then he wrapped the doll in a piece of freezer paper and put it in the back of the refrigerator.

When David got sick, the teacher explained what pneumonia was, and they all signed a card to send to him in the hospital. Billy could feel Cielita’s eyes on him all afternoon, and he was so nervous that the teacher kept asking him if he had to go to the bathroom.

When he got home he took the doll out of the freezer and took it out to the big, rusty 50-gallon drum in the back yard where they burned their trash. He buried it in some old newspapers and threw in lit matches until the whole thing had burned or melted away.

Cielita refused to talk to him after David died. He tried to follow her home after school, but she would run away from him, making horns with her hands and shaking them at him. But whatever she believed, she kept it to herself. She was gone within a week, transferred to a parochial school, and nothing was ever said about David again.

When Billy asked his mother, she told him that there wasn't really such a thing as magic, that educated people didn't believe in it. Billy wanted very much to be an educated person. He gave his special handkerchief and cards to his brother Eduardo, and in time he almost stopped thinking about David too.

CHRISTINE JOINED a study group on Tuesday nights, and by the time she got home she was too tired to do anything but sleep. Before long the Thursday nights dropped off as well.

It showed Billy how little they knew about each other, and how little the relationship had behind it. He didn't know how to tell her that making love to her once a week wasn't enough. He didn't even know how to bring the subject up. So in the end he just accepted it, the way he'd always accepted everything about her.

In May she would take the bar exam. Billy tried to get her to define what was going to happen after that, but she refused to commit herself. Their future together went right up to the day of the exam and stopped.

The more insecure Billy got, the more he acted like a love-sick teenager. He saw himself doing it, and hated it, but he couldn't seem to stop. He would stare at himself in the mirror for minutes at a time, trying to see himself the way she did, trying to decide just how attractive he really was. He became compulsive about the smell of his armpits and the odor of his breath. He was obsessively curious about the letters she got, especially from other men. He tried touching her, even if it was only his shoe against hers, all the time, until even he could see how badly it was irritating her.

His talk show featuring Rene Castillo had been a big success, and the station gave Billy a "Chicano Heritage" series, broadcast every Sunday morning. It was Castillo, of course, who had made the idea of Chicano heritage turn sour for Billy, and the irony was not lost on him.

ONE SATURDAY AFTERNOON Billy went back to the bedroom to find Christine dressing to go out.

"Are we supposed to go somewhere?" he asked. "Did I forget something?"

Christine shook her head.

"But you look like you're going out."

"I am."

"Are you going to tell me where?"

She gave him a weary look. "I've started a crafts class. Didn't I tell you?"

"No. "

"Well, I'm telling you now."

"What kind of crafts?" Billy tried to sound like he was genuinely interested, not just cross-examining her, but he knew he wasn't pulling it off.

"You know. Macramé, pots, weaving. That kind of stuff. "

“Oh, yeah. The usual liberal routine.”

She turned on him. “Why are you always so hostile about liberals? If it hadn’t been for liberals, where would you be? Growing lettuce somewhere, probably.”

Billy retreated in hurt silence.

When she still wasn’t home by suppertime, Billy took a small, sadistic pleasure in cooking himself a chicken pot pie. Christine hated them and didn’t even know he still had one in the freezer.

She got back around eight and asked, “Have you eaten yet?”

“Yes,” Billy said, and waited for her to ask what he’d saved for her.

“Good,” she said. “We ran so late I decided to get a hamburger on the way home.” She disappeared into her study.

She was still there when Billy got undressed for bed. It’s over, Billy thought miserably. Why can’t I just admit it and let her go?

His answer was to torment himself with memories of how good it had been at the beginning. After an hour of it, when he had talked himself back into being in love with her, he heard the door open.

It was, after all, Saturday night.

Christine undressed in the dark, got into a nightgown, and lay down with her back to him. Billy touched her waist, afraid that his hand would start to tremble.

“Billy, please,” she said. “I’m really tired.”

He pulled his hand away and rolled onto his back. “Oh, Billy,” she said, turning to face him. “I’m sorry. This is really a bad time for me. With the bar coming up...”

“You’ve got time enough to take a craft class,” Billy said, surprised at himself.

“That’s different. That’s like ... therapy, sort of. It’s the only way I can get my mind off studying, by doing something with my hands.”

She made him feel like a selfish little boy. He had to hold himself back to keep from apologizing to her. Instead he said, “So how was it?”

“Interesting. The woman who teaches it is really strange. She’s an old Chicana, and I think she’s a witch or something. “

“How do you mean,” Billy said, “a witch?”

“She’s got all this creepy stuff in there in the shop, in a glass case. A snake’s tongue, a rock with hair on it ... what’s the matter?”

“I don’t know. That kind of stuff just bothers me.”

“I thought it was neat. Maybe you should put her on the radio.” She kissed his cheek and rolled away from him.

Billy lay awake for what seemed like hours, his leg muscles twisted up like somebody was trying to wring the life out of them.

THE NEXT MORNING Billy learned the woman’s name was Sandoval, and that her shop was in something called the Creation Compound on Canyon Road. That night Christine had to tell him again to be patient with her. He had known better than to make a pass on a Sunday, but desperation was making him reckless.

On Tuesday he drove down Canyon Road to the old woman's shop. The so-called compound was two stories of yellowish stucco, with no windows facing the road. Wooden steps went up to a deck that ran around the sides of the building and disappeared into a thicket of junipers in the back. He pulled into the parking lot and sat with the car in P A R K and the engine running for a minute or two. The jumpiness in his stomach finally made him drive away.

On Wednesday he went inside.

"YES, I KNOW who you are," the old woman said when Billy told her his name.

She wasn't at all what he expected. Her hair was blue-black and lacquered into a beehive. She was wearing a green double-knit pants suit and a good deal of make-up. If it hadn't been for her long delicate fingers and something cold in her eyes, she would have looked like a middle-class, overweight housewife.

"You know me?" Billy said, his voice sounding shrill.

"I listen to K E S O . I've heard you and wondered about you. Ever since your talk with Dr. Castillo. I see now I wasn't mistaken."

"Mistaken? About what?" Billy felt himself losing control of the conversation, the way he had with Castillo.

"You're a very interesting man, Mr. Trujillo. I can sense things about you. You seem to be trying to find something very important to you. But you don't even know where to look."

Avoiding the harsh intimacy of her stare, Billy turned to the glass case next to him.

The first thing he saw was a lodestone, this one the size of a fist. It was covered with metal shavings, needles, and small iron pellets. Next to it was a glass jar holding two small white ovals, and Billy saw with horror that they were the eyes of a cat.

"Why did you come here, Mr. Trujillo?"

"Nothing," Billy said. "No reason." His heart was thudding in his ears and he wanted to be away from there. "I was just driving by."

The woman smiled without warmth. "The real reason, Billy. Can I call you Billy? We both know why you're here, but I want you to say it. "

"I don't know what you're talking about. Listen, I have to go..."

"Wait," said the woman.

It was like taking 120 volts. He stopped where he was.

"Tell me," she said. "Tell me what you want."

Billy licked his lips. "I want ... I want to know."

"Better," she said. "Much better. Now what is it you want to know?"

"They say you're a *bruja*."

"And if I am?"

"I..."

"Say it."

"I want you to teach me."

Whatever had been holding him let go. He slumped against the counter and waited, his mind numb.

The old woman came around to him and took his face in her hands. Her fingertips were hot, and Billy felt like they were burning their prints into his cheeks. Her grip was strong, possessive, like a lover's grip, and he didn't have the emotional strength to pull out of it.

"Don't be frightened, Billy," she said. "You've only made it hard on yourself by waiting so long, but sooner or later it had to come to this. I can help you. I can teach you."

Her perfume smelled of dry sage and musk, and Billy was threatened sexually by her closeness. When she finally stepped back, his breath trailed out in a long sigh.

"Come back Thursday night," she said. "Eight o'clock. We'll begin then."

HE CAME AWAY drenched with sweat, wondering what he'd let himself in for. He went home and showered, then lay in bed until Christine came home and began making noises in the kitchen.

He dressed and stood in the hallway watching her. She was wearing a white terrycloth housedress and her hair was tied back with a green ribbon. She was absorbed in her work and didn't notice him for a long time. Finally she glanced quickly at him, then away again.

She seemed to stand for everything he'd ever wanted and couldn't have. He wondered if he'd ever really loved her at all, or whether it had always been the idea of her. The thought frightened him, and he said, "Christine..."

She turned to him, her hands clenching nervously at her apron. "Hello, Billy." Her glance moved around the room, lighting everywhere but on his face. "I've been wanting to talk to you." She cleared her throat. "I've been thinking..."

Billy felt a wild panic, a horrible icy hand inside of him, and he couldn't breathe.

She said, "It might be best for us if we—"

"No!" Billy said.

She stopped in the middle of the sentence. She stood completely still, as if she'd been quick-frozen, and her eyes had a dull and unfocused look.

He went over to her and put his arms around her, and as he did it, she thawed slightly, just enough to hold onto him. "Not yet," he whispered. Tears were filling up his eyes and he tried to hold them back. "Not yet. Not now."

She nodded into his shoulder. "All right," she said.

ON THURSDAY NIGHT Billy went back to the Creation Compound. The old woman took him into one of the pottery workshops and sat him down on the floor. She told him that red was the color of the north, white the color of the south, yellow the color of the east, and blue the color of the west. Red stood for blood, yellow for com, blue for sacrifice. She told him that the first world, the first sun, had been destroyed by an ocelot, the second by a wind, the third by a rain of fire, the fourth by flood.

After about forty minutes, she stopped. "Am I boring you?"

"Well, it's ... not what I expected."

"And what did you expect?"

“I don’t know. Something more, well, dramatic, I guess. “

She relaxed, leaning back and dropping her hands into the lap of her embroidered white shift. “I thought so. There’s something you want, isn’t there? Something in particular?”

“I just want to learn,” Billy said. “If I don’t learn what this power is that I’m supposed to have, I’ll always be afraid of it.”

She studied his face. “A woman, probably,” she said. He must have flinched, because she nodded and said, “I thought so. Who is she?”

Billy looked down at his knees. “Her name is Christine ... she’s in one of your craft classes...”

“Ah,” said the old woman. “The *gringa* with the red hair. You want her. You want to possess her utterly. You want to lose yourself in her, because she is everything that you are not.” She sneered at him. “Of course. Like some common wetback, you chase the white man’s dream. *Tonto*. Fool. How can you be so blind?”

“I love her,” Billy said, listening to how empty the words sounded.

“Love. What do you know about love?”

Billy was consumed with embarrassment and couldn’t answer her. The old woman began to laugh.

“All right,” she said. “All right. You want the *gringa*, and you shall have her. This Saturday I will take a piece of her hair, and she will be utterly yours, from that night on. And once you have had your wish, if you still want to learn about the power, you will come back to me. “

Billy didn’t know whether to thank her or try to talk her out of it. He had a sensation of being picked up by a current and carried away, of helplessness and surrender. He knew with sudden clarity what was about to happen, knew that he had been trying to bring himself to this moment since Castillo had first suggested the possibility to him.

She got up and stood behind him, stroking his hair while he sat and endured it, unable to move. Then she said, “Go away now. And when you’re ready ... I will see you again. “

SATURDAY NIGHT he fixed himself a sandwich for dinner and sat down to read, but he couldn’t keep his mind on the words. In the end he sat on the couch and waited for Christine to come home. When he heard her car in the garage, he started to get up, then sat down again, forcing himself to pick up the book and look casual.

“Hi,” she said as she passed through the living room, on her way to the study.

“Hi,” he said, his throat tight. “How was it?”

She shrugged. “Okay, I guess.” The door of the study closed behind her.

Over a couple of strong drinks he had it out with himself. What had happened? He had started to hope, just a little, for something he didn’t want to believe in, something that, if it turned out to be true, could turn his reasonably comfortable existence upside down.

He’d had enough discomfort. He’d been through his radical stage in college, and the most important thing it had taught him was that he wasn’t very good

at sacrifices. What he wanted was dignity and self-respect, and his life would be better off without sorcery or superstition.

And, probably, without Christine.

When he finally went to bed he almost had himself convinced. The drinks had relaxed him and he barely heard her come into the bedroom. There was a rustle of clothing, then she lay down next to him, careful to keep to her half of the bed. Bitterly, Billy turned his back on her.

She sighed, and her breathing evened out as if she'd fallen asleep. Then Billy felt her hand touch him on the ribs.

He shifted onto his back and she was there above him in the faint moonlight, eyes closed. She kissed him with a fierceness he'd never felt in her before.

The passion was contagious. He pulled her to him and felt her arms go around his back, her fingers digging into his shoulders.

It was over in a few moments, and Billy had barely gotten his breath back before she rolled over and seemed to fall into a deep sleep.

Billy had never been so exhausted. A small part of his mind was aware of the strangeness of it all, but his relief and fatigue were so strong that the thought was no more than a flicker as he fell down a long, black well of sleep.

He woke sometime in the night to Christine moving against him. He felt drugged, barely able to open his eyes, but his body was responding in spite of him.

"Christine?" he whispered. "Are you awake?"

She moaned and turned over suddenly, pulling him down onto her. She covered his mouth with hers before he could say anything else, and in another second all his words had left him. She got up afterwards, and Billy heard her padding toward the bathroom, but he was asleep before she got to the door.

He slept until noon and woke feeling dazed and fragile. He stumbled into the kitchen to find Christine making French toast.

"I was just about to wake you up," she said. "You were really out of it."

"You must have worn me out," he smiled.

"What do you mean?" Her expression was blank.

"You know," Billy said shyly. "Last night."

"What are you trying to say?"

"You mean you don't remember?"

"Billy, I promise you I have no idea what you're talking about." There was no flirtation in her eyes.

"I..." he started, then thought better of it. "Maybe I was just dreaming."

HE FELL ASLEEP on the sofa that afternoon while trying to watch TV. He felt too weak to do anything, even fix himself dinner. Christine was at the library most of the day, and when she came home she found him already in bed.

"Sick?" she asked.

Billy shook his head. "I don't know."

"Can I get you anything?"

"No, I'm okay. Just need to sleep. "

“Fine with me.” She put out the light, undressed, and got in bed next to him. He was barely conscious of her as she shifted around under the blanket and finally got comfortable. Then, just as he was about to drift off, she reached for him.

“No,” he said. “I really can’t...” But he could, and he did.

HE WAS TOO WEAK to go to work the next day. His stomach cramped all through the afternoon, and his muscles felt like they were being pounded with a hammer. He drifted in and out of a delirium in which he felt like he had something urgent to do, but he couldn’t focus his mind enough to know what it was.

When Christine got home she wanted to call a doctor, but Billy told her to wait. “Tomorrow,” he said. “If I don’t feel any better.”

Christine looked drawn and tired herself. Billy saw strands of gray among the red that he’d never noticed before, and the lines around her eyes seemed suddenly harsh. He found himself a little afraid of her, without knowing why.

As she got into bed he tried to roll away from her, but he was too weak. He heard her even breathing as she fell asleep, and then, with mounting dread, he heard her moving toward him.

“Christine?” he murmured. “Christine, are you awake?”

He felt the touch of her hand on his leg and tried to sit up, fumbling for the light at the side of the bed. It clicked on, blinding him, and he fell limply back onto his pillow.

Christine was on her side, her eyes closed, reaching for him with both arms.

“Christine? What are you doing?”

She tried to kiss him, but he pushed her away.

“Come on, say something. You’re scaring me.” He was dizzy, weak, and confused, and the sight of her was frightening instead of arousing.

Her only answer was a moan as she reached for him, one hand frantically rubbing against his chest, the other moving for his groin.

“Christine, for God’s sake! I don’t want it this way! Will you wake up?” He shook her and her eyelids rolled back.

He was staring into the empty whites of her eyes. “Jesus, Christine, stop it! I’m scared, I’m really scared!”

Christine’s mouth opened and a thin line of saliva ran down her chin. Then a voice spoke to him, not Christine’s voice, but the voice of the old woman at the shop.

“Too late, Billy,” the voice said. “You can’t resist me now.”

Billy jerked away, his skin itching in horror. “Oh, Jesus,” he said. “What are you ... what are you doing to me?”

Christine’s body writhed on the bed, but it was all wrong, the stiff spasms of a puppet. The girl’s personality was gone and it made her body seem monstrous, even deformed. A horrible laugh came out of the mouth.

Billy watched in revulsion as his hand, against his will, began to reach for the thing that had been Christine. I’m going to die, he realized. Like this. Scared and helpless and ashamed. And Christine, too, without even knowing what killed her.

He would not let it happen.

He pulled his hand away. It was like taking it out of the grip of a strong, angry man, but he did it and got up onto his knees.

“Billy. . .” the thing whispered.

“No,” Billy said. The room was tilting and seemed to be strobe-lit, but he kept his balance and got one leg, then the other, onto the floor. Slumping back against the wall, he grabbed the closet door handle for support and stood there, swaying.

“No,” he said again, and this time it came out a little stronger. He struggled into his jeans, still unable to tear his eyes away from the bed.

“Come back,” the thing whispered. It was sitting up now, stroking its thighs and breasts with clumsy, nerveless hands.

Billy put on a T-shirt and moccasins and started for the door. His knees buckled and his empty stomach spasmed, sending him face-down into the carpet.

He got onto his hands and knees and started to crawl.

The thing called his name again, and then Billy heard a gasp and the sound of a fist hitting flesh. The old woman was forcing Christine to batter herself with her own hands. Despite the anguished noises and the splitting pain in his head, Billy kept going, refusing to look back.

He made it to the hall, got to his feet, and staggered toward the garage. The pain wasn't easing off at all, but he had momentum, and it took him all the way to the car.

All he could think of was killing the old woman, making her pay for what she'd done to Christine.

He got the garage door open, started the car, and backed into the street. Even after he remembered to turn on the lights, he could barely see. His tires kept brushing against the curb and weaving out of his lane, but the streets were deserted and he got away with it.

It took him twenty minutes to get to the Creation Compound, skidding and jerking the car through stoplights, slowing to nothing when his eyes went out on him completely. It wasn't until he parked the car that it occurred to him that she might not even be there.

It didn't matter. If she wasn't in the shop he would break in and find out where she lived and go after her there.

He pulled himself up the stairs, hand over hand, using the metal railing. With one hand still on the railing and the other on the wall of the building, he worked his way around the corner and saw the light streaming from the old woman's shop.

The door was open and she stood inside, waiting for him.

“Hello, Billy,” she said. “You're making this very hard for me. I'm afraid I underestimated you.” She beckoned with one finger. “Come in and shut the door.”

He shambled in, his legs as stiff as a mannequin's, and stood in the doorway. She was leaning over the counter, wearing a loose cotton dress. Her hair was down and her face was scrubbed clean.

“It was so much easier,” she said, “to deal with you through the girl, to use your weakness against you. I had hoped it wouldn’t come to this.”

“Why?” Billy choked. “Why are you doing this to me?”

“Why?” The woman laughed. “Because you’re dangerous. What would happen to me once you learned to use your power? Were you really fool enough to think I would help you? I don’t want you. I don’t need you. “

She lifted one arm and the shop disappeared.

They were standing in a dry valley, surrounded by cactus and a clear blue sky. Halfway up a distant hill Billy could see three old farmers in strange, conical hats. He could feel the rough stones under his moccasins, the blistering heat of the sun.

“And now,” she said, “I’m going to kill you.”

Purple lines, like tiny lightning flashes, sparked in the air between them. Billy was suddenly, completely, overwhelmed with fear, as if he’d stepped through thin ice into freezing water.

The woman’s eyes burned like a mad dog’s. Billy was shaking with terror, knowing that something unbearable was going to happen, but not knowing what or how.

He dropped to his knees. For the second time that night he felt the closeness of death. And after she finished with him, what would happen to Christine?

He could feel the last of his strength seep out of him. Like a drowning man, he fought blindly to stay alive for another minute, another second. With all his strength he managed to push one knee forward, leaving a smooth trail in the dirt.

Dirt?

It was so hard to think, but he had to do it. Where had the dirt come from? He wasn’t in the desert. He was in a shop, a little craft shop, in Santa Fe.

He shut his eyes. He had to remember the store, try and see the details of it in his mind. He was kneeling on the carpet, in the middle of the floor. He had to believe that. Behind him was the door, and just to his right...

He lashed out with his fist, felt glass breaking and sudden, bright pain in his knuckles. He fought the hurt and searched with his fingers, trying to find something, anything, to use as a weapon.

His hand closed on something hard and warm, and he felt a surge like an electric current run down his arm.

The lodestone.

When he opened his eyes, he was back in the shop.

Splinters of glass from the broken cabinet littered the floor, and his hand was slick with blood. But strength from the stone was pouring into him, clearing his mind, washing away the pain.

He got to his feet. The lodestone began to glow a bright, freezing blue, and Billy turned to the old woman. Her eyes opened wide and fear crawled across her face.

Sparks flew in both directions now, and Billy’s hair stood on end. He thought about Christine, and called up all the hatred he’d felt on his way to the shop, and channeled it through the stone.

And suddenly it was over.

The woman's eyes rolled up and she began to convulse. The point of her tongue was caught between her teeth, and her arms dropped limply to her sides. She fell to the floor and began to whimper in a tiny, strangled voice.

Stroke, Billy thought. My God, she's had a stroke. Without thinking, he went to the phone and started to dial E M S , the gray stone still clutched in his hand. His finger slowed, then stopped.

What are you doing? he asked himself. This woman tried to kill you. Get out of here, now, while you can.

He put the phone down, looked at the old woman, and picked it up again. Then, furious with himself, he threw the receiver against the wall and ran into the night.

His tires squealed as he pulled out of the parking lot and he took the first corner at thirty. But in a few seconds his panic burned itself out, and by the time he crossed the river he was barely coasting. He turned onto Alameda Street, parked, and walked slowly back to the bridge.

The memory of the old woman, broken and dying, was still clawing at him. Guilt and fear and disgust swept over him, one after the other, until he finally shook them away. Cold, sweating, and exhausted, he watched the moonlight on the river for what seemed like nearly an hour.

The lodestone was still in his hand. It felt like it had always been there, that it was a part of him.

So, he asked himself. Now what?

He knew the answer. The answer was ... anything. Anything he wanted.

Christine, for one thing. With his power and the stone she would be his, and he could make it the way it had been in the beginning, only better. But only with his power and the stone, because without it he knew she would leave him.

He thought that over for a while, and then he threw the stone as high and hard as he could and watched it hit the river. No jets of steam shot out of the water, no strange lights rose into the sky. He heard the splash, saw a few ripples, and that was all.

He was enormously tired. Sleep, he thought. That's the first thing.

In the morning he would take it from there.