

Prologue

"Good night, Christine." Manya edged toward the office door. She felt the aching need for rest throughout her body. The hour-long meeting had transferred to this impromptu discussion with her friend and mentor, giving her a chance to vent her frustrations and check her assumptions. "Thanks for the talk. I really appreciate your insights."

"You're welcome," responded Christine with a kind smile. "My door is always open, as you know. I'm glad I could help."

Manya returned the smile and walked down the hall to the stairwell which would take her down two floors to the small area of the building devoted to Jewish Studies where her office was located. Manya taught a few history courses at Washington University, primarily as they related to ancient Mesopotamia and the more recent Middle East, but her primary responsibilities lay with the Jewish Studies department. Her office was in the bottom of Busch Hall, halfway down the basement hall.

Once Manya had gathered the belongings she would take home from her office, she locked the door behind her. She was obsessive about protecting her spaces. She strode confidently toward the staircase that would take her up to the first floor where she could exit the building toward Brookings Quadrangle. Her path would take her around the corner of January Hall and down the columned walkway along the side of Ridgley Hall. Outside it was already dark and cold--winter was almost upon them--and the route she chose to walk was well lit, giving off soothing warmth.

Manya neared the jutting edge of January Hall and gazed at Ridgley Hall before her. She had always admired the architecture of Ridgley, had always enjoyed walking past the row of arches of the Hall arcade, lit at night by hanging wrought iron fixtures. The sight calmed her, a boon that assuaged her rattled nerves.

It was indeed cold outside, and a wind momentarily whipped her jacket open, pushing the chill further into her. The sky was still clear. No snow was predicted in the seven-day forecast, but the first snow of the season had already come and gone. Manya tightened her coat and plodded on.

The door to January Hall flew open, and a figure jumped out in front of Manya, startling her. One of the students from a seminar she had taught.

After Manya recovered from the fright, she laughed. "Where are you off to in such a hurry?"

The face before her contorted and billowed, as if vapors rose in front of it, refracting the light. A harsh, barking laughter emanated from its mouth, a low and guttural sound, a prelude to sinister undertakings. "Sie werden behauptet."

Manya's heart dropped, and a chill ran up her spine, not precipitated by the weather. The voice that, in an unexpected language, claimed her was dark and raspy, surprising from the student before her. An abstruse foreboding overwhelmed her. Manya stepped backward in shock and prepared to swivel and run, but the figure was upon her and knocked her to the ground before she could execute the turn.

Razor-sharp claws gouged into her flesh, ripping and shredding her arms and chest. She opened her mouth to scream, but her throat was torn away before she could fill her lungs, and all she could manage was a pathetic gurgle. More ripping. Tearing. Slicing. She saw blood spattering the door to the hall and the column near where she lay

pinned. Tears rolled down her savaged cheeks, mingling with her blood and stinging the open wounds. She wondered how much longer she could remain conscious.

The figure breathed into her face, burning her with agony like acid. An alien presence wormed into her body, tormenting her from within as her body was reduced to tatters from without. The flesh along her arms and legs felt as if it was burning, frying and bubbling in hot flames. Her eyes no longer provided her with sight. All she could smell and taste was charred flesh and hot blood. Her ears were filled with a cacophony of maniacal cursing. She shrieked continuously within herself, but her anguish continued, unrelenting. Unforgiving.