

FIRE DANCE

CHAPTER ONE: CONCORDIA

1

Outside the adobe walls of the sanitarium the eerie, primordial beauty of the southern California desert went ignored by the wandering inmates.

No matter that it was April, the time when desert wildflowers blossomed, painting a landscape that contradicted the majority of opinions regarding the bleak, arid world of sand and scrub. The inmates of Concordia Sanitarium, in their white, shroud-like gowns, did not see the patches of magenta monkey flowers, the yellow blooms of the creosote bush or the burroweed. The fiery red tips of the ocotillo cactus remained invisible to them, and so too the purple-blue buds of the indigo bush.

Jacob Owen liked this time of year, and he took a moment to observe its subtleties, as a connoisseur would study a fine work of art. Once, he would have felt no differently than the rest of the inmates.

Once, he had been like them.

If not for Dr. Everett Cooke he might still be walking in their shrouds.

Good Dr. Cooke.

Twelve years ago: the spring of 1866, when Jacob had been admitted to the Connecticut State Hospital for what the doctors called *dementia praecox*. He had been twenty-six years old then. An incurable case, they said. He'll stay here, safe, and won't be a burden to anyone for the rest of his natural life.

The odds had been against him, Jacob now knew. Earlier in the nineteenth century, mental institutions had been torchbearers in reforms for treatment of the insane. But by 1866—and even now, in 1878—they had deteriorated into little more than custodial facilities for hiding an undesirable social problem.

But Dr. Everett Cooke could hardly be called a conventional practitioner. Indeed, he would have been quite at home during the ill-fated reform movement. In addition to his many duties at the hospital, he made Jacob his personal project. Within a year Cooke's peers were forced to acknowledge the fact that the funereal-looking Jacob had been restored to a "far more agreeable mental condition."

Ever since then, Jacob had served Dr. Cooke faithfully. He would have followed him anywhere, as he'd done to California ten years ago.

Dr. Cooke's first four years in California had been at the prestigious Livermore Sanitarium, up north. He had done fine things there, and had won the respect of his colleagues.

So in 1872, when his dream of becoming the medical supervisor of his own facility turned into reality, the Livermore administration provided him with excellent references. Concordia Sanitarium filled up quickly.

Lots of folks criticized its location, Jacob recalled. Such an odd place: the bleak desert across the mountains from the harbor town of San Diego. Miles off the stagecoach route between Los Angeles and Yuma, the same route that the Spanish explorer, Juan Bautista de Anza, had followed over a century ago when he opened the trail to California. But after the first couple of years, even the harshest critics had to admit that it seemed to be going well.

Standing two hundred yards from Concordia's walls, Jacob watched the dust cloud rising on the rutted trail that led to the facility. He expected Dr. Cooke back today after spending over a week in San Francisco. Jacob hoped this was him.

But soon the wagon appeared: not Dr. Cooke's fine coach, but the old prairie schooner, long ago stripped of its bows and canvas, driven by Tom Semple, returning from a mail run to the way station at Diablo Wash.

The young attendant waved and reined the tired-looking horses to a stop near Jacob. He never pushed the animals, Jacob knew; but while only April, the temperature had already reached the eighties, and it was bone-dry.

"Anything of interest?" Jacob asked.

The slow-talking Tom replied, "Letters, the usual things and...uh, and the shipment of...drugs we was expecting. You want...a ride back in?"

"Thank you, I feel like walking."

Tom left. Jacob turned, started back then stopped to again take in the breathtaking sweep of the surroundings.

Concordia Sanitarium stood at the northern end of a broad valley, ringed by impressive mountains. It had been built near a twisting creek that emerged from the mouth of a canyon. Thick, ten-foot-high adobe walls enclosed the two-story main building, which made it look like a fortress. The only way in or out was through a pair of massive wood doors set into a sculpted entryway. At the moment these doors, which faced the creek, stood open. Inmates walked around outside. Some knelt by the creek under a broad canvas canopy. Attendants kept close watch on their charges, diverting them from any painful cactus plants.

Jacob set off again. Twenty yards from the entrance a slight, gray-haired woman with a smooth, laughing face waved a butterfly net in the empty air. Three times, a glance into the net, then she would pirouette a few yards and repeat it. Near her, another old woman moved along the sand on all fours, stopping upon occasion to sniff, then dig a hole. The butterfly-chaser ignored Jacob; the dog-woman, tongue lolling, rose on her knees and waved frantically.

Two bearded men, similar in features and dress, panned for gold in the tributary. Once, there had been gold in Bighorn Creek, but most of it had been taken out years ago. The inmates—original forty-niners—were content to do this from morning till dusk.

Passing through the gate into the courtyard, Jacob thought of old *ranchos* he had seen in California. Much of the labor on the outer walls and building had been done by mission Indians employed on *ranchos* to the south, or from *asistencias* in the nearby mountains.

Many more patients resided here, mostly elderly. *Senile dementia*, where would we be without it? Dr. Cooke had once joked. Some wandered aimlessly; walking ghosts, Jacob mused as he stared at their pale gowns. Others sat cross-legged on the sand, motionless. A man with long white hair and intense eyes drew pails of water from a small well—the underground runoff of Bighorn Creek—and frantically poured the contents into barrels, often spilling some.

"Good work, Mr. Witherby," Jacob called, "good work."

A girl of fifteen or sixteen squatted by the front door. Her pale, dirt-streaked face was not unattractive, but her wide, haunted eyes were unsettling. A hand reached out for Jacob's pant leg.

"There, Sarah, you let me pass." Jacob gently removed her hand and patted her head. "That's a good girl."

Though U-shaped, neither of the building's two wings had been part of the original construction and were only a single story. They too were made of adobe, as well as pine from the mountain forests to the west. Adobe, cool in the summer, retained heat for the cold winter nights. The walls, flecked with straw that had been added to the mud plaster as a binder, were between three and four feet thick at their base. Heavy timbers supported the inner partitions and the flat roof, these solidly bound with rawhide thongs. There were many small windows along the first floor, each discreetly barred in such a way as to hardly be noticeable to an inmate looking out.

Jacob walked down the lengthy main corridor, its hardwood floor covered by a woven, floral-patterned floorcloth. Attractive tapestries hung on the walls, as well as candle sconces, widely spaced, each positioned just below the twelve-foot ceiling.

The doors of the patients' rooms lined the corridor. Each room was small, modestly appointed, but clean and comfortable. Some were occupied, most empty.

Caretakers encouraged patients to stay out of their rooms during the day. At the other end of the hall was a well-stocked library. No fiction; Dr. Cooke didn't want to confuse their minds further. Plenty of other things for the patients to do in the communal hall, which doubled as a dining room. Sometimes birthday parties went on there, or dances. Dr. Cooke believed those were good things for his patients.

A middle-aged woman stood rigidly against one wall. Every few seconds she thrust her head forward and made an odd mewling sound. Farther along, an obese man in his twenties rolled about on the floor, grinning like a Cheshire cat. Jacob stepped gingerly around him.

The clinic was located at the far end of the hallway. Dr. James Lassiter, young but weary looking, worked there, assisted by a nurse named Ellie Foster. Two of the six cots in the clinic held inmates with minor afflictions.

Jacob noticed that the heavy door on the far wall of the clinic stood slightly ajar. Tom Semple or someone must have gone down into the "dungeon."

The place where they kept *the thing*.

In addition to the proximity of Bighorn Creek, Dr. Everett Cooke's choice of location for the sanitarium had to do with an underground tunnel left over from the valley's brief gold rush. A miner had discovered a thin vein and assumed it to be part of the elusive Mother Lode. Time and the changing desert had reclaimed much of the shaft. But a single chamber remained, strongly shored up, accessible only through the door in the clinic and down a flight of wide stairs. Intractable patients were sometimes confined there, even shackled, until they had calmed down. Owing to the nature of Concordia's mostly senior inmates—and Dr. Cooke's *liberal* policy regarding the use of tranquilizers—the room had seldom been occupied.

This was where, over three months ago, they brought the thing called Bruno Leopold.

Jacob had always been uneasy about what went on below. Even during the past nine days, with Dr. Cooke away and most of the administrative concerns on his shoulders, he had left the work in the dungeon to Tom and Dr. Lassiter and the others. Not that he didn't feel curious about Cooke's progress...

In any case, it would all be over in a little more than a month, thank the Lord.

"Tom's already brought the new medicine to you?" Jacob asked the nurse.

Ellie Foster nodded. "He's an efficient young man."

"No sign of Dr. Cooke yet?" Lassiter asked.

"No. But there's still plenty of daylight left. He'll be here."

2

Forty minutes later Dr. Everett Cooke arrived at Concordia Sanitarium. This bleakest of outposts, according to so many, was home for him, and he always felt glad to return.

The days in and around San Francisco had been the closest thing to a vacation in years. Business and pleasure both, of course. "*Absence of occupation is not rest, a mind quite vacant is a mind distressed,*" William Cowper had said about a century ago. Some time at Livermore, where he was always welcome. But there had been the opera, theater, the shops and fine restaurants...the women.

Cooke's four-seat Concord coach, built by the Abbot-Downing Company in New Hampshire, was engulfed by inmates and staff as it pulled up in front of the building. The "good doctor" (they all called him that) greeted every one by name. There was a rakishness about him, the aura of a Mississippi riverboat gambler, more impish than menacing. Though forty, he looked younger. In spite of the heat he appeared comfortable in an expensive, high-buttoned frock coat.

Business: Cooke had brought back two new patients, a man in his sixties, a woman of nearly eighty. He had given them meprobamate, a mild tranquilizer, to help them through the trip. Attendants assisted the pair down; inmates surrounded them with benign curiosity. The newcomers looked bewildered.

The last passenger to step down from the coach was an attractive middle-aged woman, finely attired in a striped muslin day dress and carrying a lace-edged parasol. Mrs. Lucinda Blair stood among the social elite of Los Angeles. Six months earlier Lucinda had committed her mother, Elizabeth Cuddy, to Concordia Sanitarium. The poor woman, in her seventies, had been suffering from *senile dementia* for some time now and proved both an embarrassment and a burden to the family. Since becoming a patient, Mrs. Cuddy had not

been visited once by her daughter—not an uncommon situation, but one that had caused Lucinda some guilt of late.

Looking around disapprovingly, the woman said, “I’d like to freshen up before I see my mother. Please take me to my room.”

Cooke nodded. “Tom will see to your comfort.”

Tom Semple, straining with Lucinda’s heavy suitcase, led the woman around the back of the sanitarium to the facility’s only outbuilding, a small, seldom-used guest bungalow. Cooke watched them off, then turned.

Sarah squatted at his feet, looking up at him. Her body trembled as she struggled to smile. Slowly, she hiked the hem of her gown up over her knees.

“There, Sarah, that’s a good girl,” Jacob Owen said as he pulled the hand free and smoothed down the garment. “Why don’t you go with the others and make the new people feel at home?”

The girl moved away reluctantly, her eyes still on Cooke. The doctor nodded at his associate.

“Thank you, Jacob,” he said.

“Welcome home, Dr. Cooke.” Jacob always called him *Dr. Cooke*, despite their long acquaintance and closeness in age. “You had a good trip?”

“Yes, quite good. How did everything go here?”

“Fine, just fine.”

Dr. Everett Cooke was a sincere, conscientious crusader in the fight against mental illness. If he had a *fault*—one that he recognized and accepted—it was his above-average taste for the nice things in life. Although all his patients came from families that could afford the care, he limited the number to no more than fifty at a time, the reason why his fees were exorbitant. But this did not trouble him. Those families, like the Blairs, gladly paid handsomely for concealing their “problem.” So why not take advantage of it?

“Everything all right below, then?” Cooke asked.

“Dr. Lassiter says so,” Jacob replied.

Cooke smiled. “You still won’t go down, will you?”

“Not if I can help it.”

“Well, I’d like to make that my first matter of business, as soon as I’m settled in. Jacob, you’ll see to Mrs. Blair, won’t you? Tom is not exactly possessed of your, ah, social skills.”

“Yes, of course I will.”

3

The “dungeon”—Cooke hated the staff saying that—was dimly lit. From the top step, Cooke could barely make out the large form huddled against the back wall below. When he started down slowly, the shape moved.

They had brought Bruno Leopold there in a huge crate, wearing leg irons and handcuffs. Last year, in San Francisco, this son of immigrants had murdered his parents, a sister, an aunt, and a neighbor child, most brutally. He’d been sentenced to hang.

But Dr. Everett Cooke, aware of the young man’s severe mental deficiencies, had made a request of the authorities. He wanted to “study” Bruno, find out the causes of such a malady, possibly prevent or minimize future incidents. This kind of research stimulated the good doctor and made his caretaking chores with the other inmates more acceptable. Despite resistance, he’d won his argument. A stay of execution had been granted until after the middle of May.

And on his recent visit to San Francisco Cooke had again spoken to the authorities, telling them of Leopold’s progress and requesting more time for his work. They would be sending a letter to advise him of their decision, though Cooke felt certain the extension would be granted. Until the letter came, he would refrain from mentioning it to the staff.

The hulking man on the straw-littered floor was eighteen but looked older. His dusky, moon-shaped face stayed frozen in a perpetual scowl. Although of average height he was powerfully built, the thick arms and legs silently bragging of his strength. This immense power had enabled him to kill those five people with only his hands. Also, he had injured three policemen during his arrest; one would never walk again.

Leopold's seeming passivity as Cooke stood over him was due in part to the chlorpromazine, a powerful tranquilizer, which they'd given him from the beginning. But Cooke well knew that his daily dosage had been reduced, and the chains forged to the shackles around his wrists and ankles had been lengthened in proportion to his diminishing intractability. Dr. Lassiter had reported even more improvement during Cooke's absence.

"Hello, Bruno, how are you?" Cooke asked.

Bruno shaped his mouth in a grotesque smile, raised an arm weakly. "Go-od doctor," he said in a deep, slurred voice.

"Yes, it's me, and I'm going to spend more time with you, like before. Today I must see to all my other patients, but tomorrow will be yours. You understand, Bruno? Tomorrow."

"To-morrow," he repeated dully. Lassiter had reported just giving him the largest dose of chlorpromazine all day, which would immobilize him until morning. "To-morrow. Go-od doctorrr..."

"Sleep well, Bruno," Cooke said, and he left the dungeon.

4

Lucinda Blair barely responded as Jacob Owen, in his most cordial voice, pointed out the virtues of Concordia Sanitarium while leading her into the main building. Remembering how her mother had been toward the end, Lucinda was reluctant to see her. Mrs. Cuddy could become lost within herself, not recognizing members of her own family for hours at a time. That had been the most unnerving thing of all.

And here, all these pathetic creatures wandering around the courtyard, or the hallway. So unsettling, so...frightening. But she was a strong woman, and she'd sworn she would follow through.

Elizabeth Cuddy sat on a stool in her room, staring out the window, a vague smile on her face. Years before, she had been the matriarch of one of Los Angeles' most wealthy and influential families. Now...

"Hello, Mrs. Cuddy," Jacob said cheerfully. "Look who's here to see you."

"Mother?" Lucinda said.

The old woman turned slightly. There was no hint of recognition in her voice as she spoke: "I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then am I strong."

"Mother, it's me, it's Lucinda!"

"I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken."

"Oh please, Mother, can't you hear me?"

"If we suffer, we shall also reign with him."

Lucinda glanced helplessly at Jacob. "It's no use! She's just like before—"

"Lucy? Is it...Lucy?" The old woman's vague smile had faded; she stared at Lucinda, wide-eyed.

"Mother?"

"*Lucy! Oh dear God—!*"

They embraced, both sobbing. Jacob smiled broadly. For nearly a minute they clung to each other; then, Mrs. Cuddy's face again grew serenely blank. She pushed her daughter away.

"When ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any..."

Lucinda trembled. "I-I must get out of here!" she cried. "I'll come back; yes, I will, but—"

"...that your father also which is in heaven..."

"I must get out!"

"...may forgive you your trespasses."

"I'll go to my room *now!*" she told Jacob.

She ran out into the corridor, Jacob following. There seemed to be many more inmates than before. One of the prospectors from Bighorn Creek grinned a grin of brown rotted teeth. The young girl—Sarah—clutched at the bows on Lucinda's dress with both hands, her lips moving wordlessly. A couple of yards ahead, the obese man rolled along the carpet, his tongue protruding. On the left a tall, skeletal man with skin like parchment emerged from behind a door, stark naked.

Surrounding Lucinda, hands reaching, grabbing...

"Back away," Jacob told them gently. "Let Mrs. Blair pass."

Reaching, grabbing...

"I'll go to my room now!"

Pulling free of the inmates, Lucinda ran outside. Jacob found it hard to keep up with her.

5

Dr. Cooke's three personal rooms—bedroom, parlor, office—took up a portion of the second floor, where most of the staff resided. The first-floor door leading into a single stairwell was always kept locked; too much for a wandering inmate to get into upstairs. Cooke insisted upon this for their own good.

By the time night fell over Concordia Sanitarium, Cooke had spent at least a minute or two with each of the patients. Jacob informed him of the incident with Lucinda Blair and her mother. The good doctor took it upon himself to call on the distraught woman. He hosted her at dinner in the privacy of his parlor. By the time she went to bed that night, Lucinda had calmed down greatly.

#

Later, while making their final rounds, Cooke and Jacob Owen emerged from the clinic. Sarah had been squatting on the floor a couple of doors away. She duck-walked quickly, until she crouched at their feet. Gazing up expectantly, she pointed between her legs.

Cooke smiled. It *had* been a while... "Yes, all right," he said. "Jacob, please clean her up and bring her to me."

Sarah scampered joyously to her room, Jacob following. Ten minutes later, he brought the girl to Cooke's parlor. Scrubbed clean, Sarah's face was comely, though pale. Instead of the shroud-like garment she wore a white cotton dress, slightly tattered, which fit her well, showing off her curves, the swell of her young breasts. The dress was a hand-me-down from Ellie Foster, who at thirty-five had deemed herself too old to squeeze into that sort of thing. Her innocence delighted Cooke.

"Well, don't you look lovely," he said. "Thank you, Jacob."

The gaunt man left. Holding Sarah's hand, Cooke led her into the bedroom. The girl smiled; she loved being in his rooms. And this time, she felt sure, she'd get to stay until morning.

6

The next day, a Thursday, Jacob rode to the Diablo Wash way station to meet a Yuma-bound stage. On Friday either he or Tom would take Mrs. Blair to the station for the coach to Los Angeles. But that day, Jacob happily noticed before he left, the woman had recovered sufficiently to be spending time with her mother. They walked, arm in arm, outside the walls. Mrs. Cuddy's periods of lucidness seemed longer, and even when she was "not quite herself," Lucinda seemed better able to deal with it. This, Jacob thought, was what Dr. Cooke should be most proud of, *not* what he did down in...

That Thursday was special for another reason. Dear Mrs. Virginia McLeod celebrated a birthday, her seventy-first. The staff had even managed to make her aware of it, although it required constant reminding to keep the woman excited about her party, which would, Jacob had informed everyone, begin at eight o'clock.

#

Sarah was excited about the birthday party all day. She would wear the white dress again, the one *he* had liked so much. And maybe he would dance with her.

Dance with her.

Late in the afternoon Sarah stood along the edge of Bighorn Creek, a few yards from the prospectors. There were no mirrors on the first floor, and she wanted to look at herself in the water. She stood tall by the bank, swaying gracefully, dancing to music only she could hear.

#

Tom Semple oversaw the patients outside the walls. He didn't mind the duty, even though the temperature hovered near ninety. In another couple of months there would be days in excess of 120°. That often kept the inmates quieter than the tranquilizers did. As usual the air was bone-dry, more so because of the sparse rain all year. Bighorn Creek flowed sluggishly out of the canyon at about half its normal width.

Tom had been watching Sarah by the creek and realized that he had never seen her stand so straight. Nor did the heat seem to bother her, he also noted, for what she saw in the water plainly entranced her.

Jacob Owen thought that Hiram Tickner was an amazing man. Most of the time he would recline in the courtyard, staring blankly. But sit him down at the piano in the communal hall, whisper "*Mozart's Divertimento No. 7 in D Major*" or "*Schubert's Impromptu, Op. 142, No. 3,*" and there would be lovely music for as long as one cared to listen.

Shortly after eight Mr. Tickner furiously pounded out the *rondo alla turca* from Mozart's *Piano Sonata No. 11*, not something to which you could dance. Most of the inmates and staff attended. Lucinda Blair had come with Mrs. Cuddy, although the presence of so many shrouded figures had heightened the younger woman's anxiety. Tables and chairs had been pushed back against the walls. Tom Semple stood guard over Mrs. McLeod's birthday cake, which had three large candles stuck in the chocolate icing. Tom also oversaw the dispensing of punch and other sweets.

Lucinda had again been invited to dinner by Dr. Cooke. By eight-fifteen, when he had not yet made an appearance, she mentioned it to Jacob, who told her that he would go and find him.

"Please, I'd like to go with you," Lucinda said hastily.

Promising her mother—who did not hear her—that she would be back, Lucinda followed Jacob out of the communal hall. They checked first in Cooke's quarters, then the clinic, where Ellie Foster worked.

"He's downstairs, where else?" the nurse said.

Jacob nodded. "I should have guessed. But so late?"

"That's what I told him—an hour ago. Uh, Jacob, would you like me to get him?"

He sighed deeply. "No, I'll go down. Mrs. Blair, please wait here."

Slowly descending the dozen wide steps, Jacob froze halfway. He could not believe what he saw. Dr. Cooke sat cross-legged on the straw, inches from Bruno Leopold, who had assumed a similar position as best he could with the burden of chains, his body animated with short, jerky movements.

"Dr. Cooke, are...you all right?" Jacob asked.

Cooke glanced up. "Ah, Jacob. Come here; don't be afraid."

The gaunt man continued down, pausing on the bottom step. He would go no farther. Cooke always left his keys hanging by the door; but Jacob had a full set clipped to his belt.

"Bruno, this is Jacob," the doctor said.

Leopold's scowl made Jacob uneasy. "Ja-cob," he repeated.

Jacob glanced at Cooke. "You have him heavily drugged."

"He's just taken his medicine. But *heavily*? His dosage is almost half of what it was when we first started with him."

"Astonishing," Jacob said. "He's given you no trouble?"

"There were moments, especially at first, but he's progressing nicely. I'm pleased that you finally decided to come down."

"I just came to say that Mrs. Blair is waiting to have dinner with you, and Mrs. McLeod's party has begun."

"Oh damn, is it that late?" He looked at his pocket watch. "Time to sleep now, Bruno."

The man's eyes sagged under a beetled brow. Cooke leaned forward and patted his shoulder. Jacob tensed. "Go-od doctor," Bruno said, then curled up on a straw mat.

"Yes, my friend," Cooke said, "one day we'll take off your chains. And if you've worked hard, who knows? Perhaps upstairs with the other patients, out in the sunshine?"

Bruno rocked ecstatically on his mat. Jacob was stunned. Why would Dr. Cooke say that? In another month, Bruno Leopold would be returned to San Francisco and hanged for his crimes.

"Good times ahead," Cooke went on. "Now then, Mrs. Blair. Jacob, will you stay with Bruno until he's asleep? As you can see, he's quite excited."

"All right," Jacob replied vaguely. "Dr. Cooke—?"

He looked at his watch again and started up the stairs. "We'll talk later, Jacob."

Sarah didn't like it when so many people were in one place, especially when none of them was Dr. Cooke.

The party was not a prison; patients could still walk around. Sarah had left after Jacob and now stood in her room, just inside the open doorway. The good doctor would have to pass this way.

She would go back to the party on his arm.

#

Lucinda Blair waited alone in the clinic, Ellie Foster having gone on to the party. Cooke smiled sheepishly.

"I'm sorry; I lost all track of time," he said.

"I understand, Doctor. Having been exposed to some of your wonderful work, I can imagine how busy you are."

"If you don't mind waiting, I can make myself presentable."

"You look fine. Besides, we should dine quickly. The others are so anticipating your presence at the party."

He extended his arm. "Shall we, then?"

#

The skinny man—Jacob—kept his distance, but Bruno didn't care. As the chlorpromazine calmed him more, making his eyelids heavy, he thought about the day.

He thought about *Good Dr. Cooke*.

Bruno wasn't going back. The good doctor was keeping him here. One day he would go upstairs, and he would have friends. Not going back, not back, because they would kill him for what he had done, and Bruno didn't want to die.

Didn't want to die.

Good Dr. Cooke, good doctor...

Not go back, not back.

...didn't want to die.

Hiram Tickner played a lovely rendition of Beethoven's *Für Elise*. The melody stirred a lost memory in Mrs. Virginia McLeod, from a time when she and her husband, dead these many years, had been king and queen of the dance floor. Now she was in his arms again, swaying rapturously with the grace of a woman four decades younger.

The skeleton man bumped into Mrs. McLeod and broke her magic spell. He moved about the floor, stepping high, raising each bony leg in turn. Mr. Witherby, the water bearer, and one of the bowlegged prospectors also moved to the bagatelle. The prospector nearly stumbled over the dog-woman, who appeared agitated by the activity as she weaved between the others on all fours.

Despite the urgings of the Concordia staff, most of the inmates remained off the dance floor.

#

When she heard Dr. Cooke's voice in the corridor, Sarah started out of her room.

Then, she heard the woman.

Peering out cautiously, Sarah saw Cooke and Lucinda Blair smiling at each other. *Smiling*. They went into the stairwell; she heard a click as Cooke locked the door.

Tears streaming, Sarah staggered along the corridor. With each step she regressed into the posture of her madness, until she squatted in front of the stairwell door. Looking up, she opened her mouth in a silent cry and began hammering a fist at the air, over and over, over and over.

Bruno's body lay still. He was turned away from the wall, a twisted smile visible in the cellar's dim light. "Pleasant dreams," Jacob Owen uttered.

Pleasant dreams, good dreams, Bruno's brain thought. *Good doctor...*

His breathing was heavy, guttural, as it usually sounded in sleep. "You won't be smiling next month, you poor bastard, when they put the rope around your neck," Jacob said softly. "Christ, why is Dr. Cooke dealing in such a lie?"

Good dreams, good doctor...

Rope.

Next month...poor bastard.

Good doctor, good...lie.

Around your neck.

Lie, Dr. Cooke lied.

Didn't want to die.

Bruno was gasping for air, choking. Jacob, on the stairs, turned to see him thrashing. No time to call anyone. He ran to the supine figure, whose jaw had clamped shut. Fearing that the man had swallowed his tongue, he knelt and tried to pry his mouth open.

"Bruno, what—?" he began.

Massive hands encircled his throat. Fighting through the strong drug, Bruno strangled Jacob, ending his resistance by snapping his neck. Standing now, still holding Jacob, Bruno pulled the keys off his belt then flung the corpse to the floor.

Find the right key; fit the key in the hole. Bruno was not good at this. But he...

Didn't want to die.

...so he kept at it, still shaking off the haze, drawing strength from having killed again with his hands. Luckily, one key fit all the brackets. He cast the irons across the dungeon.

Dr. Cooke...good doctor.

Lie.

Around your neck...poor bastard.

Lie lie lie.

Bruno Leopold started up the steps.

The bagatelle had flowed into a Chopin waltz. Other inmates were on the dance floor now, twenty-five or so, half the census of Concordia Sanitarium. Dr. James Lassiter knew how much they wanted to get at the birthday cake for dear Mrs. McLeod, but he wouldn't allow it until later, when Dr. Cooke appeared.

So he and the attendants exhorted, cajoled, led them onto the floor, and the number grew to thirty, then thirty-five. The fat man crawled to the center, his tongue lolling in time to the music, like an obscene metronome. They formed a circle around him, no two dancing together, not touching, other than an accidental bump. Around and around, a slow, hypnotic caucus-race out of the same impossible tale that had bred the Cheshire cat.

Around and around...

#

Sarah was still hammering at the air when Bruno loomed over her. "Dr. Cooke?" he grunted.

The girl glanced at him then pointed at the door, thrusting her arm forward and back. He tried the door, hunted for the right key, found it quickly. Pushing Sarah aside, he started up.

Recovering, Sarah scampered into the stairwell ahead of him. She knew, after all, where Dr. Cooke would be, and this man did not. Seeming to understand this, Bruno followed her.

They were at his quarters. Another key let them into his office. Holding a finger to her lips, Sarah glided across the room, past the doctor's exquisite, tambour-front William IV desk, to the parlor door. Bruno moved less stealthily.

Cooke and Lucinda were helping themselves to the still-warm food under the lids of sterling silver platters when Bruno threw the door open. He was on them swiftly, a hand around Lucinda's throat cutting off her scream.

"What are you doing?" Cooke exclaimed. "How—!"

Bruno drove a balled fist into the doctor's face; Cooke spat out blood and broken teeth. Before drifting into a thick haze his eyes fell upon Sarah. She had leaped, catlike, onto a Chippendale window bench and now grinned as she silently exhorted Bruno on with her twisting body.

The squirming woman annoyed him. Bruno snapped her neck and dropped her down on the table. But the *good doctor*, what to do with the *good doctor*? He deserved more, more, because he had...

Lied.

What to do! The *medicine*...still inside, and even without it his brain did not work so quickly, because he was not like everyone else, and he couldn't think, *couldn't think*...

Throwing the limp Cooke over his shoulder, he hurried downstairs. He heard a piano from somewhere, but the corridor was empty. Nor was the bent creature, who had shown the way up, with him anymore. He still had no idea what to do. But quick, it had to be *quick*. Couldn't stay much longer.

Didn't want to die.

The dark place. Instinct sent him back to the dark place in the ground. In the clinic he found the prybar, claw hammer and pliers that Tom Semple had used to add the links in his chains. *Chains*. Although not sure why, he grabbed the tools, carrying them and Dr. Cooke down into the dungeon, closing the heavy door.

Chains, he thought again. He hated the chains.

When Dr. Cooke regained consciousness a minute later, he found himself chained to the wall.

Bruno Leopold's face was two inches from his. "You lied."

Cooke stared in horror at Jacob Owen's body. "I—don't know what you mean, Bruno. Why do you say I lied?"

"You send me back...they hang me."

"Bruno, that's not true!" Cooke exclaimed. "You—!"

"Didn't want to die!"

"Bruno, you weren't going to—!"

"Lies lies lies!"

A hand encircled Cooke's throat and squeezed. Eyes bulging, mouth agape, the medical supervisor of Concordia Sanitarium silently pleaded for his life.

Bruno's other hand closed upon the pair of pliers. Clamping down tightly, he pulled Dr. Cooke's tongue out of his head.

Sarah wanted to follow the man downstairs, to see what he would do with Dr. Cooke. But she held back because of...

The woman.

The outsider, who had smiled at her earlier and had been so nice. Probably laughing at her all the time; *laughing*.

Jumping off the window bench, Sarah squatted by the table and hammered Lucinda Blair's corpse with a fist. Over and over, feeling no satisfaction. It wasn't hurting the woman, wasn't making her cry out.

An ornate, brass-based peg lamp burned on a satinwood server. Sarah picked it up, held it over the table, tilted it slightly so that some of the kerosene spattered on the body. The Tam O'Shanter shade began sliding out of its holder. Grabbing it, she burned her hand. The lamp fell as she staggered back.

Flames consumed the linen-covered table in seconds, Lucinda's body sitting atop the pyre like an honored Valkyrie. Sarah cowered by the wall, terrified, but also fascinated by what she had caused.

Drapes took the flames; now their spread was beyond control. Furniture, tapestries, walls ignited in the tinder-dryness, the roar like that of a long-confined dragon set free to belch its deadly breath. Dr. Cooke's exquisite Persian rug carried the flames to Sarah, who tried to move, but not quickly enough. Her dress was set ablaze; her efforts to swat it out proved futile.

Mouth open in a silent scream, Sarah waded across the sea of fire to the door. Flames pursued her through Dr. Cooke's office, engulfing all patient records and his fine collection of books. Down the stairwell, exploding into the corridor moments after she staggered away, nearly blind now, the dress burned off, hair and flesh carrying the destruction. Lurching into one wall, another, flames consuming the floorcloth and hardwood, the tapestries, these in turn igniting the dry walls of the sanitarium.

The shrouded caucus-race was circling the communal hall to a mazurka from Delibes' *Coppelia* when the blackened, flaming thing that had been Sarah burst in. Before Dr. Lassiter could turn she leaped on his back, the crisping flesh from her grasping hands adhering to his white lab coat. He screamed, tried to shake her off, could not.

A few inmates followed the attendants into the corridor, but most remained in the caucus-race, oblivious to the fire spreading through the hall. Hiram Tickner did not get up from the piano, although his music now was a single, atonal chord struck over and over, loud enough to be heard above the crackle of flames. This did not put the dancers off balance.

Only one way out. Ellie Foster, Tom Semple and the staff tried to reach the front door, but the hallway had become a tunnel through Hell. Adobe melted, flowing like lava; windows imploded.

Dr. James Lassiter's flesh became one with the charred creature on his back.

Old Mr. Witherby, the water bearer, poured invisible buckets onto the flames.

The caucus-race continued on to the tune of the discordant note.

13

Dr. Cooke had lost consciousness. *Water*, Bruno's dull mind remembered, *if you splashed water...*

Bruno wanted the good doctor awake when he killed him with his hands.

No more water here, but maybe in the clinic. He hurried up the stairs.

When he opened the door, a loud jet of flame threw him down. Intense heat filled the chamber; the matted straw caught, along with the bone-dry timbers that shored up the old shaft.

Dr. Everett Cooke, coughing thick gobs of blood, was incinerated in his shackles.

Bruno Leopold's death was longer and more painful, and even when half his body had been burned away he continued to crawl toward the steps, although for the most part those steps no longer existed, but he had to keep going, because he...

Didn't want to die.

#

A few days later, a letter for Dr. Cooke arrived at the Diablo Wash way station. It came from the authorities in San Francisco, granting him an indefinite extension for his work with Bruno Leopold, the convicted murderer.

Eventually George Tucker, the stationmaster, returned the letter to its sender, along with the rest of the mail and other things that could no longer be delivered to Concordia Sanitarium.