

ABITHICA

By Susan Goldsmith

Twilight Times Books
Kingsport Tennessee

Susan Goldsmith

Abithica

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Twilight Times Books
P O Box 3340
Kingsport TN 37664
<http://twilighttimesbooks.com/>

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Chapter 1

Gillie's Restaurant, Tucson, Arizona

God always seemed to be a joker where I was concerned, saving up special kinds of humor just for me. He'd wait until I was in a state of turmoil, then up the ante with no warning at all. This time the joke was mackerel!

He might at least have let me figure out who I was going to be before dumping water on me, or sticking me on a plane going who knew where, or placing me at some party where I didn't know a soul including my new self, but no. I didn't even know what I *was*, for goodness sakes, forget the *who* part, or when I'd be yanked out of one host body and stuffed into another. Wouldn't that have been entertaining enough? I mean, if you happened to be God?

Mackerel! I was actually chewing the disgusting stuff, oily taste and all, without so much as a whisper of warning.

Unfortunately, whenever I changed bodies it was my sight that woke up first, followed by smell and taste, so not only was I aware of what I was chewing, I could also see it. Or rather, my *host* could see and taste it. I was along for the ride. There it was, on a shiny plate with asparagus spears and a mound of fluffy mashed potatoes and the rest of whatever else I'd been eating. An ignored slice of lemon perched with some wilted parsley on the plate's rim. In a blink, I added a neat little blob of white stuff in the center. I spit again but failed to get rid of the fishy taste.

Ah... hell! Was that God laughing, there in the background? He'd have an encore, of course, something else to throw my way while I was still trying to get my wits about me. This time it arrived as a woman's voice.

"Sydney?"

I froze, refusing to look in that direction. Actually I couldn't have looked even if I'd wanted to. My essence hadn't had time to mesh with the new host. Any attempted movement prior to proper locking-in would make someone having a seizure look calm by comparison. Don't panic, I thought, the woman probably wasn't referring to me anyway.

"Sydney?"

Uh, oh—wrong! It seemed I was now going to become this Sydney person, whoever she—or he—might be. My reflexes kicked in as they always did after a switch, a kind of panicky emotion which thoroughly annoyed me because emotions of any kind were a no-no when switching. I flat out couldn't handle them, especially panic. Even thinking about the consequences could do it, but not thinking about them was... well... next to impossible. No sooner did I tell myself what I ought not to be thinking about then, whoops, I remembered what I was—or thought I was—or at least appeared to be, some sort of parasite. That was as close as I'd ever come to it. I'd even looked up the meaning: An organism that grows and feeds and lives on or in some other organism. That was me all right.

Giving up wasn't an option or I'd have done that a few dozen times over... I think. Unfortunately, thinking of anything I was trying not to think about shifted my thoughts to other things I also shouldn't be thinking about, confusing things—like what had just happened moments before I'd switched into this body.

Claire was my previous host. Thanks to a little help from me, she and estranged husband Tom had patched things up between them, and he'd kissed her. Boy, had he kissed her! Their passion reached right across my insulating barrier and ignited me like an electric shock. It was *me* kissing Tom, *me* reaching up and grabbing his hair, *me* pulling him closer and begging for more. I would have done anything for it to be me he loved like that, not Claire. Unfortunately, parasite wishes never come true. They only make things worse.

Don't get attached, ever. That was "The Rule" that kept me sane, and I'd just shattered it. Sure enough, there they were, more no-no's – lust, jealousy, embarrassment, confusion – all at the same time, with mackerel for good measure!

Instead of my new host's body responding to simple commands, something short-circuited. My arms and hands were first to go, smashing down on the table like dead weights. A salad plate, silverware, and butter dish went flying, along with an uneaten roll and everything in my water glass. Great! Sydney was no longer in the picture, but then neither was I, except maybe for my new head – which I seriously wished was my old head – but a little more of God's humor surfaced, and said head started bobbling backward. I compensated, but only managed to plunge forward, bulldozing asparagus and mashed potatoes into the small lake soaking into the tablecloth in front of my plate. My cheek ended up corralling the slippery mackerel up onto the plate's rim.

Don't think. Focus. Where on earth were my head-lifting muscles? They had to be in there somewhere, but I needed at least a few seconds without any distractions to sort it all out. No such luck.

"Sydney, honey, trying to embarrass me isn't going to work. It didn't work in the past and it's certainly not going to work now." The woman's voice drifted away for a moment. Who was she talking to? "No, it's okay. She's fine. She's just mad at me, that's all."

I was tempted to point out that fine people didn't clean their plates with their face, but ended up trying to apologize instead.

"Woofkt!"

Stupid, stupid, stupid! How many times does it take for you to learn that you can only move one limb at a time right after a switch? Your mouth feels all messed up, like it belongs to a guppy, yet there you are trying to figure out how to raise your head and talk at the same time. Just leave your head where it is and focus on talking. Pretend you fainted and say something short, like "Did I just faint?" Concentrate! You can do it.

“Gluhrrr?”

Oh, that was truly amazing. What an improvement!

“Why is your face still in your food? You got what you wanted. People are staring. Sydney? Are you even listening to me?” The voice from across the table was a little more insistent now. Her next words were whispered and sounded almost giggly. “Fine, I get to play, too then!”

This woman, she was confusing me in an already ultra-confusing situation. Was she for real, or had God tossed her in for the fun of it?

“Darling, our nice waiter would like to know if he can take your plate.” Right on top of that, some other woman’s voice scornfully commented that she’d seen *children* better behaved. I latched onto what her words meant (with a lot of effort) instead of how they made me feel. Did that mean that I was an adult Sydney with my face in my food, not a child Sydney? If so, how could the one calling me Sydney in the first place sound so... so nonchalant about the mess I’d just made? I had to assume she was sitting with me for a reason, but what in the heck was I supposed to do with her?

I couldn’t lift my head yet, so I just lay there with mashed potatoes halfway up my nose. God, how I missed Claire!

“Sydney, did you hear me? The nice waiter wants to—”

“Need time.” I burbled into my plate, cutting her off.

“You’re saying you need more...?” There was a short pause. “She’s not finished. We’ll let you know.” Was she talking to the waiter? It didn’t matter. At least my mackerel mess had produced a little information without my doing anything *really* foolish: Sydney was an adult “she” with a history of bad behavior.

Restaurant noises suddenly switched back on, as if everyone in the place had been holding their breath until that point. Unfortunately, I’d never know what spectacle might have preceded my grand appearance, but my dinner companion had said I was mad at her. I waited for a few more revealing words,

but she'd either snuck away or was sitting there pretending she didn't know me. She'd be wearing an expression that said it all, something like "Honestly, I have no idea where this Sydney person came from or why she's sitting at my table with her nose in her potatoes...."

I opened one eye briefly, but could see no more than a blur of other diners. Suddenly my tablemate was back, only now much closer, more conspiratorial.

"Well, young lady, that went much better than I'd hoped." I decided it was best to keep my one eye closed. The other one was keeping tabs on the fish. "Steven will be pleased as punch. It was his idea to give you the news someplace crowded, like it is here in Gillie's. He thought, you know, that having all these people around would keep you from throwing things or screaming. I *was* a little concerned that you'd do something rash, especially after how angry you seemed when you first walked in, but this, I must say, is all a most pleasant surprise!"

My mackerel-mashing antic a pleasant surprise? I didn't think it possible, but I was now even more confused.

The first thing I saw when I finally managed to raise my head and look straight ahead was a pair of red-covered elbows resting in the drenched part of our tablecloth. They were already soaked, not that their owner even noticed. She was yapping away as if nothing unusual had happened at all, thoroughly enjoying herself. The wet red elbows belonged to a tailored suit with frilly white blouse sleeves that puffed out around her wrists. They were wet, too. I sensed long, black hair and a tiny frame, not actually seeing anything in detail, but the rest of her could wait while I concentrated.

My arms suddenly seemed connected to my brain, so I experimented by moving one hand forward on the table, preparing to push myself back to vertical. That was when I saw the back of my left hand. The woman in red saw it, too. "What in the world have you done to yourself, Sydney? What *is* that thing on your hand, some sort of animal head?"

What, indeed! Upside down, it didn't look much like an animal. Maybe those were horns sticking out of a long head and ears sticking out sideways, but there was no sense babbling any more than I already had. I ignored the question and grabbed a napkin so I could wipe off whatever was stuck to my face. What was that hanging from my lower lip, some sort of ring? Yuck! That would have to go as soon as I had a little privacy, but I didn't dare mention it.

The picture was developing. I was an adult Sydney with a bad history, screamed and threw things, had some sort of animal actually burned into the back of my hand – that was certainly a recent scar, all red – and had a lip ring dangling from my lower lip. What else? Tattoos? Other piercings? At least the lip ring didn't hurt unless I pulled at it under the napkin.

I resisted the sudden urge to explore the rest of me. My talkative companion wasn't helping one bit in the descriptions department. I needed a lot more than vague references to this "Steven person" and how angry I'd been just minutes earlier if I was going to slip into the Sydney routine as seamlessly as possible. This switch wasn't going well at all. Where could I get answers fast? Apparently, my chatty tablemate was used to having her questions ignored, because she jumped right into telling me about a pair of shoes she'd recently added to her collection. Never skipped a beat. When I caught her peeking at my hand again, she quickly launched into another story. Whenever did the woman breathe? If I could just slide a question in, maybe she'd tell me why she felt I'd storm off and not speak to her again. An answer to that might offer a few clues how she and I were supposed to fit together, as long as I chose my words carefully.

When she finally did pause, I put the napkin down, forming the question so it would be short: Why would I storm off? Good question, right? Five little words. Couldn't get much shorter than that.

“Can we go home now? I need to sleep.” *Oh, no – no, no, no! That wasn’t what you were supposed to say. You weren’t even thinking about sleeping. Now you’ve done it. You’ll have to follow through!*

“You want to come... home? With me?” The woman in red arched her eyebrows, looking startled.

I had no choice but to play along. “I said something wrong?”

“Not at all. It’s just that you... well, you surprised me a little.”

“Is there a bed?”

“Of course.” She sounded almost apologetic. “There are even some of your old things there.” Her earlier confidence seemed to evaporate, not to mention mine. Alright, what now? Sydney was obviously seeping through and pushing buttons in my psyche, but that wasn’t supposed to happen. She was supposed to recede into the background as an observer, and I was supposed to be the new director in our paired consciousness.

Too boring, I guess because Sydney’s words came slithering out like playful snakes before I could stop them. It had to be something to do with her relationship with this woman. It sounded as if I’d been to her house before.

When I didn’t argue, she motioned to the waiter, who almost ran to the table, circling around to stay as far from me as possible. No doubt he’d been told to get rid of us fast as he could, because the black folder was already in his hand. He put it down, carefully. “Was everything –?”

“Excellent, as usual. My daughter and I *especially* enjoyed the fish. It’s one of her favorites. Was that a hint of nutmeg I tasted?”

She got no answer. He stared at me, probably waiting for me to finish wiping off whatever was on my face. I looked away, digesting the daughter comment. She appeared to be in her mid-forties. If I really was her daughter, it would make my new age somewhere in the twenties, but I hadn’t a clue as to what I might look like otherwise. “Mother” was a lot smaller than I was, but the red suit was tailored, fitting her perfectly, and she had beautiful white teeth, all

of which spelled money. Teeth didn't grow that straight, and orthodontists were pricey. I decided she *was* for real, but that she wasn't really my mother. She was just using that to advance her own purposes, sort of a "proxy mother" ploy. Maybe I was to read quotation marks around the word "mother." Or, was she trying to help me in some way?

She raised her voice several notches to ask about the special for the following day, and the poor waiter squirmed. He was the new center of attention, like it or not. He'd probably hoped to get a pat on the back from his boss, but things were not going well, poor soul. That made two of us. I watched his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed hard. "Mother" cranked the volume up another notch.

"Better yet, how 'bout you get us the specials for the week! Bring a copy we can take with us. We can wait, *can't* we, honey?" She fluttered her fingers at him in a dismissive gesture as she glanced my way.

The entire restaurant was watching us now. I was making everyone's day, it seemed, especially so for three women sitting nearest us. They all wore pantsuits that looked like they came from the same mail-order house, purple on one, emerald green on the next, and teal on the one closest to us—a giant peacock's tail without the spots, unless you counted the three heads. "Purple pantsuit" was staring sternly at me over the top of jewel-crusted bifocals with wing tips, perched halfway down her nose. Maybe they'd come from the same mail order house?

Back came the unlucky waiter with what appeared to be the requested list of specials. It was handwritten, probably created while his manager shredded him. Mother snatched the paper from his hands, no more than glancing at it before she thrust the signed bill back at him and got to her feet, all in a single motion. No credit card? That meant she ate here often enough to have an actual account. I didn't think people did that any more. Apparently, neither did the

waiter. He glanced quickly at the signed bill, then rolled his eyes at the ceiling. Now he'd have to face his manager again.

Mother was already in motion, gesturing for me to follow. I scampered after her, thankful all my limbs were finally functioning correctly, but she suddenly stopped and turned back to the roomful of gawkers. There had to be at least fifty pairs of eyes riveted on us, probably all waiting to see if I stood on my head or crawled on all fours or something. Then she cleared her throat and appeared to rise an inch or two.

"I recommend the *fish!*" she announced, then beamed at the distraught waiter, cheerfully predicting we'd return on the following day. "And we both want *you* to be our waiter, so be sure to save our table!" Her final word was delivered with a little bye-bye flutter of her fingers, not quite as dismissive as before, but definitely superior.

As soon as we were outside, she confronted me. This was the moment I'd been dreading. I'd have some real explaining to do if she was honestly my mother, but no, she was suddenly smiling. In her view the whole thing had been fun, she said, and wouldn't I just *love* to do it again. It wasn't the kind of thing any real mother would say, so I was right back to wondering who she was. Even if Sydney was somehow related to her, what could I safely say without having more time to absorb my new Sydney persona, or at least gather a few more clues? "Mother" wouldn't be all that nice if she knew what had *really* just happened inside Gillie's, and about now I needed nice. Lots of nice.

We approached a red Lexus convertible with its top down, where she paused to open her purse. She seemed surprised when I just stood there. "Sydney, where did you park? Don't tell me it's one of these cars right next to mine. That would be too precious! Imagine, after all these years..."

And off she went, rambling on about how significant such a coincidence would be and what it would mean to her. Actually, I had no idea how I'd gotten there, or, if by car, which one. I always tried to avoid driving at all costs, no

matter who my host was at the time. Too risky. What if a switch of hosts took place while I was behind the wheel? There were plenty of other options that didn't include driving, but Sydney had probably already mentioned how she'd gotten there before I took over. She'd driven, of course.

I gently unmade "Mother's" day by quashing the idea that I'd parked anywhere nearby. Gillie's was located in a huge shopping complex with dozens of stores, so there really was no specific parking lot other than the portion closest to the restaurant. My story was that I'd gotten there early and felt like walking, so I'd parked over in front of... in front of... there! J.C. Penney had a big sign a good distance away – I'd parked in front of Penney's. If we were really coming back tomorrow, we could get my car then, couldn't we? I really wasn't up to driving right then. In fact, I wasn't feeling all that well. It might have been the fish.

My improvised story tumbled out so easily I actually congratulated myself. Mother nodded all the way through it, as though every bit was exactly what she'd expected. "Oh, I knew right away something was different, darling. At first you weren't even speaking to me, then that changed and now you're even suggesting riding home with me. Is it bad to admit I like it when you're sick like this?"

"I'm not really sick, just tired. It's been a stressful day."

"But so *interesting*... full of fun little twists and turns. I can hardly wait to tell Steven."

"Is it far? To your house, I mean?" *Whoops, wouldn't you have known that if she's really your mother?*

But "Mother" didn't catch my slip. "Hop, skip, and a jump," was all she said. With that she popped the door locks and opened the door on my side, waiting until I was in before she helped with the seatbelt. My God, how old did that make me... three going on eighteen? Sure, the belts in convertibles were farther back than in other cars, but there wasn't anything wrong with my... wait!

Of course there was something wrong. Hadn't I just told her as much? She was being nice, and I needed nice, at least until I got away from her. Right now wasn't the time for that, and Sydney wasn't cooperating in the least. All I was getting from *her* was a mixture of fear and anger. How was I to spend any amount of time in the car with "Mother", or face this Steven I kept hearing about, if all I knew about Sydney was that she was an adult female with some sort of ugly mark on her hand and a lip ring and who knew what else, who'd seemed to have had a rift of some sort in the recent past?

As we turned onto the interstate, I was tempted to swing down the car's visor and see what I looked like in the mirror, but the answers I needed were more than just that. Maybe I could pretend to sleep during the "hop, skip, and jump" portion and postpone any detailed questions. Sleeping would fit in with my earlier question about there being a bed, but right then was when my thoughts turned to Sydney's purse and wallet. They'd deliver some clues, if only I could sneak a peek while Mother drove.

Ten seconds later, fresh panic set in. Sydney's purse was back there at Gillie's. We'd left without it!

Madera Canyon, Arizona

Faith stared at the woman in the mirror. *You should be happy your daughter is sound asleep in the guest bedroom, grateful that she's changed... but you're not, because you know something is wrong.*

It was true. Talk about Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, what if Miss Nice woke up and decided she didn't like being Miss Nice anymore? Could she be handled once her claws were back out?

Time to warn Steven.

He answered his cell on the first ring—God bless him. After some background voices and a brief pause, she heard a door close, then his worried question. "Are you all right?"

"I... I... I'm not sure. I think I'm in shock. I told her, and..."

"Go on."

"I was right. She started out with every cuss word in the book, including some colorful ones I'd never heard before. Come to think of it, I should have written some of them down. They were very creative. Anyway, she was rambling on and on about some guy named Max being totally right about me."

"Who's Max?"

"Who knows? Probably the latest in her long string of loser boyfriends."

"Now, now, Faith, don't be so quick to judge. He could be a perfect gentleman for all you know. A lot can happen in three years. People change."

"Oh, for God's sake, Steven, Sydney doesn't *do* gentleman! It's strictly the bad boys, the punks. Criminals. Don't you remember me telling you what her high school counselor said about girls without a steady father-figure trying to fill the void any way they can? Well, she wasn't picky about the plugs she chose back then, so why should now be any different?"

"Mmmmm."

"Thanks to that counselor, Sydney had the perfect excuse to screw up her life and blame it on me. Her boyfriend selection actually went downhill from there, if you can believe that."

"How so?"

"Forget about her just doing the whole football team. I think she's slept with every dropout in the city. She's... Steven, are you there? Earth to Steven. Come in, Steven."

"I'm just thinking."

"Yes, well, while you're thinking I'm going to check on her. She was sleeping, but she might have been playing possum. Be right back."

But Miss Nice was still asleep. Restless sleep, it seemed, judging by the way her legs were shifting about under the sheets. What did she dream about? A better mother would know.

“Okay, Steven, I’m back. Did you finish thinking?”

“Yes, well, if nothing else, you both got closure.”

“Closure?”

“Yes. You can walk away now, knowing you tried, and she’ll know you cared enough to put yourself out there like that. Doesn’t that make you feel better?”

“Steven, I’m not finished telling you. That was just the part outside Gillie’s. She *did* go inside with me, and she *did* sit at the same table, even if she wasn’t too careful with her words.”

“I’m afraid to ask.”

“Right after throwing the F-bomb for the third time, she suddenly put her head in her hands and asked for help. I thought she was talking to me, but she wasn’t. She said something about being alone, even though I was sitting right across from her, and some priest – she mentioned a name, but I didn’t catch it – that he was wrong about me being able to help. She sounded scared, Steven, really scared.”

“I thought she wasn’t religious.”

“She isn’t. Who knows how she met a priest. She sure didn’t meet him in any church, that’s for sure, not dressed the way she was. They’d have taken one look at her and called the police. You should have heard what her shoes were screaming.”

“Which was?”

“Help me!”

“Help me? That seems to me –”

“Wait, I’m not finished. The rest was that if you so much as tried to help her, she’d kick your ass with their spiked, steel tip.”

“Ouch. I can’t even imagine shoes like that.”

“She’s a Goth mess, punk hair, body piercings, probably tattoos. I wanted to laugh and cry and run for my life all at the same time when I first saw her.”

“And now? Are we back to square one with her?”

“I want... to help her. It looks like we’re going to have our first overnight guest, probably at your place if she lasts that long. Right now she’s in my guest bedroom, where I keep all her stuff.”

“What? I thought you just said she was rude and angry and sounded like someone who —”

“That’s just it, Steven, she was and then she wasn’t. In-between shoveling these huge forkfuls of fish into her mouth like she hadn’t eaten in weeks, she was talking to herself, then all of a sudden she sort of pitched forward and heaved her face right into her food. What a mess! I thought she was trying to embarrass me or something, but when she finally lifted her head, all the anger was gone. I mean all her rudeness and antagonism had been... there was something beautiful about her, once you got past the fish plastered all over her face and the rest of her punk looks. It was the most serendipitous moment of my life, fantastic and bizarre all rolled up into one. I actually felt honored somehow to be sitting there with her. I can’t explain it. You had to be there. I should have let you come.”

“You don’t think it might have been some sort of drug she took before she met you there? Amphetamines sometimes induce a kind of euphoria that —”

“No, this was entirely different. It was a complete personality change.”

“So now she’s asleep in your home? That’s just great, Faith! I’m so happy for you.”

“But she has to wake up sometime, and what if it’s back to the old Sydney and she’s furious about being tricked into coming here? Something is seriously wrong, Steven. I’m not sure if I’m scared of her or for her!”

“Mmmmm. If only you could tell what she’s dreaming.”

Shaking... something shaking the bus... have to hold on... red driver... everything red... red... sliding, can't hold on... where's the ground? Pulling... let go... go away... turkeys... what are the geese saying... peacocks... giant peacock... what's on the paper?... everything blurred. Red bus moving too fast... red... colors... red dirt... cactus... green... yellow grass... signs... television?... the TV is on... Sydney... who is Sydney... signs... mountains... mountains eating the sun... birds eating asparagus... birds... shaking... bus is shaking. Peacock... giant peacock! Can't move... huge table...

"Sydney, wake up. Please, honey!"

** * **

It might have been the word "honey" that woke me. To my utter relief the red in my dream turned out to be the "woman in red" from Gillie's, not a gigantic peacock. She was peering down at me, but the red suit had turned into a pair of torn jeans, with rhinestones sewn onto the seams, and a silky white button-up blouse. I closed my eyes once more, turned on my side, and tucked my hands under the pillow, hoping she'd leave so I wouldn't have to tackle my new situation so soon.

"Sydney, do you need to be anywhere right now? Should I call somebody? Sydney, do you hear me? Do you have a job, a roommate, a boyfriend, somebody I should be calling to let them know where you are?"

"No, I'm fine. I just need rest." I turned onto my stomach and pulled the pillow down over my head. An hour. That's all I was asking for.

The pillow was suddenly taken away and the shaking returned. "Wake up, darling. You're starting to scare me!"

She actually did sound scared. When I rolled onto my back she was leaning over me, looking quite frazzled, which was rather odd after her act at the restaurant. I'd have bet she didn't frazzle easily, so it was something else. Maybe something I'd said in my sleep?

I sat up.

Sunlight was pouring into the room, bouncing off her rhinestones and creating tiny rainbows. Outside the open window, a flycatcher perched on an ocotillo branch. Somewhere a raven was calling with its coarse, gravelly song. When I'd last looked out the same window, there'd been a gorgeous sunset.

"Mother" sat next to me on the bed and touched my head, probably trying to see if I had a fever.

"What time is it?"

"I tried to get you to eat last night," she soothed, "but you wouldn't wake up. If I couldn't wake you this time, I was going to call an ambulance and have it take you to the hospital."

"What do you mean, I wouldn't wake up? What hospital? What time is it, really?"

"You mean what *day*. You've slept for over twenty-four hours. If somebody is waiting for you, one of your friends, and you don't show up, they might call the police, and we don't want *that* ugly scene again, now, do we?"

Police? Ugly scene? What was it I'd just stepped into? Now my question was a lot more than just who Sydney was. What on Earth had Sydney done?

Seattle, Washington

Alfred Thompson lost no time getting to the main topic of the meeting: Seattle gangs, specifically the Legnas.

"We don't know where they came from," he stated, reading from notes. "Don't know the leaders by name or otherwise, don't know where they hold their meetings—"

"How do you know they do hold meetings, Fred?" The questioner was Audrey Reynolds, special investigator for the Kings County Sheriff's Office. "We've never heard a blip about it, and yet the other gangs are all pretty well known as far as meeting places and such."

“It’s conjecture, but they appear to be organized so we’re assuming the meetings aren’t held in cars or back alleys somewhere. Ted, what do you say to that?”

Ted Forman, formerly from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, was the last member of the think tank group. He just shrugged, and Thompson continued his opening summary.

“So in the past six months what we think we’re seeing is a doubling of this gang’s influence in the county, particularly here in Seattle, but all around the Sound. Murders are nearly twice what they were a year ago, at least a dozen of which we can pin on the Legnas thanks to that little goat head they burn into their victims. Yes, Audrey?” he acknowledged the woman as she raised a finger.

“Fred, isn’t it possible that some of the other gangs are branding their victims to pin the blame on their new rivals? My understanding on this is that a lot of the mutilations are quite sloppy, as if they were done with a soldering iron. The real Legnas logo seems to be more like a tattoo, even if it’s burned into place. By the way, the goat’s head is a symbol for Satan, one of many.”

“Point made. Again, we don’t know. We don’t know their long term aims here, but they’ve shown up in other cities and crimes in those places have all risen uniformly. Robbery, drug dealings, rapes, murders, carjacking, everything except white collar crime. It’s all taking place on the streets, and as of right now we’ve never apprehended a single Legnas member, not one with the goat brand anyway.”

Forman got into it. “I haven’t seen anything approaching their kind of gang loyalty, unless it’s the Asians. These creeps are doing something to their members that turns them all into... there must be some kind of indoctrination that makes them zombies when it comes to—”

“Wait, wait, wait. How would you know that, Ted? We’ve never had one in custody.”

"We haven't, no, but St. Louis had one a year or so ago. They brought him in on a vagrancy charge, of all things, and he gave them zip, including empty pockets. They let him go, but he acted weird all through their interrogation. Really weird."

"Goat's head?"

"Yep, on the back of his hand. Young kid, too, maybe sixteen. Wasn't drugged, either. It was something else, like brainwashing. Either of you two see that movie called *The Mongolian Candidate*?"

"*The Manchurian Candidate*?" Thompson grinned. It wasn't often he got to correct someone like Ted Forman. "With Frank Sinatra. Yeah, I have it in my old VHS collection."

"That's the original. There's a remake, I think, with Denzel Washington. Anyway, this kid was like that."

"So," Audrey summarized, clicking off on her fingers, "we have a kind of zombeism in one St. Louis kid to use as an example, alarming increases in murder, robbery, rapes, drug dealings, carjackings, all within the past six months, and *we're* supposed to figure out what to do about it?"

"That's it," Thompson nodded. "Any ideas?"

"We need more than we have. How about infiltration?"

"I think what Ted just said about brainwashing would rule that out. In my book, anyone trying to infiltrate might end up dead or converted."

"So... the Legnas rule? We do nothing?"

Her question needed no answer. Something had to be done, but what?