

SATAN'S MIRROR

Saint Augustine, Florida 1967

"No, Joey. I can't."

"Come on, Vanessa," he said in a low voice. "You know you want to."

He swept back her hair to kiss the nape of her neck, and she felt the familiar tingle, felt her resolve weaken. She stepped away. "No. It scared me last time."

"If it gets too scary, we'll stop." He grinned at her—a lopsided grin that always turned her knees to jelly. "Come on, Vanessa. You're the only one who can do it for me."

With a sigh, she looked at the abandoned house, resting her hands on the wrought iron fence. A stray breeze chilled her cheek. She knew the other kids were standing behind her, awaiting her answer. "All right."

"Yes!" Joey pumped a triumphant fist. He motioned to a boy carrying a gunnysack. "They brought everything you need."

Vanessa shook her head, her stomach already sick. "Let's just go."

She led them along the fence, away from the old yellowed street lamp. She entered a hollow between the houses, slipping on damp grass, tramping toward a chain-link fence with a yawning hole. Thrill seekers used this entrance so often a path had formed.

She stepped through to the yard. The fence snagged her long skirt as if to hold her back. She waited for the group to catch up. Eyes downcast, she sifted through several strands of beads to the Maltese cross she wore about her neck.

Behind her, Joey said, "Wait until you see. It's like looking into hell itself. You can even smell the smoke."

His words made her wince. Vanessa climbed through a broken casement window into a dining room. The others clambered after her. She walked through the dark with her hands stretched ahead as she felt for psychic vibrations.

"We have to go upstairs," she whispered around the lump in her throat.

"Why?" asked Joey, sounding nervous. "Last time you did it down here."

"This time is different." She looked at him, willing him to argue so she could refuse and leave. The presence was strong. She didn't want to go up there.

He grinned his best grin. "Lead the way."

They followed her through what was once a living room. Large, empty windows looked out upon the front porch. The street lamp spilled amber light over the bare floor.

Vanessa walked as if condemned, her limbs stiff, her gait slow. Dust kicked up, tainting the stale air, and she wondered if the stench of brimstone would soon replace such mundane odors.

She paused at the staircase, listening, gazing upward, drawn like a dog to a harsh master. As if her sandals were mired in muck, she climbed the stairs. No one spoke, but she heard quick breathing and knew the group was excited, anticipating a great show. She shuddered with an unwelcome thought—not all of them would be leaving tonight. The devil was hungry.

At the upstairs landing, she hesitated. Joey slipped his arm about her as if to keep her from running. She shrugged him off. "This way," she said, entering a room on the right. She glanced about. Yes, this was the place. "Do you have the powder?"

The boy rummaged inside his sack, pulling out a pouch of pickling alum.

Vanessa took a penknife from her pocket and punched a hole in the burlap wrapper. She drew a large pentagram on the floor with the powder.

Shoulders slumped, she held out her hand. "Candles."

"Here." The boy brought out a thick red candle. "I brought a lighter."

"It has to be wooden matches," she told him.

"I've got some." Joey rattled the box as he handed them to her.

She lit the candle. In its glow, she saw the rapt expressions of the four newcomers—three boys and one girl, their hair held back by beaded headbands, their clothing laced,

not buttoned. She didn't know them. They were probably part of the multitude of college kids who flocked to Saint Augustine each spring. She wondered how much they'd paid to witness the ritual.

With the candle held sideways, she dribbled a puddle of wax onto the floor and set the candle upon a point of the pentagram. As the boy held out more candles, she set one at each of the other four points. At last, she stood back to appraise her work.

"Hand me the offering plate," she said.

He gave an excited giggle, and then pulled out an ornate brass dish on a pedestal. The discolored center boasted of service many times before. He offered it to her along with a final candle.

Vanessa knelt in the center of the pentagram. She lit the candle and set the dish over it, allowing the meager flame to heat the brass. Smoke rose, drawing leftover scents of incense and soot and blood.

From his sack, the boy drew out a baby rabbit. She cradled it in her hands, stroking it, feeling its tiny heart race in terror. She looked up with a last plea—did they really want her to do this?

The boy tossed the sack down and lit a joint.

Vanessa closed her eyes, wishing she were anywhere but there. She was innocent. Just doing as she was told.

The rabbit squirmed within her fingers. Nose wrinkled, she cupped the animal on its back in one hand and grasped her penknife with the other. She felt a pop as the point pierced its flesh—then she opened the rabbit from groin to gullet. Blood dripped down her wrist.

She held the creature over the offering plate and scooped out its innards with her fingers, careful to include its heart so the legs would stop kicking. The intestines sizzled as they hit the plate.

Silence filled the room.

After a moment, the boy who was passing around the joint said, "Shouldn't you say some special words?"

"Yes," Vanessa whispered. A familiar coldness coursed through her. "Be ready to run."

The wall before her shimmered as if a portion had turned to water. The patch solidified into an oval, shining like a silvery mirror—Satan's Mirror. A face grew within. Brimstone overpowered the smoke of marijuana and entrails.

Someone gasped. "Wow."

Lightheaded, Vanessa sat on her haunches. She felt both exhilarated and disgusted. She had done it—she had called forth the devil once again.

The face observed them malevolently. It looked like a caricature from a comic book—red skin, yellow eyes. Its lips parted in a sneer or a grin, showing sharp, needle-like teeth.

Vanessa froze as its gaze passed over her. Maybe if she held perfectly still, it wouldn't see her, wouldn't know she was responsible.

"Is it real?" the girl asked, her words slurred as if she were stoned.

The face in the mirror laughed and said in a voice that sounded far away, "You are so weak, yet you come so willingly."

Its words did not match its lips, and Vanessa wondered whether it was speaking English or she was merely hearing English.

The others moved as if entranced, stepping to either side of the pentagram. Vanessa looked up just as a second mirror formed in mid-air behind the boy with the joint. A bright red demon leaned out as if through an open window. It grabbed the boy before he could turn and pulled him through. The window vanished.

The girl screamed. Vanessa covered her ears. The remaining two boys scrambled around.

"What happened?" one of them yelled. "Where is he?"

In the mirror, the devil laughed.

The other boy ran toward the door. Before he could reach it, a new mirror swirled into

existence, and he ran straight into the arms of a waiting demon. He struggled and kicked as it lifted him from the floor. "Help me! Don't let it take me!"

The third boy stepped forward then hesitated, his face stark with horror.

"Help me! Please!" His friend reached as if across a great distance.

The window closed on his cries.

"No!" The last boy rushed to where the mirror had been. He stared at the doorway, his face echoing a longing to go through it and a fear of being snatched if he did.

Joey scrambled into the pentagram beside Vanessa, hunkering down beside her. He was not grinning now.

The girl stumbled away, sobbing. She fell over the sack the first boy carried. On hands and knees, she crawled to the pentagram, blowing out the candles and shoving them into the bag. "Put it back," she said. "Put it all back."

Behind her, the air shimmered.

The boy yelped and ran out the open door, pelting down the stairs.

She looked up, her long, blonde hair spilling over her face just as the demon grabbed her. "Nooo," she wailed, trying to run away. "I'll be good. I won't do it anymore."

The demon's fingers raked her face, leaving dark trails. She screamed, arms flailing as it yanked her through the mirror. The window vanished, leaving silence.

Vanessa buried her face in Joey's chest. She smelled the smoke from the offering plate, smelled the stench of her fear. Her shoulders trembled as if she were having a fit, but she looked at the devil watching from the wall. With a bravado she could scarcely believe, she said, "You were supposed to take only one."

Its yellow eyes glinted. "Perhaps we should take you all."

Her stomach twisted. "You cannot touch me here."

"Do you honestly believe you summon me with your offering of smoke and blood? Do you think you are safe in your drawing? That mark is for me, not for you." The face grew as if leaning forward. "You serve us."

Vanessa felt hot tears on her cheeks. She served the devil? Shame overwhelmed her—a deep shame that made her feel unclean, unworthy to walk the streets of decent people. How could she face anyone, let them look at her, with this secret gnawing her soul? Yet even as she cringed from her mantle of disgrace, she felt something more—pride for being chosen.

She stared at the devil. Behind it, another image coalesced—a figure running forward. The mirror popped out of existence, but as it did, a red, raw-looking mass of flesh vomited outward onto the floor.

Vanessa jumped to her feet, scattering the pentagram, spilling the plate. She pressed her knuckles against her mouth.

Joey approached the thing before them.

"What is it?" she asked in a quavering voice.

He looked at her, face ashen. "It's breathing."