

**From Chapter Five**

**LAKE OF DARKNESS (May 5, 2020; Skyhorse Publishing/Talos Press)\***

**Scott Kenemore**

Back behind the Palmerton, Flip made his way down the crumbling staircase, reached the basement door, and pounded on it hard.

This time, a voice came from within. A dead voice like a tear in space and time.

“Whoever knocks, open up. . . it’s unlocked!”

Flip peeled back the door and ducked inside.

The shadowy, low room beyond looked and felt like an abandoned machine shop. It was a large space with no dividers, crowded-full of broken furniture—half of it covered with sackcloth, as though it would soon be moved or stored. The room had no windows, and the walls beyond the sackcloth shapes showed a perfect, utter darkness. A surreal aisle of light ran down the center; tiny lanterns with single taper candles had been carefully placed to either side of a long Armenian rug. Fifteen paces along this illuminated aisle was a wooden table. Resting upon the table was a shape about the size of a human head, covered with a thick, velvety cloth, utterly black. To one side of the table was a bare, backless wooden stool, and to the other, a very old rocking chair.

In the rocking chair sat Ursula Green.

Ursula was sexless. Genderless. Raceless. Ancient almost beyond life itself. Flip didn’t like to look at her, not directly. He had to force himself whenever it came time to meet her cataract-clouded eyes. Looking at her was one thing, but hearing her talk? Up close? *That* was what he truly found near-to-unbearable. That was what physically hurt. Hurt his mind. Hurt his soul. Hurt something in his very sense of decency.

Flip made his way down the aisle. The rug crunched softly beneath his feet. Ursula said nothing and did not move as he approached. She looked dead. Another man might have felt himself practically alone. Yet Flip knew he was being carefully watched.

Flip had difficulty telling exactly how high the basement ceiling was (he had never been able to see it), and so he always ducked a little as he walked. When he reached the table, he sat carefully on the wooden stool, keeping himself hunched. At the same moment, the black cloth was pulled away. A gibbous crystal sphere was revealed underneath. Reflected tips of lantern-light swam inside it like shimmering goldfish, exploring its irregular angles.

Ursula Green seemed too inert and lifeless to have possibly moved the cloth. If Flip had not seen it happen before, he would have looked for a tripwire, a contraption, something—*anything*—to take the credit. But it was now the withered claw of the old woman that held the cloth, like a gnarled tree branch that had grown around it for decades.

Flip got himself situated.

The witch was very still; her breath detectable only inasmuch as it disturbed her beard. When she *did* move or speak, however slightly, it felt to Flip, again—as with the movement of the cloth—as though the source *must* have come—could *only* have come—from somewhere else in the room. That a separate creature hiding behind one of the shadowy sackcloth shapes had jolted her. That a master puppeteer moved her. That electricity had shocked the corpse into a momentary simulacra of life. For it could not have been her own will or energy.

Could not have been.

And yet he knew, hideously, that it was.

Flip placed the heavy fireplace poker on the table in front of Ursula, directly beside the crystal ball with its swimming light-fish. Then he reached into his pocket and retrieved the long, thin splinter covered in the blood of the Whitcomb boys. He took out the few inches of evergreen shrub from the alley where the Washington twins had been found. These, too, he placed before the silent, ancient being. Then he fished out the shoe polish tin containing the oily dirt from where the Horner twins had been decapitated. He placed this tin on the table as well, leaving it unopened.

But he was not quite finished.

Flip dipped into his coat with a thumb and a single finger. He fiddled within the envelope until he'd counted ten hundred-dollar bills. These he withdrew and carefully set on the table before Ursula.

"There is more than usual tonight," Flip said to the witch. "This is not one case; it is four. Or rather, four cases that are connected, I believe. You're going to need a bigger table, with everything I've brought."

The crone's clouded eyes moved to the objects set before her with the jerky tic-tic-tic of an automaton.

"That much money, I expect I can afford a new table," she finally pronounced, her voice like a claw down a chalkboard.

Flip looked down and saw that the stack of bills had already disappeared.

Ancient and essentially dead, Ursula had still secreted them away with the same speed of Drexel Tark or Sally Battle.

Somehow.

And now the ritual began, and the old woman began to run her timeworn hands over the objects set before her. To Flip, it was like watching a department store window-dresser positioning a mannequin. The arms were stiff and did not flex as they should. The fingers did not bend. They seemed not really to feel. Ursula was rigid as though she were made of wood.

Flip watched carefully. Did the woman linger on one item longer than any other?

"These are new. . .to you," she finally pronounced, each word like a cutting dagger. "You only come here when your trail is cold, Joe Flippity. You only visit me when you've tried everything else. But you just picked up this scent. Therefore, you are in haste."

"I have a week to make progress on the case," Flip told her. "I need all the help I can get."

Flip took the envelope with the photos of the crime scenes out of his pocket. He knew they would be nearly impossible for anyone—much less Ursula—to see in this gloom, but it still felt important to make the presentation. Flip had never understood precisely how Ursula Green's gift worked, only that it did. He did not know what was necessary to show her or to tell her during these visits, so he erred on the side of everything.

The old woman never grasped a totem and spouted the name of the murderer, rapist, or thief—true—but her answers, however oblique, had an uncanny way of helping Flip to think about things he'd not yet considered. Always, it seemed, her words ultimately led him to the resolution he sought. (Would he have thought of these same case-breaking connections eventually, on his own, and without her? That was a question which haunted him, and upon which he never could make up his mind.)

Flip had been coming to see Ursula for nearly ten years. During that decade, Ursula had seemed never to age. Sally Battle said that Ursula was now 105. This would make her old enough to have known Jefferson and Adams—if not quite George Washington himself. Sometimes 105 looked about right to Flip. Other times, it seemed she could simply be a rough 80. The perspective, the amount of light in the room, it all changed his opinion from moment to moment.

Flip carefully held up the photographs and told Ursula about each one. He left out no detail. Because he did not know which notes charmed the snake, he played them all.

When he was finished, he returned the photographs to his coat and waited. Before long, an answer came.

“You don’t know any twins,” Ursula said. “You have no *skin* in this game, Joe Flippity. You have no skin at all.”

Flip smiled. He was unfamiliar with the expression, but understood immediately what it meant.

“To the contrary, my skin is the reason I have the assignment,” he told her. “This is a killer who kills Negro twins. *Child* Negro twins, Ursula. Think about that.”

“A white man could stop that killer, same as you,” Ursula said.

“But *I* stop this killer. . .”

Suddenly, just as she had begun to seem—from her speech, at least—human for a moment, she fell away into the unearthly. The distorted cackles that spewed forth to interrupt the policeman were not normal human laughter, or even like a machine built to imitate human laughter. They were closer to the wild HONK HONK HONK of some giant, marine animal, whose nauseating utterances are only called “the laughter of the sea” because no other words in a terrified mariner’s vocabulary exist to characterize such awful cries.

When her paroxysm had finished, Ursula drew breath like a broken bellows pulling through a wax-clogged nozzle.

“Do you really think you will change things for *anyone* in this city? Whose word do you have on that? The word of a man who always lies?”

“I . . . I . . .” Flip managed.

That was how Crespo had described the mayor, but as much could be said of any politician.

“You think you can guess what is happening here,” Ursula asserted, waving a rigid stick-arm at the items on her table. “You have *no idea* what is happening here. You have no idea what *any* of this means.”

Flip said nothing. He squinted unnecessarily in the darkness, trying to guess what the witch wanted him to understand—trying to guess what might bring her closer to pulling some useful clue out of the ether.

“What is a twin?” the old woman asked through a hiss and cackle.

Flip smiled from the corner of his mouth, but stayed silent.

“*Buy heck it!!!*” the crone cried so loudly that Flip started and the stool beneath him shook. (This phrase was one of Ursula’s favorite expletives; Flip understood only that it indicated frustration—generally with him.) “Tell me what a twin is! Tell me!”

Flip sat straight.

"A twin is a child born at the same time as another, from the same womb," he said. "And identical twins—which most of *these* are—are ones who're born looking exactly like the other."

"And *are* they the same?" Ursula pressed.

"Not inside," Flip said after a pause. "They have their own characters. Personalities. Inside themselves, they're different people."

"But their bodies . . . are they the same?" pressed Ursula.

"It sure looks that way," Flip conceded.

The witch shifted slightly in her rocking chair.

"*You* have no twin, Joe Flippity."

Flip relaxed a bit.

"I mean, not that I know," he agreed. "Not that my mamma ever told me."

"But there are worlds where a man with your skin walks and lives," the witch insisted, raising a brittle, paralyzed finger to make her point. "There are other worlds all around you. When you saw Sally's girl tonight . . . the one with the patch. . . some part of you thought to ask if it was disease from a man's prick that had rotted the eye out of her head, or a fist that had beat it out. You nearly said something . . . but you did not. And yet, in another world, there is a man—a *you*—that did. Do you understand?"

"But I *didn't* say something," Flip maintained. "And how do you know about that?"

"There are other worlds where you have other souls, Joe Flippity."

"There. . ." Flip trailed off. "Can I meet one of these other me's? Would I like him?"

"A man may meet his physical twin," Ursula hissed. "Does it not then come that he may meet his other soul?"

Flip took a deep breath and let his eyes scan the endless ceiling of the dark, dingy basement.

Redirecting the conversation with Ursula could be something of a challenge.

Flip slumped his shoulders forward and stared at the crystal ball in the center of the table.

For a long time, he said nothing.

"Ursula, do these items tell you anything about my case?" he asked after a pause. "Is there anything I should know? Or are you just gonna talk about 'the other me' wondering if an eye was lost to violence or syphilis? If you can't see anything right now, that's all right. I don't blame you for having an off night. Everybody does."

For a few moments, nothing more. The elderly woman was still.

"Your answer is right here," she said.

"Here, in the items on this table?" Flip asked.

The witch's eyes moved, tic-tic-tic.

"Right here," she hissed. "The one you seek. . . it is right here, in this very place."

Ursula leaned back in her chair and turned away.

After a time, Flip knew she would say nothing more.

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A combination of detective thriller, cosmic horror, and historical fiction, **LAKE OF DARKNESS** takes readers deeply into Chicago's very dark history. When a series of child murders takes place, Officer Joe "Flip" Flippity is summoned by the city's mayor, the legendary Big Bill Thompson himself--during a time when Chicago's African-American police officers were treated as second-class citizens--to catch the murderer and thwart the city's reputation as a safe haven for those making the Great Migration north. While searching to catch his killer—and to discover why the most powerful men in Chicago are *truly* concerned about the murders of poor black refugees—Flip's bloody trail takes him through the South Side's vice districts (where anything is available for a price), across its most dangerous criminal underbellies, and into a bracing and unexpected world of supernatural horror.