Red Souls Series

Red Souls

Wall of Unknowing

States of Being

RED SOULS

By Susan F. Banks

DEDICATION

To Michael and the usual suspects.

Special Thanks for the wonderful writers of the Raven’s Keep on Scribophile for helping me get this story off the ground.

Check out susanfbanks.com for a music playlist that accompanies this book.

LEGAL

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LCCN: 2018915041

ISBN for Kindle: 978-1-7328524-0-2
ISBN for Paperback: 978-1-7328524-2-6

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Banks, Susan F. Red Souls. DG Fisher Publishing. Kindle Edition, Paperback Edition

Cover Design: Ynne Black Art

PROLOGUE

Our world is only one of all possible worlds that are allowed by the fundamental principles of quantum physics and that exist simultaneously in probability space. – Yasunori Nomura

The Guardian of the Astral Gate in Los Angeles is 170 years old. Jat the Deceiver is older than the world. Guardian and Deceiver have been locked in battle for the Soul of L.A. since the city began. Now Jat is mounting new attacks. How did he get past the Gate? The Guardian will need help to drive the Deceiver back to the Underworld. When help is needed, help comes. The Circle of Augustus, an ancient fighting force forged in love and battle, will rise again. They see through Jat's deceptions and can close the Gate before light is driven from the hearts of the people. If they fail, the darkness of the Deceiver will overwhelm Los Angeles, and the city will fall.

Chapter 1: Worlds Collide

Chainsaws. Damn! Why can't I just take a walk in the sun like a normal person?

Willet Du Place didn't normally go out walking in the desert without her noise-cancelling headphones. Even in the desert there were noises. The screech of a hawk in the sky was enough to start a headache. Today she wandered farther from home than usual, drawn by the pleasant warmth of the morning sun, and now she was paying the price. She just started to lose the shudders of another awful dream when the hellacious scream of chainsaws started up in Hemmings miles away and took her by surprise. By the time the whine of the saws penetrated her inner ears, it was too late to avoid a migraine. The noise shook her sensitive eardrums like maracas. Her neck clenched, her eyes watered, and the pressure of the migraine pulsed under her right eye. She had to get back to the house fast or she might pass out.

She took off running toward Pine Siskin House like a spooked rabbit, maneuvering over rocks and around cacti. The growl of the saws snapped at her back. *Damn it!* She had no phone with her. Her headphones still lay on the patio table where she left them. *How could I be so stupid?* She now faced several uncomfortable realities. The desert sun rising in the sky beat down on her. She had no hat, no ear protection, and no way to call Audrey.

Her sister, Audrey, had warned her that the forestry crew would start work this week, but it totally slipped her mind. Pine needles whistled through the air and tree limbs hit the ground like sledgehammers. Even at this distance, her unprotected ears heard the impact as if the trees were landing at her feet. Just then an earthquake jiggled the ground for several seconds. Her toe hit a

snake hole, and she tripped. C*ould this day get any worse?* No time to worry about torn pants or scraped knees. She scrambled to her feet and kept running.

When she finally reached the patio, she scooped the headphones off the table and clapped them over her ears with a sigh of relief, but the headache had already taken hold. She yanked the patio door open and bolted into the kitchen. First order of business - migraine meds. She grabbed the bottle out of the cabinet, tossed one of the white pills to the back of her throat and gulped it down without water. She pulled her phone out of the jacket draped over a kitchen chair and raced for the bedroom to her refuge of last resort – a sound-proofed, cedar-lined closet. If the deep quiet of the closet and the meds didn't ease the clobbering in her head, she might end up in the hospital with a tranquilizer drip in her arm before the end of the day. She dove into the closet, pulled the door closed behind her, and dropped to the floor. Hands shaking, she punched in her sister's number.

Audrey answered after three rings. "Will, what's up?" her sister's voice boomed in her ear.

Willet held the phone away from her head. "They're chopping trees for that condo development today. I went for a walk and had to run for my life. Then an earthquake tremor hit, and I almost fell on my face. Plus, I had that dream again. This whole morning has sucked."

"Where are you now?"

Willet tried to control the quiver in her voice. "In the closet, of course."

"Damn," said Audrey. "I asked the crew manager on that job to let me know exactly, time and date, when they'd start cutting. I guess he forgot."

“I love this house, Auddie, but it needs improvements. I’m twenty-four. I shouldn’t be hiding in a closet like the boogey man is after me.”

“Did you take one of your meds?”

“Yes. I almost took a second one. My head is hammering.”

“Will,” Audrey admonished. “We discussed that after the last episode. You promised.”

“I said I just took one.”

“This is why I don’t like to leave the pills with you. You don’t want to have your stomach pumped again, do you?”

“I get it,” Willet replied through clenched teeth. “I took the recommended dose, okay?”

“Well, hang on. I’m still debugging, but almost done for today. I have a lead on an acoustic engineering company we might hire to add sound proofing to the house. It got very good reviews. I’ll stop on the way home to check it out. It’ll take me a while to get out of downtown at this hour.”

“Come home right after that, please. I don’t want to be alone right now.”

“I’ll be quick as I can, don’t worry.” Audrey clicked off.

Willet kept down pillows and a blanket under the shoe rack for situations like this. She pulled them out, spread the blanket on the floor and lay down, smashing the pillows against her ears. There was something oddly comforting about the closet. The smell of fresh cedar and leather shoes and the muffled quiet calmed her. The pill started to kick in, and the tension between her eyes eased. She slipped into that musing state between sleeping and waking.

I'd love to visit Paris someday. I could practice my French, walk along the Seine, and sit in the little cafés. I'd explore Montmartre and see where Chopin lived. Notre Dame has spectacular stained glass. Auddie would go with me, I bet. We could visit Dad while we were there…

She had practiced a Chopin Ballade on the piano just that morning and visualized the sheet music. Her fingers played the notes in the air. Her shoulders relaxed, then her knees. She dozed and drifted into a dream in which she stood on the banks of the river Seine. The bells of Notre Dame rang the hour. Water slapped against the concrete banks and a ferry boat puttered past. A man in a black frock coat and white frilled shirt with worn cuffs stood beside her, his frame thin, his brown eyes sunken. Chestnut hair curled over his shirt collar. She knew him immediately – Frederic Chopin.

"Monsieur Chopin!" she said, choked with awe. "Enchanté! You're my idol."

He turned, nodded, and smiled a sad smile. His long, thin hands lay on the handrail in front of them. He played air piano too, but she could hear the tune he played, the Ballade she had practiced just that morning. She listened hungrily to every note, absorbed by his mastery.

"Red Souls come," he said to her. His voice chimed. "Ka-la-ma-na, ka-la-ma-na," he sang in a ringing tone like a silver bell. "Worlds collide." Chopin pointed a long slender finger upwards.

She followed his finger with her eyes. Red smoke swirled in the grey-blue sky, and then twirled into a ball and dove at her at great speed, aiming for her head. Voices chattered in the smoke, hysterical and angry. She swatted the smoke away from her eyes and nose, but it seemed determined to attack her. She ran along the Seine with smoke all around her. It slipped into her mouth and down her throat. She coughed, and then stumbled. She had the sensation of falling and dropped heavily into her sleeping body as if she had been pushed from a high place.

She sat up in the closet, choking, her heart pounding against her ribs. *Can't breathe. Can't breathe. My head is splitting.* She jumped up, threw the door open and ran for the kitchen. She grabbed the medicine vial and swallowed another migraine pill with no feeling of guilt. The chainsaws had stopped for the moment. She yanked the kitchen door open to walk out on the patio and get a breath of air. It was already midday. The hot sun soothed her, but she didn't quite trust it. She closed her eyes, breathed slowly and tried to gather her wits. When she opened her eyes, a big, black dog with a white patch on its forehead sat on its haunches on the patio, staring at her with large gold eyes.

She yelped. "You scared the hell out of me! What are you doing here?" she said, her voice trembling.

The dog raised its head, and replied with a long, mournful howl. Willet backed away and ran back into the house, slamming the door behind her. She peered out through the window. The dog turned and trotted away, around the corner of the house and out of sight. Willet opened the door again and crept to the back of the house to see where it had gone. Over the broad, flat desert, there was no dog in sight.

*****

From the height of Griffith Park overlooking downtown Los Angeles, Gem Hawkins scanned the skies over L.A. County from desert to ocean, looking for signs of a breach in the Astral Gate. Lately, the Gate had suffered more breaches than usual. As Guardian of the Gate, it was Gem's responsibility to protect L.A. from whatever Underworld demons and fiends snuck into the physical world through a hole in the Gate. So, it had been for one hundred and forty years. She

felt an ache in her chest whenever the Gate was breached, and her chest was getting uncomfortably sore.

Northeast of downtown, a phantom hole hovered in the sky, and red glittering smoke poured out. Red Souls from the Underworld escaped through the hole in the clouds of smoke and poured into the city on the streets below. Their objective: to attack the minds and emotions of human beings and drive them to despair.

A veil of vibrations separates the physical world from the many other worlds that exist. Only someone who can see through the veil would notice the hole in the sky and what was coming out of it. Someone like Gem. “There it is, Dora,” she said to the big black Labrador Retriever sitting at her feet. “The third break this week. Above Covina, I would say. Trouble will soon follow.”

Dora blinked her golden eyes, and the white patch on her forehead furrowed. Dora’s physical size and presence intimidated anyone who saw her. She was the Hound of Hell after all. No one who heard her thunderous growl or saw her three-inch canines extend out of slobbering jaws would dare threaten the Guardian when Dora was by her side.

Guardian and Hound headed for the Jeep parked nearby. A shortwave radio mounted on the dashboard picked up gritty static from the police band along with reports of a fight among neighbors at an apartment complex in West Covina. The situation had all the earmarks of a Red Souls attack – sudden fighting, weapons drawn, and young children in harm’s way. Someone had a knife to the apartment manager’s throat, all for no apparent reason in a usually quiet neighborhood.

When Red Souls entered the physical world, they attacked the minds of human beings and preyed on their passions, planting vivid images of anger, violence, lust or greed. Whatever

weakness a person had, no matter how deeply buried, the Red Souls would exploit it. Every time a person acted out violently, Red Souls enjoyed the vicarious thrill.

Gem drove onto the freeway as traffic conveniently split in front of her. With her foot heavy on the gas, the Jeep practically flew. She reached the neighborhood in West Covina and slowed the Jeep to a roll. As she expected, red smoke churned and glittered in the air over the apartment.

She parked down the street. “This is it, my dear,” she said. Dora lolled her long pink tongue and whined softly. Gem closed her eyes, took deep, steady breaths, and chanted under her breath, tuning herself to a higher vibration like a tuning fork. Huuuuuuu. Huuuuuu. Thoughts drifted through her mind, nagging for attention. She released them one by one and focused on the inner screen between her eyes, waiting for the familiar soft sound in her left ear and the pinpoint of white light piercing the darkness. Suddenly there it was, a light so small, but rushing toward her, growing larger.

Then the Light crashed through her. A cool wave rolled into the crown of her head, down her spine and tingled in the soles of her feet. Ocean surf whispered inside her, mingling with the rise and fall of her breath. Her astral form peeled away from her physical body and floated through the door of the Jeep enveloped in luminous pink light. Dora followed in her own pink astral form, tail wagging happily. They moved in an undetectable blur of speed to the apartment building.

A bank of hedges hid the pool area in back of the apartment from street view but could not hide the angry voices. Gem moved through the hedges like mist, unhindered by leaves and branches. Dora floated at her side. They emerged into the pool area of the apartment complex where people in swimsuits and beachwear stood on each side of the pool, yelling and waving their fists at each

other. The silver of weapons flashed in some hands. Children huddled underneath pool chairs covering themselves with towels.

At the head of the pool, a man pleaded for help and tried to wriggle away from a larger man who was choking him with one arm and waving a knife in the other.

The phantom hole in the Gate hovered ten feet above the pool, visible only to someone with astral sight. Sparkling red smoke poured out of the hole and slipped into people's noses and mouths. The more they yelled, the more they inhaled the smoke. They were lost to their own hostile emotions, and their astral bodies looked like black and white X-rays of human skeletons. They hissed when Gem and Dora appeared. Gem's light glowed bright, and Dora bristled with energy, even more fearsome than her physical form. The skeletons crouched low, covering their skulls with boney arms. This was the emotional reality of the scene, so close to the physical as to appear simultaneous but vibrating at a different rate.

Lights in the smoke sparked faster and glittered brighter. Red Souls were excited by the anger. They darted in all directions in the streams of smoke. Dora howled if they dared get too close to Gem. Children huddled under chairs glowed pink. Each one twinkled like a star. They detect Gem's astral presence through their innocent eyes. Their astral-pink bodies slipped out from under the chairs and floated toward her with arms open wide, seeking safety with her. One skeleton tried to grab a pink star as it drifted past. Dora's growl of warning rumbled like distant thunder. The skeleton dropped its arms and sank to the ground.

"Easy, girl," murmured Gem. "We do not want to frighten the little ones."

As Guardian of the Gate, Gem possessed an unusual power to freeze negative emotions, and she used it now. She threw her head back and blew an exuberant spray of ice and sleet from her

mouth, showering the skeletons around the pool with freezing rain. Her breath sizzled as it hit them. The skeletons wailed and cringed. Their boney appearance faded, and their bodies turned a faint pink. It left them blinking and confused in their physical bodies, as if they had awakened from a bad dream. Such was the effect of the Guardian's Freezing Breath.

The situation unfolding at the head of the pool was trickier. Ruby beads of blood oozed from the manager's throat as the larger man pressed the knife against the manager's skin and locked eyes with Gem. The knife man showed a full astral skeleton. His eyes were black with rage, caught in the downward pull of negativity from which he could not escape. Red Souls screamed their encouragement of his violence. He let the knife slice fully into the flesh of the manager's neck. The manager screamed in pain. Gem blew a freezing breath at the two men, but the man with the knife was lost to his own rage and did not let go.

Gem would have to put the knife man in a hard freeze. She seldom used that kind of restraint on anyone. It left a person traumatized, but at this point, it could not be helped. The front of the manager's shirt was now drenched with his own blood, and his life was at stake. Gem had to act before the knife cut his throat.

She pursed her lips, formed an arrow-headed projectile of ice on her tongue, and spit it at the knife man with the force of a bullet. It hit him between the eyes. His eyes glazed over, and his aura turned grey. Frozen solid emotionally, he tilted to the side and fell, pulling the manager down on top of him. He would live, but the physical and emotional pain could be considerable. The manager needed an ambulance.

There was one more problem to solve. The breach above the pool still festered like a swollen blister. Red smoke oozed through cracks at the edges. Gem gathered another Freezing Breath and

exhaled it, icy and strong as a gale, and sent Red Souls scattering in the smoke. They screamed, trying to resist the force of it, regrouped and charged at Gem. Dora jumped in front of the Guardian, howling with a keening ferocity that made every astral being at the pool cover its ears. The red smoke swirled away from Dora's howl as if it was a sonic shield and tried to escape the Guardian's breath.

Gem blew another frigid blast and sent the red smoke spinning up through the hole in the Gate. When all smoke had disappeared into the hole, she layered sheets of ice on the inflamed surface of the breach. It healed as it cooled and became nothing more than a shimmer above the pool, like sunlight gilding the water. She closed her eyes and listened to the calm roll of ocean waves, the sound of the astral plane. She breathed in synchrony with the waves, and in the absolute silence between flow and ebb, she recharged her energy. Dora's wet nose nudged her neck and brought her back to physical consciousness. They were sitting in the Jeep.

"Some of the Red Souls escaped us, Dora," Gem observed. "Where will they turn up next?"

The ground shuddered underneath the tires of the Jeep. Earthquake tremors were common in LA, but she never took them lightly. Gem glanced in the mirror. Her chocolate skin glowed. Her tight, blonde-tinged brown curls remained in place, but her lipstick had faded. She pulled a tube of Ruby Rosa lipstick out of the glove compartment and applied a light coat to her lips. Better to be ready for anything. The mirror rattled as another tremor rolled beneath them.

The police band squawked about a street fight near Bell Gardens. Once again, tempers had flared, and people threatened each other with weapons. The Guardian did not believe in coincidences. Were the Red Souls that just evaded her causing trouble in a new place already?

But what if this was a new contingent, a new breach? It was troubling that she couldn't be sure. *How are they getting through the Gate?*

*****

At late afternoon, a green Porsche exited the I15 freeway on two wheels and sped up Pine Siskin Road. *Almost home, Will,* Audrey thought. *Please don't take any more pills.* The Porsche came to a squealing halt in the circular drive in front of the big stone house with wood gables. Audrey burst out of the car, hurried up to the front door and barged in. Willet was sitting cross-legged in the hallway, rocking forward and back, her body shaking. Curtains of lank blonde hair covered her face.

Audrey knelt beside her. "What's wrong, hon?" she asked. "What happened?" She pulled her sister into a hug, which unlocked a flood of tears and words.

"I fell asleep in the closet and then I was in Paris, by the Seine. It was so real. Chopin played the Ballade on the rail and red smoke chased me. I know that sounds weird, but it got in my mouth. I couldn't breathe. I had to take another migraine pill, sorry, I know I promised. And then a big black dog with gold eyes walked onto the patio and stared at me. He howled and really freaked me out, but then he disappeared into the desert. I mean, totally disappeared, Auddie, and *that* wasn't a dream. I think I'm losing it."

This sounded bad, even by Willet standards. Audrey chose to downplay it. "Slow down, now. You know how those pills affect you, especially two, and you took one just last night."

“I keep having that same dream about the guy in the white hoody stalking me. He gets closer every time. I’m afraid he’s gonna grab me eventually.”

“It was just a dream,” Audrey said. “He can’t touch you in a dream. They don’t mean anything anyway.”

The sisters rocked together, hugging. Willet rested her head on Audrey’s shoulder and started to calm down. After a while Audrey pulled back and examined her face closely.

“How ‘bout some dinner? You look tired and pale and a little wild-eyed. ‘”

Willet tried to smile. "Oh, thanks, that’s the encouragement I need. The headache is still burning my brain and I’m afraid to go to sleep. Other than that, I feel gorgeous.”

“I’m worried about you Will. The voices, the dreams, they seem to be getting worse.”

Willet hung her head. Her defeated weariness touched Audrey’s heart as it always did.

"Well, this might cheer you up,” Audrey said. “I think I found someone to sound-proof the house. His name is Dean Simmons. He’s an audio engineer, as well as a rock musician and drummer. He's coming Friday afternoon to give us an estimate.”

“Did you explain our situation?"

"I just said we wanted acoustic upgrades, full house. I didn’t go into details.”

Willet shrugged and her eyelids drooped. Dark rings circled her eyes.

Audrey hugged her closer. "Will, I know sound proofing the house will help some, but it won't necessarily eliminate the voices, right? I don't want you to get your hopes up."

"When was the last time *I* had hopes?” Willet muttered. “I think it was the seventh grade." She shuddered. "People will be coming and going with hammers and drills and stuff.”

"Maybe an apartment rental or temporary office could work," Audrey offered.

"Yeah, but I won't have my piano," Willet lamented. "Morning is my best practice time."

"We could rent a piano. And it won't take that long," Audrey reassured her. "It'll be worth it in the end. The house will be quieter, and you'll be more comfortable. You'll see."

Willet gave a weak smile. "You look happy," she observed. "What's up? Is it the upgrade, or did that Dean guy perk you up?"

Audrey allowed herself a fleeting memory of the man in question, and then sniffed. "What do you mean? It's not a guy. Can't I just be happy?"

"I know you, Auddie. You try not to notice guys, because of me. Is Dean good looking by any chance?"

"Good looking? I don't know," Audrey dismissed it with a hand wave. "I suppose you could say he's good looking."

"What did he look like?"

"He has dark curly hair, blue eyes, sort of tall, muscles. Must be all the drumming or maybe the construction work…" Audrey's voice trailed off and she avoided Willet's eyes.

Willet would not be put off. "Auddie, please don't make me feel worse than I already do. I'm not a child. I want you to have your life, and I don't mean just working on the business. After the house is sound proofed, you need to start going out more. I'll be okay."

"We've been through this before, Will. It never works."

"Well, we're going to try again. Maybe you can start with Dean."

“I’m already starting,” Audrey admitted with a cough. “He asked me to come hear his band play on Friday night. I gave him a tentative ‘yes’.”

“Well, I’m going with you. I’ll sit in the car and wait for you, make sure you get home safely.”

Audrey threw up her hands in exasperation. “See? This is what I mean. What about me having a life of my own?”

“You don’t know this guy. You may need backup.”

“From you? You can’t be anywhere near the club! The noise would destroy you.”

Willet’s eyes pleaded. “I’m afraid to be alone right now. The walls are closing in. If I could just be nearby, it would help. We’ll keep in touch by phone. I won’t bother you, I promise. It would work out.”

The alarm bells that went off in Audrey’s head were loud as police sirens. *Willet should be nowhere near a rock club in West Hollywood. What am I thinking?* But Willet had little life outside their house. Audrey didn’t want to leave her alone in her current state, so she relented as she usually did and tried to reassure herself. *I’ll be in the club for forty-five minutes max, and then I’ll leave. She’ll be fine. We’ll be fine. What could go wrong?*