THE
Josh Lanyon
SAMPLER
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THE
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Praise for Josh Lanyon

Lanyon probably knows more about the gay mystery heritage than any other novelist. Here the spirit of Raymond Chandler’s most homoerotic work, The Long Goodbye, hovers over The Dark Tide from epigraph to a final ironic twist on Chandler’s own concluding lines.

Wayne Gunn, author of The Gay Male Sleuth in Print and Film

A cracking good read, told with great wit and style, with all the humorous trademarks of Lanyon.

Squashduck.com

Have I made it clear yet how much I adore Josh Lanyon? I haven’t, you say? Then let me rectify that here and now. Aside from sharp prose – often funny, always hitting close to the emotional bone – she’s created a character I adore and want desperately to follow into the next book, and the next, and the next one after that.

Book Utopia

Countless times throughout, I found myself pegging the villain only to realize I was mistaken yet again. The plot is not contrived or obtrusive, and it kept me riveted to each intriguing page. Fair Game is a novel of suspense with well-penned eroticism. It’s the next great story in Josh Lanyon’s arsenal of well-written gay suspense novels.

A Joyfully Recommended Read from Nannette at Joyfully Reviewed
This was an excellent read. The story is multi-faceted, focusing on family ties, mystery and lost love. The mystery that evolves keeps you guessing who did it? until the very end. The tone of the story was serious with many lighthearted and emotional touches that made it impossible not to feel something for most of the character. Love in all of its forms is something that should be expressed and developed, and watching the way that Josh Lanyon addresses the emotional barriers — the hurts and disappointments, the fear and hope — makes this romantic mystery not just another gay love story, but a snapshot of the eternal quest to find love and be loved in return.

Monica for IReadRomance.com

A well-written thriller with wonderfully masculine gay characters who somehow bring out the best and worst in each other. The character arcs are as solid as the plot and I couldn’t put it down until I found out who the killer was at the end. At different points in the story, I thought I knew his/her identity only to be proven wrong. There is some sex, but it’s in context with the story and rounds out the characters. Great writing.

Monica Leigh for Paperback Dolls

“This book was just so, so good!... I spent the entire book either rooting for the two men to make a deeper connection or trying to figure out who the killer was and I wasn't disappointed on either one.”

Sarina from Love Bytes”

“That was a great read... We have thrilling actions...
SEXUAL tension... great dialogues... a quick paced gripping mystery — I’ve been puzzling over the real murder almost up to the very end... there is no abrupt finale here. It is smooth and romantic and left me satisfied, beaming with happiness.”

Lena Ribka from Gay Book Reviews

If I had to describe this novel in three words, those words would be quirky, delightful, and unique. Thankfully, I get more than three words! Reading this novel was an adventure unto itself, with surprises around every corner and the kind of fantastic character growth and emotional impact that you can expect from a Josh Lanyon book!

El at Just Love Romance Novels Reviews

Um, I love Josh Lanyon. If there was an author out there that I could convince more people to read it would absolutely be Josh Lanyon, hands down. She has become my favorite M/M writer. I just adore her ability to craft a believable but old fashioned mystery. She is the only M/M cozy mystery writer that I’ve heard of, and she is awesome.

Badass Book Reviews

This is a gem of a novel. The language and writing style is flavored with 1940s idiom without being overly slangy. There is nothing extraneous; the shorter length provides a tight, focused plot and story. At the same time, though, the mystery has a satisfying number of twists and turns.

Sunita for Dear Author Reviews

“I’m eagerly awaiting the next book in the series, and
am even more eager to stop freaking out every time I have to look in a mirror. This was a short, scary, and equally funny and heartbreaking. Once again Lanyon has lured me into a world where I can never quite guess what is coming next. Read with the lights on, the mirrors covered, and—if you can manage it—a big, strapping man to help you fight off the ghostly tremors."

Sweet Ass*terisk

“I love Josh Lanyon’s work, and I didn’t realize how much I missed her writing until I was reading it again. Her writing style and sense of humor comes through loud and clear in this story.

Jackie, The Novel Approach Reviews

When you have a hankering to read the best in the m/m genre, look no further than a Josh Lanyon book.

Beverly for The Romance Studio
The Josh Lanyon Sampler
Josh Lanyon
Short Stories
Perfect Day

“About last night,” I began awkwardly. Graham handed me the red plastic coffee cup. Steam rose from the fragrant liquid.

“Yeah,” he said. No particular inflection, but I knew my worst fears were confirmed.

I sipped the hot coffee and stared past the blue tent at the meadow's edge, at the fields of goldenrod that in the early morning mist looked like a distant golden lake.

_Stupid. Stupid. Stupid._

From the beginning — practically the beginning — from the third night I’d spent in the little cloistered house on Startouch Drive, Graham had said he didn’t want anything serious. Not looking for anything serious. Not looking for a relationship.

It didn’t get much clearer than that.

The problem was Graham was everything I wanted.

He was thirty-seven and a geologist. All right, geology wasn’t part of the dream-man job description. In fact, I’d always pictured my dream man more _GQ_ than _Field and Stream_, but Graham with his slow grin and gray eyes — gray, not blue or green — and that little touch of silver in the dark hair at his temples, and his wide shoulders and narrow hips, and his confident straight stance like an old-time explorer surveying the vistas — with his easy laugh and his maps and compasses and soft flannel shirts.

Short story long, I guess. I fell in love.

Despite my best intentions. Despite his warnings.

I fell in love.

And last night in the tumble of sleeping bags and inflatable mattresses, I’d been stupid enough to say so.

Not once. Which would have been bad enough. Not whispered against his broad shoulder where we both could
have pretended I hadn’t said it…could have preserved the fiction a little longer.

No, carried away on the tide of rich, rolling orgasm I’d clutched him and cried out, “I love you. I love you. I love you so much, Graham.”

No doubt scaring park animals and Graham alike. Not to mention myself.

Because I’d known even before the words finished spilling out, even before Graham stilled, that I’d done it. Wrecked everything.

He’d already been dropping little clues that things were maybe getting too intense. Retreating. Slowly. Almost imperceptibly. Sand whispering through my fingers and the harder I held, the faster it slipped away.

I knew it. Knew I had to pull back, play it cool, give him space. Yet the words had come pouring out like scalding water hitting ice, and I could practically hear the cracks.

Graham had covered my mouth with his own, and there it had ended.

Literally.

Because Graham still loved Jase.

And probably always would.

“There’s breakfast,” Graham said now, nodding at the campfire.

I nodded although the knots in my stomach left no room for food. There had been breakfast the first time too. I think that was the moment I fell in love.

We’d met at the Kendall Planetarium during an OMSI After Dark event. It was only the third time I’d made it to one of the Eugene Gay Men’s Social Network outings. I’d been tired after a long day of crowd control, and I almost hadn’t bothered going.

Beer in hand, Graham had been wandering the hands-on science exhibits. He looked handsome, uncomfortable,
and, in jeans and tweed blazer, a little older than most of the “adult only” crowd. The theme that night was sex. When I’d finally cornered him, he was studying a display of condom lighting art. His expression seemed somber under the circumstances.

“Hi, I’m Wyatt,” I’d introduced myself. And then, jokingly, “Do you come here often?”

His eyes, cool as starlight, had lit. He smiled. No, it was a grin. He knew I was making fun of myself and the situation, and he found it funny too. My heart skipped a beat. Yep, like in the romance novels.

“I used to,” he said.

We made small talk, all the while exchanging those quick glances, locking gazes, looking away.

After the museum we’d gone out for coffee and dessert. “What do you do?” he’d asked over the cheesecake.

“I teach.”

His eyes flickered. “What do you teach?”


He nodded.

I said, “I teach sex education to ninth graders.”

He met my gaze and started to laugh. I laughed too.

We’d ended up at Graham’s.

He also lived in Eugene and maybe that wasn’t fate, but it sure was convenient. The house was in the hills, shrouded by trees. Inside it was very quiet. Very neat. The floors were wood, the appliances stainless steel, the counters granite. But the main feature was natural light. Windows. The back of the house was a wall of windows and there were skylights in several rooms. The stars glittered and glowed all around us when we walked in that night.

Better not to let myself think about that night now. The tentativeness, the uncertainty, the awkwardness that had
resolved unexpectedly in easy smiles and hugs. We were both cold sober so I'm not sure how we managed so quickly to shed that easiness, that friendliness for something hot and hungry and close to frenzied.

We'd done it slammed up against the wall of windows that looked out over the moonlit treetops and the lights in the valley below. Naked, noisy, nasty.

Afterward it was refreshingly easy and friendly again, and Graham had invited me to spend the night. Sometimes you just know it's right. Sometimes everything clicks. That's how it was for me. I'd imagined it was the same for Graham. How was I to know?

In the morning we'd done it again — leisurely, affectionately — there in his Egyptian cotton sheets, bathed in the dappled sunlight from the skylight. Afterward we'd showered together and he'd put together breakfast for two out of the odds and ends in his fridge: a truffle, three eggs, a cold boiled potato, a piece of smoked chicken. A meal that would do the soldier in “Stone Soup” — or a survivalist — proud.

Today's breakfast was instant oatmeal mixed with peaches, and the sight of it made my stomach do an unpleasant flip.

“Pass.”

“You better eat,” Graham told me. “It's a long way back to the car park.”

“Are we heading back?”

“Yeah.” He nodded at the forbidding wall of black clouds over the distant mountains. “That's coming straight at us.”

“Oh. Right.” I knew that regardless of the weather we'd have been heading back this morning. I helped myself to breakfast. “Listen, Graham —”

He wasn’t looking at me as he said, “Nah. Heat of the
moment. I know.”

He was giving me an out. Giving me a chance to save my pride and maybe even salvage something of our friendship.

I almost took it. I wanted to take it. But I didn’t only want to be friends with Graham, and somehow to pretend that I hadn’t meant it, that I didn’t love him, seemed wrong. I couldn’t see lying about it. Anyway, he knew the truth. And we both knew that I knew he knew. So in the end it wouldn’t change anything. It would only prove I hadn’t had the guts to say it in the cold light of day.

They’re not easy words to say at any time. Not when you know you’re on your own.

So I put down my coffee cup and said, “No. I meant it. I mean, true, I wouldn’t have said it if it hadn’t been the heat of the moment.” I smiled. Graham did not smile back. “I know you don’t feel the same way. But I love you.”

He looked… I’m not sure how to describe it. Stricken? Guilty maybe. Definitely unhappy.

“Wyatt.”

That was it. My name. It had a regretful finality to it. *Stop.* That’s what he meant. *Stop, Wyatt. Don’t say it. It’s no use. There’s no point.*

“It doesn’t seem like something to fake.”

“No.” Graham stared down at his own cup. He said finally, slowly, “Thank you. I-I’m… I like being with you, Wyatt. I care about you. But I don’t feel like you do. It’s too soon for me.”

“Three years.” Three years since Jase had died. I wasn’t arguing, just…three years.

Graham’s gray gaze held mine sternly. “I don’t know if ten years will be enough. I still miss him. Every day. Every single goddamned day I want him back.”

You can’t start a stopwatch on grief. Or love for that
matter.

“It’s okay. I know. You told me how it was.”

The tension left his shoulders, which had braced as though for battle. He hadn’t expected my acceptance, I guess. Had been prepared for me to try and make my case. Well, cue Sam Harris. *I can’t make you love me if you won’t.* I never had someone to love or love me like Graham had Jase, but that much I did know. You can’t debate someone into loving you.

He said with excruciating and uncharacteristic awkwardness, “If it was — if I was — it would be someone like you.”

Someone like me. *But not me.* Obviously not me.

Funny that of all the things he said that morning, that hurt the most.

“Sure.” I gave him a smile that was probably at best polite. I swallowed the final dregs of my coffee.

What was there to say after that?

We ate our breakfast and packed up our camp.

I liked camping. I didn’t love it. I’d wanted to go camping that weekend because Graham was going, and I wanted to be with him. I preferred museums and art galleries and brunch at Metropol Bakery. Graham liked those things too, though not as much as he enjoyed hiking and camping and fishing. We traded off. One weekend doing what he liked. Then the next weekend it would be my turn to choose.

It had seemed to work for a time.

I could almost pinpoint the moment things had changed between us. We’d been seeing each other pretty regularly. Casually but regularly. And one Saturday afternoon we were barbecuing salmon steaks on his deck and I’d said,
“Hey, did you want to go to Mount Pisgah Arboretum next Sunday? It’s the wildflower and music festival.”

Innocuous, you’d think, but the implication was that we’d be seeing each other the following weekend. Not unreasonable because we had been seeing each other most weekends, but I could see it brought Graham up short. Broke whatever pleasant spell had settled over him over the past two months.

He’d said politely, vaguely, “Maybe. I might have to work. I’ll give you a call.”

It turned out he did have to work that weekend. I’d said that was too bad and I’d go with friends. And I did. And as much as I’d missed Graham, I’d had the brains not to call him, to leave the next move to him. To my relief he had called later in the week and we’d made plans for the following weekend.

But it had never quite been the same. He’d begun pushing me back. In little ways. He was never unkind, but he didn’t call as often, didn’t have as much time to see me. He was busy. We both were. But I knew. The easy instant harmony we’d known from the first had faded. We still got along, still had plenty to talk about when we did get together, but it felt a little off. I could feel myself trying too hard to recapture what we’d had, and the harder I tried, the further Graham withdrew.

And I had never really understood why. I knew it had to do with my assumption that we were going to be seeing more of each other. But how was that a wrong assumption?

No, maybe it was more to do with making plans. Making plans together.

I didn’t know. I would never know; that was the truth.

It had been good for those two months. That was what made it hard. It had felt right. I had been so sure that
Graham was going to be the guy I fell in love with. Well, he was. The part I got wrong was thinking Graham was going to feel the same way.

A honey bee zoomed in for a closer look. I waved it away.

“You know about colony collapse disorder?” Graham said.

Preoccupied with my own troubles, it took me a second to figure out what he meant. It took me a second to figure out that we were making conversation. So this is what it had come down to? Trading *SciAm* articles?

“You’re talking about the fact that billions of honey bees are disappearing from hives all across the country?”

“Country? Try globe. And they’re not disappearing. They’re dying. From pesticides. There are almost no feral honey bees left.”

Yeah. Old news in my corner of the science department. Someone should have told the bees in the meadow we were hiking through. I waved away another dive bomber. “I thought one theory was parasites?”

“It’s probably a combination of factors, but the pesticides are a major contributor to weakening the worker bees.”

“Right. That makes sense.”

Now that I had time to think I realized I probably wouldn’t see Graham again. Not after the night before. This would be the final straw. This would confirm what he’d already been feeling: that I was getting too attached, too involved. He’d run a mile.

Graham must have been thinking along the same lines. He said, “Am I going to see you again?”

That he put it in the form of a question surprised me, though I tried not to let my surprise show. “Yes. Why not?” I knew why not, but it seemed a good idea to try for
casualness.

“I thought you might figure you were wasting your time.”

“I like being with you too. So how is that a waste of time?” Pride almost made me add something like I wasn’t in a hurry to settle down either, but the fact was I’d have moved in with Graham in a heartbeat if he’d asked. Or asked him to live with me, if I’d thought there was a chance in hell of prying him out of his glass foxhole. I had been open about the fact that I was interested in something a little more meaningful, even settled.

I said instead, “If I’m not uncomfortable —”

He said immediately, “I’m not uncomfortable.”

I thought we both sounded defiant.

“Okay. Great.” I tried to picture us getting together again after we said our good-byes today. I couldn’t see it — as much as I wanted to.

Did it look like I was clinging to the wreckage? That I couldn’t let go? But that was true, right? I was feeling like any part of Graham was better than none. Where was my pride? Or was it unthinking pride that had answered for me? Hey, no problem! You want to be pals. I can switch it on and off.

Who was I kidding? Wasn’t I making it worse for myself trying to hang on?

Of course.

A clean break would be best.

But the thought of not seeing him anymore… Never hearing his voice, his laugh. Never holding him again. Never being held by him again.

I wasn’t ready to face it yet. Couldn’t.

The goldenrod had given way and we were hiking through a meadow waist-high in black-eyed susan and jerusalem sunflowers.
No more looking forward to Friday nights — even with the worry that he might cancel, even with the worry that every date might be the last, the sinking awareness that we weren’t growing closer.

He had a high-powered telescope on the deck of the house and sometimes we watched for shooting stars through it.

I loved the telescope. It reminded me of the night we’d met. Later, I realized the telescope had belonged to Jase.

I remember once I said to Graham, “Did you know you can buy a star? Well, have one named for that special someone anyway. It’s about twenty bucks. You get your star’s name registered in the Universal Star Catalog database.”

He’d smiled. Well, it was more of a snort than a smile, but it was tolerant, amused. I knew that if Jase had still been alive they would have looked at each other and shared a private joke.

That was the first night I’d felt alone with Graham. Even in bed, the stars glittering through the windows while we fucked, I felt on my own.

“You seem distracted tonight,” Graham had said at one point.

I reached for him, teasing, “Hey, we can’t have that.”

He was gentle and inventive in bed. Passionate, yes, but the only time he’d ever lost control had been that first night. That was fine by me. When you spend your day with hormone-infused adolescents, you don’t mind a little restraint. Graham was maybe the gentlest guy I’d been with, which I hadn’t expected given what an outdoorsman he was. Not exactly strong and silent, but...laconic. Reserved.
Not really my type, I would have said. Before I met him. Before I fell in love.

It's not like I had gone looking for this, wanted this, had opted for the pay-per-view gay soap opera with angst in hi def. All I'd wanted was an ordinary relationship with a nice guy. A guy I could share my life with. The good times. The bad times. Maybe even share my mortgage with. A guy who could get along with my friends — a guy who had his own friends. Maybe even a guy I could take home for the holidays. I don't know. Whatever I had been thinking, the pleasant fantasy was so far removed from the vibrant and painful reality of Graham.

And now that I had Graham — or didn't have him — all those soft-focus dreams felt like someone else's memories. The realization that Graham was not going to be part of my future, was already on his way out of my life, hurt so much it was hard to think past it.

The very thought of his soft sleepy mouth finding mine in the lambent light of morning made me want to drop my pack and crouch down, hugging myself against what felt like a body blow. A mortal blow.

How did people get over this?

They obviously did. Every day someone fell in love with the wrong person and had to pack up all their fragile, misguided hopes and unwanted affection, and move on to the next picnic table.

How many times had I had to gently — and not always so gently — redirect someone's interest from me?

Payback was a bitch.

Nah, no dramatics. Hearts got broken every day. Nobody died from that. But it did kind of fade the sunlight and drain the color from the days.

And the nights...the nights would feel too long to live through.
The thought of those nights actually had me drawing a sudden sharp breath.
Graham looked back at me.
I gave him a thumb up. Maybe a little too vigorously.
He turned hastily forward again.
I turned inward. Sure, for a time the nights would be bad. But then I’d get over this and move on and maybe finally find someone who appreciated me for being me, who didn’t wish every minute we were together that I was broader and blonder and rode a bike and listened to Bonnie Raitt and loved to camp as much as Graham.
The thought should have comforted me, but it didn’t. It hurt worse. Made my heart feel shrunk and lost, a pebble bouncing and clacking its way down a deep, empty pothole.

Why did it have to be Graham? Why couldn’t it have been a nice normal ordinary guy who was as tired as me of the clubs and the earnest, organized efforts of social networks and of fucking around? Why did it have to be Graham with his perfect house in the hills and his tragically dead soul mate?

Seriously.
And why had fucking Graham had to drag me into it? Why couldn’t he have kept his crippled heart safe at home in his house of many windows? Why pretend to be open to moving on, to falling in love again when he was still mourning his ghost? Still grieving at the shrine.

It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t right.
Or was it simply that Graham was ready but I wasn’t the right guy? Yeah, more likely that. It would take someone a lot more…whatever, to ease his grip on the past. Someone more like Jase. Or just not like me.

Graham stopped walking and uncapped his canteen. He offered me a swig, which was surely a peaceable
gesture seeing that I had my own. But I took his and tilted my head back. The water was warm and sweet.

“You’re quiet,” he said.
I handed the canteen back. Wiped my mouth.

“Thinking.”
“Yeah.”

*Way with words, Graham.*
I tried to keep my face blank but as I met his gaze, I could see the reflection of my bitterness in his eyes. Saw his expression alter. Saw that he had no idea what to do about any of this. That he was sorry.

My anger leeched away. Kind of too bad because it gave me energy and purpose, but the fact was, it wasn’t Graham’s fault he didn’t fall in love with me. Any more than it was my fault that I had fallen in love with him.

I took a deep breath. “The thing is, you’re right.”

His eyes narrowed. “Am I? About?”

“Not about wasting my time, because I don’t think being with you was a waste of time. I liked spending time with you. I enjoy your company. And I would like to be friends with you one of these days. But.”

I managed a controlled stop rather than looking like I couldn’t go on, but it was close.

“But?” he asked when I didn’t continue.

“But it probably would be a good idea if I didn’t see you for a while.”

His fluctuating expression was a study of emotions. It looked like everything from anger to relief flicked past while he absorbed my words.

“If that’s what you want.”

I guess my emotional equilibrium was still off because something dangerous surged inside me. *If that’s what I want? You know goddamned well what I want!* Reason prevailed — on Graham’s end too. Before I swallowed the
heated words, he said, “Sure, Wyatt. Of course.”
He sounded subdued. He gave great attention to
screwing the cap on his canteen. “It's just…”
I closed my eyes. Don't say it.
“I'm going to miss you.”
I opened my eyes. “I'm going to miss you too.” I waited
for him to turn. When he didn’t, I walked past him.
For a long time neither of us said anything else. The
only sounds were the even thud of our boots on the
crumbly soil, the hum of pollen-drunk bees, the faraway
boom of thunder. The clouds were rolling in, the
temperature dropping, but we were still well ahead of the
storm. We'd be back at the car before the rain started.
“It doesn't feel like three years,” Graham said suddenly
from behind me. “Since Jase.”
“No. I guess not.”
“Other times it feels like he's been gone forever. Like it
all happened to someone else. Like our life happened to
someone else.”
“I'm sorry.” Not the first time I'd said it, but what else
was there to say? I thought I understood about as well as
anyone on the outside could.
“You don't have to be sorry, Wyatt. I know I haven't
been fair to you.”
Since that was exactly what I’d been telling myself, I'm
not sure why I felt a little ashamed to hear him
acknowledge it.
“You were honest. And I thought maybe…”
“I was angry for so long. Mad at Jase. Mad at…life.
Why give people that much happiness if you're going to
take it away?”
“I don't know.”
“I don't believe in God anymore. And if he — it — does
exist, I hate it.”
He did. I could hear the undertone of rage still vibrating in his voice. I began to understand exactly how much control he had.

I stopped walking, turned to face him. “I know it doesn’t help, but some people never have that. What you had with Jase. Never have it at all. They look all their lives and don’t find it.”

Graham’s look was fierce and bright. “You’re right, Wyatt. It doesn’t help.”

“Okay.”

He took in my lopsided smile and sighed. Such a weary sound. “No. That’s not true. I know how lucky I was, and sometimes I can even remember it and be glad without getting angry.” He added honestly, “More often lately. I think that’s because of you.”

It meant a lot to hear it. “That’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

We stared at each other.

“It’s true.” Graham’s gaze shifted to the mountains, his tone changed. “Maybe if the fucking killer had ever been caught…”

_Killer?_ Maybe not in the eyes of the law, but didn’t it amount to the same thing? It did for Graham.

“If there had been some justice. Something. Some… closure.”

How many times could you say you were sorry? I shook my head.

“It didn’t have to happen. It _shouldn’t_ have happened. He shouldn’t have…ended like that. It’s so goddamn fucking pointless.” Graham’s face twisted and then, shockingly, he was crying. His face screwed up, turned ugly as he fought it. But a sob tore out of him. A winded, broken sound. And then another.

My own eyes stung. I couldn’t bear for him to hurt so
much. I wanted to put my arms around him, protect him. I didn’t think he’d welcome it, so I didn’t move.

Why did we all crave love so badly when half the time it left us annihilated?

Graham choked out, “I think of him lying there. Not a mile from the house. I was home. I could have…”

He’d never talked about it before. Not to me. Not really. I knew the bare facts. I’d got most of them off the Internet. Jason Edward Kane, 38, a professor of astronomy at the University of Oregon had been killed while out biking one early Saturday morning. It was a hit-and-run accident. The driver was never caught.

I knew more about Jase’s death than I knew about his life.

Having been in that quiet, peaceful house on a Saturday morning…been there with the satiny light filtering through the trees and pouring through all those sparkling windows, the songs of birds outside, the smell of coffee brewing. The perfect start to another perfect day. A false start, as it turned out. A faulty reading on the barometer because despite indicators reading all being right with the world, in fact the world was seconds from being rocked off its axis by an asteroid.

Hard to not feel betrayed by the very cosmos. Hard to ever believe again in a beneficent fate.

Another sob ripped from Graham. He sounded like someone took a knife to his chest and carved the sound out. “If you’d known him…”

I hugged him.

Last time, I thought. One last time. And I held him tighter. For an instant he hugged me back. Held me like I was a drifting spar and he was a shipwrecked sailor lost on the dark and rolling sea. On this vast golden windblown empty ocean where we stood together — and alone. Then
he freed himself, embarrassed, of course, and angry with himself for breaking down — and with me for witnessing it.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I wish I had the power to bring him back to you.”

He drew another shuddering breath and then fell silent, his expression…odd.

We stared at each other. The moment stretched. For the space of a couple of heartbeats it felt like we were on the verge of some revelation.

I felt a burning sensation near my inner elbow. I jumped, looked down and saw a honey bee stinging me for all she was worth. I slapped my arm. “Damn. It stung me.”

How the hell could something so little pack such a wallop? It was like it had punched a burning cigarette into my skin.

“Is the stinger still in?”

“Is it? I can’t tell.”

We both peered at my tanned forearm. There was a red patch about the size of a quarter near my elbow. Graham shook his head. “No. Little bastard lives to fight again.” He absently wiped at his wet eyes.

“Good news for the collapsing bee colonies.”

He grinned. “You’re not allergic or anything, are you?”

“No.”

“We’re not far from the car park now. Maybe ten minutes? I’ll get the antiseptic out of the first aid kit and fix you up when we get there.”

“Sure.”

The sky was getting darker. Graham was right. We needed to keep moving. We started walking again. My arm hurt like hell. I’d forgotten how much bee stings hurt. I tried to remember what we’d been talking about before I’d been stung. Of course. Jase. What else? But this had been different. For the first time Graham had loosened that tight
control. He’d finally opened up to me. More than opened up. He’d cried in my arms.

It felt unreal now.

As a matter of fact, everything was starting to feel unreal. Everything but my arm which had stopped tingling and now throbbed with a dull, insistent pain. I glanced down and saw a large raised blister where I’d been stung. Worse, much worse, was the fact that my entire arm was swollen. My fingers looked like purple sausages. I rocked to a stop. “Oh shit.”

An allergic reaction. *Anaphylaxis*. That’s the word for when the immune system releases a rush of chemicals in response to allergens such as in insect venom or shellfish. Overkill, in other words — with the key word being *kill*. You can die from anaphylactic shock. You can die in a matter of minutes. That flood of chemicals released by your immune system sends your blood pressure plummeting, your heart rate skyrocketing, and your entire body crashing in shock.

Signs and symptoms included a rapid and weak pulse, hives, lightheadedness, and feelings of anxiety.

I had them all. Especially the anxiety. That was increasing exponentially with each passing second.

How far were we from the car park? Far enough that it was still out of sight.

“Graham —”

He was way ahead of me, shouldering out of his pack, dumping it to the ground and yanking it open. “You said you weren’t allergic!”

“I didn’t think I was…”

Graham had the small first aid kit out. The white and blue metal tin looked like an antique. He popped it open to reveal a neatly stocked interior. Or at least neatly stocked until he began rifling through it. “Have you been stung before?”
“I think so. I’m pretty sure. Yeah.” I held my misshapen arm up, examining the ugly welt. My arm looked like a prop in a horror movie. “Here I thought the day couldn’t get any better.”

“When?”

*Oh fuck.* Was it getting harder to swallow? Harder to breathe? Or was that simple fear closing my throat, shutting off my airways? My heart pounded all the faster in fright. What would happen next? Would I stop breathing? Would I lose consciousness? Would I die? I realized Graham had asked me something. I’d forgotten the question. “What?”

“Wyatt, when was the last time you were stung?”

I gulped out, “High school? It was a while ago.”

*Shit.* He threw me a murderous look. His eyes looked black in his white face. “You can develop an allergy anytime.”

I wheezed, “Well, how the hell would anyone know if they’re allergic then?”

He made a sound of impatience, but I heard the worry. He wasn’t alone with that. I was scared to death. I hadn’t realized how much I wanted to live — even if Graham wasn’t going to be part of my life — until my future was actually in question.

How long did I have? People died within minutes from allergic reactions. We were more than minutes away from help. Even if we could get to the jeep, we’d never get to the hospital in time. Which hospital? Where was there a hospital? I couldn’t think of one. I felt faint, or maybe tired and faint. I didn’t remember dropping my pack but all at once I was sitting on the ground leaning against it, watching Graham from what felt like a distance.

I’d never seen him look like that. I wouldn’t have thought he could look like that. Scared.
“What do you need?” My voice sounded thick, slurred. “Antihistamines. I used to keep a bottle in here. Oh goddamn it.” His voice shook. “It’s not here.” “I’ve got a bottle in my pack.” That’s what I meant to say but it came out sounding more like, “Ow…gow…boobie…ih…mah…pah.” I was surprised I had the air left for that. It was getting harder and harder to form words. My mouth felt numb. My whole face felt numb. Even my ears felt numb.

I was even more surprised that Graham translated my words. But he did. He jumped up, brushing past me, and tore into my pack. I slumped over, watching dizzily as my clothes went sailing into the sky above my head. Oh man. I was losing it…

“Got it.”

Graham scooted around beside me. He held my bottle of antihistamine spray. “Okay, Wyatt. You’re okay. Tip your head back, honey.” I wasn’t okay. I gurgled in alarm as he leaned over me. He ignored my panicked protest, stuck the small bottle up my nostril and squeezed. If it did any good, I couldn’t tell. I was dimly aware he repeated the procedure in my other nostril. The clouds must have been over us now, casting long, deep shadows dark as night. It was colder too. Much colder. Graham was talking to me from outer space. “Don’t do this, Wyatt,” he said desperately. “God. Not now.”

Poor Graham. Some guys have all the luck.

* * * * *

The next time I opened my eyes I was in a hospital cubicle. There were the usual hospital smells and sounds. There was a fire sprinkler positioned directly over my bed and a blue curtain separating me from the activity in the
hallway. There was all the usual medical paraphernalia, but I didn't seem to be hooked up to any of it. Which was a big relief.

In fact, I felt...fine.

I turned my head. Graham was sitting next to the bed, watching me. I widened my eyes, narrowed them, blinked a couple of times. He stayed right there, eyeing me with equal interest. He said conversationally, “You know, the odds of getting struck by lightning are better than the odds of going into anaphylactic shock.”

“I’m buying a lottery ticket first thing.”

“You’re not kidding.” His eyes were the gray of imminent rain.

I cleared my throat. “What happened? I thought I’d had it.”

“We weren’t that far from the campground. I threw you over my shoulder and carried you.”

Carried? I wasn’t the Incredible Hulk, but I wasn’t child-size either.

Graham continued, “There was a paramedic truck parked next to my Jeep. They’d been called out for a heart attack that turned out to be a case of campfire indigestion. They gave you a shot of epinephrine and then we all hauled ass for the emergency room. When we arrived here they pumped you full of Benadryl and cortisone and oxygen and in a couple of hours you were back to normal.”

I felt back to normal. Tired. But wired. Like I could sleep for a month, but eventually. Not in any immediate future.

The full significance of what had happened hit me. As close calls went, it didn’t get much closer than this. I said huskily, “Thank you, Graham. You saved my life.”

“Team effort. Anyway, you may not thank me when you hear I phoned your parents.”

I groaned so loudly a nurse pulled back the curtain. I
hastily waved the all clear to her.

“I didn’t realize how fast you’d snap out of it.” His face fell into grim lines. “I didn’t think you’d snap out of it at all.” He drew a breath. “Anyway, it’s okay. They’re not driving down.”

“Thank God.”

“Tonight.”

I groaned again. He actually laughed. Quietly, but it was a genuine laugh.

“They’re nice.”

“I know they are. I picked them.” That was the family joke. I was adopted when I was sixteen months old. The story is my birthmother finally decided on Bill and Dana Finley when I tried to chew up their résumé.

Graham said awkwardly, “They…knew all about me.”

“You should have let me die out there on the prairie.”

I was kidding, of course. Graham was not. “Don’t.”

“No.” I sighed. “Anyway, yes, I did tell them about you. They keep hoping I’m going to settle down. Don’t worry. You don’t have to meet them. You’ve done more than enough.”

“I want to meet them.”

“Uh…”

“I want to meet them,” Graham repeated. His gaze was steady even as he stumbled over the words. “I want to… I want us to… I want to keep seeing you.”

My heart started to pound so hard I felt a little sick. “Listen, Graham. I don’t think — that is, I think you’re forgetting. You had a shock today too. And you’re mistaking that for something else.”

“No.” He was definite. “I was trying to tell you before you were stung. It got lost in…”

His overwhelming grief for Jase. I did understand that. Too well.
He expelled a long breath. “The words came out wrong. I’m not good at talking about this stuff.”

Who is? But I didn’t say that. I patted his hand, tried to assure him without having to dig up the words, that it was okay. I understood. Say no more.

*Please*, say no more.

But he did say more. In that choppy, uneven, occasionally cracked voice. Dry. Parched. Like he hadn’t had a sip of water in decades.

“I knew when you said that…about giving Jase back to me if you had the power.” His eyes never wavered from mine. “It was the truth. You meant it.”

“I…” I badly wanted to believe I’d meant it. I badly wanted to believe what he was telling me, what he seemed to be telling me.

“I’ve never been afraid like I was today. With Jase there wasn’t time to be afraid. It was all over before I knew anything about it. With you there was time to think of what we could have had, what I’d let slip away, and I knew…” his breath caught “I had made the biggest mistake of my life. Because I didn’t have the guts to take another chance. Because it didn’t seem right that I get to…go on. I get to fall in love again. Be happy. And…it’s…so fucking unfair. I know that sounds…it’s liable to sound… But it’s not you, Wyatt. Except that you’re this great guy and sometimes I couldn’t seem to get past that.”

I didn’t say a word. I was pretty sure he was trying to say that he couldn’t help resenting that I was alive and Jase was not, and while maybe it was understandable he would feel that way, I knew I wouldn’t be able to forgive him. Even if he had saved my life.

Graham kept stumbling along in that earnest, pained way. “It almost made it worse because I was so sure I couldn’t care about anyone again, not like I felt about Jase,
but then I met you. And it was so... It happened so naturally. Like it was meant to happen. I knew I could let go. Move on. And it felt wrong.”

“How could it be wrong?”

He countered, “How could I forget him so easily?”

“You haven’t forgotten him.” The intention was to say it gently, but it came out harsh. Hurt.

“But I could.” His face worked and here came the part that killed him, that he was ashamed of. “Not forget him. But let go. I want to. I want to move on. I want to love you. I can’t change anything that happened. I can’t fix anything. I didn’t get justice for Jase. But I still want to move on. I want you.”

I tried to swallow the lump in my throat. “You had me.”

“I know.”

The honesty of that made me laugh. Graham laughed too, a little uncertainly, and reached for me at the same time I reached for him. In that antiseptic atmosphere he smelled alive and real: woodsmoke and sunscreen and sunflowers —

The curtain rings scraped. We both retreated from our near-embrace as the doctor strode into the cubicle. “Sounds like someone is feeling a lot better.”

“Me? I’m fine.” In fact, what I mostly felt was exasperation at the worst timing in the world.

“I’m Dr. Geary.” Dr. Geary was short and boyish. He looked like he should have been sitting in a ninth grade biology class trying to drop frozen frogs down girls’ blouses.

“Don’t go anywhere,” I told Graham when he stood up. To Geary, I said, “I’m sure I’m okay now. When can I go home?”

The doctor ignored this, going unhurriedly through the ritual of blood pressure and heart rate. Graham moved to
where he could get a better view of the sprinkler overhead. He studied it like it was a rare geode. I studied Graham.

When he'd finished his examination, Dr. Geary announced, “Good news. Provided you can stay with someone for the next twenty-four hours — just in case of relapse — we can see about turning you loose now.”

“He's staying with me,” Graham spoke up.

“Relapse?” I echoed.

“It's rare but sometimes patients have what we call a biphasic reaction. I'm going to give you prescriptions for Benadryl, prednisone and an EpiPen. You'll want to carry that last one from now on.” The doctor cheerfully rattled off the rest of his mildly alarming information and retreated once again behind the blue wall.

“Relapse,” I repeated.

The curtain swung gently to a standstill. I looked at Graham. He solemnly looked back at me. “Are you sure about this?” I didn’t mean having me as a houseguest for the next twenty-four hours. I couldn’t help thinking one of us was probably making a big mistake. If he’d taken me into his arms — but, no, the moment seemed to be lost.

Instead he nodded. As declarations went, it left something to be desired. Of course I could make the next move. I’d made plenty of them before.

I started to sit up. The curtain rings slid again and the nurse was back with a sheaf of papers for me to sign. It was too late for either of us to back out. Assuming one of us wanted to.

The house on Startouch Drive felt warm and welcoming when we walked in. The sun was setting and the rooms were filled with amber light.

“Are you hungry?” Graham asked.
“Probably. It’s hard to tell with all these antihistamines bouncing around my system. I’m mostly tired.” Tired down to my DNA. But I didn’t need sleep. And I didn’t need food. I didn’t even need to hear again that Graham wanted to give us another chance. Well, I did, but Graham wasn’t much for words at the best of times. What I needed was Graham. Not even sex. Just his arms around me. Just the simple reassurance of a hug. I wanted him to hold me like he meant it.

I looked up and he was watching me in that steady, calm way. “Why don’t you jump into bed, and I’ll bring you something on a tray.”

“Nah. I’m tired but I’m too pumped up to sleep.”

“We don’t have to sleep.” Suddenly he was smiling, his face relaxed, looking younger than he’d looked in all the time I’d known him.

I found myself helplessly smiling back. When he looked at me like that, it was easy to believe that this was real, that it was going to work out.

I walked into the bedroom. The final crepuscular rays of sun lanced through the skylight and illuminated the bed. I pulled off my T-shirt, stepped out of my jeans. They’d cleaned me up in the emergency room, but I needed a shower. Maybe I was more tired than I’d realized though, because I thought to hell with it, crawled into bed and pulled up the covers. I stared up into the funnel of light, watching the dust motes dance in the air.

“You okay?” Graham asked from the doorway.

I sat up. “Yeah. Only I…”

“Me too.” He left the doorway and sat down on the bed, and all at once it was easy again, natural to put my arms around him, feel his arms around me. He needed a shower too — and a shave. I was smiling as our mouths brushed gently. The smiles evaporated in hungry fervor. Unsteady
mouths exploring flushed skin, trembling eyelashes, before latching on once more in shivery, sweet kisses. The familiar heat coiled inside me, tingling all the way from the soles of my feet to the ends of my hair.

I could feel Graham’s heart pounding against my own, feel the unevenness of his breath and the tremor of his hands.

When we finally broke the kiss, his eyes glittered. “It's okay,” I said. “It'll be okay. It’s not as complicated as it seems.”

“Does it seem complicated to you? It seems simple to me.”

I reached out to brush the tears at the edge of his eyes. The wet glittered on my thumb tip. “Are you still scared?”

“No. Are you?”

“No.” Maybe a little. I had something to lose again — and I didn’t think I could survive losing it twice

He smiled his wry smile, the funny little grin I’d fallen in love with. “I’ll fix us something to eat, and then we can talk.”

“We don’t have to talk.”

“Not a long conversation,” Graham agreed. “I want to say I love you. How’s that?”

“Perfect.”

I was still smiling as he kissed me a final time and headed back to the kitchen.

I stared up at the darkening skies. The stars would appear soon, first a faint and milky glow, then a hard, adamantine glitter, burning steadily through the night. It would be a good night. Maybe the first of many.

I could hear Graham in the other room, comfortable, familiar sounds of dishes and running water. I could hear the birds in the trees saying good-night to each other. And somewhere down the hillside I could hear the buzz of a
motorcycle like an angry bee growing fainter and fainter with the miles.
Novellas
The card was wedged under the brass 17 on my apartment door when I got back from my morning swim. For what felt like a long time I stood dripping on the welcome mat, staring at the slightly crooked number and the colored rectangle beneath.

A tarot card.

Finally, I removed the card, examined it. A castle in flames, a man and woman plummeting to the cliffs below, and the words *The Tower*.

Not good. Even if I turned it upside down so that the man and woman seemed to be doing handsprings through the clouds and lightning, it still looked pretty ominous.

I told myself that someone was playing a joke on me. Funny stuff.

Only a handful of people even knew I was writing a book about the Aldrich case. For that matter, who would care if they did know? It was dead news in every sense.

I stuck my key into the latch and stepped into my apartment, eyes adjusting to the gloom. Dusty sunshine poured through the arched living room window. Everything looked just the way I’d left it an hour ago. In the kitchen alcove the old dishwasher was steaming, stereo lights flashed from the entertainment center, and the screen of my laptop, which sat on the coffee table, offered a gently rolling view of star-lined outer space.

I walked through to the bedroom. The bed was stripped, sheets piled for laundry in the doorway. The mirrored closet doors were shut. I got a look at my face as I moved to open them, and was irritated to see that I looked worried — hazel eyes narrowed, tanned face grim, body tense.

*Jesus.* The last year had turned me into an old woman.
I slid open the closet doors, jumping back as a box of photos tumbled from their precarious perch on the shelf above and dumped snapshots across the carpet.

A photo of me — in a gold-sequined sombrero, no less — and Jack celebrating my thirtieth birthday at Don Cuco’s landed by my bare toes.

I stepped over the pictorial retrospective of my life and moved on to the bathroom, poking my head inside. Another glimpse of my frowning face in the cabinet mirror — and, by the way, I really did need a haircut, I reflected, momentarily distracted by the wet spikes of my chlorine-bleached hair. The shower dripped noisily. I yanked back the curtain with a plastic rustle.

Nothing.
Okay, bathtub ring, but otherwise nothing sinister.
Of course nothing sinister. Nobody had broken in. Why would they?
But why would someone leave a tarot card on my front door?
I went back to the kitchen, poured a glass of OJ, and drank it slowly, studying the tarot card.
Was someone trying to tell me something? Was it some kind of clue?
More likely it was just some kind of weird coincidence. Right?
And even if it wasn’t a weird coincidence…what was I supposed to do about it? It wasn’t exactly a lead that I could follow up. And I couldn’t picture myself going to the police over something so…vague. There was no defined threat, and I had absolutely no suspect in mind.
I could always talk to Jack.
I stared out the window over the sink at the row of second-story apartments, red doors and turquoise railings glimpsed through the tangle of ivy and bougainvillea.
Jack Brady was a homicide detective with the Glendale PD. We’d gone out a couple of times. Slept together once. We were still on friendly, if distant, terms.

The blinds to Jack’s apartment were up so it looked like he might be home.

I stripped off the swim trunks, tossed them over the shower rod, pulled on a pair of jeans and a clean T-shirt, stuck the tarot card in my pocket, and headed upstairs to Jack’s apartment.

I could hear Neil Young’s *Rust Never Sleeps* playing behind the scarlet door. The smell of something spicy drifted out the open kitchen window. My stomach tightened, but it had nothing to do with hunger — not for chili, anyway. I’d liked Jack a lot.

I knocked and the door opened. Jack stood framed in the doorway. He was about thirty-five, just over medium height and build, gray eyes and dark hair. He had a small white scar over his left eyebrow and a dimple in his right cheek when he smiled. He was not smiling now. Music and the aroma of garlic and onions wafted around him.

“Hey, Tim,” he said briefly, neutrally, after a pause.

“Hi, Jack,” I said. “Could I talk to you for a minute? I could use some advice. Professional advice.”

He hesitated — just long enough for me to realize I was making a mistake. Jack was the one who’d lost interest in pursuing a relationship. We were neighbors, not friends, and this was probably the equivalent of complaining to a doctor you’d met at a party about that pain in your neck.

“Yeah, sure,” Jack said, and he stepped aside, nodding for me to come in.

Worse than looking pushy, gauche, I realized this might seem like I was coming up with an excuse to see him again. So instead of coming in, I took a step back and said, “You know, on second thought, it can probably wait.”
“Whoa!” He caught my arm as I turned away. “What’s this?” He was smiling now, his eyebrows raised.

The feel of his hand on my arm reminded me vividly of our one and only night together. The warm sure slide of his palm stroking my belly, knuckles brushing the sensitive skin between hip and thigh, long strong fingers closing at last around my dick...

I let him draw me into his apartment.

Jack closed the door and I looked around curiously. Tidy as a monk’s cell. A stark black and white print of the desert hung over the fake fireplace. There were a few pieces of generic guy furniture, a number of paperbacks — mostly nonfiction and mostly true crime — on a low bookshelf. Nothing had changed. Jack had changed, that was all.

“Did you want a beer?” he asked, going behind the counter that separated kitchen from living room.

“Sure.”

Jack returned a moment later, handed me a frosty cold bottle, fingers grazing mine, and then he dropped down on the couch across from me. He took a swig.

He wore Levi’s and a yellow muscleman T-shirt that displayed his hard, tanned body to perfection.

“So...what’s the problem?” He grinned and the dimple showed for a moment. I wondered if a dimple was a liability for a cop. Did bad guys ever make the mistake of overestimating that mischievous crease in Jack’s lean cheek? “Jaywalking tickets piling up? Somebody finally haul you in for disturbing the peace?”

“Er...no.” I set the bottle on the glass-topped table, leaned on one hip, fished the tarot card out of my pocket, and put it face up on the coffee table.

Jack studied it, one eyebrow arching. “The Tower?”

“Yeah. Someone stuck it on my door while I was in the
pool this morning.”
   “Yeah, I saw you swimming,” he said absently, reaching for the card, careful to only touch the edges. His gray eyes lifted to mine. “And you see this as…what? A threat?”
   “I don’t know. I know it seems a little…” I raked a hand through my still-damp hair. “I think it has to do with the book I’m writing. About the Aldrich case. *The Tarot Card Murder.*”
   His face showed no comprehension.
   “I guess it’s supposed to be a joke.” I added doubtfully, “But it happened then, too.”
   “What happened then?” he asked. “You’re not making a lot of sense, Tim.”
   “Are you familiar with the Aldrich case?”
   “No.”
   “No?”
   He looked a little exasperated at my tone. “I’m not familiar with every homicide case that ever took place in the LA vicinity, no.”
   “Well, it’s just that it was kind of a high profile case. And it’s still unsolved.”
   “I’ll try not to take that personally.”
   “Back in 1957, a starlet by the name of Eva Aldrich was stabbed to death at a big Hollywood party. The only clue was a tarot card pinned on her blood-stained dress.” Like one of those old press cameras, my memory flashed on those gory old black and white crime scene photos. There had been one shot of Eva’s discarded and bloodstained high heel lying a few feet from her body. There was something poignant — something I couldn’t shake — when I thought about that frivolous little pump splashed with her dying blood.
   “And you’re writing a book about this?”
   I assented.
“You’re writing a book about a homicide that took place back in 1957?” Jack was expressionless. “And you think… what? You’ve got some geriatric killer stalking you?”

I felt color rise in my face. “I don’t know what to think,” I said evenly. “It’s kind of a weird coincidence, don’t you think?”

“Maybe. Who knows you’re writing this book?” He stared at the card, and then he stared at me. His eyes were just the color of the ocean when the mist starts rolling in.

“My publisher. The people I’ve interviewed so far.”

“And this card, The Tower, that’s the card that was pinned to the decedent’s — this Aldrich woman’s — dress?”

“No. The card pinned to her dress was the sixth card in the major arcana, The Lovers.”

“Not the same card?”

“No.”

“I see.”

“Look, I know it sounds silly. But…”

But what? I was the kind of guy who jumped at shadows? I didn’t have a sense of humor? I had too much imagination? I wanted attention? The unflattering possibilities were plenty.

He studied me for a moment, then straightened, arching his back a little like he was stiff — or bored with sitting there talking to me. “Okay. Tell you what,” he said. “I’ll do some checking for you. See what the unofficial word is on this cold case of yours.” He shrugged a broad shoulder. “It can’t hurt.”

I nodded, tension draining from my body. Maybe he was just humoring me, but I knew enough about Jack to know that if he said he’d check, he really would. Realizing I hadn’t touched my beer, I tilted the bottle to my lips. Jack
watched me steadily. It made me uncomfortable.

“Have you uncovered any new info on the case?” he asked.

“Not that I’m aware of.”
“Maybe it is a joke.”
“Where's the humor?”

He shrugged and checked his watch. It wasn't pointed, just remembering that he had somewhere to be.

I set the bottle down, stood up.
“Can I hang on to this?” He nodded to the card lying on the tabletop once more.
“If there were any prints I messed them up handling the card.”
“I noticed.” He offered that half grin. “It never hurts to check.”
“Thanks, Jack.” I moved toward the door. “I know this isn’t really anything for the police. Unless something else —”

“No problem.” He held the front door for me.

As I stepped out onto the shady walkway he said awkwardly, “I’m glad you stopped by, Tim. Really. I — uh — I’ve been meaning to call.”

“Oh, shit yeah.” I shrugged. Smiled. No big deal, this. “I’ve been busy myself.”

*****

Back in my apartment, I circled from room to room, trying to settle enough to get back to work. I wasn’t sure what had me more off-kilter, seeing Jack again or finding the tarot card.

After a few minutes, I sat down on the sofa with a copy of Roman Mayfield's *The Mystery of the Tarot*, thumbing through until I found the description of The Tower.

*Mars’ martial light shines upon The Tower, the card of*
war. The dark masonry of a structure built of lies crumbles beneath the lightning flash of truth. The Tower represents “false concepts and institutions that we take for real.” In a reading, the querent is often shaken when The Tower appears, expecting to be blinded by a shocking revelation. Sometimes the catalyst of reading forces the querent to face a bitter truth or knock down beliefs rooted in the concrete of self-deception.

Was someone trying to tell me I was heading for a fall? Absently I listened to the flap of palm tree leaves outside the open window, the distant rush of traffic from the Hollywood Freeway, listened for something else too. Something that didn’t belong. There was nothing to hear but the normal sounds of apartment living: splashing and laughter from the pool, someone’s stereo playing too loudly, another bout in an ongoing argument between my neighbors on the left.

And if I listened very carefully I could hear Jack humoring me. Okay. Tell you what. I’ll do some checking for you.

That was nice of him, seeing that he hadn’t been interested in keeping up the friendship — let alone something more.

Odd to think of him watching me swim. Couldn’t have been for more than a moment — just long enough to decide he didn’t feel like a morning swim.

If I closed my eyes I could feel his broad hand on the small of my back guiding our bodies closer, the comfortable friction of bare skin on skin, the solid rub of our erections. I could feel the tickle of his chest hair, the unexpected softness of his mouth…

But it hadn’t been perfect, by any means. We’d both
had too much to drink that night, and after we'd rushed past the feverish preliminaries of getting naked and getting between the sheets, there had been the usual awkward moments of trying to get into sync with each other, fitting our bodies together, finding a rhythm.

The warmth of him, the salty taste of him, the clean scent of him.

Abruptly, I sat up and started clicking away on my laptop, like I could tap and type away from memories. *It was just a couple of dates. Jeez. Get over it.*

I remembered I still had clothes in the laundry room washer.

The bad news — besides the rent — about living in one of those atmospheric 1940s LA apartment buildings was the little inconveniences, like parking in the back with the winos and homeless folk, the lack of any kind of security, and a laundry room that any Hollywood scout would immediately peg for a horror movie location.

Buried in the jungle of hibiscus and jasmine behind the pool yard, the laundry room was down a short flight of stairs. The overhead bulb was usually burned out because no one ever remembered to turn it off. There were three washers and three dryers to service the entire complex; I’d learned to take advantage of it during the day when most of the young and not-so-young professionals were working.

Carrying my laundry basket down the steps, I automatically flipped the wall switch, and, of course, nothing happened. It didn’t matter because there was enough daylight from above so that I could see to scoop soap into the battered machine.

It was warm and noisy with the sudsy washers filling up and the dryers tumbling. I put the lid down on my sodden clothes and turned to get the previous load I’d left in the
dryer. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught movement.
   I glanced swiftly toward the stairs.
   A shadow filled the doorway. The door to the laundry room slammed shut.
Chapter Two

"Hey!" I yelled.

There was no response; granted, it was hard to tell over the rumble of the machines and flood of water. I put a hand out, fingers brushing the cool cement wall, and started toward the stairs.

My foot bumped into the bottom step. I couldn’t see a damn thing; it was like a crypt in there. I swore under my breath and went up the first couple of stairs — and realized there was someone with me in the humid darkness. Someone at the top of the stairs, blocking the exit.

I could feel him — and it was definitely a him because I could smell his cheap aftershave — feel his warmth and bulk — although I couldn’t see him. I stopped midcharge and teetered off balance for a second.

He growled, “Eva Aldrich is ancient history. Butt out or you’ll be history too.”

A couple of meaty hands planted in my chest, and he shoved me hard.

I fell back, grabbing blindly at empty air, and tumbled down the stairs, landing in a painful sprawl at the bottom, my head grazing one of the vibrating washers. Dimly I was aware of the door above me opening, a flash of afternoon sunlight, and the door banging shut again.

Shocked, I just lay there for a few moments trying to process what had happened. Luckily, it was a short flight of steps. My elbow hurt and my back felt twisted, but mostly I’d landed on my ass. Nothing broken. Nothing sprained as far as I could tell. I’d banged my head against the washer, not hard, but hard enough, and that, more than anything, was scaring the shit out of me. I stayed still in the soap-scented blackness and waited for the fireworks.

Meanwhile the asshole was getting away…
But I let the thought go, just as I had to let my attacker go.

So much for thinking the tarot card pinned to my door was a joke or a coincidence. Apparently someone didn’t want this book written. Had sent a goon to lean on me like something in a pulp novel. It was crazy. Eva Aldrich had been dead for fifty years. Half the suspects weren’t even alive anymore.

The washer above me hit spin cycle, and I edged away from the juddering motion. It occurred to me that so far my circuitry seemed okay, so I got carefully to my feet and felt my way through the darkness again to the stairs and the doorway.

I pushed the door open to flickering sunlight. Shrubbery stirred in the breeze, but there was no sign of anyone. To the right, the path led to the pool yard where a woman in a red bikini baked on a lounge chair. To the left, the path led to the parking lot behind the apartment complex. The tall gate swung gently in the wake of someone’s hasty exit.

Stepping through the gate, I studied the small dusty lot crowded with cars.

A sheet of newspaper pinwheeled on the breeze, a beer can rolled to a stop a few feet away. A blue jay gave me hell from the telephone pole above.

Nothing out of the ordinary.

I noticed Jack’s Jeep was gone, so there was no point running upstairs to tell him about the latest development. And I didn’t like the fact that this was the first line of action that occurred to me.

Withdrawing from the parking lot, I headed back to my apartment, past the nearly deserted pool yard, generator humming noisily, past the open windows of my neighbors, snatches of cartoons and talk shows. I let myself into my apartment and dug the phone out from beneath the pile of
throw cushions — the LA Times having a habit of calling right when I finally fell into a deep sleep.

My conversation with Glendale PD went pretty much as expected. The dispatcher was sympathetic but admitted that without any kind of description of my attacker — or even a suspect — there wasn’t a lot they could do. She promised to send a patrol car over to take my report, and that was basically that.

I fixed myself a sandwich, although I wasn’t hungry, poured a glass of iced tea, and sat down with my notes.

The popular theory at the time of Eva Aldrich’s death was that her ex-husband, a gas station owner by the name of William Burack, had killed her in a fit of jealous rage. Burack’s then-current girlfriend had alibied him, and the police had never been able to prove otherwise. I studied the photos of Burack. He’d been one of those big blond bruising who turn to fat as they age. He hadn’t aged a lot, though, dying in a car crash in 1965.

Since he was dead, I couldn’t see anyone close to Burack getting worked up at the idea of my writing a book about the case. He hadn’t had any kids and his only close relative, a brother, had died sometime in the 1980s. So if someone was threatening me to stay out of the Aldrich case, it probably wasn’t because he feared I was going to uncover proof that Burack had killed his glamour-girl ex.

Which meant that someone else had.

Washing the ham sandwich down with iced tea, I considered this theory objectively. It made sense, right? Someone unconnected to Burack didn’t want me digging into the old case. Because someone, somewhere, still had something to lose if the truth about a half-century-old homicide were to be revealed.

Since there’s no statute of limitations on murder, there was an obvious motive for keeping the identity of Eva’s
killer secret: her killer was still alive.

But Jack also had a point. Most of the principals in the Aldrich case were now in their seventies. Not that trial and prison would be any more appealing at age seventy than at age twenty, but it was hard to picture a member of the Geritol set scurrying around tacking tarot cards to my door and shoving me down stairways.

Besides, no senior citizen had knocked me down in the laundry room — unless it was Jack LaLanne. There had been a size and a force — and a voice — to my attacker that had indicated an adult male in his prime.

Well, on the bright side, assault and threats would make pretty good publicity for the book. Assuming I lived to write it.

I was still wound too tight to work and my muscles were beginning to stiffen up after their collision with a cement slab. I set aside my notes and occupied myself with tossing out old newspapers, vacuuming, reshelving all my reference books. I paused in the bathroom and swore at my reflection. A colorful bruise was making an appearance where my forehead had caught the edge of the washer.

Great. I’d just got rid of the last set of abrasions.

It was sometime after eight that a thump on my door sent me jumping out of my chair — and nearly my skin. Which pissed me off no end. I hated feeling wide open; it was happening way too much these days.

Eye to the peephole found a miniature Jack adjusting his tie as though it were too tight. That explained the Police! Open Up! knock. He was in official persona.

I unlocked the door, opened it.

“A chain would be a good idea,” he remarked.

I stepped back and Jack stepped inside. He looked around curiously, and I remembered that this was the only
time he'd actually been in my place. He'd picked the right night; usually it looked like a cyclone had hit it.

“Would you like a beer?” I asked.

“No, I can’t st —” He broke off, staring at the discoloration on my forehead. “What happened to you?” Then his face changed, uncomfortable as he leaped to the wrong conclusion about what had happened to me.

I said shortly, “Someone threw me down a flight of stairs.”

“Oh. Right.” His eyes looked dark in the soft lighting of my apartment. “I heard you had some trouble today.” He hesitated. “Maybe I will have a beer.”

I got a cold beer from the fridge and brought it to him. He was sitting on the sofa glancing through the photos of the cast of suspects in the Aldrich case. He took the beer with absent thanks and continued looking through the photos.

He paused at one. “Now here’s a familiar face. Tony Fumagalli.”

“Tony the Cock,” I agreed. “The Early Years.”

“Don’t tell me he's involved in this?”

I nodded. “Eva was engaged to him for about six months. She broke it off a few days before her death. No one seems to know what went wrong, but by all accounts it wasn’t an amicable split.”

“He’s not an amicable guy. Or he wasn’t. He was one of those old school gangsters like Mickey Cohen or Johnny Stompanato. He’s in some kind of old folks home now.”

“He’s got Alzheimer’s,” I said. “Currently residing at Golden Palms Nursing Home in Santa Barbara.”

Jack’s eyebrows rose. “You've done your homework.”

“Yeah, well.” It bothered me that this surprised him.

For a minute our eyes held. Jack seemed to notice he had a beer in his hand and took a swig.
“So,” he said, lowering the bottle. “Why don’t you tell me what happened this afternoon? Assault and battery in the laundry room?”

“They sent a uniformed officer by,” I said. “I filled out a report.”

He nodded, noting and dismissing. “What happened?”

I told him exactly what had happened.

“Did you get a look at the guy at all?”

“No. Not a glimpse.”

“What did he sound like?”

“Big.”

He grinned and that damned dimple showed. “Did he have an accent or anything that might help in identifying him?”

I thought back to the close darkness of the laundry room. “He didn’t have an accent that I noticed. I’d say he was a native Angeleno. His voice was deep, mature.” I thought it over. “He sounded confident,” I said. “Like maybe he did this for a living.”

“Hired muscle?” Jack glanced instinctively to the glossy of Tony Fumagalli in his sleazy prime.

I shrugged. “It’s possible. But anyone can hire a thug. It wouldn’t have to be someone connected to Tony the C —”

I caught Jack’s eye and for some reason swallowed the rest of the word. “Tony F.”

Was that a gleam of amusement in Jack’s gaze? He said, “Yeah. And Fumagalli did have a rock ha — solid alibi for the Aldrich homicide.”

Okay, it wasn’t just me.

“He was in Vegas at the Tropicana gambling away a small fortune,” I agreed. “But he could have hired someone to kill Eva.”

“That’s true, but whoever whacked Aldrich didn’t appear to be a professional. That was not in any way an
execution-style murder. She was stabbed thirteen times. That kind of MO can indicate a couple of things: a disturbed psyche and/or a perceived personal grievance."

I knew he was right, which was why the ex-husband had been the favorite suspect. The method of Eva's murder had indicated a certain level of rage or passion that one just didn’t associate with cold-blooded mob bosses.

“Were you able to find anything out?” I asked.

“I was in court most of the day.” He stared at the stack of photos. “I talked to a couple of people. It’s a very cold case. Frozen, in fact.”

“It’s a Hollywood legend.”

“Oh yeah. There are all kinds of wild theories about who might have offed Aldrich. Everyone from her astrologer to the commies.”

“But the most popular theory is her ex-husband, Will Burack.”

“Right.” He studied me meditatively. “You know it usually is the current or former spouse — or boyfriend — in a homicide.”

“I know. And I know the cops tagged Burack as the most likely suspect. But Burack’s dead, so who objects to my looking into this very cold case?”

“I don't know.” Jack drained his beer bottle and rose. “I take it you’re not planning to back off from this book?”

“No.” I rose too, only half joking, “I’d have to give the advance back. And I already spent it.”

“Right.” He was all business now. “Well, let me give you some advice. Change your routine. And keep changing it. Swim in the afternoons instead of the morning. Don’t use the back parking lot as a short cut. Try a different market besides Whole Foods — and pick a day besides Tuesday to shop. The dead bolt is good, but get a chain on the door and don’t open the door until you see who’s on the other
side.”

“Thanks for the advice.” I didn’t think Jack just happened to hit on Tuesdays or Whole Foods market as a hypothetical example of my shopping habits. I wasn’t sure I should be flattered by this attention to detail; it seemed more like Jack on the job rather than Jack romantically interested.

Anyway, I had a lot more important things to focus on — like the fact that while Jack apparently agreed there was a threat here, he didn’t seem to see a way to neutralize it — unless I was willing to drop the book.

I opened the door and Jack stepped out into the warm smoggy night.

He suddenly turned back to me. “Look…Tim. I really was going to call you.” He cleared his throat. “The thing is…I’m not interested in a — a serious relationship.”

I stared at him, heat flooding my face — my entire body — mouth dry, heart slamming against my collarbone. I managed to get out, in a voice that didn’t sound anything like mine, “Neither was I.”

He had the grace to wince. “I know. It’s just…you seemed kind of …vulnerable.” His eyes moved to the bruise on my forehead. “I didn’t think it was fair —”

I quit worrying about being polite on the off chance I ever ran into him around the complex again. “You don’t have to make excuses for not wanting to see me, Jack,” I said. “In fact, I kind of prefer the excuses I made up myself.”

I moved to shut the door, but his hand shot out, stopping it midswing. “I don’t think I explained that very well.”

“You underestimate your communication skills.”

“I really like you, Tim. I hope w —”

“Likewise. ‘Night.”
The door closed firmly, cutting off his subdued “Good night.”

I stood for a moment listening to him walk away. Silence filled the hollow place in my chest where my heart had used to beat.
Chapter Three

“It was all such a long time ago,” Gloria Rayner sighed.
We were sitting in the opulent “drawing room” of her Bel Air home. The room was crowded with the kinds of antiques that probably originally sat in a French palace right before the peasants had had enough and killed everyone they could lay their hands on: spindly legged gilt chairs, brocade-covered sofas, marble-topped tables, and all kinds of gold-framed mirrors and vases and china knickknacks.

Gloria herself sort of looked like a knickknack with her platinum blonde hair and porcelain made-up face. She was very tiny and very wrinkled. Her baby blue hostess gown was a perfect match for the blue of the silk wallpaper behind her, with its designs of fantasy pagodas and curved bridges.

I said, “I appreciate your taking the time to talk to me again, Ms. Rayner.”

“That’s no hardship, Mr. North,” Gloria said with a flash of that famous smile. “You’re a delicious young morsel.” She giggled at my expression. “When you get to be my age you can say things like that.”

Actually, Gloria had been saying things like that for the last fifty years. She was nearly as famous for her racy comments as she was for the string of B movies that had secured her charter membership in the Hollywood bombshell pantheon. I’d seen a slew of those movies in the name of research, and I’d had to admit that she did have something: sexual charisma or animal magnetism. It was diffused now by age, but she didn’t seem to know that. Or maybe she did know it, and found it all the funnier.

“So you don’t have any idea why Eva broke her engagement to Tony Fumagalli?” I asked for the second
time that afternoon.

Gloria bent forward to pick up one of the three white miniature poodles oscillating at her feet. “No,” she said. She straightened up, holding the poodle. “Tony the Cock. What a laugh. Did you know the name Fumagalli means ‘smoked chicken’ in Italian?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Yeah. Smoked chicken!” She laughed a throaty nicotine laugh. “You said you’re a reporter?”

“I used to be.” I stroked the poodle on my own lap. It squirmed contently. “Now I’m writing this book about Eva.”

“About Eva?” she asked shrewdly. “Or about Eva’s murder?”

“Both, really. I can’t really explore the murder without understanding Eva.”

“You figure Eva out, explain her to me,” she replied. She patted the dog's head with her gnarled fingers. Her nails were mandarin-length and painted in hot pink. One of the other dogs barked and she patted the sofa beside her. “Come on, then!”

The dog jumped, nails slithering on the slick upholstery, and wriggled into place beside Gloria.

I said, “But you were Eva’s best friend.”

“Baby, I was Eva’s only friend. Her only real friend, unless you count that quack Roman Mayfield. Now there was a queer duck. And I do mean queer.”

I looked at my notes. After a moment I said, “Roman Mayfield, the astrologer?”

“Seer to the Stars!” she scoffed. “Yep. He and Eva were as thick as thieves. He told her not to go the party that night.”

I’d heard this several times, but I’d always figured Mayfield’s premonition had been 20/20 hindsight. “Did she say so?”
“He said so. I heard him. For once he was right.” She fastened me with one of her marble blue eyes. “What paper did you used to work for?”

“The Santa Monica Mirror.”

“Never heard of it. So you decided you wanted to be An Author? My third husband was an author. What a joke. The only thing that guy authored were love letters to my secretary. Which is one reason why I don’t keep a secretary anymore. Or a husband.” She laughed that raucous laugh. “Not that I need a secretary these days. No one remembers Gloria Rayner. It’s all about which Third World country Angelina Jolie is adopting this week.” She sighed. “Hollywood isn’t what it used to be. In my day we understood about the fantasy, about entertainment. Who wants to see movie stars holding preferences about death and disease and disaster? Where’s the box office in that?”

“Oh, right.” I made an effort to drag the interview back on course. “So Eva wasn’t afraid of anyone or —?”

“Eva wasn’t afraid of anything,” she interrupted. “Although she was superstitious. She believed all that horseshit Roman used to shovel her way. It wasn’t just an affectation. Tarot cards, astrology, pick-up sticks, who the hell knows what all.”

“But she didn’t believe him that night? She went to the party at the Garden of Allah after he warned her not to.”

“She probably figured Roman was jealous. You’ve probably run across the type in your line of work.”

“Roman’s type?”

“Hollywood has more than its share of jealous queens — of both sexes.” She winked at me. “I used to tell Eva I thought Roman believed he controlled the stars instead of just reading ‘em. Took it very personally when anyone didn’t hang on his every prediction.” Gloria shrugged. “Prediction or not, Evie wanted to see Stephen that night.”
“Stephen Ball?”
Gloria nodded and looked down at the dog she was patting. “They were both starring in a picture. *Desire in the Dust* or something. It was an adventure picture. Eva played Steve’s love interest.”

“*Danger in the Dunes,*” I said. “But they’d been engaged, right? Stephen Ball and Eva? For a brief time before she met Tony Fumagalli.”

“Yep, but that was all over. On Stephen’s part anyway.”
I tried to read her expression. “So it wasn’t over for Eva? Was that why she broke off her engagement to Fumagalli?”

“Like I said, baby, it was a long time ago.” She studied me. “Tim North. Do your girlfriends call you Timmy? You’re a very nice looking boy, Timmy. You’ve got striking coloring. Blond hair and brown eyes.” She leaned closer and I automatically straightened up like you do when a wasp is trying to land on your nose. “But they’re not brown, are they? More what we used to call whiskey-colored. Very nice.” She winked. “Very nice.”

I got out, “Uh…Ms. Rayner, who do you think killed Eva?”

She replied instantly, “Will Burack. There was never a question in my mind.”

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Gloria pressed me to stay for lunch, but I escaped on the — true — grounds that I had an appointment at the UCLA Library Department of Special Collections.

As it was, by the time I caught the bus for Westwood I was starting to feel tired and a little let down, enough so that I considered skipping UCLA and just heading home. There wasn’t any reason for it. The interview had gone fine, although it was obvious to me from Gloria’s body language and diversionary tactics that she wasn’t being
candid about a number of things. That was to be expected. Maybe I wasn’t asking the right questions. Maybe I wasn’t aggressive enough. Or maybe she just needed to get a little more familiar with me — not that she wasn’t plenty familiar.

I’d had a bad night, and that always tended to color the next day. The bad night wasn’t a surprise considering the physical and emotional trauma of the day, and there wasn’t any point giving in to it. I’d had bad nights before — one in particular, which reminded me of Jack. The very last person I needed to be thinking of.

In my experience, when a guy tells you he doesn’t want a serious relationship, he really means he doesn’t want a serious relationship with you. If Mr. Right came along, he’d get serious fast enough. In a way Jack had done me a favor, although my currently fragile ego could have done without his sudden decision to come clean. I already knew Jack didn’t want to pursue a relationship, and I knew why. And once upon a time I’d probably have felt the same way.

So I didn’t blame him, but I didn’t want to be friends with him, either. In fact, I’d be happy never to run into him again. And I was going to do my best to see that I didn’t run into him again, which probably wouldn’t be hard because I was pretty sure Jack felt the same.

The bus roared along its air-conditioned way, and I popped the gold stud I’d removed for my interview with Gloria back in my ear, put my head back and closed my eyes. I thought about what I’d learned from Gloria. I kept remembering the Life magazine layout of that fateful party. Glossy black and white photos of Hollywood Babylon. Somehow Hollywood parties just never seemed as glamorous or exclusive as they did back in the ‘40s and ‘50s. Maybe it was because of the old star system. Those old actors and actresses had a mystique that didn’t seem
to exist anymore. It wasn't all good, of course. Part of the price of being packaged for public consumption meant sacrificing a lot of freedom both personally and professionally.

About an hour later, I sat in the hushed Ahmanson-Murphy Reading Room carefully turning the page of the September 1957 issue of *Modern Screen* magazine. The cover featured an artwork portrait of Eva Aldrich eating an apple. The issue had come out the month of Eva’s death, and it had been a huge seller. The article itself was not wildly informative: one of those planted publicity pieces where Eva chatted girlishly about her latest film, *Danger in the Dunes*, and her dreamy upcoming wedding to local businessman Tony Fumagalli.

Besides the fact that Eva mentioned her dashing costar Stephen Ball six times during the single-page interview, there didn’t seem to be any indication that her romance with Fumagalli was on the rocks.

Apparently no one — including Fumagalli — had seen it coming.

He hadn’t been the only one, I thought, studying the sexy little grin of Eva’s pinup portrait.

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It was late by the time the bus let me off. I was dead tired and the thought of walking all the way around from Central Avenue was about as enticing as a picnic in Death Valley. I thought of Jack’s warning about not using the apartment parking lot as a shortcut, and then I thought to hell with Jack, and turned off the narrow alley that ran behind the neighboring complex.

It wasn’t really an alley, just a pathway of dirt and rocks and weeds stretching behind the buildings with a tall cinder block wall on one side shielding the apartments from the adjacent freeway.
Oleander bushes lined the freeway side of the wall, dead leaves and withered blossoms scattering the pathway as I strode along the length of two apartment complexes. At the end of the walk was a shorter cinder block wall. There were two wooden crates stacked against the wall providing makeshift steps. I climbed onto the crates and hauled myself up, balancing precariously on top of the wall as I looked down into the parking lot of my own apartment structure.

Jack, wearing jeans, boots, and a black blazer, was getting out of his Jeep. At the sound of my scrabbling ascent, he jerked around and stared.

One leg over the wall, I paused. Our gazes fastened across the roofs of cars.

_Busted._

“Nice to see you take my advice seriously,” he said.

“I hang on your every word,” I returned, and I jumped down, landing with the lightness of a lot of practice beside a blue Mustang on wheel blocks.

I’m not sure why I was playing the smart-ass; I could tell by the way his face tightened that it wasn’t going to win points. But then, I didn’t want to win points with Jack anymore, and that allowed for a certain freedom. Actually, it allowed for a lot of freedom considering how very careful I’d been the couple of times we’d gone out. It had been like auditioning for a part or interviewing for a job you knew you weren’t qualified for. I’d been on my best behavior every second. Not giving a damn was surprisingly liberating.

I brushed the seat of my charcoal trousers, feeling where the rough surface of the wall had snagged the material. Jack continued to eye me. I walked toward the gate, passing close enough by him that I could see his five o’clock shadow.

“The fact is,” he said suddenly, “I wanted to talk to you.”
I'd had all the talks with Jack I wanted. “Can it wait? It's been a long day and I need a shower.”

“It's about your book. I found something out today that I think you ought to know.”

He sounded pretty grim, so I said, “In that case, follow me, Officer.”

He did — in silence. We got to my apartment and I let us in. The answering machine was on and I heard my twin sister Callie’s voice.

“Excuse me,” I said to Jack, and I brushed past him and grabbed for the phone before Callie hung up.

“Hey, Cal,” I said.

“Hey,” she said with obvious relief. “How are you doing?”

“Good.” I glanced at Jack who was still standing in the doorway. Have a seat, I mouthed at him.

Apparently he’d been waiting for an invitation. He sat down on the sofa and stared at the turned-off television.

“Are you?” Callie questioned. “Because I got this sudden feeling last night, and I’ve had it all day.”

“Ah, Cal,” I protested. But it was useless. It was the twin thing, I guess; she always knew when something was up with me, the same way I did when something was up with her. “I’m really okay.” I was uncomfortably aware of the fact that Jack couldn’t fail to hear every word.

“How’s the book coming?”


“The one who does those AARP commercials? That must have been a laugh.” Her voice changed. “Are you… taking care of yourself, Tim? You know, doing everything you’re supposed to?”

I expelled a long breath. “Of course. Come on; stop
acting like a big sister. You’re only eight minutes older.”

Callie chuckled. “I did a lot of living in those eight minutes. So are you still seeing the cop?”

I’d forgotten I’d told her about Jack. “No,” I said after a hesitation.

“Oh, no! What happened? He sounded —”

“Not my type,” I said. “In fact, he was kind of an asshole.” Jack was staring at me with an odd expression. I gave him a cheerful smile. Unless he had bionic ears, there was no way he could hear what we were saying, but I had the not unpleasant feeling he somehow suspected.

“That’s too bad,” Callie was saying. “I keep hoping you’ll meet someone.”

“Low on my list of priorities right now,” I said. “I have to get this book finished.”

“Do you think you’ll have time for a trip home this summer? Mom and Dad were really hoping you would spend some time here. I think Mom wants to make up for…everything. I think she needs to. And Dad really misses you. You know that.”

This was getting way too complicated. I said carefully, “Yeah. I don’t know. Maybe. It depends on the book. Hey, Cal, can I call you back? I’m in the middle of something.”

“Oh, you should have said!” She hastily said her good-byes and I said mine, and then I hung up and walked over to the chair across from Jack.

“That was the twin sister?” he said.

I nodded, surprised he remembered, but I didn’t want to get distracted from the purpose of his visit. I didn’t want to start thinking of Jack as a friend — or mistaking a cop’s attention to the little things for anything more than that.

“What was it you wanted to tell me?”

“Did you ever hear of a guy named Raymond Irvine? He was a crime reporter for the Herald Examiner.”
I shook my head. “No. Should I have?”
“It depends. In 1963, he started research for a book on Eva Aldrich’s murder.”
“He couldn’t have finished it,” I said, watching his face. “There is no book on the Aldrich case.”
“No, he didn’t finish it. He was killed the same year. His car was run off the road on Mulholland Drive.”
Chapter Four


“It wasn’t an accident,” Jack said. “His car was forced off the road.”

“How do you know?”

“I read the report.”

“Wow.” I didn’t know what else to say. I rubbed my jaw and glanced at Jack again. He was watching me steadily.

“I guess they didn’t catch the guy?”

“Guy or gal,” Jack said. “No. The only witness was too far away to get a make on the license. The car was described as a two-toned Chevy Impala. In the 1960s the Chevy Impala was the most popular car in America.”

I said, “Will Burack was still alive in 1963.”

“I thought your theory was that Burack didn’t do it.”

“It’s too soon for me to have a theory,” I said. Jack’s gaze woke me to the realization that I’d automatically started unbuttoning my shirt. My fingers stilled. “Were there any suspects in Irvine’s death? Was a connection actually made to the Aldrich case?”

“No.” Jack raised his eyes from my apparently fascinating blue tailored shirt. “In fact, the primary suspect was the former boyfriend of a girl Irvine had been dating. But nothing was ever proven. And the boyfriend owned a Buick.”

“Then how did you make the connection to the Aldrich case?”

“The senior investigator on the Aldrich case was one of the first people Irvine interviewed when he started research for his book.”
“Bud Perkins.” I rose and stepped down the short hall to my bedroom to change. I could still see Jack angled in the closet mirror. I thought about moving out of range, and then I just…decided not to. I raised my voice as I unzipped. “Perkins passed away in seventy-eight.”

“Yeah, but he kept track of anything and anyone related to the Aldrich case. He’d stuck a note about Irvine writing a book in the file.”

I pulled on Levi’s. Buttoned them up. Jack’s mirrored gaze met mine. I said, “Was that normal?”

I was sort of pleased to see he’d lost his train of thought. He looked away, offering his profile as I watched him listen to me undress and dress. He had a weird expression. Was he afraid I was going to try and seduce him? He could rest easy. “No, it's not normal,” he said. “Not then. Not now. But I guess the killer in the Aldrich case was Perkins's one that got away.”

Dragging on a faded cinnamon-colored Abercrombie & Fitch T-shirt with the slogan *I had a nightmare I was a brunette*, I returned to the front room. It hadn’t escaped my Master Detective attention that Jack still seemed to be checking into the Aldrich case on my behalf; I wasn’t sure what to make of that.

I took the chair across from him again and said, “It could be a coincidence.”

“It could.” His lips folded firmly shut as he took in my T-shirt, whether at the message or the fact that it was a woman’s tee — Jack preferring to stick to the butch side of the triangle.

“Either way, I appreciate the heads-up.”

He nodded, moved to rise, and then stopped. “Any more threats? Or tarot cards?”

I shook my head.

“I should have word on the card left on your door by
tomorrow.”

“Thanks.” I slouched in my chair, crossed my ankle over the opposite knee. I had a lot to think about, and I couldn’t think with Jack there. I didn’t go so far as to drum my fingers on the armrest, but I think he got the message.

He stood, and — relieved — I stood. And then — taking me aback — he sat down once more.

“Listen,” he said slowly. “It’s possible Bud Perkins kept a private file on the Aldrich case.”

I forgot all about not being able to think with Jack in the room. “Seriously? Is there a way of finding out for sure?”

“I can do some checking.”

I was so excited at this possibility that it barely occurred to me to wonder why Jack was being so helpful. But really, what was the mystery? If he was instrumental in helping me come up with a convincing scenario for who had killed Eva Aldrich, it sure wouldn’t do his career any harm. He’d get his acknowledgment right there with the UCLA Library in the front of the book.

“That would be great,” I said. “Do you think it’s likely?”

He flicked me a look from under his lashes. “Yeah, I do. We’re not supposed to, but detectives do sometimes keep their own files, especially when a case that really gets to you goes cold and you have to move on.”

“I appreciate you taking time to look into this for me,” I said. I waited for him to get up and leave, but he just kept sitting on the sofa looking at me like he was waiting for something.

What?

I said, “I don’t mean to be rude, but I’ve got to eat something. Skipping meals plays hell with my wiring.”

Even a day ago I couldn’t have admitted that to him; now I had no problem. I thought that was a good sign that I was well on my way to being over Jack. Not that I didn’t
still find him attractive: the easy power of his trim, muscular body; that lazy grin — that disconcerting dimple. But I found my response to him more annoying than anything.

He said, “You want to go grab a couple of burgers somewhere? There are a couple of things…”

I gazed at him with disbelief. “No,” I replied shortly. “I don’t. I’m tired. I want a shower and dinner and a couple of mindless hours in front of the tube.” I didn’t wait for his reply, uncoiling from the chair and going into the adjoining kitchen. Yanking open the fridge, I took out the still half-frozen tilapia and tossed it on the counter. It landed with a little bang — louder than I’d intended. There was no point getting mad. I knew what this was about: Jack feeling guilty. Jack trying to make good on his hope that we could still be friends.

Every muscle in my body tensed as he rose and came over to the bar separating the kitchen from the dining alcove. Watching me ripping open the plastic wrap on the fish, he said, “Sorry. I should have thought. There’s nothing that can’t wait till later.”

I gave him a brief look. “Good.”

He turned and opened the apartment door. “Don’t forget to lock this,” he said, and went out.

Netflix had delivered *Danger in the Dunes*, Eva Aldrich’s last film, so I popped it into the player and watched it while I ate my dinner.

It was not a brilliant film. One of those convoluted VistaVision adventure-romances, the plot had something to do with a lost city and Tuaregs and the rekindling of an old romance. Eva played a feisty lady reporter who, following a plane crash in the desert, gets foisted on her old explorer boyfriend played with GI Joe-like stiffness by the implausibly handsome Stephen Ball. What the story
lacked, the chemistry between the two leads more than made up for it. Eva and Stephen Ball were *hot* together. Hot, as the movie trailer would have it, as the sizzling desert sun. And I didn’t think it was acting, because neither of them was particularly gifted in the thespian department.

True, sexual chemistry didn’t necessarily mean they loved each other — or even liked each other. But, according to Gloria, Eva had gone to that fateful party at the Garden of Allah to see Ball. This, only three days after ending her engagement to gangster Tony Fumagalli.

Neither Fumagalli nor Eva had given an official explanation for the end of their engagement. Had the reason been Stephen Ball? Eva had been briefly engaged to Ball soon after she landed in Hollywood in the early fifties. She’d broken it off to marry William Burack, a wealthy local businessman, but that hadn’t taken either, and two years later she had divorced Burack with some untactful comments about the grease under his fingernails. It was a matter of public record that garage-station owner Burack had not taken the split well and had continued to try to “woo” Eva back. Nowadays his idea of “wooing” would be classified as “stalking,” but things were different back in the fifties, and a lot of people were sympathetic to the idea of a husband wanting his headstrong wife back.

There were plenty of good reasons for suspecting Burack of killing Eva — including a drunken threat that if he couldn’t have her no one could — but the cops had been unable to shake his current paramour’s alibi. And Burack had a few influential friends. So he had evaded arrest, though not scandal and suspicion, and when he died in 1965, most people believed the answer to who had killed Eva Aldrich died with him.

But if Burack had killed Eva, why was someone so anxious that I not look into this half-century-old murder?
I needed to talk to Stephen Ball, but so far he had refused all my requests, and my publisher’s requests, for an interview. He still lived in the Beverly Hills mansion he had bought decades earlier.

Watching him and Eva locked in one of those grand Hollywood clinches, I had to admit they made a beautiful couple. He was tall and dashing, although I never trusted a guy with one of those pencil-thin mustaches, and she was beautiful in a bargain-basement Elizabeth Taylor sort of way.

As I studied Eva, I realized I still had no fix on her character. I’d seen most of her films — there were only twelve of them — and I’d talked to a number of people who had worked with her, but I still had no sense of who she was. She remained as impervious to analysis as her screen character was unsmudged and unmussed by sand and wind and plane crashes and Tuaregs and all that kissing.

Was that because, dying at twenty-four, her character had not been fully formed? Or was she just a shallow party girl? Or had no one really known her very well?

Or maybe the people who knew Eva best still weren’t willing to talk about her.

Gloria Rayner could certainly have told me a lot more, and maybe she would the next time we talked.

Speaking of talking, it would have been nice to be able to bounce some of my thoughts off someone, share my theories — not that I had a lot of theories at this point — but it would have been nice to...hell, watch this awful movie with someone.

Since the accident I’d cut myself off from most of my friends. From everyone, really. I didn’t see that changing anytime soon. My experience with Jack had confirmed what I already knew.
Jack.
Who was I kidding? The someone I wanted to talk to, share my theories with, bounce my thoughts — and other things — off was Jack. Even now.
And how sad was that? It was pathetic.

I didn’t sleep well that night. I kept thinking I heard someone outside my bedroom window. I got up and checked a couple of times, but there was no one there. When I dozed, I dreamed of burly shadow shapes warning me to mind my own business, and in my dreams it seemed like a good idea.

When I finally drifted off, it was after four in the morning, and I ended up oversleeping, which meant I had to rush to make my interview with Roman Mayfield. I didn’t want to take a chance on being late since he’d already canceled three previously scheduled meets. I had to skip my morning swim, scarf down my breakfast of instant oatmeal — chased by the usual meds and vitamins and eleven different herbs and spices — and then run for the bus.

I was so goddamned sick and tired of having to take a bus everywhere.

Mayfield lived north of Sunset Boulevard in a pseudo-French chateau built by an oil magnate in the 1920s. A security guard, suspicious that I had arrived on foot, eventually — after much back and forthing on the security booth phone — finally let me through the towering wrought iron gates. I hiked up the long, tree-lined drive to the mansion.

A maid opened the double front doors and escorted me down a mile or so of parquet floors and chandelier-lined ceilings to my audience with Mayfield. The hall was lined with photos of Mayfield and a galaxy of celebrities
stretching from the late ‘40s to current day.

The maid led me through an arched doorway and I found myself in a huge room with a ceiling painted midnight blue and speckled with gold and silver stars like the night sky. At the far end of the room was an enormous desk. A very tall, very thin, bald man sat behind the desk, and behind the man was a huge black and gold astrology chart.

He watched with an intent, unblinking gaze as I walked toward the desk — and he said not a word. He looked like Hollywood’s idea of the head priest in an ancient Egyptian temple — if Egyptian priests wore black silk turtlenecks and Armani slacks.

I said, “Thanks very much for agreeing to see me, Mr. Mayfield.”

“Exactly as I thought!” Mayfield exclaimed in a deep, melodious voice, and he rose from behind the desk. “Sagittarius. The Archer. Am I correct?”

He was correct, actually. My birthday was December 19. But he could have found that out a number of ways; I didn’t believe he could tell just by looking at me.

“Timothy North,” I responded.

“Curious, direct, sincere, and idealistic. Useful traits for a journalist.” He came around the desk and offered his hand. “I’ve been looking forward to this meeting.”

I shook hands and said, “I know. I got your calling card.”

He continued to clasp my hand, his expression all at once guarded. He was quite a bit older than the latest of the photos in his hall gallery. Late seventies, I thought, although he looked very fit. I noticed that he had one blue eye and one brown. What was that called? Heterochromia? It seemed a nice touch for a professional oracle.
“My…calling card?” Mayfield repeated cautiously.
“Sure,” I said. “ Didn’t you leave a tarot card on my front
door?”
Chapter Five

After an astonished moment, Mayfield threw back his head and laughed. He had a great laugh, hearty and unrestrained. I found my lip twitching in response.

“There’s that famous Sagittarian intuition!”

“I don’t know about that,” I said. “You’re the only person involved in the Aldrich case that I know of who reads tarot cards.”

I’d been thinking about that during the long wakeful hours of the night, and it had occurred to me that whoever left the tarot card on my door had not been the same person who sent a thug to threaten me. Different psychological signature entirely. It had also occurred to me that if someone wanted to scare me off, they’d have used the Death card or the Devil card or one of the more obviously sinister-looking cards. The fact that those cards hadn’t been used made me think that the message of the card was genuine, and that rather than being threatened, I was being…encouraged. Or at least tantalized.

“Very good!” he exclaimed, and he really seemed pleased about it. “Now, my dear, sit down and tell me when exactly you were born, what time and where, and I’ll do your chart. Gratis.”

I couldn’t quite get a handle on Mayfield. He’d canceled our meeting three times and then he’d practically left an engraved invitation on my front door — after he’d already agreed again to an interview. Now that I was here, he seemed all set to distract me with astrology readings and avuncular flirtation.

I said, “That’s very kind of you, but I don’t want to take up your time, and I do have a few questions —”

“Oh, nonsense. We won’t really be able to talk until we know each other. Trust each other.”
Great. I said, “The truth is, I have no idea what time I was born. It was sometime during the night.”
“You know the day I suppose?”
“December nineteenth.”
“The cusp.” He was frowning. “People are so careless about these matters. Where exactly were you born?”
“Up north. Mendocino.”
“What city?” He sounded a little sharp, like he thought I was holding out on him.
“Mendocino. The city within the county.”
Mollified, he said, “And I suppose you can find out the exact hour of your birth?”
Was he expecting me to phone my parents on the spot? That would make an interesting call. No, I’m not ready to kiss and make up, but can you get my astrologer some info? Probably confirm their worst suspicions. Some of their worst suspicions.
“I can try,” I said. “Later.”
He thought this over for a moment or two and then gestured abruptly to the chair in front of his desk. He retreated behind the desk like a soldier returning to his own foxhole following the Christmas cease-fire.
“Is it all right if I tape this interview?”
He gestured vaguely with his hand.
I turned on the tape recorder, and he said, “First of all, Will Burack did not kill Evie. If that’s what you think, you’re quite mistaken.”
I said, “How do you know Burack didn’t kill her?”
Elbows on the desk, he steepled his hands together. “Burack was a Taurus. An earthy sign but not without its attractions — and appreciative of all things beautiful.”
“Like Eva?” I said, hoping we could skip the horoscope and get straight to business.
“Like Eva,” Mayfield agreed. “Eva, on the other hand, was Leo. Fire, fixed and positive, ruled by the sun. Leo is of the day, a masculine sign. Taurus is a feminine sign and of the night.” He looked at me expectantly.

I said, “I didn’t realize. So they were opposites?”

His eyes seemed to pop. “Opposites? It’s a 4-10 sun sign pattern. Square.”

“Oh,” I said. What I was thinking was what the hell?

“There would be conflicts, naturally, personality clashes, but violence, no. Never.”

“What about Tony Fumagalli? What sign was he?”

“His sun sign was Scorpio.”

From Mayfield’s expression I got the impression this was a bad thing.

“The scorpion?” I hazarded.

“Jealous, possessive, passion that borders on mania. I’m speaking of Fumagalli in particular, you understand, not all Scorpios. It was also a four-ten sun sign pattern.” He sighed. “Eva was always attracted to the same sort of man.”

“Do you think Fumagalli murdered her?”

He stared at me as though he didn’t understand the question. Then, finally, he said, “No.”

Right. Because of that 4-10 sun pattern thing. I asked, “Did you suspect anyone in particular?”

He gave an odd smile. “It is, as the Bard said, ‘written in our stars.’”

And if anyone could analyze the handwriting, it was Mayfield. I said, “Could you tell me who you suspect?”

He gave me a chiding look. “No, my dear, I could not. It would hardly do my career good to go around accusing my friends and clients of murder. I have, you see, an unfair advantage.” He looked up at the painted ceiling, his expression soulful.
I decided to let that go. Was I going to hear anything of what Mayfield thought and felt or was everything going to come via starlight? Or was he using the stars as a vehicle for what he personally believed? Was I going to have to do my own astrological research to verify what I was hearing from Mayfield?

“What was Eva like?” I asked. “You knew her better than anyone, didn’t you?”

His stern face softened. “She was very young. We all were. We just didn’t know it, you see? The young never recognize how truly inexperienced they are. How unprepared they are. Eva was not a great actress. She was not an intellectual giant. But she was funny. Very charming. And so incredibly lovely. It was a pleasure to simply look at her, listen to her. I laughed with Eva like I laughed with no one before or since.” He added dryly, “No doubt the champagne cocktails had something to do with it.”

As he spoke, I felt the all too familiar aura sweep over me: my stomach tightened, and with it, that panicky, scared feeling flooded through me. I couldn’t catch my breath. No time to speak, no time to think, and what was there to think except…please, no. Not now. Please…

****

I came to, terrified. A black bulk leaned over me — I couldn’t think where I was, what had happened, but the sensation of danger was overwhelming. I whimpered, unable to move.

“It’s all right, my dear. You’re all right now. There’s nothing to be afraid of.” I listened to that low croon. Realized it had been going on for some time. How long? I widened my eyes, tried to see his face. Did I know him?

He was chafing my hands. Warm hands, soft palms and soft fingers. Gentle.
It slowly dawned on me that I’d had a seizure. I swallowed. Pulled my hands away. Tried to sit up.

“No, no, my dear. Just rest.” He pressed me back. He’d put a cushion under my head. I was lying on a carpet. Indigo and brown. There was a name for that kind of carpet but I couldn’t remember it. Expensive carpet but not comfortable. I turned my head. There was a pair of red Turkish slippers underneath the desk. That seemed funny, but I felt too weak to laugh. I shifted my gaze. He was kneeling beside me. What was his name? May-something. Mayhew? Mayfield. Roman Mayfield. He wore the expression I had come to dread: that horrible mix of pity and alarm. I couldn’t deal with it.

He stroked my hair back, quite gently. “Have you ever had a seizure before, my dear?”

I affirmed. Closed my eyes. I just wanted to sleep.

“You’re...epileptic, is that it?”

I nodded, not bothering to lift my weighted lids.

“That’s all right then.”

*It is?* Not really. He was taking it pretty well, though, considering. Poor old guy. I was glad he wasn’t too frightened. I knew exactly what he’d seen. I’d had it described to me in detail a couple of times, and it frightened most people. It frightened *me*. I’d go stiff as a board, tip over, eyes rolling back in my head, my eyelashes fluttering, and I’d tremble violently for three to four minutes. Then it would stop and I’d gradually come round.

So far I hadn’t pissed myself or thrown up, which was something to be grateful for, but I couldn’t seem to shake it off like a lot of people did. I’d read about patients who had a seizure and five minutes later were back at work — or out to the theater with friends. The epilepsy poster children.
I couldn’t do that. I was exhausted and strung out afterwards. At least I’d stopped crying. That was something else to be grateful for, because at first I couldn’t help it. Every time it was over, I’d cry. I don’t even know why. It’s not like it hurt during a seizure — unless I fell on something hard, furniture or a wall — I wasn’t even conscious during the seizure. The crying was as humiliating as the seizure, but that was mostly under control now. Mostly. What was harder to control was my desire to be held — because the last thing anyone wanted to do was hold someone who’d just had a seizure. The weird thing was I didn’t even like being held usually. I was never big on cuddling. But after a seizure I just wanted the reassurance of someone’s arms around me.

It was beyond embarrassing. It was mortifying.

The worst time was the night with Jack. Too little sleep, too much to drink, and whammo. After a night of fooling and fucking, I’d seized, right there in Jack’s bed, waking him out of a deep sleep to…everything I’d prefer not think about. He was good about it — knew exactly what to do, moving me into recovery position, talking to me, stroking my back. When I’d asked him to hold me, he’d taken me into his arms without hesitation and cradled me until I fell asleep.

It wasn’t until we’d talked later that I’d realized how disgusted and angry he was.

And that was the end of me and Jack. The memory of it was still sharp and painful enough that it dispersed my lethargy, and I opened my eyes.

Roman Mayfield was sitting cross-legged beside me. One of his hands rested on my head and the other was resting on his knee, fingers extended, thumb and forefinger joined to make a circle. His eyes were closed; he appeared to be meditating.
Like this all wasn’t weird enough?
When I moved, his eyes flew open and he smiled at me. “Better now?”
“Sorry about that,” I mumbled.
“There’s nothing to be sorry for.” He crawled out of the way as I sat up and then pushed onto all fours. From there I used the edge of his desk to pull myself up. Mayfield did the same, rising stiffly to his feet. I heard his knees pop. Maybe someday this would be funny. I couldn’t imagine it, but maybe. About a million years from now. I raked a hand through my hair, put shaky hands to my tie.
“Would you like to lie down?” he asked.
I laughed unsteadily. “I think I already did.”
“I mean, have a real sleep.” Those weirdly colored eyes met mine, and I could see that he was sincere in his offer; I thought he had to be one of the kindest people I’d ever met, even if he was a little screwy.
I said, “Thanks. I think I should be going.” The thought of getting myself out of there, walking back to the bus stop, and the long bus ride was almost overwhelming. I needed to go while I still could. “Would it be all right if I contacted you with any questions?” I was afraid to ask for another interview.
“Of course.” He gave me an oddly intent look. “I think perhaps we should reschedule, shouldn’t we?”
I nodded. Fumbled my tape recorder into my pocket.
“Now sit down and relax for a moment. I'll have my car brought around.”
I protested, but he insisted — and he had a lot more energy than I did — so in the end, I was dropped off in front of my apartment building by Roman Mayfield’s white limousine.

* * * *

Jack must have had the day off because he was
swimming in the deserted pool as I wearily passed the courtyard on the way to my apartment. I deliberately ignored the sight of his lean brown body cutting through the aqua water, glistening powerful arms dipping slow and steady in perfect rhythm with the strong kick of his long, tanned legs.

I was going to have to work on my ignoring technique.

I was unlocking my door when I heard him call my name. “Tim!”

Unwillingly, I turned in time to see him hoist himself out of the pool, water raining down on the pavement.

He came toward me, unself-consciously straightening his red swim trunks. “I’ve got some news.”

“Great.” I pushed my door open, practically weak-kneed with the relief of being home at last. *Sanctuary.* “I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

He caught the door before it shut on him, just as he had done the other night. The easy friendliness of his face changed. “Hey. Tim, is there some reason why we can’t be friends?”

It was spoken in the same tone that cops ask *Is there a problem here?*

And, yeah, there was a problem. The problem was that he was standing too close to me and he smelled of chlorine and bare skin, and I could remember only too clearly the smooth supple texture of that skin, and the salty taste of it, and how it felt to rest my face against it and listen to his heartbeat.

“No,” I said shortly. “No reason. But I’m not feeling too hot right now, so later, okay?”

“Are you all right?” His gray eyes scanned my face with apparent concern — and I lost it.

I didn’t shout or anything, I didn’t even say it loudly, but Jack’s eyes narrowed. He glanced around like he thought someone might overhear us, and then he pushed open my door, forcing me back as he stepped inside my apartment.

“Wait. A. Minute.” He snapped each word out. “You’re the one who withheld information. So don’t give me some snotty attitude like I’m not sympathetic to your situation.”

“‘Withheld information’? What, were we on stakeout together? You have no idea what my situation is.” And just like that, I was in his face, yelling.

Jack paled, his lips folding in the way they did when he didn’t like something. His eyes looked black. He yelled back, “You know what I mean. You should have told me you’re epileptic!”

He was always so controlled; his answering anger caught me off guard. More calmly, I asked, “On the fourth date? Would there have been a fifth date?”

“I don’t know. But I do know you should have told me before we spent the night together.”

“Sorry I’m not up on epileptic etiquette,” I said bitterly. “It’s still kind of new to me.”

I watched the anger dissipate from his face and body. “I know. I remember. The accident was eighteen months ago. Look, Tim, it’s not the seizures, okay? You should have been up front with me, but —”

“Can we not do this now?” I interrupted, dropping down on the sofa. My adrenaline-fueled burst of energy was long gone. I said tiredly, “I should have told you. I know. And I know it wasn’t working between us anyway.”

Something in the quality of Jack’s silence made me look up. I couldn’t read his expression.

I said, “And I do want to stay friends, so thanks.” I tried for a smile. “So will you please go away now?”

He seemed to shake off his preoccupation. “Yeah. Of
course. Sorry.” He opened the door. “Call me when you wake up. It turns out that Bud Perkins did keep his own private file on the Aldrich case.”

* * * * *

I slept till seven-thirty. When I woke, I felt a lot better — a little embarrassed for coming unglued with Jack, but equally relieved to have gotten it off my chest. I showered and hunted around in the cupboard for something to eat — along with lack of sleep and stress, missing meals was another trigger for my epilepsy — and then gave Jack a call while Campbell’s soup heated on the stove.

Jack picked up immediately, and I felt a little self-conscious after our earlier confrontation.

“Hi, it’s Tim.”

“Hey,” said Jack. “Have you eaten? I’m fixing wings.”

I glanced at the canned soup bubbling on the burner.

“No,” I said slowly.

“Why don’t you come up and you can look Perkins’s file over while we eat.”

“You’ve got Perkins’s personal file?”

“Yeah. There’s a lot in it, but I don’t know how relevant most of it is. I figured you’d find it interesting.”

To put it mildly. “I’m on my way,” I said.

I turned off the burner, stuck the soup in the fridge. Stopping only long enough to slip on a pair of Vans and drag the comb through my damp hair, I shook my head at my mirrored self. I had a feeling trying to work out a friendship with Jack was a bad idea. I was still too attracted to him. But, unless one of us was planning to move, there didn’t seem much help for it — and he was a valuable resource.

I stepped outside of my apartment and locked the door. The evening air was mild, filled with the hum of the pool generator and air conditioners. The lights were on in the
pool, the solar-powered tiki torches flickering in the twilight. I could smell the jasmine in the air — and a hint of tobacco smoke.

I glanced over as I started up the stairs to Jack’s apartment, pinpointing the round orange dot of the cigarette of someone standing in the shadow of the blanket of bougainvillea cascading over the side of the building. I didn’t make anything of it until I saw the cigarette arc off into the night and a bulky silhouette detach itself from the deeper shadows.

“You don’t listen too well,” the shadow said conversationally, walking toward me.

The funny thing is, my initial thought was that he said too well rather than too good. A thug with proper grammar?

He lunged for me, and instead of backing away, I moved forward and delivered an uppercut with all the power I had. Despite the fact that I was off balance on the steps, it was a good punch; I hadn’t had time to think and so my body was loose and my hand relaxed till the last moment. I put my total body force into that strike, driving my fist squarely into his sternum. It was like punching a bull. I tried to follow through to his chin, but he’d recovered from his initial surprise by then and blocked me, slipping left and countering with a straight punch.

Ducking, I thought, Fuck. He’s a boxer.

Most street fights aren’t about training or skill. They’re about two pissed off men throwing punches until one of them falls down. So a guy who can stay cool and keep thinking, and knows the basics, has an advantage, even if he’s on the slim side. Unless he runs into a bigger guy with a lot more experience and training — which I’d just done.

The punches began to fall, landing on my arms and shoulders. I had my guard up trying to protect my head, but there was no way I could stand up to that onslaught.
His fist landed in my gut and I went down on one knee, nearly losing my balance. The stairs and railing prevented me from getting clean away, and that was my only hope at that point. Through the barrier of my arms, I tried to get a good look at him, but it was nearly dark by then. He kind of looked like Mr. Clean: big and bald and sort of jolly. He seemed to be enjoying pummeling me.

Footsteps pounded on the landing above and then down the stairs, and somebody brushed over me and tackled Mr. Clean, who quit whaling on me and plunged back, crashing down the stairs with Jack on top. I lowered my arms, panting, muscles shaking, and hauled myself to my feet.

Jack and Mr. Clean were rolling around on the cement courtyard, and I had to take a moment to admire the brutal efficiency of Jack's attack. He swung with fine, fierce proficiency — and he was better built for brawling than me, though not in Mr. Clean's division.

Mr. Clean changed tactics, snaking around like one of those Water Wiggles. He was a wild man, and he managed to wriggle out from under Jack, grabbing for one of the umbrellaed metal tables and tipping it over. I was down the stairs by then and caught the table edge before it cracked down on Jack.

Mr. Clean rolled onto his feet, Jack scrambled up, and Mr. Clean drew a gun from beneath his lightweight sports jacket and pointed it at us.
Chapter Six

I froze. Jack’s arms came up in a *hold everything* position. “Easy, pal,” he said.

Mr. Clean’s eyes met mine, and they were as dark and fathomless as the barrel pointed my way. “Bang,” he said.

I stopped breathing, but instead of firing he swung the gun at Jack and said, “Don’t move. Don’t even twitch.” He was backing up, moving swiftly to the front entrance, one hand stretched behind him to keep from walking into one of the other tables or lounge chairs.

The gun swung back my way. “Last warning,” he said to me. “Stay out of the Aldrich case.”

And then he was out through the arched entrance.

“*God damn it!*” Jack snapped, and he went tearing up the stairs back to his apartment.

I sat down on the bottom step, feeling like a puppet after someone had cut the strings.

*Bang.*

I could hear the blast; feel bullets tearing into my body, plowing through flesh and bone. I felt sick, although that probably had something to do with the punches I’d received.

Jack came racing back, taking the stairs a couple at a time. He shot past me and out through the apartment complex entrance. It was dark now but I could see the gleam of the gun in his hand.

I put my head in my hands, getting my wind back. I was going to have a beautiful set of bruises in a few hours. It’d happened so fast, but that’s like anything. Fast and unexpected, like when a soccer mom runs a red light and smashes into your car. Like a lightning strike in your brain.

After a short time Jack returned, walking through the arched entryway. Spotting me still sitting on the stairs, he
came over and dropped down beside me, resting his gun on his knee.
“Okay?”
“Yeah.”
“Do you know him? Did you recognize him?”
I shook my head. “I think it’s the guy from yesterday. Same voice, I think.”
“I’ll file the report on this one. I want that asshole.” His face was all angles and sharps in the uneven light. The little white scar on his forehead stood out clearly. Meeting my gaze, he suddenly grinned. “That was a helluva punch you threw, Mr. North. You can handle yourself okay.”
“Define okay.”
“Nah, the dude was built like a brick wall.” His cheek creased. “You’ve done some boxing.”
“College.”
He nodded. After a moment he said quietly, “The guy’s connected. I’ll guarantee it.”
“You mean like mob connected?”
He nodded. “I guarantee you we’ll find him in a mug book.”
“Tony Fumagalli?” I said doubtfully. “No one seems to know — or will say — why Eva broke her engagement to him.”
“Maybe she figured out what he did for a living.”
“They called him the Gentleman Gangster in the press. It shouldn’t have been a newsflash.”
He didn’t say anything. I was crazily conscious of his shoulder against mine, his bare arm brushing my bare arm. Jack shrugged. “Tony F.’s out of play but there’s always Frankie, his son. He inherited the family business when the old man’s brain turned to mush.”
Speaking of brains turning to mush. I wiped my forehead on my arm and said, “Maybe there’s a problem
with Tony’s alibi. Even so...would it really matter? Would anyone prosecute a senile old man?”

“They might.” Jack sighed. “I agree it doesn’t seem worth the taxpayers’ money.”

“Maybe Mr. Clean's not mob connected.”

“Mr. Clean.” He snorted with amusement. Then he shook his head. “You don’t hire guys like that off the street. He’s a pro.” He smiled at me and his dimple showed. “You’ve got someone seriously annoyed with you, Tim.”

***

Splashing cold water on my face, I used one of Jack’s immaculate towels to dry off and stepped out of the bathroom.

His place was very neat. Everything-in-its-place-scary. I glanced in his bedroom as I walked past. The bed — a waterbed — was tidily made, black and brown striped pillows stacked comfortably on a black comforter. I wondered who he was sleeping with these days. I hadn’t noticed anyone coming or going, but then I’d tried hard not to notice. And Jack had always been discreet about his social life, even when I was part of that social life.

I found him in the kitchen tasting a honey-colored dipping sauce. “That's good,” he announced.

“Smells good,” I agreed.

He gave me a searching glance, picked up a plastic baggie stuffed with ice cubes and tossed it to me. “Here, Rocky. Ice your hand.”

I caught the bag, glanced down at my hand, and he was right. The knuckles were puffy and pink. I applied the ice pack and glanced around. “Anything I can do?”

“The Perkins file is on the coffee table. You want a beer?”

I walked over to the sofa, sat down feeling the protest of newly punished muscles on top of yesterday's aches
and pains, and picked up the file. A stack of newspaper and magazine clippings slithered out and spilled on the carpet. Jack was right. Perkins had kept anything and everything related to Eva Aldrich. I scooped up the fragile clippings. There were also sheets of legal paper covered in faded handwriting. Perkins’s unofficial notes? I flipped through, absorbed.

“You want a beer, Tim?” Jack repeated.

I glanced up and he had a funny half grin. “Huh? No. Thanks. I don’t want to push my luck. How did you get hold of this?”

“My first partner was one of these old-timers who knew just about everyone on the force. I got hold of him and he put me in touch with Perkins’s wife. He’d only kept one file — this one.”

“Wow.” What really wowed me was that Jack had bothered to do this on his day off. It was way beyond the call of duty. I looked up. “Thanks. I really appreciate this.”

He shrugged. Turned back to the oven.

I continued reading through the folder. Perkins must have kept up the file until shortly before his death. There were several photos that I recognized from the Life magazine spread of that evening, and there were a couple of those Where Are They Now features from the early ‘70s. A lot of the stuff I’d seen on microfilm and microfiche, but some of it was new — and a bit lurid. There was speculation about drugs and alcohol and Eva’s sexual orientation — none of which had shown up in the earlier articles about her death. Was there any foundation in fact or was this all based on rumor and gossip — and boosting circulation numbers?

I barely noticed when Jack set a plate of wings and a Coke beside me. He sat down across from me and ate silently while I frowned over Perkins’s notes.
At last I looked up out of the years and distance and said, “According to Perkins, only two people at the party were unaccounted for at the time of Eva’s murder: Stephen Ball and Gloria Rayner. He didn’t seem to consider Burack or Fumagalli real suspects at all.”

Jack said, “For what it’s worth, I think Fumagalli’s alibi is unbreakable. Over a dozen people saw him at the Tropicana.”

“He could have hired someone.”

“We’ve been over it,” he reminded me. “That wasn’t a professional hit.”

He was right. “They found the knife,” I said. “It had been wiped clean of prints and dropped in the swimming pool. That information was never officially released to the press. I wonder why not.”

“Could have been a lot of reasons,” Jack said. “Usually it’s because we hope someone’s going to accidentally trip himself up during questioning.” He tipped his head at my plate. “Are you going to eat something?”

“Oh, right.” I set the file aside and picked up a little drumstick. “The murder took place during a party at the Garden of Allah, but Eva was found inside Stephen Ball’s adjacent villa. The murder weapon was a knife from Ball’s own kitchen, so the killing almost certainly wasn’t premeditated.”

“I thought you’d find that interesting.”

“I can’t believe this never came out before. It’s not even made clear in the official reports.” I bit into a wing, crunchy with baked parmesan cheese and oregano and garlic. My eyes widened. “Wow. That’s really good.” I reached for another wing. Suddenly I was starving, and even the fact that my various bruises and sore spots were starting to make themselves felt didn’t distract me.

Jack and I munched for a few minutes in an unusually
companionable silence.

He neatly wiped his mouth on his napkin. I finished off my Coke. “I think Ball did it,” I said. “Perkins doesn’t come right out and say so, but I think he leaned that way too. She went to Ball’s villa during the party — why, if not to meet him? He didn’t go with her, so he must have given her a key because she got inside somehow. And he’s the only remaining principal who won’t give me an interview.”

“That’s not exactly conclusive,” Jack pointed out. He rose, went to the fridge and got himself another beer. I declined a second Coke.

“I know, but why won’t he talk to me? What does he have to hide?”

“It’s not a news story to him,” Jack pointed out. “It’s part of his life. A painful part.”

“It was fifty years ago.”

“Yeah, but all the same, it’s a touchy subject for someone or that goon wouldn’t have shown up this evening warning you to back off.”

I swallowed hard, remembering that gun pointed my way. Bang. I dropped the last chicken bone onto the pile before me.

“True.”

“By the way, I want you to come down to headquarters tomorrow and look through the mug books.”

“It was dark. I didn’t really get a clear look at his face.”

“Still.”

I sighed. “Okay.”

Jack’s gray eyes were alert. “Problem?”

“Not really. It’s just a pain in the ass not driving. It takes up half the day making bus connections. Taxis are expensive. And I really didn’t get a good look at him.”

“How long do you have to be seizure-free before you can reapply for your license?”
“At least three months. And, as you know from personal experience, I'm not seizure-free yet.”
His gaze slid away from mine.
“Anyway,” I said into the somewhat awkward pause, “I should be going. Thanks for letting me see the file.”
“You can keep it for now. No one knows about it. You might as well.”
“Seriously?”
He nodded.
“Thanks.” I picked up the file, rose, and he said, “You don’t have to go, you know.”
I stopped and stared at him. Jack gazed steadily back at me. “How about coffee and dessert while you tell me what you’ve found out from your interviews? Might help to run your findings past someone else.”
“Uh…okay.” I sat slowly back down. “I haven’t found out much in the way of new information.”
“So you said, but you’re willing to tap Stephen Ball for murder, so you must’ve come to some conclusion from talking to people.” He went into the kitchen and switched on the coffee machine.
“I’ve seen Gloria Rayner twice. The first time we mostly talked about her. Last time we talked a little about Eva, but she’s pretty cagey. I know she could tell me a lot more if she chose. I’m hoping the third time will be the trick.”
“Gloria Rayner? She does those AARP ads?”
I could just imagine Gloria’s opinion of being remembered for her AARP work.
“She was one of those ‘50s blonde bombshells. She and Eva were best friends — and rivals, I think.”
“Romantic rivals or professional rivals?”
“Both, as far as I can tell. I know they were both trying for a role in a William Wyler film.” I watched Jack moving efficiently around his small kitchen. The overhead light
shone down on hair as black and glossy as a raven’s wing.
“And I’ve seen Roman Mayfield once.”
“‘He’s the astrologer?’”
“‘Seer to the Stars.’ I forgot to tell you, he’s the one
responsible for leaving the tarot card on my front door.”
Jack stopped and stared at me. “He admitted it?”
“Pretty much.”
“He admits leaving a tarot card — like somebody left on
Aldrich’s body?”
“I don’t think he looked at it like that. Or maybe he did.
He’s an oddball, but…” I stopped, remembering his
kindness and patience that afternoon.
“But what?”
“He’s a…genuinely nice person.”
Jack looked unimpressed.
“He didn’t have a motive that I can see. He’s gay, for
one thing. His relationship with Eva was strictly platonic,
from what I can tell. Anyway, my point is, the card wasn’t
left as a threat. I think it was supposed to be sort of a
come-on, actually.”
“He sounds like a nut.”
“Probably, but he’s figured out a way to make a living at
it. And, like I said, I think he’s harmless.”
“Don’t underestimate a potential threat just because
he’s an old man. If he was capable of killing once, he’s still
capable.”
I looked up, surprised at his serious tone. Jack carried
in coffee and dessert plates on a tray, and I had to bite
back a smile. The tray struck me as farcical. Not that Jack
wasn’t civilized, but the bruise on his cheekbone from Mr.
Clean’s fist sort of undermined the cosmopolitan effect.
I took the dessert plate he handed me and said, “And
I’ve talked to a lot of people who were on the periphery of
Eva Aldrich’s world, read every article on her I could find.” I
tried the strawberry nut crisp. It seemed to be a baked mixture of fruit and mashed up pecan cookies and nuts topped with a scoop of vanilla ice cream. “This is really good,” I said thickly, and swallowed.

Jack smiled at me, a slow smile — that endearing dimple appearing unexpectedly. I suddenly ran out of things to say, and we ate our dessert in silence but for the scrape of forks on plates.

Finally I glanced at the clock on the bookshelf and set my empty plate aside. “I should go. It’s late and you’re working tomorrow.”

“I go in late tomorrow.”

“Yeah. Well, I still should go.”

He studied me without speaking, and then put his plate down.

I stood up and he stood up. “Thanks for dinner,” I said. “And, now that I think of it, thanks for saving my ass earlier.”

His eyes were so dark and intense I could hardly look away. I felt crazily self-conscious.

“You don’t have to go, Tim,” he said. “Why don’t you stay?”
I wasn’t exactly sure if it was excitement or anger, but my heart was thudding so hard I could hardly get the words out. “What are you doing, Jack?”

“ Asking you to stay the night.”

Come to think of it, it was mostly anger pounding through my veins and tightening up my throat. I got out a reasonably calm, “Why? You already said you weren’t interested. You made it clear.”

“I know.” He shook his head. “But…”

“But what?” I didn’t manage to control my temper quite so well that time, and I saw his eyes glint.

Jack said quietly, “I know how this seems, but I’m not playing games with you — I like you a lot, Tim. That hasn’t changed. I still find you very attractive. That hasn’t changed either.”

“What has changed?”

“I was mad that you didn’t tell me about your seizures. I think that’s the kind of information that needs to be shared with a potential lover, but…more than that, it seemed indicative of some other problems.”

“What other problems?” Then I put a hand up. “Never mind. I don’t give a fuck what you thought my other problems were.” I turned and headed for the door.

“Wait!” He caught my arm as I yanked open the door. It was a hard grip, but it gentled almost at once into a caress sliding down my biceps and forearm and then reluctantly releasing me. Goose bumps prickled all down my skin; I felt that touch in every pore, every hair on my arm. My heart slowed, the beats heavy against my ribs. “I keep making it worse,” Jack said. He sounded so rueful, I hesitated.

Seeing my hesitation, he put a hand on my shoulder,
drawing me back inside and shutting the door. The warm weight of his hand slid down my back and drew me close. Our lips touched — he tasted like coffee and strawberry nut crisp.

“Stay,” he whispered.

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The waterbed gulped as we settled on the comforter, and I had to bite back a nervous laugh. The first night I’d had a lot to drink, too much. Tonight I was cold sober and very conscious that this was probably a bad idea.

I pulled my T-shirt over my head. Jack’s shirt was already off, his tanned chest lightly furred in silky black, his nipples brown and flat. He reached for the top of my jeans about the same moment I brushed my fingertips against his nipple. He smiled and I smiled, lightly pinching the tiny buds.

“Oh, yeah,” he murmured. He undid the buttons of my Levi’s and his hands slid knowledgeably inside the encasing denim. “Use your tongue, Timmy.”

I fully intended to, but paused, closing my eyes and savoring the feel of Jack’s big hand feeling me over. I savored his warmth through the soft cotton of my briefs, and then his fingers slipped through the fly. I pushed my hips into that exploration and moaned, my dick coming up hard and a little painfully in the binding Levi’s.

“Lift up,” Jack ordered. I raised my hips and he tugged on my jeans and briefs, helping me maneuver out of them. He kicked his own off in a couple of quick, limber twists, and I reached for him, the mattress sloshing beneath us. We kissed long and deep. I could feel the tension quivering through his lean body, echoing my own aching need. I dragged my mouth away, gasping for air.

“Jack, you’re sure about this?” I didn’t want to know if he wasn’t, so I was a little startled to hear my voice.
“Hell, yes,” he rasped. His eyes looked unfocused as they found mine. “Why? Changed your mind?”

I shook my head and he captured my mouth again, hot and hungry.

One thing about Jack, though, he wasn’t selfish. His hands were everywhere, lingering, exploring, fingertips teasing, tracing my mouth, ears, eyes; palms stroking my ribs and sides; hands cupping and caressing balls and buttocks, all this attention leaving me breathless and distracted. I tried to respond in kind, licking his nipples, nibbling his ears, sucking his lower lip.

“Mm. Nice. You taste sweet,” he whispered.

No way was this going to last long. I hadn’t been with anyone since Jack, and that had been over six months ago. His legs wrapped around me, I rocked against him, belly to belly. Caught between the press of our bodies, our stiff cocks poked and scraped against each other — part pain and part pleasure. It quickly switched from a gentle seeking for rhythm to something electric and a little desperate, bodies arching and grinding and thrusting toward release.

Jack came first. He gave a little shout and then semen shot between us, sticky and wet. He laughed, and I remembered that about the first time. He laughed when he came — a genuinely joyful sound.

Noticing that I was still writhing beneath him, he wrapped his hand around my straining dick, pumping me once, twice.

I sucked in a ragged breath and then I was coming too, Jack’s hand slipping on wet heat. Sweet pulsing relief rippled through me, sharp peaks of pleasure like sound waves singing through my nerves and muscles.

It was good, but it didn’t last nearly long enough.

Relaxed to the point of inertia, I rolled over beside
Jack, listening to his breathing settling back to normal.

“That was great,” he said drowsily. He kissed my ear — I think he was aiming for my temple.

“Mmm,” I murmured. And it had been great, but I still felt a little let down. Probably nothing more than physical exhaustion; it had been a long damn day, and it was liable to be a long damn night — which was the last thing I needed, and more than likely to tempt fate.

But Jack turned his head on the black pillow and studied me with peaceful gray eyes. “Okay?”

“Yep. Great.”

“Okay if I sleep?”

So it had just been a mutual jerk off. I nodded wearily, sat up.

His hand smoothed over my back. “Hey.” He drew me back down. “Where're you going? There's room in this birdbath for two.”

I hesitated, remembering the last time — wondering if he’d forgotten.

“Turn the light out, Tim,” he said.

I turned the light out and gave in to the tug of his hand, settling down beside him once more.

“Night,” Jack said, his breath light and warm against my face. Judging by the sound of his breathing a few moments later he must have plunged instantly into sleep.

“Night,” I murmured, and dived in after him.

* * * * *

I opened my eyes to a long row of pristine and beautifully pressed shirts hanging in an open closet. It was clearly not my closet. There was a shoe rack on the floor beneath a second row of trousers and pants, and one of those belt caddy things. Jack actually hung up his Levi’s.

Lifting my head, I glanced at the clock on the nightstand. Early still. Five-thirty. Jack’s alarm wasn’t going
to ring for another hour and forty-five minutes. I laid there in the rosy morning light and studied his sleeping face: the curve of black lashes against his purpling cheekbone, the relaxed line of his mouth, the stubborn jut of his bristly jaw.

I thought about kissing those softly parted lips, but things were liable to be different in the daylight.

Jack’s lashes quivered, lifted. His eyes — almost blue in the tentative sunlight — scrutinized me for a moment, then he smiled, a sleepy, sort of sweet smile. I felt my belly tighten with desire.

“Morning,” I said.

“Morning.” He reached up and brushed the tiny gold stud in my ear with a fingertip. “Sleep okay?”

“I did.” I was a little surprised at that; I’d enjoyed the best night’s sleep I’d had in a long time.

“Sore?”

I grimaced, glancing down at the bruises mottling my arms and shoulders. “He landed a few good punches, yeah. I’ll feel better after a swim.”

“I’ll swim with you.” He grinned, the dimple showing briefly. “But not just yet.”

Round two was lazy and loose, both of us taking time and trouble, trying this, that, and the other — we both seemed to like the other a lot. Jack had an instinct for what felt terrific, an astonishing delicacy and playfulness given his strength and vocation.

Before long I was in a state of screaming — and only Jack’s mouth on mine kept that from being literal truth — tension. He fingered my balls, weighing, teasing, fondling — then just when I thought I couldn’t take another second of it — he moved to my cock, tracing one finger along the cleft, running the circle of finger and thumb up and down my swollen length. I needed to feel his hand around me.
Needed to feel that firm grip working me, needed to feel the blaze of friction grazing up, gliding down. I fumbled my hand on top of his, trying to guide him, moaning in abject relief when his fingers wrapped around me.

“Yes. Yes. Yes…”

The pull and pump sped up, and I thrust fiercely against Jack’s fist. I’m not sure why it was so much better than jerking myself off, but it was. Something about handing over that control, letting someone else drive. And Jack had a real sense for what felt great, that mix of imagination and empathy — or maybe it was just a hell of a lot of experience.

I wanted it to last forever, but a few more knowing tugs and I was coming in creamy surges, reduced in moments to boneless satisfaction.

“Oh…wow,” I breathed as Jack finally rolled over onto his back. He turned his head and grinned at me.

“On a scale of one to ten?”

“Is that Richter scale? Cities toppled.” I eyed him, lying there, legs splayed, thick cock still stiff and erect.

I listened to the soothing rustle of water beneath us, and all I wanted was to close my eyes and go back to sleep, but I made an effort and pushed up, positioning myself between Jack’s long brown legs.

“What are you up to?” He smiled a languorous smile.

I touched the sticky pearl at the head of his cock.

“Speaking for yourself, yeah?” And I took him into my mouth. Salty taste, familiar scent…oh, Jack…

He groaned, “Oh, yeah!” And his back bowed.

His shaft was very straight, thick, strong — beautiful as it jutted out of the dark nest of curls. It deserved my full attention, and I gave it to him, sucking hard, then soft, taking him deep inside and then barely grazing the slick head with my tongue.
Jack encouraged me with throaty noises and soft shivers.

His eyes were shining and warm, his hands gentle as they locked on my shoulders, drawing me closer, urging me on. I kissed his cock, his balls — nuzzled lower and he bucked. I smiled, rose, and fastened my lips around his shaft again, probing beneath the crown with my tongue.

“Oh. My. God,” he groaned.

I began to suck him hard, pursuing, insisting, and I felt surrender well up and flow through him — the white flag spilling into my mouth.

At last he showed signs of returning life, shifting, urging me up beside him, folding me into his arms. We drifted there for a time, snoozing lightly while the waterbed lulled us.

We woke the next time when the air conditioner kicked on. It was going to be another scorcher of a day. I pulled away from Jack, my skin sticky and damp where I had rested against him.

“A swim sounds good,” he mumbled.

I nodded, sitting up and looking around for my jeans. “I’ll meet you downstairs?”

“Or we could just shower and have breakfast.”

I glanced over my shoulder. He looked supremely relaxed — and content.

“I need to work the kinks out,” I said.

He smiled — a very sexy smile. “I like your kinks.”

Well, one thing was for sure: he wasn’t one of these guys who couldn’t wait to kick you out after getting his rocks off — not normally, anyway. Our first time he hadn’t showed much interest in lingering.

I said, dragging my Levi’s on and standing up, “So... what other problems do you think I have?”
“What?”
“Last night you said my not talking about my epilepsy indicated other problems.”
His brows drew together. “Come on, Tim. I didn’t know you.”
“You don’t know me now, but you’re willing to sleep with me again. What changed?”
All the easy contentment was gone from his face; his gaze was unwavering, and his mouth unsmiling. His game face. At least I wasn’t going to hear a bunch of platitudes to coax me back into bed.
“All I knew about you was that you used to be a reporter and that you were on disability.” His eyes met mine directly. “You didn’t seem disabled, and in my line of work I’ve known a lot of people who try and take advantage of the system. You said you were estranged from your family and you didn’t seem to have any friends or outside social life.” He shrugged.
I listened to this with mounting anger. He was so exactly what my wounded self-confidence didn’t need. I said, “My parents — my mother — didn’t take the news that I was gay very well. In fact, she pretty much gave me an ultimatum. I could have my family or my ‘lifestyle.’ And my dad, though he didn’t agree, just went along with her. Then when I got hit, suddenly she — they — decided all was forgiven, and I should move home — after essentially not speaking to me for five years, they want me to move home.”
“Sometimes it takes a close call like that to wake people up.”
What I really didn’t need to hear was Jack taking the part of my parents. I said, “So you’re right. I don’t get along with my parents and I cut myself off from most of my friends after the accident. So, if that makes me a loser —”
Jack didn’t look away. “You asked me, I’m telling you. I didn’t think you were a loser, but I thought you had some problems and my professional life is stressful enough without looking for complications in my personal life. But you were smart and funny and cute as hell, and I wanted to go out with you anyway.”

I was so nonplussed by the cute as hell comment that I couldn’t think of how to respond.

“But it was obvious to me right away that you were hiding something.” I opened my mouth to object and he qualified, “That you weren’t really open, weren’t really candid.” He shrugged. “I’ve had a lot of experience with people not being candid.”

“I’ll bet. You’re a judgmental prick.”

Jack acted like he didn’t hear that. “And then I found out what it was — and it wouldn’t have been that big a deal except that you seemed to think it was.”

I turned my face and stared at the sunlight filtering through the slats of the blinds. The shadows looked like a ladder climbing up the wall. A long way to the top of that ladder.

He added flatly, “And it still worries me that you take the risks you do. Stupid risks. Like swimming alone and walking down a deserted back alley. Not wearing a Medic Alert bracelet or necklace or something.”

I faced him, but couldn’t read the expression I caught on his face. That mix of tenderness and disapproval — what did that mean? That he didn’t want to feel whatever it was he felt? I turned away again.

“But besides being smart and funny and cute as hell, you’ve got guts and discipline and the meanest right this side of North Central Avenue.”

My mouth twitched, but I didn’t really feel like smiling. I understood where Jack was coming from, and I
appreciated his honesty in a way, but I also felt hurt and a little disillusioned. I was glad I’d asked him, glad that he’d been candid — before things went any further between us. Hearing the truth had…tempered my enthusiasm, so to speak.

“Last night was good, wasn’t it?” he said softly.
I nodded.
“So we’re friends again?”
“Sure.” I found my T-shirt, pulled it on.
“After all, even if I am a judgmental prick, I do make damn good chicken wings.”
I did laugh then.
Chapter Eight

We swam together that morning, and then Jack went to get dressed for work and I went inside to have breakfast and read over Bud Perkins’s private file.

Stephen Ball’s party at the Garden of Allah had started around eleven o’clock, following the premiere of Ball’s film *The Professional*. Over thirty Hollywood luminaries had been in attendance. Eva Aldrich had arrived late and alone. Having just publicly broken off her engagement to mobster Tony Fumagalli, she was the object of a lot of speculation, and her movements throughout the fateful evening had been easily tracked and verified. There were a number of stunning photos of her; she had been at the peak of her beauty, and if her heart was breaking, it didn’t show in Kodak color.

Eva had danced three dances and retired to the powder room for a long chat with Gloria Rayner. She had danced a fourth time — this one with Stephen Ball — drunk a champagne cocktail with the director of *Danger in the Dunes*, and then slipped outside at approximately two o’clock. Stephen Ball had discovered her lifeless body in his villa at three-fifteen, and the authorities had been summoned.

The only reason Ball hadn’t been instantly arrested was that he had been observed walking from the hotel itself to his villa — followed almost immediately by his horror-stricken exit — by guests in the hotel swimming pool. Ball had not been inside the cottage long enough to commit murder — nor was there enough blood on his tux to account for having stabbed someone to death.

But Bud Perkins had theorized that Ball could have slipped away from the party earlier, met and killed Eva in his villa, then showered, changed into another tuxedo and
returned to the party. True, there was the problem that these theoretical bloodstained clothes had never been found, and that no one had seen Ball make an earlier trip to the villa, but then no one had seen Eva heading for Ball's villa either. And, more interestingly, no one could verify seeing Ball at the party after Eva had left.

It was clear to me, deciphering Perkins’s faded scrawl, that he had believed Ball was guilty, but he had also noted that Gloria Rayner had been MIA shortly after she and Eva had exited the powder room. Also there seemed to be a difference of opinion as to the nature of Eva's and Gloria's discussion. One witness reported they had been arguing, two others stated their conversation had seemed “serious but friendly.” Gloria herself claimed that she had been comforting Eva over her recent breakup with Tony Fumagalli.

Somehow I had to wrangle an interview with Stephen Ball. Not that I expected him to confess to me or anything, but I felt that speaking with him would maybe give me the direction I needed to take in the book.

If I couldn't get an interview with Ball, I'd have to rely on whatever I could glean from my conversations with Gloria and Roman Mayfield — assuming Mayfield would hold true to his promise of another interview. I had the impression that Gloria had once had a thing for Ball, but since he wasn’t numbered amongst her many husbands, it must not have been reciprocal.

Either way, armed with Bud Perkins’s notes, I felt I had the necessary ammunition to move the next interviews into deeper water.

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After breakfast I caught a bus for Isabel Street and spent a few depressing hours scanning mug shots in the hope of spotting Mr. Clean.
One thing for sure: there was no particular criminal physical type. Crooks came in all sizes and colors — everyone looked the worse for wear in this particular class photo. Even movie stars and solid citizens looked like the dregs of society in their booking photographs. I'd been flipping through pages of drawn and mascara-smeared faces when a uniformed officer brought me what appeared to be a printout of a composite sketch.

“What's this?”

“Detective Brady also gave us a description of the assailant.”

I studied the printout. Nodded slowly. “It's not quite like I remember him but...it's not really wrong either.”

The officer nodded. “Close enough in the details to enter into a facial recognition program and run it through the database of criminals we have on file?”

“You can do that?”

“We have the technology,” she agreed. “Even if we're not CSI.”

“Yeah, it's close enough.”

She left me with the mug books and a Styrofoam cup of terrible coffee. Forty minutes later she was back with several printouts of digital photos. “It's an all-star lineup,” she announced. “Any familiar faces?”

I studied the rogue’s gallery of photos, all of them blunt-featured and bald Caucasians. They were a scary-looking crew. They all looked familiar — and they all looked foreign.

My gaze lingered over an arrogant, almost handsome face. Something about the shape of the head and the alignment of features…

“Who's this?” I asked.

The officer examined the photo. “Clyde Wells.” She looked impressed. “Is this the dude?”
I shook my head. “Maybe. I can’t be sure. Maybe.” I tried to read her face. “Who is he?”
“He works for Frankie Fumagalli.”
“Tony the Cock’s son?”
“That’s right. Frankie took over the organization when the old man lost his marbles. Clyde’s one of his enforcers.”
She gave me an admiring smile. “You don’t mess around, do you? You’ve got the A-list baddies mad at you.”

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I’d wondered if I might run into Jack at the station — and how I was supposed to react. I’d interviewed a few closeted cops when I worked as a reporter, but Jack seemed pretty relaxed about his orientation. Of course, I’d never seen him on the job; maybe he was different when he was on the clock. In any event, I didn’t run into him, so I left the police station and caught a bus back home.

As the bus rumbled along, flashing in and out of shade, I found myself thinking about Tony Fumagalli. If his son and heir was bothering to send hired muscle after me, there had to be something wrong with Fumagalli’s alibi. Some weakness that wasn’t obvious at first — or second, third, and fourth — glance. But if the police hadn’t found the chink in Fumagalli’s armor, what were the chances that I would stumble on it?

What I didn’t get was why it mattered to Fumagalli, with the old man now senile and living in a nursing home. By all accounts he was in increasingly poor health; by the time the book came out, Tony F. could easily be dead. And even if he wasn’t, prosecution was highly unlikely.

But what if prosecution wasn’t what Fumagalli Jr. feared? What if there was something else at risk?

What?

It clearly had to do with Eva’s death — or did it? It had to do with Eva, that much was sure. But if Fumagalli really
had an unbreakable alibi for the murder, then the only other thing I could think of was the mysterious end of his engagement to Eva.

Why had she broken the engagement? Someone had to know. Gloria and Roman had supposedly been her closest confidants; it was inconceivable that she hadn’t spilled the beans to one or both of them in the three days before her death.

But was finding the answer to that riddle going to get me off the hook or just guarantee me being taken out?

It was moot anyway because Fumagalli wanted me to give up writing the book, and I couldn’t do that — wouldn’t do that. So either way, I had to keep going, and the more I knew — knowledge being power — the better my odds of survival.

The pulse of bright sunlight and deep shade was starting to bother me. I didn’t suffer from reflex epilepsy, and so far I’d never had a seizure triggered by outside stimuli, but I was feeling a little susceptible at the moment. Not to seizures so much as life in general. I closed my eyes, put my head back, and immediately thought of Jack. I shut that line of thought off instantly.

I liked Jack a lot — too much — and he basically thought I was a good-looking liability. Not a lot of room to go from there.

Instead, I made myself think about the night of Eva’s murder. She had been found stabbed to death with a bloody tarot card stuck to her bodice. Where had the tarot card come from? Surely Eva hadn’t walked around with The Lovers card in her handbag?

Roman Mayfield had done a couple of readings at the party, but not for Eva. I’d read several accounts of the evening, and they all had made a point that Eva did not have a reading. Granted, the readings had not been
serious, more high spirits than a spiritual high.

The card had come from Mayfield’s tarot deck, that much had been established, but Mayfield had left the deck with his cape — yep, cape — hat and driving gloves in the bar at the hotel, which meant that at least thirty people had access to it. Besides, by the late ‘50s, the Garden of Allah was hosting more than its share of call girls, con artists, and riffraff. And, in fact, one theory was that Eva had fallen prey to a crazed transient. It wasn’t a popular theory, but it did have its merits.

If someone had deliberately swiped the card and followed Eva out to Stephen Ball’s cottage, then her murder had been sort-of premeditated. Not completely premeditated because no one could have counted on Mayfield bringing his tarot deck to the party and doing a reading — could they?

Of course, the simplest explanation was that Mayfield had palmed his own tarot card and planted it on Eva’s body after he killed her, but that would be stupidly incriminating. Besides, what motive did he have? And besides that, his movements were accounted for during the evening.

Although I hadn’t seen the accounting myself.

There were two messages blinking on my answering machine when I let myself into my apartment. One was from a bookstore letting me know that they’d found a copy of the original *Life* magazine with the photo layout of the night of Eva’s murder.

The second was from my publisher, and the news was good. Stephen Ball had finally agreed to see me.
Chapter Nine

I didn’t like Stephen Ball.
In fairness, I hadn’t liked him even before we actually met. I never thought much of his acting and I loathed his politics. I’d seen way too many documentary clips of him testifying in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee about communists in Hollywood. He had retired from film and television at least a decade earlier, and now spent his free time on golf courses or attending lifetime achievement banquets.

Our interview was held poolside at his Beverly Hills home. Ball was drinking Tom Collinses while the current Mrs. Ball — a nineteen-year-old former Victoria’s Secret model — practiced her high dive at the end of the park-sized pool.

“I’ll be frank with you,” Ball said after I’d been seated at the large umbrella-shaded table and handed a highball glass, “I’m not happy about this book of yours.”

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“Let’s not play games, son. You’re digging into Eva’s death and that’s a painful subject for a lot of us.”

“It was a long time ago,” I said. “Half a century.” I sipped my drink and waited for his response. I didn’t bother pointing out that there weren’t “a lot of us” left.

Ball had to be in his nineties now, but he could easily have passed for fifteen to twenty years younger. He was tall and deeply tanned with unnaturally coal black hair and equally coal black eyebrows and mustache. He’d had some work done around his mouth and eyes, but nothing too ridiculous. His eyes were so blue I half suspected contacts. They studied me coldly.

“And you’re going to write this goddamn book with or without my cooperation,” he commented, “so I might as
well give you the facts. If you’ve been talking with that fruitcake Roman Mayfield, you could use a few facts.”

“You’re not one of Mayfield’s clients?”

“Hell no.” He snorted. “Oh, sure, I read my horoscope in the paper. Everyone does, but that’s as far as my interest in the occult goes.”

There had been a photo of a much younger Ball and the Seer to the Stars in Mayfield’s photo gallery, but maybe he had outgrown that interest early. I decided to move in another direction.

“You were a leading suspect in Eva Aldrich’s death, weren’t you?”

He said shortly, “She was found in my bungalow. Yes, you could say I was a leading suspect. Although I think the police always knew Will Burack was the real culprit.”

“Meaning you believe Burack killed her?”

“You’re goddamn right. He was the only one with a motive. That alibi of his was tissue paper. I don’t know why the cops didn’t force the truth out of him and that lying, treacherous broad he was shacked up with.”

Like how did he think the police were going to force the truth? Rubber hoses and bright lights? Mildly, I asked, “You were having an affair with Eva, weren’t you?”

“That was over a long time before,” he said, dismissing. He picked up his glass, drinking and watching me over the rim with his chilly blue eyes.

“You were engaged to her for a short time when she first arrived in Hollywood,” I agreed. “She married Burack instead. So maybe it wasn’t an affair, maybe you were just sleeping together.”

He gave a crisp laugh and nodded to me as though acknowledging a point in a game. “Maybe so. We’d just finished making a picture together. *Danger in the Dunes*. The old fire was still there.” He winked at me.
“But she was engaged to Fumagalli.”

“That dago!” He raised his glass to the swimwear model who’d made another perfect dive off the board at the end of the pool. “There was no way she was going to marry him.”

“Do you know why she broke it off? Was it because of you?”

“Probably.” He smiled a dazzling white smile. I suspected dentures. “Like I said, the old chemistry was there.”

“What happened the night she was killed?”

He picked up the pitcher of Tom Collins, topped off my drink and then leaned back, folding his arms across his tanned chest.

He drawled, “What do you think happened?”

“I think you arranged to meet her at your villa.”

His gaze held mine for a long moment, and then he relaxed. “I guess there’s never really been much mystery about that. Yes, I gave her my keys and told her I’d meet her there in about half an hour. The party was winding down by then, but even so, I couldn’t get away as quickly as I wanted. Finally I managed to slip out. I walked out past the pool yard. I remember thinking how quiet it was. You could hear the music from the hotel. They were playing ‘An Affair to Remember.’ I remember how bright the stars were.” His smile was suddenly strained. “There were only a couple of people in the pool by then.”

He fell silent.

I waited.

“The lights were on in the villa. It looked…welcoming.” He cleared his throat. “The front door wasn’t quite latched. I pushed it open and stepped inside. She was lying on the floor between the bedroom and the front room. Her eyes were open.” His own eyes rose out of the horrendous past
and met mine. “I knew at once she was dead.”
   “I’m sorry,” I said. And I was.
   “She’d been wearing this dress…lots of filmy layers in a pale shade of pink. You know the kind of thing women wore back then. It was like…a cloud around her. It was splotched with her blood. There was blood everywhere. I’d never seen so much blood. They never did get it all out of that tile.”
   “Did you notice the tarot card right away?”
   He said slowly, “Not at first. She was, as I said, soaked in blood. It took my eyes a few moments to adjust, to recognize it — lying on her chest — smeared in her blood.”
   “Not pinned to her dress?”
   He shook his head. “It looked like someone had deliberately placed it on her.”
   I glanced at the tape recorder winding away in the bright sunlight. “For the sake of argument, if Will Burack didn’t kill Eva, who would be your second guess?”
   He stared at me for a long time, then he turned to watch his junior partner perform a tight little somersault off the diving board.
   “Gloria Rayner,” he said.
   **

   It was dusk by the time I made it back to Glendale. I met Jack going out through the arched entranceway as I was coming in.
   My instinctive delight dissolved. He was dressed for an evening on the town: boots, tight-fitting jeans, body hugging silk T-shirt. He checked for a moment, seeing me.
   “Hey, Tim.”
   “Hey, Jack.”
   “Good day?” He didn’t look guilty exactly, just sort of uncomfortable.
   “It was,” I said, and I was pleased that my voice
sounded relaxed. A little flare of malicious humor prompted me to ask, “Hot date?”

“Oh…” He offered a lopsided smile — no sign of the dimple at all. “I wouldn’t go that far.”

“You can go as far as you want,” I assured him — and if I’d had dimples, they would have showed. No way was I going to let him know that this mattered to me. He already thought I was some pathetic loser; the last thing I wanted was for him to think I placed unreasonable significance on the fact that we’d had sex. In fact, I felt almost giddy with relief that I was able to pretend that it meant nothing — that he meant nothing. I’m not even sure where it was coming from. Maybe from the same place that final wisecrack comes right after they line you up against the wall and point the rifles. “Have a good one,” I said, and I went on through the archway, leaving him standing there framed in the bougainvillea.

Once safely inside my apartment I got a beer from the fridge and uncapped it with unsteady hands. I dropped down on the couch and chugged half the bottle, then sagged back and put the cold bottle against my hot forehead. It was stuffy as hell in the apartment, but that wasn’t my problem.

No, my problem was I had a migraine coming on. And I still didn’t have an ending for my book, the mob was mad at me, and I was dangerously close to falling for a guy who didn’t give a damn about me.

“Well, hell,” I said softly. I put the beer down, went into the bathroom, and rummaged in the cabinet for some Tylenol. Catching my expression in the mirror, I sneered.

“Get a grip,” I said.

Putting Jack out of my mind, I popped a couple of Tylenol and got to work.

I had finished transcribing the interview with Ball and
entering my notes into my laptop, when something occurred to me.

Pulling my copy of Mayfield’s *The Mystery of the Tarot* off the shelf, I looked up The Lovers card.

*Two Lovers stand in front of the Tree of Knowledge. The man represents the rational, conscious, practical mind. The woman symbolizes the intuitive, subconscious, and mystical. The man gazes upon the woman, the woman looks skyward toward an archangel who blesses their union. Upright, this card in a reading bids the querent unify both intellect and intuition. A choice must be made: will the querent follow the dictates of her heart or “use his head?” The answer lies in surrendering to a higher spiritual power. The card is also known as The Twins.*

I stared at the page thoughtfully, then reached for the phone. I dialed Stephen Ball’s home. Naturally I didn’t get Ball himself, but I left a message asking him to call as I needed to verify some facts. I had a feeling it was going to take more than one message to get hold of Mr. Matinee, but I was prepared to keep calling until I got an answer.

Turning off my laptop, I gave some thought to dinner. To my relief, the migraine turned out to be just a bad tension headache, which surrendered to the pain relievers and a ham sandwich. The lights were still out at Jack’s place by the time I took my shower and went to bed, but it was still early in the evening.

And it was none of my business.

It was still none of my business at one o’clock in the morning, when I gave up on sleeping and got up to watch some Perry Mason reruns. All the same, I couldn’t help
noticing that Jack’s porch light was still on, as I heated up the teakettle.

Settling on the sofa with a mug of tea, I watched Perry dispensing law and order.

I wasn’t fretting about Jack anymore — well, not much — but my brain couldn’t seem to turn off. I hadn’t let myself think about Frank Fumagalli and his pet goon all day, but now that I had nothing else to keep me busy, I couldn’t help feeling a little uneasy. Okay, a lot uneasy. I had no idea what to do about Fumagalli. How far was he liable to take this? Would he put a contract out on me if refused to drop the book? Was that what happened to Raymond Irvine back in ’63 when he started research on his book?

The doorbell rang and I spilled my tea. Even decaffeinated hot tea has an energizing effect when you pour it in your lap. I jumped up, shrinking out of my bathrobe, and then stood there, immobile, listening to the doorbell buzz a second time.

Did hit men ring first or did they just knock down the door and blast you where you stood? I slunk over to the door, peeked out in time to see Jack turning away. I yanked the door open.

He swung back to face me; his smile was tentative. “I didn’t wake you, did I? I saw the light was on.”

“No. You didn’t wake me.” I made an effort to do the friendly thing, more for my sake than his. “How was your date?”

He shrugged.

I ran out of things to say. Why was he here?

“Can I come in?”

Without a word, I stepped back and let him in. He glanced at the TV, at my discarded bathrobe, and the mug on the floor. “Listen,” he said, and stopped. He gave me a funny, uncertain look.
“I’m listening,” I said.
“Tonight…I’d agreed to go to this concert over a month ago. I couldn’t cancel.”
Something tight inside my gut slowly let go. “It’s okay,” I said. “You already said you weren’t looking for anything serious.”
“I’m not, but…” His eyes zeroed in on mine. “I kept thinking about you all evening.”
“You did?” Maybe I shouldn’t have sounded quite so surprised.
“I did. I was wondering how your day went. And what you were doing. I kept thinking about last night.”
“I…” I shrugged. “Me too.”
Jack’s dimple showed briefly. “Anyway, I was wondering if you had plans for the rest of the night?”
I wondered if I was still dreaming. Maybe I hadn’t woken up at all, and I was still tossing and turning in the bedroom, dreaming that I had put the kettle on and was watching Perry Mason reruns — and that Jack suddenly appeared at my door saying nice things and wanting sex. It seemed like the kind of thing I’d dream.
Jack was still smiling, but he tilted his head a little like he was listening for something he just couldn’t hear. His smiled slipped a fraction. “No?” he asked after a moment.
My heart did one of those little end zone victory dances, but I did my best to stay stoic. “I don’t know,” I said slowly. “I really wanted to find out how this episode of Perry Mason ends.”
“Ah.” Gravely, he studied Perry’s grim, blue-jawed visage. After a long moment, he looked back my way. “It’s the ex-wife of the other rancher.”
I gazed at him, and I couldn’t keep from smiling. “I think my schedule just opened up.”
Chapter Ten

“Y ou have a great laugh,” Jack said.
“T have?”

He nodded, threading my hair through his fingers. “I kept hearing it tonight, kept thinking how funny you’d find this — or that.” He seemed almost puzzled — nearly as puzzled as I at the idea that Jack had spent his date thinking about what I might find humorous. Especially since I didn’t remember laughing a lot around Jack.

He leaned over and kissed me, his hand sliding down to my hip. I thrust up against him, and he said, “Do you want to fuck for real?”

“Well’s last night for real?”

“Last night was great. Can I fuck you?”

I thought it over. Felt an unwilling smile tugging at my mouth. Maybe I really did have a weird sense of humor, because there wasn’t much funny about that. Ironic maybe.

“Sure,” I said, “but go easy. It’s been awhile for me.”

“I won’t hurt you,” he said solemnly, and I smiled. Yes, you will, I thought, but I didn’t say it.

I turned over onto my belly and shivered as Jack ran warm hands down my sides.

“Very nice. Sleek and brown, like a…a…”

“An otter?”

He chuckled. “Not exactly. Maybe a mink. You’ve got a temper like a mink, don’t you?”

“Me? I don’t think so.” I closed my eyes as he ran a light hand over the curve of my ass. Very nice. Just palm against bare skin was lovely.

“Do you have any lube?”

“There’s some old stuff in the drawer next to the bed.”

I heard the squeak of springs, the slide of the drawer,
then the tear of foil. A moment later I heard the squirt of the tube and shivered. There was another pause before a fingertip insinuated itself at that sensitive pucker of flesh. Lots of warm gel and a gentle press. I expelled a long breath, consciously relaxing my muscles, but Jack's entry was more caress than push. He slipped past the little ring of muscle, homing, pressing against the prostate.

I shivered.

“Good?” I could hear the smile in his voice. I grunted acknowledgement, easing myself onto his hand, unable to concentrate on more than that delicate pushing and rubbing inside me, wanting more of it…and deeper.

So fucking long. I'd forgotten how good this could feel...

After a time Jack's second finger slipped in, slick and warm with jelly; I moaned, humping back. His breathing sounded funny, rough and fast. “You’re beautiful like this.” He moved his fingers back and forth in that shattery massage that had me squirming on the bed. I needed the cock brushing the cleft of my ass to be inside me.

“Now,” I urged. The voice didn't even sound like me. “Fuck me now, Jack.”

He moved his hand some more, refusing to be rushed, petting and palpating, and I didn’t know whether to swear or start sobbing with the need twisting through my guts.

“Jack!” I groaned when I just couldn’t take it any longer.

And there he was, guiding himself in, controlling the thick weight of his penetration — I could feel him shaking with need and hunger, but he held it in check — until he was in, buried to the balls, and we both moaned together in relief that sounded like harmony.

He rocked against me, and I rocked back, and we slid into effortless rhythm, like we’d been working on this routine for years, like we were fuck buddies of long
standing — or true lovers.

Slow and sweet, push and pull, the timed thrust and instinctive contractions that changed after a time to something neither of us could control, something powerful and primitive. Our sweat-soaked bodies labored, the sheets twisted and tangled, lungs gasping for air as we pounded against each other…the hardness of bone and muscle, the softness of skin and genitals. One hand fisted in my pillows, the other milked my dick ruthlessly while Jack’s hands dug into my hips, and I knew I’d have bruises there and didn’t care. It felt good being held so hard, pierced so deeply.

At last I began to come and I buried my face in the damp linen of my pillow and howled my relief. Jack kissed the back of my neck, and a few moments later I felt his body go rigid.

Hotness pulsed into me, spilled through me. He was coming in my ass; I was wet with his semen. Jack trembled, transfixed as orgasm rippled through him in blinding waves, and then he collapsed on top of me and started laughing.

And that was something we had in common because I loved that husky, breathless laugh of his.

I chuckled too, and he stopped laughing and said, “Turn over, I want to kiss you.” I dragged myself onto my back, and Jack hauled me into his arms and covered my mouth. The kiss surprised me, wet and deep and hungry as though he couldn’t get enough. He was kissing me like I wanted to kiss him, but wouldn’t have dared.

“Was that okay?” he asked at last, cuddling me against his side.

“ Fucking A,” I returned, and he laughed again, closing his eyes, growing quiet.

I reached over, jerked the sheet over us.
In the morning we were relaxed and easy together, and the give and take of pleasure was quick and gentle.

“Are we swimming this morning?” Jack asked, when I brought him a cup of coffee a little later. I sat down on the foot of the bed. I liked looking at him in my bed. Liked the brownness of him against white sheets, liked the pillow-ruffled softness of his hair, liked the contentment of his sleepy gray eyes as he sipped his coffee.

“I am. Do you have time?”

He glanced at the clock, considered. “I’ve got a few errands to run before work...but sure.” He took another swallow of coffee.

“What’s your sign?” I asked, curious.

His smile was wry. “Yield? I don’t know. What’s yours?”

“Stay alert. Expect new traffic patterns.”

He chuckled.

“Seriously. What month were you born?”

“I can’t be serious about astrology. That’s what you’re talking about, right?”

I nodded. “I’m just curious.”

“That’s how it starts. Next thing you know you’re dialing Madam Cleo, credit card in hand.” He sighed. “April eleventh. Aries.” He glanced at my face. “Is that good or bad?”

I rose from the bed. “Beats me. Maybe I’ll ask Roman Mayfield. He left a message setting up another meeting.”

“This is the guy who left the tarot card on your door?”

“Yes. I didn’t tell you. I finally got to interview Stephen Ball yesterday.”

“Still think he’s your murderer?”

I found my swim trunks, pulled them on. “I don’t know. I don’t like him, but...I don’t know. He thinks — or says he thinks — that it was the husband. And if it wasn’t the
husband, he says it was Gloria Rayner.”

“What was her motive supposed to be again? They both wanted the same part?”

“And maybe the same man — Stephen Ball. That reminds me. I need to try to call him again.”

Jack finished his coffee and threw back the sheets. “You make your phone call and I’ll meet you down at the pool.” He picked his jeans off the footboard. Even in the heat of the moment, Jack had managed to avoid throwing his clothes on the floor; I found that sort of endearing.

While Jack went upstairs, I tried calling Stephen Ball again. Morning though it was, he wasn’t at home — or least not at home to me — and I had to leave another message.

By the time I got outside, Jack was already in the pool doing laps.

I dived in, the water chill and refreshing despite the fact that it was already getting hot; air conditioners were starting to hum all over the complex.

Jack and I swam laps, which inevitably turned into a race, but it was friendly and I don’t think he took it too badly when I beat him by an arm’s length — both times. We horsed around for a little longer and then swam for the stairs in the deep end.

Climbing out of the pool, I felt the aura sweep over me…too much light flooding over me, bright and remorseless, bleaching out my vision. My heart sped up, but it was already too late. I felt that shift in balance, a dizzy drop though I was still gripping the railing. I put my hand out. “Jack…will you help me?”

I came back to awareness of grass tickling my face, the heat of the sun, the smell of chlorine. Someone was speaking to me, quietly, slowly.
“That's it. That's it. Take your time. Everything's okay.”

He was running his hand up and down my bare arm.

I croaked, “Jack?”

“Right here.”

Swallowing hard, I breathed in the smell of the grass and soil and flowers and my own sweat and sickness. I felt sleepy, weak.

“What’s…wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong.” Jack sounded definite about that.

“You had a seizure. You’re okay now.”

I opened my eyes, trying to focus. Jack’s face was hard, despite the gentleness of his touch. I closed my eyes against the truth I could read there, and hot tears threatened to spill from under my lashes.

“Don’t,” he said tersely. “I can’t take you crying.”

“No. Sorry.” I wiped the back of my arm across my face, tried to roll over so that I could push up. I felt so fucking feeble, still quivering with the physical and emotional shock; it must have been a bad one. Jack’s arm came around me at once. He was naked and wet — no, he was wearing a pair of swim trunks. And so was I.

I remembered that we had been swimming. And then it got confusing.

Just for moment I let myself rest against him. This is good-bye, I thought. This will be the end of it. I don’t blame him.

Closing my eyes, I was enfolded by comforting sensations: Jack’s sun-warmed scent, the brush of soft body hair, the hard pound of his heart beneath my ear. His heart was fast; I’d scared the hell out of him. I panted into his chest while Jack’s hands smoothed up and down my back, familiar and reassuring.

“Everything’s okay now,” he said. I had a feeling he was talking to himself.
I felt abjectly grateful to him for holding me — for the protection his arms offered. I needed that now, needed that reassurance, that anchor to reality — even if the safety of Jack's arms was more of a dream than reality. I held tight to him, but I must have drifted off because I was startled to hear someone speaking overhead. The voice was fuzzy, loud. Jack answered quietly, “Chill out, Wallace. We're fine. We're going inside in a minute.”

I pried my eyes open. We were sitting on the grass in the courtyard. I was plastered against Jack. Our landlord, Mr. Wallace, stood over us, an expression of extreme distaste on his face. I pulled away, got to my knees, and couldn't seem to figure out what to do next. Jack rose, taking me by the arms and drawing me the rest of the way to my feet. Mr. Wallace stepped back as though fearing contamination.

“This kind of thing can’t go on,” Mr. Wallace said. “There are other residents to consider.”

What the hell was he talking about? What did he think was going on? I didn’t have the energy to figure it out then. “I have to sleep,” I said woozily, leaning back into the arm Jack offered.

He helped me across the courtyard, opening my apartment door and letting us inside the air-conditioned dimness.

“I have to lie down,” I told Jack.

“I know.” He guided me down the hall to the bedroom, everything just as we’d left it little more than an hour earlier, bedclothes still tumbled into a ball. I folded onto the side of the mattress, vaguely aware of Jack moving around, shaking out the sheets. His silence seemed ominous.

“It’s the stress,” I muttered. I rubbed my head tiredly. “I’m taking my meds. I’m doing everything right. It just
happens sometimes…” I flinched at the snap of linen, avoided looking at him as he moved around the foot of the bed.

Tears started in my eyes. Hell. Not that. I wiped my eyes on the back of my arm, and stretched out in the cool sheets. I wanted to say something, apologize, but what was there left to say? Instead I stretched out in the cool sheets, let my weighted lids drop shut. They flew open again as I felt Jack tugging at my clammy swim trunks. I couldn’t see him through the blur of tears.

“Lift up, Tim,” he ordered, and I obediently raised enough for him to peel them off me.

His touch was impersonal, nonerotic. I couldn’t read his face at all, but I didn’t need to. I closed my eyes again. Felt him packing pillows around me. Did he think I was going to roll off the bed? It didn’t matter. The nest of pillows was comfortable, and I turned on my side, putting an arm around one fat spongy pillow, snuggling into it. I felt the top sheet come floating down over me.

* * * * *

When I opened my eyes again it was dark outside. The bedroom light was on and Jack stood over me, frowning.

I blinked up at him, then rose up on my elbows, mumbling, “What time is it? Did I oversleep…?”

“Relax,” he said. “I just wanted to make sure you were okay before I left for work.”

“You’ve been here the whole time?” At the horror in my voice, his grim mouth relaxed into a lopsided grin. “Pretty much. I want you to lock up after I go.” He was dressed for work in jeans, blazer, and one of those immaculate white shirts. Did police detectives work at night?

I sat up, started to push back the sheet, and realized I was naked. Somehow I no longer felt comfortable trotting around nude in front of Jack.
“Thanks,” I said awkwardly. “I’ll do that.”
He hesitated. Then he bent and kissed me, his mouth cool and minty fresh.
“I’ll see you tomorrow. We…should talk.”
I couldn’t wait. Another chat where Jack explained why he didn’t want to get serious and why we should probably lay off for a while.
I nodded.
“You sure you’re okay?”
“I’m great,” I snapped.
“Good,” he returned equally curt, and turned away. I grabbed my bathrobe as I followed him into the hall.
Jack let himself out without another word, without so much as a glance my way, and I locked the door after him.

* * * *

I opened a can of soup for dinner, and spent a quiet, dispirited evening watching TV and flipping idly through the *Life* magazine I’d picked up the day before.
I was drifting off to the sounds of canned laughter when the phone rang, shocking me back to awareness. I dug the phone out from under the sofa, answered, and was surprised to find Stephen Ball finally returning my phone call.
And sounding none too pleased — or sober — about it.
“I just had a couple of follow-up questions,” I said after apologizing for disturbing Mr. Hollywood after a hard day of golfing and drinking.
“How much more can there be to say about this?” Ball demanded. “It happened half a century ago. I can’t understand why you’re stirring this up.”
“Two questions and I’ll be out of your hair,” I promised.
“Like what?”
“Do you know how The Lovers card on Eva’s body got there?”
“What the hell are you accusing me of?” he roared. “You know goddamned well how that card got there. Her killer —”

I interrupted, “If her killer was Will Burack, how did he get hold of a card from Roman Mayfield’s tarot deck? No one saw him at the party that night and Mayfield left the cards with his cloak and hat and gloves in the bar at the Garden of Allah. Someone would have seen him in the bar.”

Silence. Ball said, “Maybe it wasn’t one of Mayfield’s cards.”

“It was. Mayfield identified it. The card was missing from his own deck. I think Eva must have had the card with her, but by all accounts Eva didn’t have a reading that night. So either she stole the card out of the pack when it was left in the bar or someone else —”

“All right!” he flared. “I filched the card during my reading. Roman never noticed, pompous prick that he was. I slipped the card with my key to Eva when we danced that night. It was just…nonsense. Just romantic nonsense.” He paused and I could hear him breathing noisily down the line. “She was so beautiful that night. So…desirable. I wanted her and she wanted me.”

Another piece of the puzzle snapped into place. The killer had not brought the card with him, but the card had meant something to the killer. Or…at least the image and words “The Lovers” had meant something to the killer.

“One last question,” I said. “Can you recall whether the card was upright or reversed?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Was the picture on the card upside down or right side up?”

“How the hell would I…” I could hear the connection crackling emptily. He said a little unsteadily, “Upside down,
I think. I can’t be sure…but…I seem to remember upside down.”

“Upside down.” I felt a surge of energy. “And it looked like it had been placed on her body deliberately, you said.”

“That's right. Why would it matter?” Ball asked.

“Maybe it doesn’t. But in a reading the meaning of the card can be changed depending on whether the card is reversed or upright. It wasn't clear in the crime scene photos, and it was never mentioned in the report. In fact, according to all the reports, it was pinned to her dress.”

“Maybe they didn’t want to talk about her breasts.”

“I'm sorry?”

“The top of her dress — the bodice — was ripped and you could see her breasts. Maybe they didn't want to talk about that. The papers weren't like they are today. They still had some standards, some morals.”

“Uh…right,” I said. Ball went on talking, but I'd stopped listening. It was sinking in on me that I might have accidentally stumbled on the first real break in a fifty-year-old murder case.
Chapter Eleven

“And that’s a picture of me and Eva with Louis B. Mayer.” Gloria stabbed at the black and white snapshot with a scarlet talon. “He died the same year — just a month or so after Eva.” She gave me a sly look from beneath her false eyelashes. “You know what they say his last words were?”

“Cut and print?”
She laughed that smoky laugh. “Nah, but that’s not bad, baby. Nope, his last words were ‘Nothing matters.’”

“That’s depressing.”
Amused, she turned the next page of her photo album. “And here’s me and Eva with Tony at the Troubadour.” I studied the three faces. Gloria and Eva had made a pair of knockout bookends, one fair, one dark, Snow White and Rose Red — and the frog prince sandwiched between them. Tony Fumagalli was not, by any stretch, a good-looking man: short, swarthy, heavy-jowled — and chomping on a cigar in every picture.

“So what was the attraction?” I asked Gloria.

“Money, I guess. Power, definitely.” She started to turn the page. I stopped her.

“So what went wrong? Did he slap her around?”

“Now that she would have understood.”
I stared at her, trying to put two and two together. Something that Eva couldn’t forgive or understand, something that neither Eva nor Tony nor anyone else wanted to talk about…

“He’d been married before, hadn’t he?” I was thinking aloud.

Annulled. But that could have been because Tony was of Italian descent and — all things being relative — a good Catholic. I scanned his pug-ugly face. Or maybe not.

“Was he... gay?” I asked slowly.

Gloria’s head tossed like a pony slipping its bridle.

“Baby, was he ever!”

“Are you serious?”

She nodded. “He was as queer as a two-dollar bill. Evie caught him one afternoon prancing around in garters and hose and a corselette. Red garters and red corselette.”

_What the hell is a corselette?_ I said, “Tony Fumagalli was a transvestite?”

“Imagine if that had got around!” Gloria crowed with laughter and the poodle pack came scurrying in from the next room. She began tossing colored doggie candies out of the pockets of her mint green hostess gown. “Smoked chicken nothing! They should have named him rubber chicken.”

Talk about a motive for murder. I could see Tony F. deciding he needed to shut Eva up before she spread that story around town.

“Did he threaten her?” I asked Gloria.

“I doubt it. He still thought he could get her back. You know, give her time to cool down. He didn’t know our little Eva. She had an appetite like a shark.”

“An appetite for...?”

“Sex, baby, sex!”

I nodded understanding. “Do you think he was afraid she’d tell someone?”

Gloria’s eyes were shrewd. “If he’d wanted to stop her mouth, he’d have had to kill her on the spot. What would be the point three days later? Besides, there are no secrets in Hollywood.”

There were one or two left, but they did seem to be
unraveling fast.

* * * * *

I was waiting for the bus on Beverly Drive when the long black limousine pulled up in front of me, and Mr. Clean, aka Clyde Wells, got out smartly from the passenger seat.

My companions at the bus stop, all apparently employed in local domestic service, observed in interested silence as he opened the rear door and nodded encouragingly at me. “Mr. Fumagalli requests a word.”

What word would that be? Murder? Unexplained disappearance? Granted, that last would have been two words.

“I’ll give him a call,” I said. “Is he in the phone book?” As much as I’d have loved to talk to Fumagalli in controlled surroundings, I didn’t think going for a ride in his long black limousine was a smart move.

“Mr. Fumagalli prefers face-to-face.”

“Fist to face, did you say?”

Clyde grinned. “That was a slight misunderstanding, Mr. North.” He nodded again to the dark interior of the car. I could see someone sitting there in the shadows: dark suit, dark sunglasses, and a giant pinky ring. “Please don’t keep Mr. Fumagalli waiting.”

I thought it over. If Fumagalli wanted me dead, I’d already be dead. Of course he might want to oversee the next round of roughing up, but…probably not. I glanced at my bus stop companions.

“My name is Timothy North. If something happens to me,” I said, “the last place I was seen alive was in Frankie Fumagalli’s limo.”

An elderly woman in a peach-colored maid’s uniform giggled.

“Now you’re just embarrassing yourself,” Clyde told me
sadly as I moved past him and ducked into the backseat.

Hey, I have seizures; not much embarrasses me anymore. I didn’t say that, though. I settled across from the man in the suit and Clyde slammed the heavy door shut. The limo glided off soundlessly. I watched my bus stop companions slide out of the frame of the tinted windows.

“I appreciate your time, Mr. North,” said a dry voice, and I turned to check out Frankie Fumagalli. “May I offer you a drink?”

He was in his late forties, slim and gray and tired-looking. He must have taken after his mother’s side of the family, because he had none of Tony’s ugly heaviness — or raw power. In fact, he looked like any worn-out corporate executive after a long, hard day of mismanaging employee retirement funds.

Tony the Cock’s son, Frankie the Weenie.

“Thanks,” I said.

He turned to the built-in bar, used a pair of tongs to drop a couple of cubes of ice into a short glass, poured a generous dose of Bulleit Bourbon, and handed it to me.

I took a mouthful. Oaky and smooth, like liquid smoke. I swallowed, comforted by the velvet burn through my belly.

“I think there’s maybe been a misunderstanding,” my host remarked, watching me with his sad, dark eyes. “I got a very…troubling visit from a couple of detectives with the Glendale Police Department. They seemed to be under the impression that someone in my employ might have been harassing you.”

I said, “Mr. Clean in the front seat there has tried to throw me down a couple of staircases; maybe that’s what they were thinking of.”

“I have no control over what my employees do in their spare time. If there’s some history between yourself and Clyde, I’d like to see it worked out in peaceable fashion.”
He studied my face in the sickly light. “What do you think the trouble is?”

“I think the trouble is you’re afraid if I keep digging into Eva Aldrich’s death I’m going to discover Eva’s reasons for breaking off her engagement to your father, and that I am going to publish those reasons in this book I’m writing.”

“You couldn’t be more wrong,” he said, and he smiled. His teeth were surprisingly yellow, but I guess when you’re a mob boss no one can make you go to the dentist if you don’t want to. “If you were to publish something scandalous about my father, I’d simply sue you for everything you own — and I’d make sure that you never worked again.”

“But the damage would be done,” I said with a calm I didn’t feel. I’d never seen eyes deader than those gloomy black ones gazing at me unblinkingly now. “The book would be published and the secret would be out. It’s not much of a secret in this day and age, but you’re in a traditionally macho line of work, and image is everything, I guess.”

After a moment, he observed, “I’ve noticed that cocky guys like you annoy a lot of other guys. Maybe that’s what’s happened between you and Clyde. Maybe you just…bug him. You’re starting to bug me.”

I’d be lying if I said his words didn’t give me a qualm or two. I made myself ask, “Is that what happened to Raymond Irvine? Did he get on someone’s nerves?”

“Who?”

“Raymond Irvine. He started a book on Eva Aldrich back in nineteen sixty-three, but someone forced his car off the road on Mulholland Drive.”

“Oh, the reporter,” Frankie said, lifting an indifferent shoulder. “Like I said, guys like you bug other guys.”

My hands, clasped around the glass with ice, were
growing cold. I said, “I’m not a tabloid writer. I don’t write gossip. Unless your father killed Eva, or had her killed, I’m not interested in writing about his sexual preferences.”

“My father didn’t kill that bimbo! He didn’t give that for her!” He snapped his fingers in front of my face.

“Then what’s the problem?”

His hand rose as though he was going to throw his glass at me. He screamed, “My mama, God bless her soul, is still alive. You think she should have to read that filth? I want you to drop this goddamned book.”

“Someone is going to write it,” I told him. “Sooner or later this big secret that you’re willing to have Clyde break my neck over is going to come out. You’d be better off letting someone like me write the story because I don’t give a damn about your father’s kinks. I can write it so that no one will think twice about Eva breaking her engagement. But if you knock off another reporter looking into Eva Aldrich’s death, you’re going to alert the interest of a lot of people — including the cops — and a lot of writers who aren’t going to be as sensitive as I am to this particular angle.”

He stared at me for what felt like a very long time. I didn’t look away, and I tried not to show that I was wishing I’d left some final word for my parents or bothered making a will. After a few moments, I put my glass to my lips and finished my drink.

“He didn’t kill her,” Fumagalli said again, at last.

“I believe you.” The car was slowing. I glanced out the window and we were drawing up to the sidewalk outside my apartment building.

“You break your word to me and it’ll be all she wrote. You get my meaning, Mr. North?”

“Yes.”

“And I don’t want any visits from Glendale PD. This
conversation never happened, you got that?”
   “Yep.”
   Clyde jumped out and opened the door for me. I unfolded and got out into the bright sunlight. The heat felt good after the unnatural cold of the limousine. I glanced back in, but Fumagalli was staring straight ahead.
   “‘Til we meet again,” I told Clyde.
   He slammed the door shut and grinned at me. “I'll be counting the minutes.”
   “Do you have that many fingers?”
   He shook his head like he would dearly have loved to pop me if he only had the time, and jumped back in the limo. Watching the car pull away, I wondered if maybe Jack didn’t have a point about pushing my luck.

Music drifted down from Jack’s apartment as I walked past the pool: Bob Seger’s “Beautiful Loser.”

He's playing our song, I thought grimly, letting myself into my own apartment. I was in no hurry to hear what Jack had to say. I already knew what Jack would have to say — about everything from my joyride with Frankie Fumagalli to our own doomed relationship.

I loosened my tie and went to the fridge. I still had a couple of hours before my next interview with Roman Mayfield. I toasted sourdough bread, spread it over with cashew butter and sat down with a glass of milk, flipping through the old copy of Life magazine yet again.

A picture of Eva standing in the pool yard at the Garden of Allah caught my attention. Or rather, not Eva herself, but the crowded pool behind her. There were a few familiar faces, nearly forgotten starlets and blandly handsome young men, but one face stood out. He had hair back then, which is why I’d never particularly noticed him in the bobbing mass of young, laughing faces. I stared at the
slightly blurred face staring past the camera, staring past Eva into the encroaching darkness.

Roman Mayfield had gone swimming the night of Eva’s murder. And now I knew how, under the cover of darkness, someone could have waited for the right moment and washed away all that blood.
Chapter Twelve

“Did you bring it?” Mayfield demanded as I was ushered into the room with the starry ceiling.

“Bring…it?”

“The exact hour of your birth. For your chart.” He planted a bony index finger onto some papers on the desk in front of him.

“I forgot,” I admitted as I reached his desk.

“Forgot?”

“I’ve had a lot on my mind.”

He was staring at me as though he couldn’t believe his ears.

I said, hoping to redeem myself a little, “I do have an astrology-related question, though.”

He put his head to the side as though considering whether he should deign to listen to it. Then he nodded.

“Would Sagittarius and Aries make a good team?”

The mismatched eyes lit with interest, although he asked sardonically, “Were you thinking of playing baseball or getting married?”

“I’m just curious,” I said. “This is mostly theoretical.”

“Isn’t everything? Hmmm…the Archer and the Ram.

Yes, that’s a very good match indeed. In fact, it’s a 5-9 sun sign pattern, what we call trine — which means positive and harmonious vibrations. Depending on the moon and other aspects, your chances for finding happiness and love in a permanent relationship with an Aries are excellent. In fact, the empathy and emotional fulfillment you’ll find with an Aries will rarely be as effortlessly achieved with another sign.”

I felt a weird desire to burst out laughing. Maybe Mayfield read something in my expression because he tilted his head to the side and said, “Any
misunderstandings with this person will soon be cleared up.”

“That’s a relief.”

He shrugged. “Mock if you will, but the stars don’t lie.”

“I wouldn’t know about the heavenly ones, but the human ones sure do.”

After a moment he indicated the chair behind me with his finger. I sat down. I felt nervous — not afraid. The only real danger, I believed, was that I might be wrong. I might be way off base in my speculations, but I didn’t think I was.

“What have you learned?” Mayfield asked.

“I think I know who killed Eva. And I think I know how. What I don’t know is why. That’s the part that puzzles me.”

“That’s the only thing that puzzles you?” His tone was dry.

“Well, I’m not sure why you agreed to talk to me,” I admitted. “And I’m not sure why you stuck that tarot card on my door. It’s almost as though you wanted me to…”

“Discover the truth?”

I nodded.

He smiled. “Fifty years is a long time to carry the burden of grief and guilt, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yes. I suppose so.”

“Yes.” He stared up at the cobalt blue ceiling with its blazing gold stars and mysterious moons. “My time is coming to a close.”

“Is that what the stars say?”

“It’s what my doctor says.” He permitted himself a grim smile. “And two specialists. It’s a cliché, but as my hour wanes, I feel the need to… make peace with the past.”

Since I had already worked out this much, I’m not sure why it felt like such a jolt to hear it out loud. “You killed Eva?” I remembered the horror of those blood-drenched photos and I just couldn’t seem to reconcile that manic
violence with this quiet, gentle man.

“You already know that, my dear.” When I didn’t have an answer, he said, almost reminiscently, “She’d discovered that Tony was queer. Eva was a naive girl in many ways, but even so it shouldn’t have been such a shock to her. She was disgusted by what she had seen and it made her cruel.”

“To you?”

He nodded “She was angry and bitter and more than a little wild that night, and I…was in love with her.”

“You were?” That hadn’t occurred to me. I had pegged him as gay; that he might be bisexual never entered my mind.

“Very much so. And I made the mistake of trying to tell her so that night.”

“Oh.”

“Yes.” A strange smile touched his pale mouth. “And, you see, at the time I had been experimenting with peyote — mostly for spiritual reasons, though not entirely — and we all drank a good deal all the time back then.”

“You’re saying it was drugs and alcohol?”

“The drugs and alcohol didn’t help, certainly.” He was silent for a moment. I thought of the times he had canceled our interviews, and I held my tongue.

At last he said, “I was the only one in the pool when she came out of the hotel and walked through the courtyard to Ball’s villa. I got out and followed her inside. We argued. It was unlike either of us, really, those ugly, horrible things we said that night. She couldn’t separate me from Tony, you see, she thought we were the same, and she was worse after I told her I loved her.”

He fell silent. I said, “And so you picked up a knife?”

“There was a fruit basket on the table. She was cutting apples and pears up — using the wrong size knife, which
was so like her — and — I don’t remember. I really don’t. I only remember standing there after it was over. It seemed like a dream. Far away and long ago — it felt more like a distant memory then than it does now. I remember I was very angry with her for making me do that. I picked up the tarot card from the table, and I placed it on her.”

“Reversed,” I said.

His strange gaze rested on me. “That’s right. The Lovers betrayed.”

“And the fingerprints didn’t matter because the card was yours to begin with.”

“That’s true.”

“And then you went outside to the pool and jumped in.”

“There was still no one in the pool. I jumped in and washed off the knife and let it sink to the bottom of the drain. By the time Stephen walked outside, the pool was full of people again, but everyone was so drunk that no one remembered who had been there first. I wasn’t clever at all, but somehow the fates worked to protect me, and I suppose I believed there was some purpose to that.”

I didn’t know what to say. He was still the same person who had showed kindness and compassion to me and he had committed an act of monstrous violence.

“And all these years you’ve kept silent.”

“I couldn’t see any value in speaking. It wouldn’t bring her back, and — I was afraid. But I’m not afraid anymore, and I was almost happy when I heard this book was to be written. I thought that if you could discover the truth, I would confirm it for you, but you would have to do the work yourself.”

“What do you expect me to do now?”

“Write your book, of course.”

“But…”

He waved his hand in one of those vague, graceful
gestures. “If you feel you must inform the police, go ahead.” His smile was acrid. “It’s not as though I’m a danger to society.”

I stared at him. “It’s not like you paid your debt to society either.”

Mayfield said quietly, “You have no idea what I’ve paid. But if you’d like a price tag, I’ve contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to charity — and there will be millions more upon my death.”

“How…long have the doctors given you?”

“Six months at the outside.”

If that were true he’d be dead long before the book was published.

I said, “Why are you leaving this up to me? I don’t want to have to make this kind of decision.”

“This is the hand you’ve been dealt,” he pronounced, for all the world like the Sphinx delivering its riddle. “Sagittarius is the truth-seeker. Now you have the truth.”

***

Jasmine scented the twilight — as did the smell of pot roast escaping from Jack’s kitchen window. I knocked on his door and a moment later it swung open. He was wearing jeans and a white T-shirt that emphasized the strong brown column of his throat and the muscles in his arms.

“I left you a couple of messages,” he said.

“I know.” I handed him Bud Perkins’s file. “I thought you might want this back.”

“Are you done with it?”

“Yeah.”

He studied my face. “Do you know who killed Eva Aldrich?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re kidding.”
“No.”
“Who?”
“I guess you’ll have to read the book.”
He didn’t say anything, just stared. Finally he said, “Did you want to come in?”
“Not really.”
His face did change then. He said, “I think we need to talk, Tim.”
I said tiredly, “Maybe I can save us both some time. You feel like things are moving too quickly between us and we both need to take a step back. And I agree. It’s better if we leave it at friends.”
He said, after a pause, “I see.”
I risked a look at his face, and found I couldn’t read it easily. “Isn’t that what you were going to say?”
“No.”
“Oh.” I blinked. “What were you going to say?”
“I guess it’s moot at this point.”
He moved back as I stepped inside the doorway. I closed the door behind me and said, “What were you going to say?”
He shoved his hands inside his jeans and offered a funny smile. “That I think I could be falling in love with you, and I’m not going to let that happen unless —” His eyes rested on my face. “It’s sort of beside the point now, isn’t it?”
I shook my head. “I thought you were going to say —” I think I was more shocked than he was when my voice gave out.
He didn’t move a muscle and I got control of myself and said, “I guess I was trying to beat you to the punch.”
Jack frowned. “This is one of the things I don’t understand about you, Tim. It’s one of the things that worries me about getting involved with you.”
I had that dizzy, breathless feeling, like when you’re a kid playing crack the whip, and you find yourself at the end of the whip. Things were moving too fast for me. I put my back against the door and said, “I’ve lost my nerve. I’m afraid to hope for too much, to trust that things can work themselves out. I thought you were — repulsed.”

“By your seizures?”

I nodded.

“I’m not repulsed. They scare me. Not the seizures themselves, but —” He swallowed as though his mouth was suddenly dry. “You would have drowned the other morning, Tim. If I hadn’t been next to you, you’d have slipped back in the water and drowned. You don’t remember that, do you?”

I shook my head. I couldn’t look away from Jack’s face. He looked…stricken.

“You reached for me, and then you seized. I had to drag you out of the pool. You’re not dumb. You have to know the danger, but you swim out there morning after morning by yourself.”

“Is that why you don’t want to take a chance on me?”

“I am willing to take a chance on you,” he said, “but you’ve got to be willing to take a chance too, and stop risking your life for no good reason. You’ve got to commit to keeping yourself alive and well before I commit —”

I interrupted, “You said you couldn’t stand me crying.”

His brows drew together. Then he said, “It’s not what you think. It rips my heart out when you cry. I want to fix it for you, and I can’t.” He reached a hand out, brushing my jaw. “I can’t do anything but love you, and I’m not sure that’s what you want.”

I found that I couldn’t meet his gaze anymore. “Yeah, it’s what I want.” I stared down at my hands knotted in fists on my thighs, and I consciously relaxed them. “I think
I've…loved you from the first time we ever went out.” I smiled a little, but it still hurt remembering how he had cut me loose, how quickly and easily he'd dropped me before.

As though he read my mind, Jack said, “Me too. I knew six months ago when I couldn’t stop noticing you, wondering about you. I told myself I couldn’t afford to get involved with you, that it wasn’t going to work, but I couldn’t help watching you, wondering how you were doing, if there wasn't some way…”

“You hid it pretty well.”

“You just weren't looking. I used to drink my morning coffee watching you swim, waiting for you to get into trouble. I kept trying to think what the hell I was going to do about you.”

Those dusk gray eyes met mine steadily, and something hard and dry and twisted inside me softened and let go. I muttered, “Okay, I'll wear a Medic Alert bracelet or even a damn dog collar if that's what you want.”

It was a relief to be pulled roughly into his arms. “I think the bracelet is a good idea.” His mouth found mine. “While we're on the subject of jewelry, how do you feel about rings?”
Novels
Come Unto These Yellow Sands  
(Chapters 1 -5)

It was like those old Choose Your Own Adventure novels.

*You are primary unit commander of the Lazarian Galaxy Rapid Response Team*—

Well, no. Not that adventure. This adventure started: You are a respectable college professor and the director of the prestigious Lighthouse MFA program of Casco Bay College in Southern Maine. You have had one hell of a day and you just want to go home and enjoy a glass of wine and a nice meal with your lover—sort-of lover—Police Chief Max Prescott. But as you approach your office in Chamberlain Hall, you spot a kid slumped in a chair outside the door. Even from this distance you can see that the kid is having a worse day than you. If you want to do the responsible, grown-up thing, keep walking. If you want to make life easy on yourself, turn around and leave before he notices you.

Once upon a time, it would have been no choice at all. But Swift was older now—against the odds—and he took a certain pride in the fact that he no longer ducked out on his responsibilities. Besides, he recognized that tall, dark and despondent figure. Tad Corelli was one of the most gifted students to take part in the Lighthouse residency program. He reminded Swift a little of himself at that age—minus the self-importance and mile-wide self-destructive streak.

Swift found his keys as he reached the door. He glanced at Tad. “Sorry. I was held up. Have you been waiting long?”

Tad lifted his head, and Swift dropped his keys. “What the hell happened to you?”

Tad wore a dark coat and a black knit cap. The cap
framed a bruised and battered face. One eye was swollen shut, his bottom lip was split and puffy, there was a crust of blood beneath one nostril. He bent painfully and retrieved Swift’s keys.

Swift took them automatically, still staring.

“I’m okay,” Tad mumbled. He looked at the door, clearly waiting for Swift to open it, and Swift shoved the keys in the lock and pushed the door open.

His office was a comfortable clutter of books and plants and old posters. The desk was an antique. It had belonged to Carl Sandburg. The leather chair behind the desk had belonged to Swift’s own father, the poet and dramatist Norris Swift. The chair in front of the desk was a comfortable secondhand club chair. Swift put a hand on Tad’s shoulder and guided him to its beige plush depths.

Tad leaned forward, head in hands, and Swift closed the office door.

“Do you need—what do you need?” He was at a loss. Physical violence was not his area of expertise, though he’d had the shit kicked out of him on occasion. But then he’d generally had it coming.

“Nothing.” Tad looked up, met Swift’s eyes and managed a gruesome smile. “You should see the other guy, Professor Swift.”

“What happened?”

Tad put cautious fingers to his split lip. “Doesn’t matter. Look, I-I have to go away for a while. Please don’t drop me from class. Or the Lighthouse program.”

“Where are you going?”

Tad shook his head.

Swift sat on the edge of his desk, trying to read Tad’s face. “It can’t have been much of a fight. Your knuckles aren’t banged up.”

“Please...”
“What?”
Tad said pleadingly, “I just have to get away for a little while. I’m not dropping out. I just need time to get myself together. Just a couple of weeks or so.”
Swift said slowly, “Okay.”
At Tad’s look of surprise, Swift said, “I’m not going to drop you, Tad. I want you in the program. But why don’t you tell me what’s going on? I might be able to help.”
“No one can help.” Tad closed his eyes, struggled with his emotions.
So much pain there. But then being young was a painful state.
“Is there anything you need? Do you have money? A place to stay?”
Tad’s head moved in negation.
Swift gave it some thought. Pay it forward. He was alive today because people who didn’t have to had taken a chance, had reached out to help him when he needed it most—not just once, but several times in his misspent youth. He leaned over his desk, pulled out the top drawer and fished around for the spare key to his bungalow.
He withdrew his wallet, rifled through it. He never carried a lot of cash. Not anymore. It was too dangerous. He’d got out of the habit—one of a number of habits he’d got out of. “I can give you twenty bucks and you can stay at my place on Orson Island while you figure out what you’re doing.”
Tad opened his eyes, his expression one of disbelief. “I don’t…know what to say.”
“You don’t have to say anything. I’ve been where you are. Just take the time you need, get your head straight and come back ready to get to work.”
Tad stared at him, unmoving, doubting.
“Okay?” Swift asked gently.
Tad nodded. He reached for the keys and the cash, shoving them automatically into his coat pocket. He put both hands on the edge of Swift’s desk and pushed to his feet.

“You sure you don’t need a doctor?” Or maybe an ambulance. The kid was moving like he was a hundred years old.

Tad shook his head.

“Let me know how you’re doing, okay?”

Tad jerked another nod. He shuffled toward the door. Hand on the knob, he stopped. “Thanks, Professor Swift,” he said without turning around.

The next moment he was gone, the door closing softly behind him.

Swift lived in an old deconsecrated church in the village of Stone Coast. Against expectation, it was a comfortable and practical living space, yet it still retained its original eccentric charm.

The original arched entrance doors, complete with stained-glass panels, were still intact. Gothic windows offered warm eastern light in the morning. The thick exposed wooden beams, floors, ceilings and even walls were all of dark, burnished wood. In place of the altar was a long marble-topped island within the raised, completely modern kitchen. Swift was a devout cook. For him, cooking went beyond therapy.

Speaking of religious experiences, the pews were also long gone—all but one which was positioned in the entryway. Swift had purchased a number of statues and carvings, large and small, from garden centers, estate sales and church auctions, and these now decorated the main living area. The stone fireplace and built-in
bookcases were part of the renovation, as were the slate floors in the kitchen and entry hall. The upstairs loft with its giant master bedroom and bath was surrounded by ornate reclaimed 1940s’ cast-iron railing. Upstairs the stained-glass windows were nearly intact. A giant cast bronze statue of a winged woman gazed down at the living room with a benevolent smile.

Swift was not particularly religious, but he experienced good vibrations in this old house of worship. It was a peaceful place, and he had needed peace when he’d arrived in Stone Coast fresh out of rehab six years earlier.

Arriving home after the meeting with Tad, he poured himself a glass of wine, one—he was careful about that—and started dinner. He wasn’t sure if Max was dropping by that night or not. Max came and went as he pleased, which was how they both liked it, although Swift wouldn’t have minded more coming than going.

He blended lemon thyme and pistachio nuts in the food processor for the pesto, drizzled in the olive oil and added freshly ground black pepper. As he worked, he thought about Tad. A smart, talented kid, but he hadn’t been in any fight. He’d been beaten. Badly beaten. And he’d been scared.

But you couldn’t force help on someone who didn’t want it. No one knew that better than Swift. So you did what you could do. And maybe time and space was all Tad needed. Swift took a sip of wine, set the pesto aside and prepared the chicken.

Chicken with lemon thyme pesto and summer tomato salad. There would be plenty of food if Max dropped in. And if not, there would be plenty of leftovers.

Swift was reading *Passionate Hearts: The Poetry of*
Sexual Love when he heard Max’s key in the front door just after nine that evening. His heart sped up as it always did, and he spared himself a wry smile. What was it T.S. Eliot had written about when the here and now cease to matter?

At one time he’d tried to convince himself that his feelings for Max were more about being one of the only two openly gay guys in a small town, but in the last year or so he’d come to accept that he cared for Max. More than Max cared for him. For Max it probably was mostly about the fact that they were the only two openly gay guys in a small town. And whatever Swift had once been, he was entirely respectable now. He was a good catch. Except, as Max occasionally pointed out, he wasn’t trying to catch anything. Max wasn’t into commitment.

“Something smells good,” Max said from the entryway.

Swift tossed the book aside and sat up. “Hungry?”

“Starving.” Max appeared in the arched doorway, and Swift rose to meet him. Max was six four and broad-shouldered. His wavy hair was brown with reddish glints, his eyes were hazel. He looked a lot like Tom Selleck except for the devilish white scar through his left eyebrow courtesy of a coked-up would-be carjacker who had tried to carve Max’s eye out.

Swift wrapped his arms around Max’s neck. Max pulled him closer, and as Swift’s mouth found his, he muttered, “But it’ll wait.”

His face was cold and he tasted like too many cups of coffee, but Swift didn’t mind. He loved the taste of Max. He kissed him more deeply, melting inside as Max responded hungrily. It probably had to do with the poetry book he’d been reading before Max showed up. He’d definitely been in the mood and getting ready to deal with it himself. But here was Max with his big, hard hands digging into Swift’s
ass as he pulled him closer still, and Max’s tongue licking at Swift’s lips. Swift opened to that tentative probe, and Max’s hot slick tongue slipped inside.

Swift moaned low in his throat. He wanted this—he always wanted this—and the best part was Max seemed to always want this too.

They continued to kiss, then Max broke for air. “I don’t know if it’s you or the fact that I haven’t eaten since breakfast, but I’m getting lightheaded.”

Swift laughed too, let his fingers tangle briefly with Max’s as he led the way past a seven-foot-tall marble angel, its sword upraised, up the two steps to the kitchen. “You came to the right house, Chief. What d’you want to drink?”

“What’s on tap?”
“Casco Bay Riptide Red and Summer Ale.”
“I’ll have a Red.”

Max leaned against the doorway and sipped his beer while Swift pulled the leftovers out of the fridge and heated the chicken.

“Tough day at the office?” Swift asked when the silence had stretched. Max appeared to be a million miles away.

He looked up, smiled faintly. “Yeah. You could say that. We don’t get a lot of homicides. Maine’s got the third lowest violent crime rate in the nation, and we’ve got one of the lowest rates in Maine. We’re proud of that.”

“You have a homicide case?”

Max nodded. “A local restaurant owner by the name of Mario Corelli was found shot to death on the beach at Wolfe Neck.”

Swift’s finger froze on the microwave start button.

“What?”

“If you owned a TV, you’d have heard all about it. Mario Corelli. Corelli’s Ristorante. We’ve eaten there a couple of
“I remember. The manicotti was incredible. Ricotta, mozzarella, pine nuts, herbs and a marinara sauce I’d kill to have the recipe for.” Swift was answering automatically, giving himself time to think.

“Maybe that was the motive. Should I ask if you have an alibi?”

“You don’t have a suspect?”

“We’ve got a couple of suspects. Corelli fired one of his waiters last night and the guy is missing. Also missing is Corelli’s son Tad.”

“Is Tad a suspect?”

“The kid and Corelli fought like cats and dogs. We definitely want to have a talk with him. The fact that he’s disappeared is suspicious.”

“Maybe he doesn’t know about his father.”

“Maybe.” Max sounded skeptical.

“He could be missing for other reasons, right?”

“Sure.” Max leveled a direct look from beneath his brows. “But his disappearance is news to everyone who knows him. The kid’s been in trouble before. Substance-abuse problems, that kind of thing.”

It was the wrong thing to say. Swift could feel his resistance building. “People can change.”

“So the bleeding hearts tell us.” As though he realized how harsh that sounded, Max added, “You’re one of the rare ones, Swift.”

Swift pressed the button and watched the microwave vibrate. He stared at his reflection in the microwave door. His face was a pale blank. There was just the shine of his eyes, the gleam of his earring, the dark frame of his long hair.

“It sounds like you already have your mind made up.”

“I have a hunch,” Max said, and the assurance, the
certainty, in his voice raised Swift’s hackles. It wasn’t logical, it probably wasn’t reasonable, but that judgmental streak was one of the things that bothered him about Max. It was one of the ways in which they didn’t mesh. Not at all.

He folded his lips against the unwise words. Watched the chicken spinning slowly on its plate in the microwave.

Max said, “Come to think of it, Corelli’s in your residency writing program, isn’t he? What can you tell me about him?”

If he was going to speak up, now was the moment. Max might be a little jaded, a little cynical, but he was a good cop. An experienced cop. And he thought Tad was guilty.

And Swift disagreed. Swift had hunches about people too, and they were usually right on the money. He knew Tad Corelli. Max didn’t. Tad Corelli hadn’t acted like someone who’d just killed his father. He had seemed afraid, but he had not acted guilty or like someone on the run. He’d been battered, bloody, emotionally exhausted… but none of that indicated he’d committed murder.

And Swift felt a bond with Tad. He had from the beginning, from the day Tad had begged to be enrolled in the Lighthouse program. The kid wasn’t working on his master’s, he hadn’t even graduated yet, but he’d pleaded to take part in the ten-day residency that took place each semester, and though space was as limited as the program was competitive, Swift had responded to that passion. He’d pulled strings.

Tad deserved a break. He deserved a chance to tell his side of the story, and it would look better if he came in on his own. That much Swift knew just from listening to Max talk shop on long winter evenings.

“Something wrong?”

Swift turned to face him. He was thinking quickly. He
could go out to the island tomorrow and talk to Tad, explain to him what was going on—Tad probably didn't know his father was dead yet, and that terrible news would come better from a friend. Swift remembered only too clearly the pain of his own father's death. And the relapse into cocaine use that had followed.

He said slowly, “He's...gifted.”

“They all are in that program, right?”

Swift nodded. “More gifted than usual. He's the youngest student we've ever had enrolled in Lighthouse. Although, technically, he's not in the program yet.”

“That's right. I remember now. You let him take part in the conferences even though he's an undergraduate.”

“Right.”

“How's he doing?”

“He's excelling. He's an exceptional kid. Just the fact that he wanted into the program so badly before he was even eligible is...inspiring to me. As his instructor.”

Max's expression was polite. He wasn't much for touchy-feely. “What about friends?”

“He hangs out with a couple of jocks. Hodge Williams and Denny Jensen.”

That raised some interest. “The Jensen that quarterbacks for the Brown Bears?”

“Does he?” Swift shrugged, and Max's mouth quirked in response.

“Unless there are two Denny Jensens at CBC, yeah. The kid's attracted some big league interest according to the local papers. He's captain of the sailing team too.”

Swift didn't follow the local paper any more than he followed college sports. “I think they all played football in high school together.”

“What about a girlfriend?” Max asked.

“Nah. I'm satisfied with you for now.”
Max looked up in surprise. Swift raised an eyebrow. “Are you interrogating me, Chief?”

The microwave pinged. Max offered his slow, devilish grin. “Saved by the bell, Teach.”
Chapter Two

You stare and stare in disbelief at the mirror. How could this have happened? YOU ARE A MONSTER!

Okay. Maybe not that bad, but you are lying to your sort-of boyfriend, and you might even be an accessory to murder after the fact, or whatever they call it. Max will undoubtedly know what they call it when he charges you for—

“If the teaching thing doesn’t pay off, you could always get work as a chef.” Max spoke through a mouthful of chicken and salad, interrupting Swift’s thoughts. “This is great.”

Swift smiled automatically. They sat at the table in the kitchen. The overhead light picked out the golden bubbles rising lazily in Max’s glass, blanched the dark wood of the cabinets to the color of old ivory and threw the rest of the room into gilded shadow. The topic of Mario Corelli’s murder had been temporarily shelved. Swift had seen to that, and he was doing his best to keep it off the table. He didn’t want to lie to Max. One of the things he liked best about their relationship was that they didn’t lie to each other.

Except…even if his decision to keep silent was more omission than lie, Max would view it as a lie of omission. Frankly, so did Swift.

“How was your day?” Max asked suddenly.

Swift shrugged. Max delivered an interrogative look, the pale scar on his forehead crinkling.

Swift drawled, “Oh, you know. The usual whirlwind gaiety. Faculty meetings. Lectures on subjects only I find interesting. Being stood up for office appointments. Grading papers over a soggy avocado sandwich.” He picked a cherry tomato out of the salad bowl and absently
considered the sharp burst of pulpy flavor on his tongue. There was a time when something as mundane as the bite of tomato juice would have had him reaching for a pen, testing the first words of a new poem. Now flavor was an end in itself.

_The aroma of the roast._ Savor the moment.
“Avocado in November? You’re an optimist.”
“Probably.”
Max’s gaze was unexpectedly keen. “Getting bored with the academic life?”
“Nope.” Swift meant that. He liked teaching. He liked believing that he was introducing some of these kids to neoteric ideas, fresh ways of looking at literature and even the world around them. And he took pride in his role as the director of the Lighthouse program. He liked the image of himself as a mentor rather than menace, and he believed that he had earned the title, that he had helped some of these aspiring writers reach—if not their full potential—greater potential.

He even liked the routine. Needed the routine, in fact. But…

“But?” Max was reading his thoughts tonight. Sometimes it was a little dull. A little lonely. “Just looking forward to spring, I guess.”
“You’ve got a wait. It’s only turned autumn.”
“True.”
“Maybe we—” Max broke off. For a split second he looked uncomfortable. Or as close to uncomfortable as Max got.
“Maybe we…?”
“Ought to finish up in here and leave the dishes for tomorrow.”
“Sure.” Swift didn’t push. He never pushed Max. Instead he gave a slow, lazy smile and watched the color
warm Max’s face.

At the far end of the loft was a large painted mural of an undersea temple. Smiling dolphins swam through bands of sunlight and broken marble columns. Sand dollars littered the glittering ocean bottom with scattered gold coins and pearls. A solemn-faced Poseidon contemplated Swift over the glint of his trident. That would be Poseidon’s trident, though Swift’s was making an impressive showing too thanks to Max’s generous attentions.

Max crawled over, stretching out beside Swift. Swift smiled up at him. He felt relaxed and at ease in the way unique to good sex with the right person. He felt content. What a lovely word that was. Content.

“God. You’re…” There was a quiet sincerity to Max’s voice.

When he didn’t complete the thought, Swift raised his right eyebrow—something he'd spent an inordinate amount of time practicing when he was a goofball kid.

Max traced the haughty arch with his thumb.

“Beautiful,” he admitted self-consciously.

Swift spluttered into a laugh. “You need to get your eyes checked, officer.”

“Hey.”

“Hey, yourself.” Swift wrinkled his face in distaste. “I look like an ex-ju—”

“You’re beautiful.” Max cupped the side of Swift’s face, his own expression serious.

Swift crossed his eyes, trying to break the mood.

Max’s lips twitched. He shook his head reprovingly and bent to press his mouth to Swift’s. He was smiling. The smile imprinted itself gently on Swift’s mouth. On his
“What?” Swift asked when he could breathe again.
“You look like that angel in the front room.”
Swift laughed, dismissing it. Secretly, he was flattered. He liked the jaded, world-weary expression of the angel in the downstairs alcove. He thought the statue had more than beauty. It had character—something he hoped he had developed by now.

Max rested his forehead against Swift’s. They breathed in soft unison. At last Max groaned and lifted his head.
“I’ve got to get some sleep or tomorrow’s going to be hell.”
Swift nodded. Tomorrow was going to be hell anyway, for a number of reasons. He was holding tight to these peaceful moments.

Max rose from the bed and padded off to the bathroom. Swift listened to him splashing and brushing and flushing. Max padded back to the bed, turned out the lamp and climbed in beside Swift who had already cocooned himself in the blankets. It was cold in the loft. The building’s heating in general left something—about six degrees—to be desired.

Max tossed and turned a couple of times, and then, as he always did, settled on his side facing Swift. The shine of his eyes vanished. His sigh was warm against Swift’s face.

Swift listened to Max’s breath smoothing out, deepening. Moonlight lit the mural at the far end of the room, gleamed in the kindly eyes of the swimming dolphins, glanced off the spirals and curls of the ruined temples.

For a time Swift lay quietly, thinking. “Max,” he said abruptly, “is it possible Corelli’s death was an accident?”
“Hmm?”
“Could the gun have gone off by accident or something?”
Max mumbled, “What gun?”
“The gun that killed Corelli.”
He could feel Max blinking, trying to gather his sleep-scattered wits. “He was shot three times in the chest. I don’t think it was an accident.”
“Oh. No. Doesn’t sound like it.”
“Why?” Max sounded more alert.
“Just thinking about Tad.” That at least was the truth.
The bedclothes whispered as Max turned onto his back. “No point worrying about what you can’t control.”
“When did that ever stop anyone?”
Max chuckled sleepily and patted Swift’s thigh beneath the bedclothes. “Night, Teach.”
“Night, Chief.” But it was a long time before Swift closed his eyes.

He woke to the familiar pleasure of muscular arms wrapping themselves around him, a hard body molded to his back, a very hard cock nudging his ass. But the mouth brushing the nape of his neck was very soft indeed.
Swift raised his lashes to read the alarm clock. Not quite forty minutes before they needed to leave this sweet, humid womb. He didn’t move, didn’t even let his breathing change. He savored the moment. Soon the day would officially begin and their brief allotment of intimacy would be a memory.
“Time?” Max’s calloused hand raised goose bumps on Swift’s sensitized skin. Max’s hand slid lower, lower over the ridges of abdomen, the flat plane of Swift’s belly.
“Time.” Swift caught his breath as Max’s fingers tangled in the softness of Swift’s pubic hair. Max’s fingers flicked him teasingly, and Swift sucked in his gut.
“Ticklish?”
Swift shook his head although they both knew he was
extremely ticklish. His cock pushed for attention, and Max obliged, wrapping his fist around the thickening length.

“Good…” Swift breathed out as Max used his free hand to lazily tweak his nipple, “…morning.”

“Could be at that.”
Max’s tongue rasped the back of Swift’s neck, tasting his skin. Swift shivered, a full-body shiver that made Max chuckle, warm breath gusting against Swift’s nape.

“Mm. I like that.”

“Kissing…” gasped Swift.
“Kissing,” agreed Max. He pulled Swift over, and their mouths latched on a wet, warm kiss, suddenly starving for each other. Ravenous. As though they hadn’t just had each other a few hours before.

They broke apart, and Max gave Swift’s cock another hard caress, skin on naked skin. “You know what I want?” Swift closed his eyes, smiling, murmuring, “Mm. Me too.”

Neither of them being kids or inexperienced, they had it down to a science. A fun science, though, like…zoology or astronomy. Max rolled away, dragged open the drawer in the bedside table and grabbed the lube. Sea kelp and guava bark. It had provided Max no little amusement. It was nice stuff though, slick and slippery on Max’s calloused fingers. It felt nice melting into Swift’s body, it smelt nice mingling with the sharp scent of male sex.

Just the lube, no condoms. That was the closest they got to commitment. The acknowledgment that they were only sleeping with each other.

Max covered Swift’s body with his own. Swift wound his
arms around Max’s broad shoulders. They gazed at each other in the dove-soft shadows of the loft. Their faces drew slowly close, their mouths met in a gentle graze, but the gentleness fell away in seconds to the brisk, efficient pursuit of satisfaction, kisses turning rough with bristly cheeks and hot tongues moving in the silent language. They explored the taste of each other as though somehow something might have changed overnight.

Max’s hands locked on Swift’s shoulders, and he sheathed himself neatly in Swift’s body. Swift moaned. His hands gripped Max’s muscular butt, pulling him close so that their hips ground against each other. They humped, frantic and without grace in the naked honesty of need. Then Max groaned into Swift’s mouth, raw, male longing, and within seconds of each other they were spilling out their slickness, coating groins and bellies with hot wetness.

They rested for a few seconds, caught their breaths, and then they were up and moving through the morning routine of showers and shaves. Max kept a couple of shirts and changes of underwear at Swift’s. He dressed while Swift made coffee and toast. No time for anything more. Not on the weekdays. Not even Fridays. On the weekends—well, they didn’t spend that many weekends together. Swift wasn’t sure why, exactly, but this one would be no different. He considered it while he buttered slices of oat nut bread, sprinkling his with cinnamon and sugar. Considered what he knew of Max.

Even after three years of seeing each other regularly—or at least what passed for regularly with the two of them—there was a lot about Max that remained a mystery to Swift. Initially, if Swift was honest, he hadn’t been that interested. He’d just been grateful to find someone to have sex with who he could stand to talk to afterwards. After a year or so he’d grown more interested in who Max was
when he wasn't with Swift, but he'd run into the amiable but impenetrable barriers Max kept firmly in place between them.

He knew the basics, of course. He knew Max was forty-five, in excellent health, had never been married, and voted Independent. He was easy to talk to and a good listener. He sang in the shower in a pleasant baritone and rarely got the words right. He couldn't cook to save his life but he enjoyed eating, and to compensate for it put in time at the gym and went running on the mornings he didn't wake up in Swift's bed. He followed sports—baseball and football in particular. He liked soul music. Most important, he had never heard of SSS and the last time he'd read a poem was probably in *Mother Goose*.

“I'll have to get mine to go,” Max said, jogging down the staircase.

“Ready and waiting.” Swift took a mouthful of coffee, watching—appreciating—as Max strode into the kitchen area. An ex-jock, Max moved well, with a careless, athletic ease.

Picking up his yellow mug, Max downed his coffee in three giant swallows. He scooped up the paper towel wrapping his toast, pausing in front of Swift long enough to give him a coffee-tasting peck.

“No cinnamon on mine?”

“Nope. Have a good day,” Swift said.

“I'll see you.”

Swift nodded. Max usually left it like that. Sometimes they made plans but just as often it was left to chance. The fact that chance usually led them to each other's bed might mean something—or it might not.

Today Max would be busy with his murder case. And so would Swift.
Chapter Three

You are an underwater explorer. You’ve just accepted your most challenging assignment. To find the ancient vanished city of Atlantis lost far beneath the waves.

Or maybe you’re just a sleep-deprived, under-caffeinated college professor with rain trickling down the back of your neck as you swim—er, sprint—from your car to your classroom clear on the other side of campus.

Normally Swift didn’t mind the rain. He liked water. He’d been born underwater. His parents—literary icons Norris Swift and Marion Gilbert Swift—had wanted their only offspring to experience a childhood rich in sensory and cultural stimulation. They had documented, both in film and poetry, nearly every moment of Swift’s childhood journey. From tadpole to poet in his own right, it was all there for anyone who wanted to know—and was a regular subscriber to PBS.

It was a peculiar thing to grow up in the public eye. It was a still-weirder thing to serve as the living, breathing form of inspiration for two of the greatest poets in North America. Sometimes, when Swift had been much younger, it had been hard to separate who he was from who everyone else thought he was. He’d seen home movies of himself at eighteen months sitting inside a giant watermelon and trying to eat his way out, of being dipped in watercolor and crawling over canvasses. He’d swum with dolphins at age eight and drank wine at his parents’ dinner parties at ten. His godfather had been the Poet Laureate William Stafford, and according to family legend, Anne Sexton had once babysat him while Marion Swift was accepting a gold medal from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

No wonder Swift had been doing drugs by the time he
was seventeen.

That was the year he’d also scored the Agnes Lynch Starrett Poetry Prize for *Black Solstice*, his first book of poems. *BS*, as he’d come to think of it, had gone on to win the Kate Tufts Discovery Award. He’d followed that success a year later with *Cuckoo Shells*, which had pretty much summed up his state of mind. *CS* had been critically lauded but had failed to score any major awards. Swift had been certain his career was over. Maybe it would have been better for everyone if it had been.

He’d sought comfort in more chemical relief. A lot of chemical relief. By the time he was nineteen he had learned to deal with the crushing expectations of his nearest and dearest by means of his serious and less and less easily concealed cocaine habit.

But that was all a long time ago. Now days Swift was healthy, whole and mostly happy. And even if he never wrote another poem as long as he lived, he would be okay.

The only reason he was even thinking about this, dredging up painful history as he jogged across the green and glistening campus, was Tad. Swift didn’t need to hear the particulars of the case—although it had been all over the local radio during his morning drive—to know it was possible Tad had killed his old man. Especially if the kid was using again. Personal experience. Swift always figured it was a miracle he hadn’t killed someone—let alone himself—back in the bad old days.

Not that Tad had appeared high when Swift spoke to him the previous afternoon. In fact, Swift had never once picked up a hint that Tad suffered chemical addiction. But if Mario Corelli had delivered the beating Tad received? Yeah, Swift could see Tad hitting back.

Tad was a big kid. Not just tall but broad, heavyset. He reminded Swift of an overgrown puppy who still hadn’t
grown into his size. He'd played football in high school despite his current literary aspirations. Swift could imagine him striking out in anger and doing serious damage. Except Mario Corelli hadn't died in a fight. He'd been shot to death. Shot to death on a state park beach according to Max, which sort of eliminated the striking-out-in-blind-rage defense.

Swift wished now he had shut up and let Max talk about the case. No one else really had much information beyond the most basic, but rumors were already circulating that Tad was wanted by the police for questioning.

He reached Chamberlain Hall, which was busy and bustling at a quarter to eight in the morning, and picked up his messages and mail from Dottie Dodge, the department secretary. Dottie was a fierce munchkin of a woman, and she had never made a secret of the fact that she thought Swift did not belong at a fine old institution like Casco Bay College. The first week Swift had started teaching at CBC she had informed him that her nephew had died in a car accident caused by a drunk driver. It was Dottie's opinion that all addicts were the same animal and that that animal ought to be put down. He tried not to take it personally, although after six years of that same unbending attitude it wasn't easy.

That morning Dottie greeted him more cordially than usual, her yellow-green eyes alight with malicious pleasure as she handed over the usual assortment of junk-mail catalogs and brochures. Dottie religiously kept Swift's junk mail safe for him. The important stuff she tended to misplace for a day or two.

Swift shuffled quickly through the envelopes. There was yet another letter from Shannon Cokely. Probably once again listing her imaginary grievances against the Lighthouse Program in general and Swift in particular.
“The police were here when we unlocked the doors this morning.”
“Oh?”
“They made copies of Corelli’s cumulative records.”
Dottie sniffed. “Looks like teacher’s pet is in hot water again.”
There was no point pretending he didn’t know what she was talking about. The whole campus was abuzz. “I thought the cops were looking at a waiter Corelli fired.”
“Oh, you’re way behind the times. The waiter, Tony Lascola, has an alibi. And the Corelli boy has disappeared.” She smiled tightly. Dottie had always been deeply offended by the fact that Swift had bent the rules to get Tad into the Lighthouse program.
“Innocent until proven guilty,” Swift reminded her, he hoped affably.
Dottie gave another of those sniffs that conveyed so much disapproval with so little oxygen.
Nodding farewell, Swift headed for his office. He was running late and had just enough time to dump his coat and grab his roll book before getting over to the seminar room where his students milled restlessly in the hallway.
“Hey, Professor!”
“Morning, Professor Swift.”
“Professor Swift? About Tuesday’s assignment…”
He unlocked the door and let them crowd inside the room, absently responding to greetings and questions.
The first class of the day was Foundations of Literary Analysis. It was a class Swift enjoyed not least because it spared him teaching Introduction to Creative Writing. As sponsor of the college literary magazine he had all the exposure to newly hatched scribes he could handle. The course emphasized a subject dear to his heart: critical reading and writing. It never failed to dismay him how
many kids confused liking something with literary merit. If there was one thing he intended his students to take away at the end of the semester, it was an ability to separate personal likes and dislikes from objective analysis.

It would probably be easier to teach them to write book reports in iambic pentameter, but he was going to do it or die trying. If there was one life skill everyone on the planet needed, it was the ability to think with critical objectivity.

As always, once Swift began his lecture, the passion for words and writing swept him away, and he forgot all about Tad and the murder of Mario Corelli, and the fact that Max was going to be very unhappy with him.

“The discovery that you like William Carlos Williams? That's great. We'll keep it in mind for Christmas. But to get an A on a paper in this class, you're going to have to convince me that you've got a good reason for liking William Carlos Williams.”

He could see the faces of those most fond of their own opinions wrinkling up in protest.

“I want to see those opinions supported by evidence. I want you to prove to me that you've considered elements like theme, setting, characterization—”

“How can there be characterization in a poem?” objected Denny Jensen.

Jensen was a smart kid even if he had taken Foundations of Literary Analysis in the hope of avoiding having to write anything himself. Swift remembered what Max had said about Jensen the evening before. He wouldn't have guessed Jensen was the bright hope of the football team given the fact that he exhibited none of that attitude of entitlement of so many jocks, so he forgave him the dumb question and was off and running, explaining exactly how characterization worked in poetry.

The next seventy minutes passed quickly—for Swift
anyway. Back in his cubbyhole of an office he graded papers, absently listening to the drum of rain against the windows, and calculated how soon he could get out to Orson Island to talk to Tad. Not before his afternoon seminar. Not without bringing attention to himself.

That worried him—the realization that he was automatically thinking like a criminal. He wasn't a criminal. It wasn't even for sure that he was helping a criminal. He just wanted to make sure Tad wasn't sandbagged. What was wrong with that?


It took Swift a few strange seconds to place the name. Recognition brought a little jolt with it. Bernie was Swift’s agent. Former agent.

“You’re kidding.” That was a rhetorical comment. Of course Dottie wasn’t kidding. Dottie had no sense of humor. She didn’t bother to reply, and a split second later the phone rang in Swift’s office.

Swift picked up. “Bernard.”

No one called Bernard “Bernie”. No one ever had but Swift who, back when he was a punk kid, thought it funny to irritate Bernard at every opportunity. What did it say about him that he’d set out to antagonize his own agent? His agent and his friend. He remembered once, after he’d been beaten up by a less-than-amused drug dealer, calling Bernard in the middle of the night—and Bernard had unhesitatingly answered that cry for help, driving to the rescue, cashmere coat thrown over his silk pajamas, hair sticking up on end like a cockatoo. Bernard had sat with Swift in the emergency room while they stitched the cut in his scalp and taped his broken nose.

So there was a lot of warmth in Swift’s voice. There was warmth in Bernard’s tone too, though he sounded
tentative even after six years, always prepared to find that Swift had once more descended into self-destruction. “My dear. How are you?”

“Good. Very good. How are you?”

It was odd to be making polite chitchat with someone who knew him as well as Bernard did. Had. Sometimes you had to go through the ping-pong preliminaries. It had been nearly two years since they’d last spoken. They still exchanged cards at Christmas.

“I’m in fine fettle, Swift. As a matter of fact, I’m just back from a fabulous holiday in Barbados.” Bernard forever sounded like someone who’d escaped from a Noel Coward play, like one of those suave congenital bachelors—and he was a congenital bachelor, but he was also as straight as a baseball bat.

“That must have been nice.”

“Oh it was, my dear.” Bernard launched into a wry and witty account of his island vacation. He followed that with a catty description of a literary luncheon he’d recently attended—Capote couldn’t have done it better—complete with updates and the latest gossip about people Swift no longer gave a damn about.

Swift appreciated that this was all warm-up for the main event and waited patiently, if a little nervously. Bernard would not call just to chat. Not these days.

“But how did we get sidetracked on me when I rang to hear about you? I don’t suppose you’re…working?” The last word was cautious. Bernard didn’t mean working as in teaching or being otherwise gainfully employed. He meant writing. He meant poetry.

“No.”

“Not a word?”

“Not a word worth showing anyone.”

“I only ask because Fountainhead has been in touch
about the *Blue Knife* collection."

Swift sank back in the leather chair that had once belonged to his father. He felt…gut-punched. Fountainhead Press was a small, independent literary press. Best known for the prestigious Fountainhead Prize, it was one of the most influential publishers in the United States. Fountainhead had published all but Swift's first collection of poems.

After ten years Swift had nearly forgotten the plans for his last ill-fated collection. He'd sort of assumed Fountainhead had forgotten too.

When he found his voice, he said, "There was no *Blue Knife* collection, Bernard. You know that. We all know that. I lied to get an advance because I needed money for coke."

Bernard cleared his throat. "Er…yes." The discomfort traveled all the way from Midtown Manhattan. Such dangerous streets.

"Do they want me to repay the advance?" Swift couldn't even remember how much it had been. Nothing wildly extravagant, safe to say. Fountainhead was a small operation, and financing poets was never a huge moneymaker. Whatever the amount, he'd blown it—literally—within a week.

Well, his teaching salary wasn’t exorbitant, but if Fountainhead would give him a little time, he should be able to figure out a way to come up with the cash. If worse came to worse, he could approach his trustees—but that would be a last resort.

"No, no," Bernard interrupted his roiling thoughts. "Nothing like that. They just—well, we all—hope that you might be writing again."

"No." Swift made an effort to temper it. "Sorry. The words just aren’t there."
Bernard didn’t seem to hear him. “In fact, given the complicated circumstances, Fountainhead is even willing to kick in another grand.”

Far from cheering Swift up, that news just made him feel all the more wretched. “That’s generous of them, but I’m not writing.”

“Ah.” Bernard’s careful tone was a dead giveaway. “What about the poems you wrote after…?”

Swift’s heart paused mid-beat. He managed to say, “After what?”

“After Norris passed away.”

Passed away. What a feeble term for a star collapsing on itself. All that light and brightness and warmth extinguished.

He closed his eyes, and over the sick, hollow pounding of his heart said hoarsely, “No.”

“I’m sorry. What was that?”

“No.”

“Why not let me look at them?” Bernard persisted. “They might be better than you think. They almost certainly are. You were always far too harsh a—”

The laugh that tore its way out of Swift’s chest shocked them both.

But…truly? The poems he wrote after he learned his father had died? The poems that narrated the end of his two-year struggle to keep clean? The poems he wrote in that final, despairing plummet to self-destruction? How could anyone even ask?

“I can’t.”

“But—”

Just for an instant the close rein Swift kept on himself slipped. “No one is ever going to see those poems. Not while I’m alive.”

Bernard’s silence was stricken. He said, “Swift, dear
boy. I didn’t mean—"
    “I know.”
    “I thought perhaps time had—”
    “I realize. But no.”
    “Of course. It’s completely your decision.” Pause. “But
the poems do still exist?”
    If Swift started laughing, it was liable to turn into
something else. He flattened all emotion out of his
response. “Yes. And after I’m dead you can do whatever
you like with them. You’re my literary executor, Bernard.”
    “Don’t joke about that.”
    “It’s okay. I’m not planning on going anywhere. You’re
going to have a long wait to get your clutches on my
greatest works.”
    He was trying to lighten the mood, but Bernard wasn’t
laughing. Maybe the bad old days when Swift’s imminent
self-annihilation loomed over their heads were still too
close.
    Bernard cleared his throat and said in apparent non
sequitur, “I saw Marion in Bermuda.”
    “Did you?” Swift asked without interest.
    “She was vacationing there with Ralph. She looks well.”
    Ralph. Swift stared out the rain-blurred window. “She
always does.”
    Bernard’s hesitation stretched the distance between
them. “She seems happy.”
    “Good for her. Damn. There’s the bell. I’ll talk to you
later, Bernard.”
    “Yes, all right,” Bernard said hastily, “but Swift at least,
well…at least consider Fountainhead’s offer.”
    “I’ll think about it,” Swift lied.

There was no phone at the bungalow on Orson Island,
and for the first time Swift regretted that. He wished it was possible to cancel his afternoon seminar, but sticking to his routine had become second nature by now. He didn’t like to diverge from his road into the yellow wood. It always felt slightly perilous. More perilous some days than others.

Lunch was spent at a local coffeehouse grading more papers. There was a lot more grading papers in teaching than he’d originally anticipated. He didn’t mind. He actually found a lot of the stuff kids wrote amusing. Had he ever been that young? That naïve?

He listened with half an ear to the conversations around him—most of which sooner or later touched on the murder of Mario Corelli. Corelli’s restaurant was a popular and successful one, and its owner was well known in Stone Coast. His wife Nerine was currently running for mayor, although there was speculation that she might drop out of the race now.

Swift ate his clam chowder bread bowl, mechanically marked papers, and absorbed the delightfully shocked conversations flowing around him. Popular opinion was that Tad had killed his old man. Max was right. The Corellis hadn’t enjoyed quite the warm relationship Swift had with his father, but that didn’t mean Tad had killed Mario. It didn’t mean that hearing about Mario’s death wouldn’t be a terrible shock. It didn’t mean he hadn’t loved his father.

Swift needed to get to the island and talk to Tad. He wasn’t going to make his mind up about anything until he’d heard Tad out.

So he spooned his soup, graded papers and refused to think of anything else.

After lunch Swift returned to campus in time for his Reading Poems seminar. The Reading Poems course was always a mix of pleasure and pain. Pleasure because he did still passionately love poetry and the course covered a
range of poetic practices and a variety of media. Pain because most of these kids read anything but their own work very badly.

There are few things in this life more bamboo-under-fingernails than good poetry read aloud badly—unless it is bad poetry read aloud badly.

Swift suffered stoically through renditions of Browning's “My Last Duchess” and Lowell's “Patterns”, and the minute the classroom was empty, locked the door and bolted for the parking lot.

It was still raining as Swift’s Jeep pulled slowly off the Casco Bay Lines ferry onto the sandy beach at Orson Island and headed up the winding road that led to the bungalow.

He’d inherited the bungalow from his father. Norris had lived there for several years before he met Marion Gilbert. It was on Orson Island that he’d written two of his most famous plays, Name Dropping and Broken Bells.

Technically, Orson Island was part of the city of Portland, Maine. It had a year-round population of 60. During the summer months the population swelled to 150. Swift's original plan had been to live on the island year round as part of his staying-clean strategy, but the ferry commute had proved too difficult, and though he liked his privacy and the idea that his father had intended that refuge for him, the island was too isolated.

Now days he used it for a vacation home or when he needed time on his own.

There were no paved roads on the island, but the dirt roads were hard-packed and wide. Swift drove them easily, despite the rain sheeting down. White sand, white skies… the only color came from the trees lining the road, scarlet
and gold foliage fading into the autumn mist.  

_Nothing gold can stay…_

How very true.

In the early 20th century the island and its quaint, cozy inns had drawn summer folk, but these days there were no hotels. Orson Island was not on anyone’s Top Ten Vacation Getaways. A number of homes were seasonal rentals. Few people lived on the island year round. The only real public services were a post office located in Sandy’s General Store and Café, a strictly volunteer fire department and a one-room local school. As far as luxury amenities, the island boasted a community hall, a lending library and a tennis court.

Swift turned off the main road onto a loose gravel drive which led to the bungalow. He could see the rooftop and chimney through the flame-colored trees. By now Tad would know he was coming. He’d be able to hear the car engine from a mile away. The island was very quiet, as Swift knew from his own experience, and this time of year the only sounds to break the silence were the rush of waves, the wind through the trees, the cries of gulls.

At last the bungalow swung into view. It was a 1920s bungalow, gray and white clapboard with a screened porch overlooking the bay.

Swift parked in the circle of shell and pebbles, and went up the stairs. The scent of autumn and burning leaves sharpened the damp air.

He knocked. There was no response from inside the bungalow. He gave it a few seconds and then knocked again.

When there was still no reply, he unlocked the front door and stepped inside.

He knew at once that Tad was not there. The tobacco-brown curtains were drawn across the windows, the
fireplace was cleaned of all ash and laid in readiness, the dust on the tabletops was undisturbed.

“Tad?” Swift called against the sinking sensation in his gut.

The bungalow smelt cold and clammy and empty as seaside places did after being uninhabited for a month or two. Wherever Tad had gone after leaving Swift's office the previous afternoon, he had not come here.

Swift walked through the rooms, footsteps sounding troublingly loud in the extended silence. The paneled interior had been photographed many times, and as usual he had that odd sensation of seeing the past and the present overlap like double exposure on film. His father's battered typewriter—which had belonged to his father before him—sat on a small table facing the window overlooking the beach.

Outside the window he could hear rain ticking against a metal watering can.

Swift walked out to the back porch and gazed down at the empty beach below. Cyan-blue waves ruffled against the sand and rocks. There was no sign of anyone.

A gust of wet wind blew against his face. Mother Nature giving him the raspberry. He shivered. Shining drops beaded along the edge of the porch roof and splashed down on the steps in moody silence. Swift turned and went back inside to have another look around, not wanting to accept the obvious: that Tad had never arrived. That Tad was missing—possibly on the run.

Possibly something worse.

There was a ring of undisturbed mold around the waterline of the toilet bowl. The fridge was empty of everything but a box of baking soda and an unopened jar of blueberry preserves.

The bedroom, too, had not been used since the last
time Swift had stayed on the island. The wooden blinds were closed. The pale green chenille bedspread was slightly crooked. The white dresser top was cleared of anything but the milk glass shaded lamp and a framed photo of Norris Swift’s parents, dead long before Swift was born.

The bed was one of those white antique storage beds with drawers built into the base and a bookshelf for a headboard. The shelves were crowded with Swift’s childhood collection of Choose Your Own Adventure books. One of the books was lying on the bed. *Who Killed Harlowe Thrombey?*

Swift picked it up, opening to his forgotten bookmark, his smile dimming at the sight of a faded antique postcard featuring 19th century couples, parasols and Sunday best, strolling along the water’s edge. Beneath the flouncing hemlines were printed the words: “*Oh! Come Unto Those Yellow Sands.*” *Shakespeare.*

Max had sent him that card last summer when Swift had been staying on the island for a couple of weeks. He turned the card over. Max had written in his neat, controlled handwriting, *Wish you were here.*

That had to be the single most romantic gesture Max had made in the course of their relationship. It had been enough to get Swift to end his island retreat a week and a half early and head back to the mainland.

Max had been satisfyingly appreciative, but it had not been the turning point that Swift had privately hoped for. Max had been glad to see him—as he had been glad to see Max—and life had gone on as usual.

Standing in that silent, shadowy room, it suddenly hit Swift that it was probably too late now for things to move in the direction he’d have liked. Time and tide. Love had its own circadian rhythms, and it was beginning to look like he
and Max had missed their chance, that they'd slipped into a comfortable somnolence. Perhaps they would continue on indefinitely, but it was all too likely one of these days they were simply going to drift gently, quietly apart.

That still might be preferable to the shrieking wake-up call Swift would have to deliver when he got back to town and told Max that he'd invited a murder suspect to stay at his bungalow—and that the murder suspect was now twenty-four hours further ahead in his escape from justice.
Chapter Four

You have wasted too much time. You must get back on track. Should you phone Inspector Pennyfeather and find out whether he has made progress on the case or should you proceed on your own?

If you phone Inspector Pennyfeather, turn to page 47.
If not, turn to page 8.

Or maybe you should just take a minute or two to think it out—seeing how much you’ve screwed things up already, you fucking idiot.

Swift gripped the ferry railing and stared bleakly down at the churning water. The rain had thinned out to a mist. It felt good against his flushed face. He’d been too restless to stay in his car, and he’d spent most of the trip back to the mainland walking up and down the slick deck.

Despite the weather he was warm enough. He was wearing the coat Max had bought him last Christmas. A hooded, lined Carhartt. It was a nice coat though Swift didn’t particularly care about its breathability and waterproofing and all the other things Max had mentioned when Swift opened the neatly wrapped parcel. Swift was sensitive to the cold, and Max had dealt with it in his usual efficient manner. Was that romantic?

Swift had given Max a seascape by Maine artist Caren-Marie Michel.

Max had smiled over the gift, held it up and given Swift a quizzical look. He’d hung it in his bedroom.

Swift had wondered what they’d do for the holiday this year. He’d toyed with the idea of suggesting they go away for a couple of days, even if it was just spending some time alone on Orson Island, but he’d never quite had the nerve and now…now it might be beside the point.

Max didn’t get angry easily or quickly, but when he was
mad, he stayed mad. He would be angry about this, Swift had no doubt. He probably had a right to be angry.

The ferry docked on time at the terminal in Portland, and Swift headed straight back to Stone Coast.

*If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly.* There was Shakespeare for you. Not *The Tempest*. Not the stuff of golden sands and sweet sprites and wild waves. No. *MacBeth*. A nice, juicy crime story. A tale of murder and madness.

Perfect for the day Swift was having.

He cranked up the Muse CD in his player and pressed the accelerator.

Stone Coast was a scenic little village near Casco Bay not far from Wolfe Neck State Park. The town had retained its rustic charm and, barring the luxury cars in the driveway and a few coats of fresh paint, many of the houses looked as they had in the 1800s. The architects of the newer structures tended to follow the organic inspiration of Frank Lloyd Wright and Bruce Goff. There was a lot of money in Stone Coast. A lot of people were interested in seeing Stone Coast become to the arts what Freeport was to retail.

Swift drove down the shady wide streets, past the little shops and art galleries and comfortable homes to the small brick police station surrounded by tidy green lawns and a forest of wet flagpoles.

Inside the station it was warm and surprisingly quiet. Hannah Maltz, the dispatcher, was working at her computer, clicking briskly away at the keyboard. She was a very pretty middle-aged woman—far too pretty to be an effective cop, in Max’s opinion. Max had a tendency to make those kinds of judgment calls. What Hannah thought about being regulated to desk duty was anyone’s guess,
but she was a great dispatcher. She had a very nice voice in an emergency. Not that Swift had many emergencies these days.

“Why hello, Professor Swift,” Hannah greeted him. “Wet enough for you?”

Swift was unsure what official explanation of their friendship—if any—Max offered inquiring minds. Having grown up in the spotlight, Swift was basically blind to public curiosity. He took it for granted that people paid attention to what he did, and he’d stopped noticing his own celebrity a long time ago. After three much publicized stints in rehab you tended to develop a thick skin. But Max was the police chief of a small town, and it went without saying—or at least they had never got around to discussing it—that he required discretion.

He was not much good at jokey back-and-forth stuff, but Swift said gravely, “Are you checking out my gills again?”

Hannah laughed. “Chief Prescott’s on the phone, but you can go on through.”

The door to Max’s office stood open. Swift could see a sliver of Max tilted back in his chair, phone to his ear. He heard snatches of Max’s deep tones between the click-clacks of Hannah’s keyboard.

Max glanced up as Swift pushed open the door. His brows rose in surprised inquiry, and he nodded to the chair in front of his desk.

“You can bitch about First Amendment rights all you want, Harry, but I’m telling you if you print that, we’re going to have words.”

Swift sat in one of the chairs before Max’s orderly desk and looked idly about the small office with its battered file cabinets, wooden coat rack, bulletin boards and bookcase with leather-bound volumes that were older than Max.
Whatever Harry said on the other end of the line amused Max. He gave that deep, growly laugh that always sent a pleasurable shiver down Swift’s spine. He wished Max would hurry up and get off the line. He hoped the phone call never ended.

The first time Swift had been to this office was six years ago, not long after he’d moved to Stone Coast. He’d woken one morning to find someone had plowed into his parked car during the night. He reported the hit and run and spent a couple of minutes talking to the then newly elected Chief of Police. The only thing he really recalled of that first meeting was that he’d immediately liked Max’s air of quiet, easy competency. It hadn’t occurred to him that Max was gay. Sex, let alone romance, had been the last thing on his mind in those early brittle days of his recovery.

“I’m just an overworked, underpaid public servant of the people.” Max’s eyes met Swift’s and he winked.

That was another thing Swift remembered from that very first meeting. Max’s unexpected charm. You didn’t look for charm from a cop. Swift didn’t, anyway. But Max had it in spades. It didn’t hide the tough competency, just made it a little more palatable, like the spoonful of sugar that helped the medicine go down. As now. Harry—most likely Harry Wilson, editor of the Stone Coast Signal—was having the law laid down in the nicest possible way. And as pissed off as he undoubtedly was, he’d probably vote Max into office for a second term when Max came up for reelection in two years.

Hannah came in and left a sheaf of papers in the tray on Max’s desk. “I’m taking off,” she whispered to Max.

He raised a hand in absent acknowledgment. “Yeah, yeah,” he said good-humoredly into the mouthpiece. “Same to you, my friend.” He stood his pen on its nose, absently balancing it for a second, then catching it before it
fell. “Sure, give me a call. Maybe sometime next week.”

Swift smoothed his suddenly damp hands on his jean-clad thighs. The moment of truth. He wasn’t ready for it.

After all, no one need know what he’d done. Even when Tad was caught, he might not say Swift had given him keys to the cabin. It might never come out at all.

But no. No. Swift no longer permitted himself to run from the difficult things.

Max hung up and smiled across his desk at Swift. His eyes were the warm color of good whisky. “Your timing is perfect. I’ve just got time to grab some supper before I have to meet the coroner.” He rose, six foot four of lean muscle, and reached for his leather jacket hanging from the coat rack.

Swift stayed seated. “Max, I have to talk to you.”
“Something we can’t talk over while we eat?”
“Indigestion guaranteed.”

Max took a closer look, scrutinizing Swift’s face. He slowly sat down again. “Okay. Shoot.”

His heart was hammering with something weirdly close to panic. Swift made himself go on, made himself speak calmly. “I neglected to tell you last night that I’d seen Tad Corelli earlier. In the afternoon. After my classes were finished. In fact, I loaned him the keys to my place on Orson Island.”

Max didn’t move a muscle. He didn’t even blink. He was so still, Swift wondered if he’d heard.

He opened his mouth to ask, but Max finally said in a voice stripped of any emotion, “You didn’t think that was something you ought to mention?”

“Yes. But…I wanted to talk to him first. I wanted to convince him to give himself up.” Swift watched Max reach for the phone. “He’s not there now.”

“And you know that how?”
“I went out there this afternoon. There’s no sign that Tad ever arrived at the bungalow.”

“You... Jesus fucking Christ.” Max let the handset drop back in its cradle. He stared at Swift. “Are you crazy?”

Swift shook his head, though the question was probably rhetorical.

“You knowingly, deliberately let a murder suspect...” Max’s voice died out as though his thought process had short-circuited. He continued to gaze at Swift in almost stricken disbelief.

“I didn’t know he was a suspect when I offered him the use of the bungalow.”

“You sure as hell knew after I told you last night.”

“I’m sorry,” Swift said. “I acted on instinct. Maybe a bad one.”

“Maybe? Maybe? Do you have any clue of what you’ve done?”

Unwisely, Swift protested, “Even if Tad did this, it’s not like he’s Public Enemy No.1. He’s a confused, scared—”

“Don’t.” It was enough to shut Swift up. Max’s face was white, his eyes blazing with fury. He looked like a stranger. A stranger Swift would not want to get on the wrong side of.

“Max—”

“Not one fucking word more, Swift.”

But there was always room for one word more, right? Especially this word. Besides, Swift had always been so very bad at following rules.

“I’m sorry, Max,” he repeated.

Max stared at him as though Swift had been hand delivered by Martians. As though Swift were an alien creature that Max needed to exterminate—as soon as he figured out whether to use bullets or pesticide.

“Yeah?” Max made a funny sound that wasn’t quite a
laugh. “Not as sorry as you’re going to be.”

The hair rose on the back of his neck. Swift searched the hard, implacable planes of Max’s features. Max wasn’t a guy for idle threats. “Are you…? Am I…?” He wasn’t even sure what question to ask. He knew that expression although Max had never worn it before—not for Swift. It was the expression that said, You’re pathetic. You’re a junky low-life loser. You can’t be trusted. You aren’t one of us. You don’t belong here.

It was an expression he’d have done anything to keep from seeing on Max’s face.

Almost anything.

Swift steadied his voice and got out, “Am I…under arrest?” He tried to say it without emotion, but he had at long last reached a point in his life where he had something to lose. A number of things, in fact, that he didn’t want to lose. Wasn’t sure he could survive losing. Arrest meant losing them all.

Max didn’t seem to hear the question. He was on his feet again, moving into action, speaking under his breath as he grabbed the phone. Tight, fierce words. “Stupid, arrogant, irresponsible, crackbrained…” He jabbed a couple of buttons and then paused. Fastening that lightless gaze on Swift’s face, he said, “Get the fuck out of my office. Get out before I do something we’ll both regret.”

Swift was up and to the door when Max threw after him, “You realize this is probably going to cost you your job?”

Swift had no answer. Or maybe the answer was in his face. Max turned his back on him and snapped his orders into the phone.

If he had it all to do again…?
Well, that was the point of those Choose Your Own Adventure books, right? Taking responsibility for your decisions, living with consequences. The lady or the tiger? You never knew until the door swung open.

If Swift could hit instant replay of the previous evening, he’d do it differently. He’d probably speak up when Max mentioned Mario Corelli’s murder. Speak up and ask that he be allowed to go to the island first to speak with Tad, to break the news about Mario—and, if it wasn’t news, to convince Tad to give himself up.

But unfortunately you didn’t get multiple do-overs in real life, and it looked like Swift had seriously, fatally screwed up. But one thing you learned in rehab, there was no point bewailing the pratfalls. The only thing that mattered was getting back up again.

The faster the better.

Was there a way to fix this? Beyond apologizing again to Max when he had cooled down, Swift couldn’t think of one. If he knew where Tad was, he could do what he’d planned on this afternoon, but he had no idea where the boy might hole up—and any ideas he came up with were bound to be things the police had already thought of.

Swift left the police station, drove home on automatic pilot and headed straight for the kitchen. After some aimless opening and closing of cupboards, he decided to prepare a bacon quiche. Not because he was hungry—the smell of the browning bacon had him gagging over the trash bin—but because the dish was complicated and required his full attention. He needed distraction from his worries and he needed routine, so he rolled out the pâte brisée, eased the dough into a 9-inch fluted tart pan, whisked the eggs with the cream, milk, salt, pepper and nutmeg. And when it was all done, when the quiche came out of the oven golden brown and flaky and smelling of
warmth and earth and light, he made himself sit and eat.

Beyond the importance of routine, it was vital to stay healthy in times of stress. Swift had badly abused his body for most of his life. His current state of health required consciousness and commitment. He allowed himself two glasses of wine with his meal. The second glass of wine was a compromise. For the first time in a long time he wanted something else—wanted it badly.

That was a natural reaction to emotional strain. The best thing was to ignore it and stay busy, so after dinner he built a fire in the fireplace, put on a Barber CD and settled on the sofa with the latest stack of submissions to the *Pentagoet Review*, the college’s quarterly poetry magazine.

Since Swift had taken over sponsorship, the magazine had doubled both in size and circulation. Granted, that wasn’t saying a whole hell of a lot. It was still a mostly obscure college publication. The people who had hoped they might discover a new poem or two from SSS had long given up, but the magazine continued to thrive and Swift was proud of it.

He flipped through the first couple of submissions—calligraphy on colored paper, no less.

He was never very popular around submission time, but whether anyone noticed or not, he’d considerably eased his critical standards over the years—had to in order to fill the pages with something other than artwork. Even so there were limits.

*That aching hollowness is filled when you are near. When you are far away my soul pores forth...*

Soul pores. He sighed and turned to the next submission. The trouble was most of these kids—and more than a few of his colleagues—were used to the generally uncritical praise from a circle of writing friends.
Blame is the flame of a candle made of stone. I love you thrown in vein…

He glanced at the byline. Tess Allison had been the magazine’s faculty advisor before Swift had come along, so that “vein” was probably deliberate. Either way this one would have to be published. Swift had learned a few things through the years—generally the hard way.

He turned to the next submission—all lowercase. This one was a clever take-off on E.E. Cummings’s “since feeling is first…” which happened to be a favorite of Swift’s.

*since feeling is first*
*who pays any attention*
*to the syntax of things*
*will never wholly kiss you;*

Wonderful. And this little parody was wonderful too. He read it over twice. Smiling, he set the submission in the pile with the others marked for acceptance. Nothing made him happier than when he found a jewel like this.

Mostly what he got was the inevitable adolescent and post-adolescent angst usually written in anticipation of coitus and punctuated with “I, I, me, me, I.” Sunset, suicide and long walks on the beach figured largely in the variations on the theme of nobody loves me, nobody understands me, we’re all gonna die.

No wonder his thoughts kept circling back to Max’s office. Each time he remembered the angry contempt on Max’s face, heard that whiplash *get the fuck out of my office*, it was all he could do to keep down the boiling acid of his dinner.

*Crackbrain.* That pretty much summed it up. How had he not realized ahead of time what a disastrous decision he was making by not telling Max what he’d done? Apparently it was only too true about the permanent brain
damage cocaine caused.

He let his head fall back on the arm of the sofa and stared up into the soaring cathedral ceiling past the grid work of blackened beams into the ink shadows. He couldn’t let himself think about Max. The rest of it was already more than he could deal with. If he was arrested… if he lost his job…?

Either one of those was liable to prove too much for his fragile equilibrium. He knew better than anyone how weak he was, how…untrustworthy. His relationship—friendship—with Max was one of the things that gave him the most happiness, most comfort. No, he couldn’t even consider that loss right now. Not on top of the rest of it.

Swift jumped up, scattering the neat stacks of papers. He circled the large room, too nervous to stay still any longer. He needed…something.

Maybe a walk.

The rain had stopped. The cool air would feel good after an hour of sitting so close to the fire. He could stretch his legs, fill his lungs, clear his head.

He started toward the coat hook by the door but stopped.

No. No, leaving the house now was not a good idea.

Swift mentally ran through The List. The list of ways he’d found of coping when the craving started. The first version of the list had been supplied by his therapist. Since then he’d had six years to come up with his own personal tried-and-true methods of distracting himself from that twisting, gnawing hunger. In the beginning he’d resorted to elaborate diversions: hyperbaric oxygen treatments, infrared sauna, acupuncture and massage therapy. Now days a long walk was one of the best things, but at night… no. The night offered the wrong kind of possibilities. Sex was a good distraction and comfort, but the only person he
wanted to have sex with was Max. And jacking off on his own was a poor substitute for that.

He could usually find some relief in small, homely things like a cup of hot tea and calming music, a hot bath and aromatherapy candles, looking through art books, meditation and visualization techniques. *Martha Stewart Living* magazines. He had a whole collection of them. There was something very comforting about Martha’s ruthless discipline and focus—something almost Zen. And there was always yoga. Yoga and meditation.

He couldn’t stand the thought.

It was disheartening to realize that he’d come to take his focused well-being so much for granted that he felt unprepared to deal with the sudden resuming of the symptoms of addiction.

Not that Swift had been silly enough to think he was cured, but after six years he’d reached a point where dealing with his habit was no longer the mainstay of his day. What had triggered the craving? The phone call from Bernard? The fight with Max? All of it? None of it?

Whatever the reason, he now needed a distraction. Nothing that was going to trigger anxieties or put him in temptation’s path. He went into the kitchen and fixed a cup of chamomile tea, carried it back to the cluttered comfort of his office and sat down to sort through the papers and books and brochures he tended to stockpile.

He didn’t let Mrs. Ord in this room to tidy up, or he’d never manage to find anything at all—not that he spent a lot of time in here. Mostly he worked in his office on campus or at one of the local coffeehouses. When Swift did work at home, he tended to sprawl on the sofa in front of the fire or, in better weather, on a lounge chair in the garden.

Looking around at the stacked books and piles of
paper, he tried to decide what needed doing first. His gaze fell on the bookshelf and a familiar spine. He rose and pulled the narrow volume out. *Black Solstice* by SSS. Sebastian Shadrach Swift. His mouth quirked. Now there was a moniker. From the time he had been old enough to speak, he’d insisted on being called only Swift.

He flipped through the crisp pages curiously, studying his own adolescent efforts. It had been twenty years since he looked at these.

*Time roaring loud behind me,*  
*Spring-heeled sun sprinting over housetops and dusty trees;*  
*And there they are, glistening, brilliant, motionless,*  
*Dying stars stitched in a failing sky*  
*By mild and faded fingers long since turned to dust.*

He snorted. What the hell was that supposed to mean? He’d have been better off writing about walking with his boyfriend on the beach.

Swift stared moodily at the black bird-scratchings on the snowy page. An idea suddenly came to him. Tad had submitted a poem to the magazine, hadn’t he?

Swift shuffled more stacks of papers, moved more books. Where the hell…?

He opened one of the deep desk drawers and swallowed at the unexpected sight of a blue rigid paper box laminated with images of clouds and crimson leaves. He’d forgotten that was in there.

He stared down at the box. What a weird coincidence that Bernard should be asking about those poems. To this day he didn’t know who had collected and saved them after he’d ODed.

He closed the drawer with a little bang and kept moving
papers and files until he found the folder with the twenty lonely accepted submissions to this spring's *Pentagoet Review*. He flipped through them until he found Tad's submission.

*Cast your shadow white as stone*
*Wing of laughter, heart of bone…*
Thirty lines of it beneath the title “Ariel”.
*Ariel.*

Was that Ariel as in homage to Plath? Or Ariel the asexual sprite from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*? Or Ariel as in a real, live flesh-and-blood girl?

Because if this Ariel did exist, there was a slim chance she might know where Tad was. Assuming Max hadn’t already tracked him down and was holding him in a jailhouse cell. In which case it was too late for Tad. And perhaps too late for Swift.
Chapter Five

You’re journeying on your own by train through the snowy mountains of Romania. This lonely and remote range is known as the Carpathians, and this part of the country is rumored to be the ancestral home of vampires!

Although, in fairness, most of the kids weren’t that bad. You couldn’t go by the fact that they all looked dazed or half-dead on a Monday morning. He probably didn’t look a hell of a lot better after the weekend he'd had.

The good news was he hadn’t been arrested. He had half expected it, but there had been no word from Max at all—that, of course, was also the bad news.

Not that Swift had sat around waiting to hear from Max. He’d managed to keep himself occupied planting over two hundred Asiatic lily bulbs in the back garden. He’d dug holes and raked leaves and mulched until his back felt ready to break. Then he’d cleaned out the garage, giving away boxes of books and odds and ends of old furniture and fixtures. He got rid of the bike he never used. He got rid of the punching bag that only Max used. He should have slept like a log, but the nights had been spent tossing and turning as he went over and over the scene with Max in his office.

But better not to think about Max just now.

Swift said briskly, “At the outset of The Tempest we see Prospero as man in conflict. He’s wise, balanced, mature, but he also longs for revenge—although I guess we can argue that it’s justice he longs for. He’s not a man of perfect judgment. He lost his position of political authority by failing in his duties. Now he’s got one chance to revise that mistake. He doesn’t create the opportunity, it comes ‘by accident most strange’ and ‘a most auspicious star’. So sorcerer or not, Prospero’s not all powerful and he’s not in
total control. He plans to reverse his fortunes and regain his previous position, but there’s no guarantee of success. His plan might not work. It's dependent on timing. On Fate.”

In the back row, Hodge Williams’s head tipped back, and he woke himself up with a loud snort.

“Wouldn’t you say so, Mr. Williams?” Swift inquired, just to be a prick.

“Uh…” Hodge sat up, blinking. There was a ripple of laughter around him.

After a second, Hodge laughed too. He was a nice kid. Not the brightest bulb, but handsome and—for a varsity-jacket jock—good-humored. He was also one of Tad’s closest friends.

What Hodge and Tad found to talk about was a mystery, but plenty of friendships had been built on having only one thing in common. Swift could testify to that.

Tad would need a friend about now. According to the news on the radio that morning, he was still on the run four days after his father’s death. Swift decided to have a word with Hodge after class. It couldn't hurt, right? He dearly wanted to find a way to fix things.

Claudia Lambert raised her hand. Swift nodded permission.

“I saw the film *The Tempest*. It was with Helen Mirren. They changed Prospero to Prospera.” Claudia stuck her tongue out. She had an unusually long tongue. Swift observed it, fascinated.

“Uh…did they?”

“It was terrible.”

Because Prospero was now Prospera? If that was the case, he could only imagine what snake-tongued Ms. Lambert would make of Derek Jarman’s untraditional version.
Swift turned back to the chalkboard and out of the corner of his eye caught motion at the door.

Glancing over, he saw Max standing just inside the classroom.

His willful heart gave a delighted leap before he recalled the situation between them. Max’s face was impassive, and Swift's throat tightened with a painful mix of fear and longing. Was this it? Was the arrest he had feared all weekend now imminent?

Several of the students were throwing Max curious glances. Max was impervious to them. He nodded curtly to Swift, apparently giving him permission to continue with his lecture, but no way could Swift calmly conduct class while wondering if he was about to be led off campus in handcuffs.

That morning he’d told himself on the drive to work that he was prepared for anything. He wasn’t.

How could you prepare for something like this?

He shot a glance at the clock in the back of the room. “I think that's it for today. You should have read up through act four, scene one by Wednesday.”

There were a few surprised faces, but mostly everyone was moving fast, gathering notebooks and backpacks before he could change his mind. Cell phones flipped open like transporter devices used by space crew desperate for escape. The seminar room doors flew open and students began to file out.

“Hi,” Swift said to Max who had not moved.

“Swift.” Arms folded, Max continued to wait, unsmiling, as students moved between them on their way to the door.

Yes, this was clearly going to be official business. Not that he’d really hoped for anything else. Except that you always hoped…right up to the moment the axe fell. Swift carefully stowed his lecture notes and roll book away in his
briefcase and sat on the edge of the desk, waiting.

Max didn't move a muscle until the last student had shuffled out. Then he pulled the door shut.

“Tell me if you're going to arrest me,” Swift said. “My nerves can't take this.”

The look Max gave him was unmoved, but what he said was, “Arresting you isn't going to solve anything, and it would only bring more unwelcome attention from the media our way. That's the last thing we need now.”

There was no hiding his relief, and Swift didn't bother to try. “Thank you.”

“Don't thank me, because if it made sense, I'd throw your butt in a cell in a New York minute.”

Swift nodded. It was too hard to meet Max's steely gaze. He stared at the well-worn carpet. Institutional blue. Why did everyone, from mental hospitals to jail visitation centers, favor that same depressing shade? Why not a soft, buttery yellow? Or the fragile pink of a baby's blanket? Granted, belfry blue ought to be his favorite color by now. He'd seen enough of it in his lifetime.

It occurred to him that Max was expecting more of a response. “Have you found Tad yet?”

“No. That's why I'm here. I need to ask you some questions about what happened between the two of you.” Max added acridly, “I should have held you for questioning Friday, but I admit to being thrown off-guard.”

Max's brown boots appeared in Swift's line of vision. He looked up. Max stopped a couple of feet away, propping his arm on the lectern. Max was keeping a safe distance. Possibly to control the desire to throttle Swift.

“Tad was in class on Thursday. He seemed...well, I didn't notice anything out of the ordinary. When I saw him later, he'd obviously been in a fight. Bloody nose, black eye, split lip. He said I should see the other guy.”
Max’s dark brows drew together. He considered. “What time was that?”

“After four. It might have been as late as four thirty. We had a department meeting, so I’m not sure how long Tad was waiting.”

“What about the department secretary? Wouldn’t he have checked in with her?”

“Anything’s possible, but I doubt it. We try to encourage it, but students don’t really need to make appointments. The idea is instructors keep regular office hours and make ourselves available to students. Tad might have asked Dottie where I was but, like I said, he’d been beaten up. I don’t think he wanted to advertise that. Plus, I think it had just happened.”

“Why’s that?”

“He hadn’t had time to clean himself up at all. Tears and blood.” Swift’s mouth crooked. “Been there, done that.”

“That doesn’t mean anything.”

Swift shrugged.

“Tad said you should see the other guy. Did he give you any clue to who the other guy was?”

“No.” Swift thought that over. “Did it look like Corelli had been in a fight?”

“No.”

“But—” Swift tried to read Max’s face. “Doesn’t that prove that Tad wasn’t fighting with his father?”

“It doesn’t prove anything. It means Tad might have been lying about getting in a few good licks of his own.”

Swift remembered his own observation that Tad’s knuckles weren’t bruised or cut. Either he hadn’t fought back or he’d been jumped. “Okay, but what about Corelli’s hands? Were they banged up? Because maybe Tad wasn’t in a fight with him at all.”
“The two things don’t necessarily have anything to do with each other. If Corelli beat the kid, there might have been some defense argument in there, but the fact that Tad got in a brawl with someone else doesn’t mean he didn’t pop his old man. He threatened to kill him the night before, according to his stepmother.”

“But you can’t go by that. People say things in anger. Friday night you were probably mad enough to—” He broke off.

“I wouldn’t go there if I were you,” Max said.

Swift's face warmed. “Maybe the timing of this fight gives Tad an alibi. When was Corelli killed?”

“We're withholding that information for now.”

Swift ignored the painful implication that he was no longer trustworthy. “So it's possible Tad has an alibi?”

“It’s possible.” Clearly Max thought the possibility slim.

“Before you gave the kid your keys, did he give any indication of where he was headed?”

Swift shook his head. “He said he had to get away for a while. He didn’t specify how long, but he asked me not to drop him from the program, which tells me he planned on coming back.”

“Maybe.”

“If he was on the run for killing his father, why would he bother to stop by my office and beg me not to drop him from the program?”

“I don't know. I know that people under extreme stress don’t always behave logically. You’ve been a mentor to this kid. Maybe he wanted to see you one last time, but he couldn’t tell you the truth about why.”

Despite Swift's instant repudiation of the idea, it sounded logical. Plausible. Swift knew only too well how it felt to grab desperately for your old life, for any kind of stability, when the ground started to give way beneath you.
Max’s voice jarred him from his reflections. “So Corelli gave you no idea of where he was going?”

“I thought he was going to the bungalow. Just from the way he reacted when I gave him the keys, I was sure I’d find him there.”

“Are you sure he hadn’t been there?”

“Well, I’m not a forensics expert, but the place felt—smelled, looked—like it hadn’t been opened since I was there during the summer. Everything was exactly as I’d left it. Only dustier.”

Max rubbed his bearded chin meditatively. “So you have absolutely no idea of where Corelli would go if he was in trouble?”

“No. I’d hope that he’d come to me. Which he did. Beyond that…no. I don’t know anything about his personal life.”

Max made a sound, not exactly a snort, that indicated this was no surprise. What did that mean? Was it supposed to be commentary on Swift’s social interactions? Because how was Max in a position to judge? He had only permitted Swift into a small corner of his own life.

“Can you think of anything that might be useful?” Max asked. Meaning that so far nothing Swift had had to say was useful? That was probably true. At least from Max’s perspective.

“I’ve told you everything I know.”

Max inclined his head, accepting that much. “I don’t need to tell you—hopefully—that if Corelli does get in touch with you, you need to contact me immediately.”

“No.” Max’s eyes narrowed and Swift added quickly, “No, you don’t have to tell me. I know I fucked up.”

“Yes. You got that right.”

Swift opened his mouth to apologize again, but all at once he was tired of it. He was sorry, sincerely sorry, but
he wasn't going to grovel. In fact, he was starting to get irritated. His eyes met Max's, and he saw that Max was reading him quite accurately, lip cynically curling.

Neither spoke for a few strange moments.

“Why did you do it?” Max sounded curious. “Why did you keep it from me? Aside from the fact that you were breaking the law, you had to know it wasn't going to…end well between us.”

That cool end well between us knotted Swift’s stomach, doused his flare of rebellion. If he'd realized at the time that he was ending things between himself and Max, then of course he'd have handled matters differently. Didn't it go without saying? He'd never intended or wanted to lose Max. Maybe he'd been naïve enough to think that whatever was between them was strong enough to survive —no. The fact was, he just hadn't thought far enough ahead. He'd acted on impulse. And his efforts to fix his mistake had failed. It was that simple.

Max was still waiting for an answer. Swift said, “It wasn’t a conscious decision.”

“Really? Were you unconscious at the time?”

“You know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t. I can’t begin to understand what the hell went through your head. I’ve tried.”

“I know it doesn’t count for much now, but I wanted to spare him—”

Max’s face changed instantly. “Christ. Spare me,” he interrupted. “He played you, Swift. You don’t get that yet, do you? You still think, what? He’s innocent and hiding from the real killer or some other bullshit story?”

Swift deserved that. He was probably wasting his breath, but he tried anyway. “No. I don’t know. Will you just listen to me, Max? Can’t you give me that much?”

Max pressed his lips against whatever it was he dearly
wanted to say. He waited. Pointedly.

Swift knew that set, stubborn line of Max's jaw. He wasn't going to change Max's mind. Not about Tad and not about himself. He tried anyway. He had to. It was too important not to try, however unflattering to himself the truth was. "I'd been clean for two years when I got word my...dad had died. I heard it on the nightly news. That's one reason I'm not big on television."

Max's expression altered infinitesimally. He started to speak, but Swift rushed ahead. He needed to say it while he still had the guts.

"I'm not saying I wouldn't have relapsed anyway. They were a rough two years. Every day was a struggle. But what I can tell you is finding out the way I did sent me into a tailspin." He didn't want to think about that time. The time when his entire world had been reduced to the rat-bag motel he was living in and his regular trips to the local crackhouse, when all he had lived for was the next line of coke, when he would have done anything...and all too frequently had.

"The only reason I'm alive today is I had enough people who cared whether I lived or died to step in and...save me from myself."

"I know you identify with this kid. But so what?" There was no sympathy, no understanding in Max's face.

Swift's forehead wrinkled. "So...what?"

"What did you think you were doing here? Sponsoring the Bingers and Bedbugs Boys Club?"

It was the disgust in Max's face that was hard to take. Max despised junkies. He made no secret of it, though he'd tempered his comments once he'd learned Swift's history.

"I was trying to help. I didn't know—"

"No you didn't. You knew nothing about anything, but
you still stuck your oar in. You ever hear the saying ‘the road to hell is paved with good intentions’, Teach?’

There was no bending, no softening. What had Swift hoped? He met Max’s hazel gaze. “Yeah. I’ve heard that one.” He turned away.

He could feel Max watching him, though the other man was silent now. Outside the classroom door, Swift listened to the racket of kids moving through the halls, laughing, calling out despite the fact that other classes were in session.

All at once he was very tired, amped-out, although the letdown here had nothing to do with artificial stimulants.

Max said finally, “All right. You thought that your breaking the news to him would make some difference.” His tone wasn’t exactly kind, but Swift could tell Max was making an effort not to be cruel again. “But Corelli already knew his old man was dead because he killed him.”

That glimmer of protest within Swift sparked back to life. He faced Max. “Maybe you’re right. But whatever happened to presumed innocent?”

“Whatever happened to coming forward and explaining your side of it to the police?”

“Kind of a waste when the police chief already has his mind made up.”

Max’s gaze flattened. “I hope this kid is worth everything you put on the line for him.”

Swift gave a tired laugh. “Me too.”

Max stood motionless for a moment. Then, “I’ll be in touch.”

It was not a promise of sweet things to come.

It was hard, very hard, to be on the outside—and Swift was most definitely on the outside now. In fact, looking at the uncompromising set of Max’s shoulders, the ramrod-straight line of his back, it was difficult to believe they’d
ever laughed together, let alone made love. Not that it had been love for Max. Swift was not convinced it had been love for him either, although he had clearly felt more than the other man.

A lot more.

He busied himself erasing the boards so he didn't have to watch Max walk away.

BUY **COME UNTO THESE YELLOW SANDS**
It was stupid to be nervous.
It wasn’t like he wasn’t qualified. Not like he couldn’t handle this. Not like anyone was expecting him to solve the mystery of what had happened to four-year-old Brian Arlington on that long ago summer’s eve. He was only writing a book—and these days everyone was writing a book.

Griff sucked in a long breath and reached for the car door handle. But he didn’t open the door. He continued to sit staring at the white Italianate façade of the villa, graceful columns, punctiliously flat roofs, balconies with black wrought-iron railings, and all the while his heart was beating too fast in that mix of anticipation and anxiety. More anxiety than anticipation which was just…weird.

The best way to deal with it was to get his ass out of the car and in front of those elegant, imposing double doors.

What was the worst that could happen? The old man might change his mind, might decide he didn’t want to cooperate, didn’t want Griff staying at the estate, didn’t want Griff to write the book at all. All or any one of those would be disappointing, yes, but they would only amount to stumbling blocks, and a couple of stumbling blocks wouldn’t stop Griff. It was unlikely to happen anyway since Griff’s staying at the Arlington estate had been Jarrett Arlington’s idea.

So?

Why was he still sitting here, heart in his throat and hands like ice?

It was a long time, years, since he’d experienced an anxiety attack. He sure as heck didn’t have time for that now.
He was tired, that was all. Bone tired. He'd been driving for nearly two days. Fifteen hours behind the wheel. It was nearly a thousand miles from Wisconsin to Long Island. As the lakes of Madison had given way to the thunderstorms of Illinois, the sooty industry of Ohio, the red bricks, red barns, red cows of Pennsylvania...he had felt further and further adrift from everything he knew and loved, an explorer heading off for the New World only to find that happiness really was in his own backyard.

Yeah, he needed to get out more, that was for sure.

Griff took a deep breath, yanked open the door, and unfolded from the battered Karmann Ghia.

A bird, hidden in the green leaves of the tall hedge, trilled a cheerful greeting and took flight. The sun was bright and warm for Long Island in April. The brisk air was salty sweet with the scent of the sea and newly bloomed lilacs. It steadied him. Ridiculous that he should need steadying, but that was the way it was. Then again, this gig was kind of a big deal. A big deal for anyone, but especially for the crime beat reporter of the *Banner Chronicle*, paid circulation 4,401.

By rights the story should have gone to a C.J. Chivers or an Ann Rule. It was still hard to believe that he, Griffin N. Hadley, had been tapped to write the account of one of the most famous kidnappings of the last century. So, okay, maybe some nervousness was permissible.

He walked across the courtyard, sparkling white pebbles and shells crunching beneath his chucks, passed between two weathered stone griffins—hopefully a good omen—up the six long, narrow steps to the next terrace, past a water-stained and silent fountain, up six more long, narrow steps, through the columns and arches of the wide portico to the double front doors with their amber-and-black stained-glass panels.
It took a second or two to locate the doorbell buzzer, concealed as it was in a large, bronze sunburst. Griff pressed the buzzer and nothing seemed to happen. Maybe, like the fountain, the bell no longer worked?

He glanced around. It was not that the house or grounds looked shabby, exactly, but the grass was a little long, the lilac hedges were a little ragged, the paint was a little faded.

Had the Arlington family fallen on hard times? Not according to his research. Maybe this was winter on the Gold Coast. Maybe it really was hard to get good help these days.

Griff pressed the doorbell again.

The nearest door swung open and a tall, gaunt woman in a severely plain black dress said, “I heard you the first time.”

“Oh. Sorry,” Griff said guiltily. “I didn’t…” He let that go.

“No, you didn’t.”

In a funny way she reminded him of his mother. His mother when she was in one of her tempers. Same general physical type, same snapping dark eyes and strong features, though his mother had been softer and prettier—and much younger.

He tried, “I’m Griffin Ha—”

“I know who you are,” she cut him off. “Mr. Arlington is waiting to see you.”

Now that was odd, right? Griff didn’t pretend to know how the other half—or, more exactly, the other one percent—lived, but he was pretty sure the help wasn’t supposed to take that tone with visitors. But then he probably didn’t look like the usual visitor to Winden House. Maybe he should have searched around for a trade entrance.

“And you are?” he asked, refusing to be cowed.

Her eyes narrowed. “Mrs. Truscott. I’m Mr. Arlington’s
housekeeper.”

Truscott. The name was familiar. Griff was sure she had been employed at the time of Brian’s kidnapping, but not as housekeeper. Back then the housekeeper had been a Mrs. Cameron, now deceased.

Mrs. Truscott led the way through an elegant entryway. Griff looked around and tried not to gawk. It wasn’t easy. Creaking beneath his feet was the much-photographed diamond parquet floor, and stretching right over his head was the low, cream-colored compartmented ceiling. It felt unreal. Dreamlike. To his left curved the famous marble staircase the kidnappers had carried little Brian down that fateful night.

He’d studied this entry hall many times in so many pictures. Now he was here, crossing the glossy walnut-and-rosewood parquet and following Mrs. Truscott up the graceful staircase. It was like walking into a history book—except that Griff was the one supposed to write the history.

Well, he was ready. He’d done his homework. He knew more about Winden House than he knew about the house he’d grown up in. The villa sat on 160 acres and had been built in 1906 by Gold Coast architects Hiss and Weekes. The entire estate was comprised of the main house, two greenhouses, a solarium, a swimming pool, a five-room guest cottage and two barns. Once upon a time the Arlingtons had bred horses, which was the reason for the two barns. What the excuse was for all the rest of it, he couldn’t imagine. He wasn’t here to judge, though.

The ceiling in the downstairs library was gilded in gold leaf; the stained-glass ceiling on the upper level had originally been a skylight. The night Brian Arlington had been kidnapped, there had been a party in the sunken garden behind the house. The party theme had been *A Midsummer’s Night Dream*. A pretty wild affair according to
the news accounts of the day.

A lot of facts, a lot of information, but none of it could compare to three minutes inside the house. There was no substitute for the actual experience of hearing the brisk click of Mrs. Truscott’s sensible heels on the marble steps; for breathing in that unique scent of fresh cut flowers, furniture polish and expensive old age; for the first glimpse of the glittering sea through the Serlian windows, or the sight of gold-framed paintings that ought to be hanging in museums. Yeah, if the Arlingtons were running short of cash, they could always sell a painting or two.

“This way,” Mrs. Truscott said as they reached the second landing and a life-sized oil portrait of a slim young man holding a pocket watch. Mrs. Truscott sounded like someone speaking to a wayward kindergartener. Griff eyed her curiously. She looked to be in her sixties, but she moved briskly and her back was as straight as a yoga instructor’s.

He opened his mouth to ask about the size of the household staff, but stopped himself. She probably had definite ideas about how this process was supposed to go, and getting the final stamp of approval from the old man would be part of it.

Hopefully Arlington would not take one look at him and change his mind. It could happen. Weren’t the rich famous for their whims and impulses?

Their footsteps were buried in the faded roses of the Aubusson carpet. The scent of pipe tobacco drifted from down the long hall.

Mrs. Truscott stopped before a closed walnut panel door and tapped softly.

“Come in,” called a voice. Age blurred gender, but the accent was the distinctive one known as Locust Valley Lockjaw.
This was it. Griff squared his shoulders. Mrs. Truscott opened the door, delivered one final, disapproving look and departed.

Griff stepped inside the room.

It was probably a beautiful room—he had an impression of arched windows and a high ceiling—but Griff's attention was focused on the spare, white-haired figure staring down at the star-shaped courtyard. Griff had a moment to wonder if Jarrett Arlington had watched him arrive, watched him sit vacillating in his car, watched him finally get up the nerve to knock on the door.

Arlington turned to face him. It seemed a very long moment before he took the pipe from his mouth. “Well? What do you think, Mr. Hadley?”

“The house? It looks exactly like the photographs.”

Grave blue eyes studied him from beneath formidable white brows. Jarrett Arlington was slim, slight and brown from a lifetime of sailing and golfing and whatever else the very rich did when they weren’t counting their money. Despite his considerable age—he was nearly ninety—he still had a full head of hair, which stood up cockatoo-like.

Griff waited for Arlington to say something like…Griff looked younger than his photo on the Banner Chronicle editorial staff page. Or just interrogate him about what he proposed to write and why he imagined he was qualified to tackle this story. One brief phone call wasn’t going to be enough to seal the deal—even if that was how it had seemed at the time.

But after another of those thoughtful pauses, Arlington said, “Hmm. I suppose it does. Did you drive all the way from Madison, Wisconsin, in that Karmann Ghia?”

“I did, yeah,” Griff said.

“And how many times did you break down?”

“I didn’t. Not once.” That was because he had
completely rebuilt the engine six months ago, but Arlington wasn’t going to be interested in hearing how Griff had spent two years lovingly and painstakingly restoring a vintage car.

“Hmm.” Arlington continued to appraise him with that keen blue gaze.

It wasn’t his imagination, right? This was a strange interview.

Arlington seemed to come to a decision. He said briskly, “I’d better tell you, the rest of the family is none too pleased about our arrangement and this book you’re going to write.”

*Here it comes.* Griff opened his mouth, though he wasn’t sure what he could say to convince Arlington over the protests of his nearest and dearest.

But Arlington made a dismissive gesture. “Don’t worry. I’ll handle them. I want this book. I want this case reopened. If anybody gives you any trouble, you refer them to me. I’ve instructed them all you’re to have complete access, complete cooperation.”

“Thank you.” Arlington made it sound like he’d given orders to his corporate staff rather than his children.

“How long do you think it’ll take you to write the book?”

Was Arlington imagining Griff would write the book this week? “I don’t—I’m not sure.” He stopped himself from admitting that he’d never written a book before. Not that Arlington didn’t already know that, but there was no point in emphasizing Griff’s lack of experience.

“Merely curious. It doesn’t matter,” Arlington said.

“I’ll do my best to bring the case back to public attention.”

A light kindled in Arlington’s eyes. “If Brian is out there somewhere, I want him to know we haven’t forgotten him. We haven’t given up.”
“Uh…right.” Brian was dead. Odell Johnson was sitting in prison right now, convicted of Brian’s kidnapping and murder.

“Either way, I want the truth. I don’t care how painful it is.”

Griff liked the courage of that. One of the theories was that the kidnapping had been an inside job. He said, “I’ll do my best to get the truth for you.”

Arlington smiled. “I know you will, my boy. Do you have any questions for me? I mean, before you settle in and start dragging out the family skeletons?” The warmth of that smile transformed him. Griff could see the shade of the heartbreaker Arlington had reportedly been in his youth.

“Is it okay if I take photos?”

“Take all the photos you want. Pierce will have to approve everything anyway.”

Griff repeated uncertainly, “Pierce?”

“Pierce Mather. My, er, man of affairs.”

*Man of affairs?* Did people really say that?

“The family lawyer.” Arlington chuckled, so maybe it was supposed to be a joke.

“Oh, *that* Pierce,” Griff said. “The one who told me not to write the book.”

“That’s the one.” Arlington was definitely amused. “Yes, Pierce can be a bit overbearing. He means well. Pierce will look everything over just to make sure nothing damaging or defamatory is inadvertently published.”

Griff had been waiting for the other shoe to drop, and here it was, right on schedule, delivering a hard, swift kick to his ass. “Pierce is going to have final approval of my work?”

“I wouldn’t put it that way,” Arlington said.

“Because we didn’t agree to that. I can’t—won’t—work
under that kind of restriction.”

The disappointment was sickening, but no way was Griff going to write some kind of corporate-approved publicity piece or whatever it was the Arlingtons had in mind. If staying on the estate and having access to these people meant he couldn’t write the book he wanted to write, then he’d rent a room in town and get his interviews the regular way, the way he’d planned on writing the book before Arlington had proposed this too-good-to-be-true idea of staying at the estate.

He should have known. Should have realized a wealthy, powerful family like the Arlingtons would try to control the spin of a book like his. He was stupid not to have seen this coming.

“No, no,” Arlington was saying hurriedly in answer to whatever he read in Griff’s expression. “It’s not what you’re thinking. No one is going to censor what you write or attempt to...to restrict the freedom of the press. It isn’t anything like that. Nothing related to Brian’s kidnapping will be off-limits to you, but staying on the estate you’ll be privy to potentially sensitive information that has no bearing on the case or your story. That’s the sort of thing Pierce will be looking for.”

Put like that, it sounded reasonable. Griff still felt wary. He had spoken to Pierce Mather once on the phone—for as long as it had taken Mather to shut him up and shoot him down. The words sue your ass had featured prominently. Griff had a gut feeling he and Mather might not see eye to eye on what constituted information with “no bearing.”

As if reading his thoughts, Arlington said almost coaxingly, “Mr. Hadley—Griffin—you have my word you won’t be asked to sign a non-disclosure nor any kind of contract. This is a gentlemen’s agreement between you
and me. Agreed?” He held out his hand.

Griff studied Arlington’s face, considered that charming, part-rueful, part-willful smile. Arlington was a man used to getting what he wanted, no question. But there was something almost kind in his gaze, and he seemed sincere.

Nothing easier than convincing someone who wanted to believe you. Griff grimaced inwardly and reached out to shake hands.
Chapter Two

“That’s right,” Nels Newland said. “I was working on the estate back then. Been working for the Arlingtons since I was a boy. I wasn’t here that night, though. Nothing I can tell you.”

Newland led the way down a wide brick path shaded by tall rhododendrons wreathed in pale peach-colored blossoms. He was a big man with sparse gray hair and broad, badly stooped shoulders that made him look like he was carrying Griff’s bag against a strong headwind. He had insisted on carrying the bag, and short of wrestling it away from him, Griff had no choice but to give in. Apparently it was not possible to drive to the guest cottage, which was located behind the main house. It seemed inconvenient and impractical and just the kind of idea rich people came up with for the hell of it.

“Partly I’m trying to get a sense for what it was like then,” Griff said to Newland’s wide back. “You know, just getting an overall feel of the place and the people.”

Newland grunted and continued to plow down the pathway. Arlington hadn’t been kidding about the cottage being behind the main house. Well behind the main house, in fact. But that suited Griff fine. He liked his privacy and his space. Too much so, according to Levi.

No point thinking of Levi now. That was over.

He glanced over his shoulder, but his view of the villa was blocked by the clouds of pastel flowers. The rhododendrons must be fifty feet tall. They’d probably been planted when the house foundation was first laid.

“It’s no good digging up the past,” Newland said. “Leave sleeping dogs lie, I say.”

Judging by Newland and Mrs. Truscott, it was what a lot of people said.
“Mr. Arlington wants this book,” Griff felt obliged to point out. “It was his idea that I stay here and talk to people on the estate.”

Newland gave another of those disapproving grunts that was probably the poor relation to Jarrett Arlington’s Hmm. His boots thudded down the trail in solid, stubborn cadence.

Griff persisted, “There are still questions about what happened that night. Who was Odell’s accomplice? Was there even an accomplice? Where is Brian’s body? Why did they kill him when the ransom was paid?”

“Answers to none of that’s going to change anything.”

“It will give Mr. Arlington closure.” That was something Griff had learned working the crime beat, even on a small paper in a small town like Janesville. As bad as knowing what the worst was, not knowing, not having answers, not having certainty, was worse.

The sea breeze rustled the blossoms. Bees droned high overhead. They passed a small bronze statue of a stag and, farther down the shaded path, a low marble bench. Parks in Janesville weren’t as big as the Arlingtons’ backyard. Not that the Arlingtons would refer to all this cultivated acreage as a “backyard.”

Newland lifted his head and said abruptly, “There’s the cottage.”

Griff stopped walking.

The guest cottage stood on the other side of a wide and rocky stream which pooled into a series of large green ponds ringed by ornamental grasses, boulders and classical statuary. Black-faced swans glided serenely across the pond surfaces. A wooden bridge, balustrades painted white to look like stone, offered safe passage across the water.

Griff said, “It looks like a doll house.”
A doll house or maybe a piece of wedding cake. A pretty, two-story slice of columns and cornices and arched windows. Three small stairs led to a pale pink door.

Newland had not paused. Griff recovered from his astonishment and sped up to follow him across the bridge and up the narrow stone walkway to the cottage door with its stained-glass oval of ivy and swans.

Newland set Griff's extra bag down, unlocked the pink door, and pushed it open. He handed the old-fashioned key over to Griff. “It's all ready for you. If you do need something, there's a phone to the main house.”

“Thanks. I'm sure I've got all I'll need.” Griff patted his laptop case.

Newland, a man of few words—unless you counted the grunts—looked unconvinced but took himself off without further ado, leaving Griff to explore the cottage on his own.

Five rooms didn’t take long to explore. Every room but the kitchen and two bathrooms—two bathrooms in a guest cottage!—had some variation on parquet floors and old-fashioned blue-and-silver wallpaper. The draperies and upholstery were slate-gray silk, vintage but still functional. There wasn't a lot of furniture, but any one of those antiques probably cost as much as the rent on Griff’s apartment. How ridiculously wasteful. An average-size family could have lived here easily.

Okay. Maybe an average-size family of elves, because no average family of Griff's acquaintance would know what to do with silk upholstery or a cottage in the middle of the Enchanted Forest. He smothered a yawn as he paused to inspect a painting of two Gibson girls playing croquet.

It was like looking through a window at the past. A gracious past that most people had only ever experienced through newsreels and art books. How weird would it be to live surrounded by priceless antiques and original
paintings? He couldn’t even imagine not having to worry about money. Not having to worry about paying rent and saving up for, well, everything.

Wow. Not. Judging. Of course. But…the rich were really different.

And yet for all their money and power and position, the Arlingtons hadn’t been able to recover their lost child. Had no more luck in discovering what had happened to Brian than some poor family in Boscobel.

Griff yawned again and his jaw cracked. What he needed now was a shower and sleep. After that he’d go over his notes so he’d be prepped and ready for dinner that night. Mr. Arlington had invited him to dine with the family so that he could meet the cast of players. And, he gathered, so that Arlington could again warn everyone to cooperate fully.

Griff picked out one of the rear bedrooms with a view of the distant ocean and carried his luggage—if you could call a battered suitcase and a laptop “luggage”—upstairs.

He tried to hang on to his Midwestern skepticism, but there was no squelching that sense of elation as he gazed out the window at the azure haze behind the wall of trees. He was really here, here on the very shore of what F. Scott Fitzgerald had called “a fresh, green breast of the new world.” He thought of the tattered copy of *The Great Gatsby* in his suitcase. He was going to do it. He was doing it. He was going to write this book. The first of many books, hopefully.

“Hey!” someone called from downstairs, snapping him out of his pleasant daydream. “Where are you?”

The voice was female, young, and at this moment, unwelcome. Griff left the bedroom to cross the hall and lean over the wrought-iron banister. He had a foreshortened view of a young woman, maybe his age,
very thin with brown hair cut in elaborate layers. She wore skinny jeans—that actually fit—and a long plum-colored leather jacket.

“There you are,” she said. She smiled, her teeth very white, her lipstick very red.

“Who are you?” Griff asked blankly.

“Chloe.”

“Chloe who?”

“Chloe Kloppel.” It sounded like a knock-knock joke gone bad. Chloe clarified, “I’m the daughter of the house. Well, granddaughter.”

Okay. Now he had her. Chloe was the only child of Michaela, Jarrett's youngest daughter. She had been on the estate the night Brian disappeared, but she’d been an infant. Probably not going to have a lot to offer in the way of insight or information.

Griff said, “Nice to meet you, Chloe Kloppel.”

She shook her hair back, tilting her face up toward him in an unconsciously provocative pose. “Nice to meet you, Griffin Hadley. You look younger than your photo. Cuter too.”

Or...maybe not unconsciously provocative.

Griff asked warily, “What photo?”

Chloe gave another of those very white, very red smiles. “The photo of you in a Santa hat at the Banner Chronicle Christmas party. After Grandy announced you were coming to stay, I googled you.” She shrugged, hands spread wide in a kind of what-can-you-do? The blue beaded bracelets on her wrists made a clicking sound.

“What kind of a name is Griffin?”

“What kind of a name is Chloe?”

“Sexy. Stylish.”

Uh-oh.

“Well—” Griff awkwardly gestured behind him, “—it was
nice of you to—I was just unpacking.”

“Leave that,” Chloe told him. “I was thinking we could grab a late lunch and I’ll show you around town.”

Maybe she didn’t realize how she sounded, like she was telling the under butler to give the fish forks another polish.

“Thanks, but I already had lunch.”

Chloe frowned. “Where?”

“Muttontown.” Syosset, actually. And it had been coffee and a bear claw at Dunkin’ Donuts, but he wasn’t hungry. Still too keyed up. He got like that when he was working.

She thought this over. “You can come and keep me company.”

“That’s really kind of you, but I want to get settled in and go over my notes. I’ve only got a couple of days here and there’s a lot of ground to cover.”

“Oh my God. The famous book.” She shook her head.

“That’s why I’m here.”

“I know. We all know. It’s all we’ve been hearing about for the last two weeks. But it’s been twenty years. No one cares anymore.”

“Your grandfather cares.”

“Yeah, and you care. We know. But Brian was four when he disappeared. I’m sure he was adorable and I’m sure it was horrible at the time, but it’s not like he had developed a personality. I think everybody missed the idea of him more than him. Anyway, his parents aren’t even alive now.”

“Jeez. You’re all heart,” Griff said.

“I’m just being honest. I’m telling you what everyone else will be too polite to say to your face. How is finding Brian buried under the floorboards of one of these cottages going to make things better?”

His expression must have given him away. Chloe
added, “I don’t mean literally under the floorboards. Though who knows? Maybe. I just mean, twenty years is too late to do anyone any good.”

“Your grandfather wants to know the full story. He has a right to know.”

She tipped her head sideways, her expression puzzled. “Are you really going to keep skulking up there?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Are you coming down here or do I have to go up there?”

Griff straightened. “I’ll—”

Too late. Chloe was already on her way up the staircase.

What the heck? Was he going to have members of the family traipsing through the cottage while he was trying to work? Maybe a motel would have been a better idea.

“Anyway, it’s not like I care,” Chloe assured him as she reached the top of the stairs and sauntered toward him.

“We can still have fun even if you are wasting your time.”

“Fun?” he said cautiously.

Up close, she was very thin. Too thin. And tall. She was as tall as he was, and he was just over medium height. She was wearing a spicy, exotic perfume. She did not smell—or look—like girls in Wisconsin, let alone Janesville, though it was hard to pinpoint what exactly was so different about her. Maybe it was just attitude.

“Sure. Fun.” She was crowding into his space, her face tilted challengingy, and he realized uncomfortably where she thought this was going.

“Uh…hey,” Griff said feebly, trying to step back without looking like he was retreating.

Was this really how it worked for girls like her? Did it work like this for the boys of her social strata too?

After a couple of seconds the sparkle died out of her
blue eyes. Her knowing smile faded. Another second passed and realization dawned on her face.

“Are you kidding me?” she demanded. “You’re gay?”

Now that, illogical or not, was really irritating. “Is that the only reason a guy might turn you down?”

Chloe glared, hands on her hips now. “Are you gay or not?”

Griff glared back. “Yeah, I’m gay.”

She relaxed. Sort of. She still frowned as she eyed him. “It’s becoming an epidemic.” Before Griff could respond to that, assuming he had a suitable response, she gave a short laugh. “It’s not going to do you any good with Pierce.”


“I’m not worried about Pierce,” Griff said.

Chloe was turning, heading back the way she’d come. She threw over her shoulder, “You should be.”

Did rich people dress for dinner or was that just something out of old movies? Griff had no idea and he hadn’t thought to ask—wouldn’t have known how to ask. It was moot anyway because the closest thing he had to formal attire was a pair of dark jeans and the Tommy Hilfiger navy blazer he’d got on sale two years ago and wore to his city hall interviews.

Anyway, his clothes were clean and they fit right. That was all that anyone should give a damn about, right?

As he did up the buttons on his shirt, he could hear Levi jeering, “You’re just a reverse snob, Griff. Nobody is more judgmental than you.” Levi still getting the last word, even four months after their relationship was history.

Griff took a final glance in the mirror, swore, and headed back to the bathroom to have one last shot at
slicking down the persistent cowlick that made him look about twelve. It didn't seem to matter what kind of haircut he got, he always ended up looking like Dennis the Menace.

Finally, having run out of reasons to stall, Griff left the cottage, walking across the wooden bridge and hiking up the brick path to the villa. Bloodred sunset splashed across the ivory sky, but inside the tunnel of trees it was nearly dark. Discreet blue-white lights shone at the base of the trees to light the way.

The bees were gone, the birds silent. There was no sound but his footsteps on the old bricks. It was so quiet he thought he could hear the distant crash and thunder of waves.

Already he had a better sense of what the size of the estate meant in practical terms. So much ground to search, so many places to hide. Even if the kidnappers hadn't had that significant head start, they would have had a number of advantages.

Griff left the shelter of the trees and the house stood before him, lights blazing in welcome. Of course, it wasn't actually in welcome. It was in complete disregard for natural resources and indifference to utility bills.

He timed the distance it took to walk from the concealment of the trees to the back entrance of the house. Eleven minutes. And he wasn't rushing. He could have run it in half that time. Even carrying a small child, it wouldn't have taken much more than five. But for those five minutes he'd be in clear view of both the house and the gardens. Because of the party, there would have been people everywhere, and presumably the walkways would have been well lit.

Would the kid have been awake or asleep? If awake, he'd have been yelling, wouldn't he? Crying at least? But
maybe he wasn't awake. Maybe he'd been drugged or knocked over his wee noggin. Which could explain why, even after the ransom had been paid, Brian hadn't been returned. Maybe he hadn't survived the first phase of the kidnapping.

Maybe he was buried somewhere on the estate.

A strange, shivery feeling slithered down Griff's spine. Someone walking on your grave, his mother used to say. He glanced instinctively over his shoulder. It was twilight now, the first faint stars appearing in the sky, trees and shrubs and statuary throwing long, sinister shadows across the grass.

For the first time it occurred to him that if Brian's kidnapping had been an inside job, that insider might still be alive. Alive and well and living on the estate.
Jarrett Arlington outstretched a hand in welcome.
“Come in, my boy, come in. You're right on time. This is Griffin Hadley, my dears. What will you have to drink, Griffin?”

At first glance, there seemed to be a lot of people in the drawing room, and Griff's stomach knotted as he met that barrage of stares. It wasn't that he hated social situations. He actually liked getting together with friends, going out. You couldn't be shy and survive as a reporter. It was only situations like this that made him feel self-conscious and uncomfortable.

But on closer inspection, there were only three other people enjoying their before-dinner apéritifs. Chloe, dressed in a skimpy orange shift that barely covered her ass, was sitting on a long sofa next to a pigeon-breasted woman of about sixty. The woman was dressed in a beige pants suit and pearls. Across from the sofa sat a gray-haired man who looked too much like the older woman to be anything but a brother. He wore khakis, one leg casually crossed over the other, and an Aztec print sports shirt. He was sipping a martini, which he raised in cursory welcome to Griff.

“Rum and coke,” Griff answered Jarrett. He didn't particularly like rum and coke, hadn't drunk rum and coke since college, but he was afraid “a beer” would sound too plebian. Ordinarily that wouldn't have worried him, but this room with its gold-tasseled ivory velvet draperies, giant oil paintings, and fragile antique furniture intimidated him just a little. Actually...a lot.

“Excellent. Pierce, will you do the honors?”

For an instant, Griff thought he'd guessed wrong and Pierce was the middle-aged man in the Aztec shirt, but
then he realized the room had a large alcove with a drinks cabinet, and that a tall, well-built man with dark hair stood in front of the cabinet, staring right back at him with a hard, unfriendly gaze.

The famous Pierce Mather.

Mather looked to be in his mid-thirties, slick and corporate in an expensive and impeccably tailored suit. Too good looking. The kind of guy with a morbidly obese stock portfolio, a lifetime gym membership and a country-club wife.

“Rum and Coke coming up.” Mather’s deep voice was cordial enough, so maybe Griff had imagined the hostility he’d read in his eyes. The lawyer set down the decanter of whisky and reached for the ice tongs.

Jarrett was making the introductions. The woman in pearls was Muriel Arlington. The man in the Aztec shirt was Marcus Arlington. Griff knew that Muriel was Jarrett’s unmarried eldest daughter, and Marcus his youngest son. In between Muriel and Marcus had been Matthew, Brian’s father. Matthew and his wife had died in a boating accident ten years after Brian had been kidnapped, so that accounted for them. There was no sign of the second daughter, Chloe’s mother.

“How do you do?” Muriel asked with polite lack of enthusiasm. She offered a small, plump hand and disengaged quickly. Her fingertips brushed her thigh, but she didn’t actually wipe her palm on her pants.

“So you think you’re going to write a book about us?” Marcus smiled, a wide, meaningless smile. His eyes, those same deep indigo blue eyes all the Arlingtons seemed to inherit, did not smile.

“Not exactly,” Griff said. “I’m writing about Brian’s kidnapping.”

“You can’t write about the kidnapping without writing
about us.” Marcus resumed his lounging position and picked up his martini glass.

“You’re much younger than I thought you’d be, Mr. Hadley,” Muriel observed.

Griff got that a lot. He was nearly thirty, but his slight build and fair coloring gave him an unreasonably boyish look. “I’ve been the editor of Crimewatch, the crime/police section of my newspaper, for five years.” Okay, true, he was the only reporter covering the crime beat for the Banner Chronicle, but the title of editor was his, fair and square.

Muriel looked unimpressed.

“Good for you, young fella,” Marcus said. Young fella? The older Arlingtons all sounded like close relations of Thurston Howell III. It was like they thought moving their lower jaw to enunciate clearly was ill-bred or something.

“Pierce, come and meet Griffin,” Chloe called. Her smile was ever so slightly malicious.

“I’m coming,” Mather replied easily, picking his way through the obstacle course of cast-iron footstools and nesting tables and figurine lamps. He carried Griff’s drink and his own, and he was smiling. It was an attractive smile, assured, friendly…not the smile you’d expect from a guy who had threatened to sue your ass, but something about him made Griff wary all the same.

“You look like a man who could use a drink.” There was a snap of static electricity as Mather handed over the rum and Coke, his fingertips brushing Griff’s.

“Sparks!” Chloe observed as Griff muttered thanks.

Mather laughed. His eyes met Griff’s. They were the shade of brown that looks almost yellow. Amber. Kind of a weird color. Weird but not unattractive.

No, to be fair, there was nothing technically unattractive about Pierce Mather. Maybe his aftershave, which was too
strong for Griff’s taste and too…spiky. A mix of tobacco and coriander.

“How are you settling in, my boy?” That was Jarrett, watching Griff and Mather with a bright, alert gaze. “How do you like the cottage? Will it suit you?”

“Sure,” Griff said, only too happy to have something to focus on besides Mather. “It’s very comfortable.”

Mather made a faint sound, though when Griff glanced at him, his expression was bland.

“Excellent.” Jarrett looked pleased. “I think the kitchen has everything you need. You’ll find the larder is fully stocked. But you must feel free to have your meals up here at the house.”


That was one word for it.

“I keep kind of irregular hours when I’m working,” Griff said.

“That’s what kitchen staffs are for,” Jarrett said breezily. “You’re to come and go as you like. The staff will be happy to accommodate you.”

“Where do you think you’ll begin your investigation, Mr. Hadley?” Muriel asked.

The others looked at him expectantly. Except for Mather. There was definitely something…ironic about his expression. As though he knew something none of the rest of them did.

“I’m not sure investigation is the right word,” Griff said.

“What is the right word?” Mather inquired. Yeah, definitely an ironic glint in his light eyes. That unwavering regard was making Griff self-conscious. As it was probably intended to do.

“The plan is to write more of an overview of everything that happened, analyze, and then draw my own conclusions. I don’t imagine I can solve the case when
both the FBI and the best police in the state failed.”

“You’re not going to try and solve the mystery of what happened to Brian?” Chloe was looking from Griff to Jarrett.

“I’m going to look at all the evidence, of course. Re-interview everyone I can. Maybe having a fresh perspective will help, but I’m not a—”

“Trained investigator?” supplied Mather.

“No, I’m not.” Griff stared right back at Mather, whose mouth curved in a humorless smile before he took a sip from his glass.

Jarrett said, “I believe reopening the case will provide answers, provoke some kind of reaction.”

“Provoke is liable to be right,” Marcus said, draining his glass.

“Pierce, is your dear mother taking part in the en plein air painting at Sagtikos Manor this weekend?” Muriel briskly changed the subject.

“Rain or shine,” Mather said.

At that point, Mrs. True Blood appeared and announced dinner. Griffin found himself sitting across from Mather in the stately dining room. It irritated him to be so aware of Mather, but maybe he was so aware of Mather because Mather seemed to be watching him all the time. Every time Griff looked Mather’s way—which he tried not to do too often—Mather was either looking right at him with that penetrating stare or just glancing away.

While the meal was served, the conversation flowed along neutral channels: island social events, civic affairs, even the weather. But once everyone was served and Mrs. Truscott had vanished to the nether regions from whence she came, Marcus fixed Griff with a critical eye.

“What was it that sparked your interest in our family tragedy, Mr. Hadley? You’re from Indiana, aren’t you? How
did you learn about Brian's kidnapping?"

“Wisconsin. Anyway, a few years ago I was reading about Long Island, and I came across a reference to Brian’s kidnapping. It caught my attention.”

“Why?” Mather asked.

Griff glanced at Jarrett, who was watching their exchange with untroubled interest. “I guess because there are still some puzzling things about it.”

“If you’re that interested in puzzles, I’m surprised you didn’t decide to write about the Long Island serial killer. It would be a lot more commercial.”

“That case is still open, it’s still under investigation. I’m not a cop.”

Chloe said, “Why were you reading about Long Island?”

“Oh. I was interested because of *Gatsby.*”

“Who?” Marcus looked from Mather to Jarrett.

Griff cleared his throat. “*The Great Gatsby.*”

“The movie?” Chloe’s puzzlement was plainly mirrored by her aunt and uncle.

Griff’s face warmed. Not that it was anything to be embarrassed about, but he was sure none of these people would understand his fascination for the authors of the Lost Generation. Especially Fitzgerald. And especially *Gatsby.* In fairness, nobody in Wisconsin got it either. “The book. There are movies too, yes. Anyway, it's one of my favorites. I was curious about how much of it was accurate. As far as the setting, I mean.”

“Oh my God.” Chloe reached for her glass.

“So you're really just looking for a tax-deductible reason to visit Long Island?” That was Mather sounding more and more like he was questioning a hostile witness.

“Ignore them, my boy,” Jarrett interjected with a meaningful look at Mather. “You don’t have to explain
yourself to anyone.”

“Except you, Daddy,” Muriel said. “I hope Mr. Hadley has adequately explained himself to you. Personally, I can’t see what is to be gained by reopening such a painful chapter in our family history.”

“I know you don’t, my dear.” Jarrett left it there, and happily so did everyone else.

The conversation returned to safe and shallow waters and Griff was happy to devote himself to listening while eating his dinner. It was a very good dinner, by any standards. Tomato, arugula, mozzarella salad was followed by a main course of striped bass with fresh spinach and julienne fennel—all island-grown and paired with a white wine from a local vineyard.

“Are you interested in the food movement, Mr. Hadley?” Muriel asked, after explaining his dinner to him in detail.

What the heck was the food movement? Griff said warily, “I’m interested in moving food from my plate to my mouth.”

Across the table, Mather smothered a laugh. Muriel was unamused, however, and delivered a brief but dizzying lecture on “food sovereignty,” farm bill reform, farmland preservation and feedlot pollution.

“My dear, we’re eating,” Jarrett protested feebly.

Muriel was unmoved. “Yes. And most of us are eating poison. Every day. Most people in this country are putting poison in their bodies every time they sit down to dine.”

“No wonder I can’t eat anything without puking,” Chloe remarked. In fact, she didn’t seem to have eaten more than a couple of tiny heirloom tomatoes and a few bites of the spinach. She was drinking, though. They all drank like fish, from what Griff could tell.

“People need to know these things,” Muriel insisted. Happily, dessert arrived, and even Muriel’s political
activism couldn’t withstand the temptations of white chocolate cheesecake drizzled with raspberry brandy sauce.

Imagine eating like this every night? Griff tried but failed. Normally his diet consisted of peanut butter toast, milk—a lot of milk—and takeout. This single meal probably cost more than a week’s worth of his groceries.

Marcus, seeming to rise out of the alcoholic mists, said abruptly, “They were playing ‘Stranger on the Shore’ that night. I remember they played it over and over.”

Muriel said in a quiet, flat voice, “Gem loved that song.” “I’ve never heard it since that I don’t remember…”

“Yes.”

The hair rose on the back of Griff's neck. “Gem” would be Matthew's wife, the mother of Brian. Surely Marcus and Muriel were talking about the night that Brian was kidnapped?

They were remembering details, the kinds of details that had never made it into any description or report of the events of that fatal evening. The kinds of details that maybe meant nothing, but would surely help him better understand and ultimately write more effectively about that night.

He opened his mouth to ask…he wasn’t sure what, but Marcus looked up and down the table, pushed back his chair, saying briskly, “Bridge, I think?”

“Do you play bridge, Mr. Hadley?” Jarrett asked, eyes bright with fanatical hope.

“No. Sorry.”

“We'll teach you,” Muriel unbent enough to assure him. “I hate to eat and run,” Mather broke in, “but I've got to be in court tomorrow.”

The Arlingtons gazed at him with open disappointment. Mather was regretful but firm, and made his escape.
It took Griff longer to wriggle loose. He claimed, truthfully, exhaustion and the desire to get an early start the next morning. The Arlingtons brushed this aside, but once they began shuffling cards, it was clear he could have stripped and done a table dance and they probably wouldn’t have noticed.

Jarrett bade him a vague farewell, the others never looked up from their hands.

Griff liked to think that, as a jaded crime reporter, he wasn’t easily spooked, but there was no question that the grounds of Winden House were atmospheric at night. Maybe it was all those empty-eyed statues, human and animal, peering out from behind shrubberies, or the deep, deep shadows cast by gnarled trees and spidery, ornamental grasses; but there was no arguing the creepy factor was high. As the lights of the villa grew smaller behind him, he was conscious of how far the guest cottage was from the main house. And how isolated the estate was from its neighbors down the coast.

The sound of the waves carried at night. Other sounds should have carried too—crickets? frogs? owls?—but all was quiet. There was only the dull, steady thud of his shoes on the damp bricks. The scent of wet grass and moldering leaves rose from the cooling earth as he entered the long tunnel of rhododendron trees.

He walked quickly, eyes raking the blue shadows cast by the lights at the base of the trees, mentally formulating the questions he wanted to ask Jarrett the following day. Trying to think of the questions he wanted to ask, anyway. He kept getting distracted by thoughts of Pierce Mather.

Why had Mather been at the house? Had he simply been there to size up Griff? At whose behest? To what
purpose? Or was he a frequent dinner guest? He had certainly seemed very much at home. Almost like a member of the family.

He didn’t wear a wedding ring. Maybe he was interested in Chloe?

But no. Griff had received no impression that there was any kind of sexual chemistry—no chemistry at all—between Mather and Chloe.

If there had been chemistry, it had been between Mather and himself. Bad chemistry. Natural antipathy. Whatever his reason for being there that night, clearly Mather was suspicious of Griff, clearly thought the book was a bad idea. Maybe that was to be expected from a lawyer. It seemed to be a universal opinion. With the exception of Jarrett, all the Arlingtons seemed to think the book was a bad idea. And Griff could understand that, could see it from their perspective. Asking questions was going to stir up a lot of painful memories for everyone.

He came out of the tunnel of trees, and the night air was sweet and fresh, laced with the salty scent of the sea. He had left one of the downstairs lamps burning in the cottage, and the bright light threw long bullet shapes across the lawn.

Movement caught his attention. Griff's gaze traveled to the pallid shape of the bridge and his heart seemed to stop.

Someone stood on the bridge.

A tall, dark, unmoving silhouette was positioned at the midway point on the bridge.

Even as Griff tried to explain away the shadow, reassure himself it was just a trick of the moonlight, the figure moved, raised a hand in brief greeting.

“It’s Pierce,” a deep voice called over the rush of the stream. “I wanted a word.”
Relief had the funny effect of weakening Griff’s knees. What the hell had he imagined? Brian's kidnapper was lurking on his doorstep, ready to do anything to keep him from writing this book? Ridiculous. Too much imagination was right.

“It’s kind of late for a social call, isn’t it?” Griff said as he neared the bridge, hoping Mather hadn't noticed his paralyzed pause.

“Not unless you go to bed at nine o’clock. Anyway, I think it’s time you and I had a chat.”

“About what?” Griff’s steps on the wooden slats of the bridge were waking the swans. There was a lot of fluttering and hissing and soft whistles in the reeds, though no birds took flight.

Pierce leaned casually against the balustrade, arms folded. His moonlit face looked as coldly perfect as one of the blank-eyed statues along the garden path.

His voice was even as he replied, “About why you’re not going to write that book.”
Chapter Four

“Why am I not going to write this book?” Griff stopped walking when he was still a couple of yards from Pierce. It was not that he was afraid of Pierce, but there was no denying the other man put him on guard.

“Three reasons.”

“Which are?” Griff tried to match Pierce’s crisp tone.

“First, it would irresponsible and unethical to write such a book.”

“I don’t agree. Second?”

“No reputable publisher will print such a book.”

“You obviously don’t know anything about publishing.”

Pierce’s smile was as white and chilly as the moonlight.

“I don’t need to. I know everything about filing injunctions. Third, and of most interest to you, I will pay you not to publish this book. And it’ll be more than this book would earn you, even if you did manage to get it published. We’ll call it a kill fee.”

A kill fee? Pierce had been doing his homework. Griff forgot about trying to seem equally cool and businesslike.

“Why? What’s your problem with this book? What is it you think I’m going to find out?”

“I don’t think you’re going to find anything out. I think all you’re going to do is cause a lot of grief to people I care about.”

“You don’t know anything about me. You sure as heck don’t know what kind of book I’m going to write.”

“I know enough.”

That utter certainty had Griff practically stuttering his outrage. “Is that so? It must be great to be all knowing. And all powerful too, I guess. But you got this part wrong. I’m not going to take your kill fee and I am going to write this book. I’m going to be as respectful and sensitive as I
can, but I’m writing it. If you’re serious about stopping me then the person you need to have this conversation with is Mr. Arlington.”

Pierce didn’t reply, and Griff said shortly, “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

“You’re making a mistake,” Pierce said.

The very quietness of his voice sent unease rippling down Griff’s spine. He said, “Well, I make a lot of mistakes, but I don’t think writing this book is one of them. Someone is going to write this book, so why not me?”

“I can think of several reasons. Starting with the fact that you’re unqualified.”

That was direct. He had to give Pierce credit for not beating around the bush.

“Okay. I appreciate your honesty, but I disagree. And if you’ll excuse me, I’ve had a long day.”

He had to nerve himself to walk up to—and past—Pierce. He didn’t imagine handsome, sophisticated Pierce would resort to fisticuffs or shove him off the bridge, but there was no denying that tension and hostility ringed Pierce like a force field. At least he thought that peculiar energy, awareness was tension and hostility. Tension and hostility were part of it. Griff brushed by Pierce, uncomfortably aware of that spicy, sexy aftershave and Pierce’s hard, unfriendly gaze.

Pierce said nothing and Griff kept walking. The wooden slats creaked loudly beneath his feet.

“Do you know why you received authorization to write this book?” Pierce asked suddenly.

Griff stopped and turned. “No.”

Pierce’s face was in shade now. He was just a shadow on the bridge behind Griff. “We’ve been approached plenty of times, and by authors with a lot more impressive credentials than yours.”
“I believe it.”

“Why then do you think Jarrett decided to throw open the doors to a nobody cub reporter from Milwaukee?”

*Cub reporter? Nobody?* It was increasingly tough to keep his temper with the arrogant ass, especially since Pierce was clearly trying to provoke him, but Griff hung on. “No, I don’t know. Why don’t you tell me?”

“Because you look like Matthew did at your age.”

When Griff didn’t respond—couldn’t think of a response—Pierce said, “That’s right. You got the job because you remind that grief-stricken old man of his dead son. As you vultures always ask, how does that make you *feel*, Mr. Hadley?”

One thing you learned as a reporter was not to take antipathy for the job you had to do as a personal attack. Some times were easier than others. Griffin finally found his voice. “It makes me *feel* like I have a responsibility to help bring some closure to Mr. Arlington. Since he was kind enough to take a chance on me. Good night, Mr. Mather.”

He turned and walked the rest of the way across the bridge. He didn’t let himself look back and when he had finished fumbling with the lock to the guest cottage, he stepped inside and closed the door firmly.

Usually that kind of hostile exchange would have had him lying awake reliving every word, thinking of everything he should have said, second-guessing what he had said. But he was tired from his long, long drive and the bed was very comfortable. The light through the pink-and-blue glass globe of the lamp by his bed was rosy-soft and soothing, the linens smelled pleasantly fresh as though they’d dried in the sunlit sea breeze, and he could see the stars outside
his bedroom window. So many stars. Was it his imagination or were they especially bright and shiny stars in this corner of the sky—as though the parlor maids had just finished giving them a good dusting?

He was here. He had made it. It was really going to happen. He was really going to write his book. Griff was smiling as his eyelids grew heavier and heavier…

He woke once with the echo of music in his ears. He listened closely, but now there was nothing to hear. Just the normal night sounds, the sounds of a house settling.

He must have dreamed it. The melody was clear in his mind, so clear he could have hummed it, but he didn’t recognize it. It probably wasn’t a real melody at all, and in the morning it would be forgotten anyway…

And it was forgotten. The next morning he couldn’t remember a single note. If the music had come from the main house, someone had been blasting the stereo through open windows in the dead of night, and that was hard to imagine. But there was nowhere else the music could have come from. So he had imagined it.

Despite Jarrett’s invitation to have his meals at the house, Griff opted for a glass of orange juice and a bowl of cornflakes in the cottage. Seeing that someone had taken the time to stock his pantry, it would have been wasteful not to use these supplies. Plus he wanted to organize his plan of attack. He had to make the most of this week. He didn’t want to get distracted by chitchat over the smoked salmon and Earl Grey. Or whatever the Arlingtons ate for breakfast. Probably not cornflakes.

Today he was really just getting his bearings. He was supposed go through photographs and whatever other papers the Arlingtons had supplied. Tomorrow he had an appointment with the Nassau police after meeting with Benjamin Copper, who had covered the story for the
Oyster Bay Runner. On Wednesday he was planning to interview Odell Johnson in Sing Sing prison. That was the big one. No one other than law enforcement and his lawyer had ever interviewed Johnson before, and Griff was hopeful that after all this time Johnson might be willing to talk. Twenty years was a long time to keep a secret.

After Wednesday he had the rest of his stay to follow up on interviews and hunt down additional leads. It was going to be a very busy week. And that was just the way Griff liked it.

When he was done with breakfast, Griff grabbed his notebook and camera and made the trek across the bridge and up the green hillside. Leaving the archway of trees, he decided to check out the sunken garden where the party had taken place the night of Brian’s kidnapping.

Winden House's sunken garden was directly influenced by the “Italian” garden at Hever Castle in England—which had itself been influenced by the popular formal court gardens of the Renaissance and Romantic era. Coincidently, Hever had been commissioned by an American; previous owner William Waldorf Astor had required a fresh air gallery for all his Italian sculptures. Winden House’s comparatively skimpy fifty acres of formal garden included tall hedges forming elaborate mazes, a copse of white plum trees called the “Fairy Wood,” terraces of rose gardens, elegant ponds and fountains, museum-worthy statuary and lush mounds of nonnative plantings.

Ridiculous, in a word.

Ridiculous, but undeniably beautiful. The smell of cut grass mingled with the profuse perfume of roses and other flowers. The formal urns and architectural features reminded Griff of Forest Home Cemetery in Milwaukee—except this all belonged to one family rather than being shared and appreciated by everyone.
Griff pulled his camera out and took a few shots of Nels Newland on the lowest terrace level of the garden, pruning rose bushes. There were no doubt better pictures of the garden, but Griff thought the image of bent and bowed Nels laboring in the gigantic, empty maze made a statement.

He put his camera away and went down the moss-stained steps to where Nels was working.

“Morning!” Griff called.

Newland grunted without turning his head.

Griff was not easily put off. He said, “This is a beautiful garden.”

Newland nodded, unimpressed with the cheery approach.

Griff surveyed the interconnecting garden rooms. He had been wrong about one thing. From here it wasn’t possible to see the walkway from the house leading into the tunnel of trees. The hedges and stone walls were too tall. So someone could have whisked Brian down the path that night. The only danger of discovery would have come from guests walking to and from the house to the garden. Guests and servants. Once someone reached the dark tunnel of trees, the chances of discovery were nil.

With everyone in the garden—or moving back and forth from the kitchen to the garden—the house had been essentially empty. The police favored the theory that Brian had been carried out the front door to a waiting getaway car. So many vehicles were coming and going that night, parked along the drive and crowded in the courtyard, that one more would have been all but invisible. It would have taken nerves of steel to carry the kid out the front door like that, but it was a shorter trek than carrying him out the back of the house and all the way down to the rear of the estate and the sea.
If Griff was planning this kind of crime, he’d have gone for the back exit because it offered more options for escape if things went wrong. But however it had been done, the crime was an audacious one, so maybe worrying about alternate escape routes hadn’t been part of the kidnapper’s thinking.

Griff snapped a couple of photos of the barrier made by vegetation and turned back to Newland, who was steadily ignoring him. “I like roses. You’ve got some of the nicest I’ve seen in a long time.”

Nothing from Newland.

“Is that white one Alba Semi-Plena?” Griff pointed to an eight-foot climber with milk-white flowers and golden stamens.

Newland threw him a sideways look and unbent enough to say, “White Rose of York, that’s right. It blooms once a year.”

“Spring or summer,” Griff agreed. “My mother used to grow roses. Heirloom roses were her favorite.”

Newland eyed him thoughtfully.

Griff turned slowly, taking in the green and blooming levels of the garden. “It must take a pretty good-sized staff to maintain the grounds of a place this big.”

Newland straightened. Or at least straightened as much as his curved back allowed. “In the old days we had a small army. Now it’s just me and a couple of local boys on the weekends.”

“Why is that?”

Newland gave him a dour look. “The Arlingtons haven’t fallen on hard times, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

Griff grinned. “I wasn’t suggesting anything. For all I know there’s a brand new trend in gardening, like Miss Arlington’s food movement.”

Newland’s heavy face twisted as though he was in
pain, but then he snorted, and Griff realized it was amusement he was struggling with. “I told Miss Muriel if she wants to grow her own beets and carrots, she’s going to have to hire more help.”

Griff nodded. “I guess you don’t generally have a lot of contact with the family?”

“Enough.” Newland returned to pruning roses with brisk, decisive chops.

Griff studied the wall of tall hedges, which provided both a sound barrier and an effective screen. “This is where the party was held the night Brian was kidnapped, right? They put a dance floor out in the center of the green there?”

“That’s right.”

“A Midsummer’s Night Dream. That was the theme. Like the play.”

“Wouldn’t know. I don’t go to plays.”

“Me neither. We had that one in school though. Did the garden look then like it does now?”

“Yep.”

“The hedges were as tall as they are today?”

“Pretty much. Coupla new rose bushes over there by the obelisk.” Newland pointed out a pair of pink and coral tea roses well on their way to engulfing a ten-foot wrought-iron structure.

“You’ve got a good memory.” Griff asked, “Did you know Odell Johnson?”

“I knew him.”

“What did you think of him?”

“I didn’t think anything of him.”

“Were you surprised when he was arrested for kidnapping Brian?”

“Surprised?” Newland sounded indignant. “Sure, I was surprised. Anyone would have been surprised. It’s not like
the Arlingtons would have knowingly hired someone capable of that.”
  “Was there any doubt in your mind that Johnson was guilty?”
  Newland took another whack at the yellow rose bush.
  “No.”
  “Did you know that Johnson continues to this day to claim he’s innocent?”
  “Well, they all do, don’t they? Criminals?”
  “I guess they do, yeah.” Griff studied Newland’s shuttered expression. “Who did hire him?”
  Newland’s heavy head turned and he stared at Griff without comprehension.
  “Who did the actual hiring? Not Jarrett Arlington, I assume? Was it Miss Arlington?”
  “The Arlingtons don’t do the hiring and firing.” Newland scoffed at the very idea. “Mr. Tuppalo. He was the butler back then and he hired Johnson when the old chauffeur left. After Tuppalo retired, the Arlingtons decided they didn’t need a butler anymore. Not like the old days when the house was always full of guests. It’s pretty quiet around here now. Just the family mostly. Nothing Mrs. Truscott can’t manage.”
  Griff vaguely recalled Mr. Tuppalo from the old news reports. He was one of those ancient family retainer types and had not come under suspicion in the police inquiry. At least, not that the papers had picked up. “How well did Mr. Tuppalo know Johnson?”
  “He didn’t know him at all. Johnson wasn’t from around these parts.”
  Maybe Tuppalo hadn’t known Johnson. Maybe he had. Just because Johnson hadn’t been local didn’t mean there was no connection between them. “Where was he from?”
  “Don’t remember.”
“Is Mr. Tuppalo still living?”
“No. He passed…” Newland thought it over. “Probably fifteen years now. Maybe more.”
That was too bad. Tuppalo might have made an interesting subject for an interview. “Do you know if Mr. Tuppalo has any family locally?”
Newland said reluctantly, “His daughter May still lives in Syosset.”
“Is she married? Would you happen to know her last name?”
“Chung. But you’re wasting your time. The police went over all this with Tuppalo. They asked the same questions. Tuppalo didn’t know Johnson. The idea of Mr. Tuppalo involved in any crime, let alone kidnapping, is crazy.”
“Oh sure,” Griff said easily. “But it’s my job to go over everything again. It can’t hurt to double-check all the facts, right?”
“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Newland said.

When Griff reached the house Mrs. Truscott informed him that he was too late for breakfast.
“That’s okay, I already ate,” Griff told her.
This indifference to being snubbed seemed to annoy Mrs. Truscott, who followed her first salvo with the information that Mr. Arlington was too busy to talk to Griff and he was to head straight to the downstairs library where family papers and photo albums had been left out.
Griff was pretty sure Jarrett Arlington had not phrased it “too busy to talk to you,” but he was more than happy to find he would have access to these precious research materials without having to be considerate of anyone’s feelings. He was not exactly sure what the “family papers” consisted of. Jarrett had mentioned at one point that
Gemma Arlington kept a diary. It was hard not to imagine something like the journals Anne Morrow Lindbergh had kept—what an incredible resource that would be. There were obvious and painful correlations between the infamous Lindbergh kidnapping and the Arlington family’s tragedy. But there was no guarantee that Gemma Arlington’s diary would be more than a record of her daily appointments or what she consumed on her diet, assuming rich ladies had the same complicated eating habits as the women Griff worked with at the *Banner Chronicle*.

Mrs. Truscott led the way to the library, clearly not trusting Griff on his own in the house. She did not speak to him, and her heels tapped hollowly down the corridor.

The library was a long, two-tiered room accented with marble and gold leaf. Thousands of books, probably more books than in the entire Janesville public library, were housed on carved walnut paneled bookcases that stretched ceiling-to-floor. A green-and-blue tapestry large enough to serve as a circus tent hung at one end of the room. The tapestry depicted a young man with a single golden apple and three complacent-looking females. On the other end of the room was a fireplace surrounded by a magnificent black-marble mantel. The mouth of the fireplace was taller than Griff. Two chairs and a spindly game table with a delicate ivory and ebony chess set were arranged before the hearth.

“My God,” Griff murmured, gazing up at the ornate marble marble mantel. It looked like a memorial monument.

Mrs. Truscott cast him another of those condemnatory looks.

Griff bit back the rest of his thought, which was that it was ludicrous that any one family should possess something like this when entire towns, cities, states
couldn’t afford to keep their museums and art galleries open. Mrs. Truscott was clearly a willing proletariat slave to her capitalist masters. He asked instead, “Anything by Fitzgerald or Hemingway?” He was half joking, half not. Just to hold a first edition of *The Great Gatsby* would be amazing.

“The downstairs collection consists of books on literature, history, religion, art, philosophy and sailing.”

“Sailing?”

“Nautical and seafaring books.”

“Right.” Maybe ranking sailing right there with religion and philosophy did make sense for the Arlingtons.

“Some of these books are over a century old.” Mrs. Truscott sounded as proud as if the library was her own.

“I believe it.”

Griff walked toward a long mahogany library table where stacks of leather-bound photo albums had been laid out. The albums were all neatly labeled. He opened the one with a start date of 1975. The youthful, highly photogenic faces of the Arlington sons and daughters smiled up from boats and ponies and armfuls of purebred puppies.

“I didn’t expect anything so well-organized. This is impressive.” His entire collection of family photographs fit in a large manila envelope. In fact, for all he knew, Levi had taken the envelope along with nearly everything else when he left.

The Mrs. Truscotts of the world did not roll their eyes, but without so much as the twitch of a facial muscle she managed to convey her lack of surprise at his abysmal ignorance of all things Arlington.

“Is this something else you’re responsible for?” Griff asked. “It must be a real job keeping the press clippings in order.”
“Certainly not.” But then she softened. “Mrs. Arlington—Mr. Matthew's wife—put these albums together. She collected all the loose photos back from when the house was first built and then she sorted and cataloged them.” The momentary softening was for the long-dead Mrs. Arlington, not Griff. The next moment Mrs. Truscott said tartly, “Mind how you handle those. They're fragile.”

“I'll be careful.” Griff spoke absently because he had noticed the bulging, pale lavender book on the far side of the table. His heart sped up. A plain lavender cover? It had to be some kind of ledger or a journal. Gemma’s diary?

“And you’re not to take any of these things out of this room,” Mrs. Truscott warned him, in a tone that would have done any museum curator proud.

“I won’t.”

Even distracted as he was, he knew she wanted to continue admonishing him but was out of material. He offered his most reassuring smile. Her heavy brows drew together, but she retreated at last, the brisk click of her heels fading down the length of the room and then falling into silence.

Griff snatched up the journal. The moleskin cover felt soft and strangely alive to the touch. He opened it. Please return to: Gemma Macy Arlington read the graceful, feminine script on the inside cover.

But Gemma had been dead for over a decade, and the secrets of the dead were fair game to scholars and journalists alike.


When I lived in New York the constant noise used to get on my nerves. Planes, trains, and automobiles. Barking
dogs, yowling cats. The crazies and the bums swearing on the streets. The constipated plumbing in my apartment building, my neighbors’ TV blasting on at all hours. But the silence here in the winter is so complete sometimes I wish an air raid siren would go off.

Even the snow is quieter here.

Right on the dot, Gemma chatting away with the ease of the lifelong journaler. Griff flipped quickly through, and yes, there was an entry for every day. Some were pages long, some were no more than a couple of lines. Happily none of them had to do with daily caloric intake or appointments with hairdressers.

He couldn’t help it. He flipped ahead to Saturday, June 26 but was disappointed to see only a few notes about Gemma’s dress—pale blue chiffon with beaded bodice—and Chinese lanterns for the party. Chinese lanterns?

That was disappointing, but then the kidnapping had not happened until later that night. So of course there would be no mention. Griff turned the page.

Nothing.
A blank page.

In an odd way the stark creamy emptiness after pages and pages of dreamy thinking aloud and chatty commentary seemed to say more than any words could have.

There were several blank pages and then Gemma’s narrative picked up on July 4.

I keep thinking about how much Brian loved the fireworks last year. If I close my eyes I can hear his excited laughter and see his little hand reaching up, pretending to snatch the gold and purple and green bursts from the sky.

Griff was not sentimental, and his mental image of Gemma Arlington was of a spoiled, pampered woman who, until her child was taken from her, probably believed
tragedy was another woman wearing the same dress to a party. But something in the painful simplicity of that recollection made him clear his throat.

The next entry was two days later. This was a longer passage, two or three pages.

_I hear myself saying such stupid things. It's impossible, it's wrong, it's unfair…_

Griff sat down in the nearest chair and began to read. After a time he was distracted by sounds from down the hall. It sounded like a herd of wildebeests had arrived complete with luggage and entourage. A couple of small dogs were yapping and a lot of voices seemed to be raised.

He lifted his head, listening.

Footsteps were approaching. A woman’s voice called, “I don’t give a shit what Daddy said. I want to see this so-called journalist for myself.”
“What do you think you’re doing?” The woman standing in the doorway to the library was small and slight with white-blond hair cut austerely short. Like all the Arlingtons her brows were black, her eyes a brilliant blue. She wore biker boots, skintight jeans, and one of those short motorcycle jackets. As Griff studied her weathered face, he thought the biker boots and jacket might not be just affectation. She looked like a woman who had traveled more than a few rough roads. He recognized her—barely—from the news photos taken around the time of Brian’s kidnapping. Michaela Arlington. Jarrett’s second daughter. The youngest of the Arlington offspring.

“I’m looking through these photo albums.” Griff had had the presence of mind to return the journal to the table when he’d heard footsteps coming his way. It wasn’t hard to guess how someone already hostile to the idea of his inquiries would react to the sight of him reading from her sister-in-law’s private journal.

“You have no right to be here.”

“Well, the thing is…” he began apologetically.

“If you had any decency, you wouldn’t be here.”

“I intend no disrespect, Miss Arlington.” It was a phrase he’d got a lot of use out of through the years. One person’s news story was another’s intimate secret—sometimes worth a punch or two in the nose. Or worse. Except Brian’s kidnapping and murder was not a secret. It had been big news from practically the moment it happened.

Michaela said, “You don’t think digging up the dead is disrespectful?”

“I don’t plan on—” The rest of Griff’s speech was lost as Chloe also appeared in the doorway. She wore an ice-blue dressing gown, and she looked tousle-haired and
harassed.
   “Mother, this isn’t helping. You’re just embarrassing yourself.”
   “Hello to you too, Chloe. Nice to know you have my back.”
   “Seriously?” Chloe raked her talons through her hair, ruffling it further. “Your back is all I’ve ever had.”
   Michaela’s eyes narrowed to slits. “Don’t start with me.”
   “Then don’t start with me!”
   Griff wisely kept his mouth shut while they went at it.
   “You’re just going to piss off Grandy.”
   “Grandy deserves to be pissed off if this is the kind of thing he does when my back’s turned.” Michaela turned back to Griff, did a kind of double-take as though she’d only then really gotten a good look at him. Her lip curled.
   “Oh. I see now. I get it. Sorry, kid. It’s not going to work.”
   “Miss Arlington—”
   “Save your breath. And for your information, I am not Miss Arlington. Miss Arlington is my sister. I am Mrs. Shelton.”
   What was the old quote attributed to P.T. Barnum? I don’t care what the newspapers say about me as long as they spell my name right. But maybe he was being unfairly cynical. She did seem sincerely and utterly pissed off.
   “Of course. Sorry,” Griff said.
   Chloe tried again to drag her mother away. Michaela shrugged her off. She pointed her finger at Griff. “Pack your bags. You’re going to be out of here by lunch. No way am I about to allow this to happen.” She turned and stalked away down the hall.
   No sooner did she depart than a pair of bow-legged brown-and-white spaniel-type dogs appeared in her place and began barking at Griff. They seemed to be taking turns, one yapping furiously, then pausing to let the other
get a few observations in.

Chloe shook her head. “I hate my mother,” she told Griff. She bent, scooped up the dogs, and also withdrew. Griff waited, but when no further interruptions materialized, he picked up the nearest and smallest photo album and sat down again. He wasn’t sure if he was about to be booted out or not. He assumed Jarrett had a pretty good idea of what he was dealing with when he’d confidently said he’d deal with objections from his kinfolk, but families were tricky. Even Griff knew that much.

Either way, best not to waste any time. He opened the album. These were all photos of Brian. Baby photos looked pretty much the same—not hugely interesting, in Griff's opinion. He flipped through pages of Brian the infant, Brian the toddler, Brian the scrawny little kid. Snub-nosed and tow-headed. Cute enough, if you liked kids. Griff had no strong feelings either way.

He made quick notes regarding photos he’d like copies of for the book, used his phone to snap a few pictures as reminders and reference, and put the album aside. Remembering Pierce's theory on why Jarrett had agreed to cooperate with Griff's project, he hunted for the album dated 1993.

It wasn’t hard to pick Matthew Arlington out from all the other fading images, and yes, there was a superficial resemblance. At Griff's age, Matthew had also been tall and fair, slight and boyish. But it wasn't doppelganger time or anything. It probably hadn't hurt Griff's petition that he was the same general physical type as Matthew had been, but Jarrett seemed like a shrewd old duck. His decision to work with Griff had probably been based on a number of factors, including the supposition that being inexperienced, Griff might be easier to control. Even manipulate.
You didn’t work the crime beat, even in a little town like Janesville, without developing a mildly jaded outlook. Griffin grimaced inwardly and went back to looking for suitable photos for his book.

Thinking of which, sooner or later he was going to have to come up with a title. He’d been toying with a couple of possibilities. *Little Boy Lost* was his current favorite, although a quote from *A Midsummer’s Night Dream* might work too. It would be nice to work in something from Fitzgerald, but no. Probably not. He was sincere about not intending to deliberately cast the Arlingtons in a bad light. Of course, it might work out that way in the end, depending on what he learned over the next few days. Assuming he learned anything.

Griff continued to scrutinize pages of photos. It was like looking at magazine advertising. Lots of shots of beautiful people amusing themselves in expensive ways. Didn’t these people ever take a bad picture? Or a candid picture? Of course this was before the days of Instagram and selfies. Heck, it was before the days of cell phone cameras. Even so, it seemed like Matthew and Gemma might have kept a stash of private photos. He and Levi certainly had. Griff wasn’t looking for anything sensational, just something more…human.

But if it came down to it, these photos would do, and almost none of them had ever made it into any of the news reports or articles of the day, so that would be a coup right there. Assuming Michaela did not prevail and he would shortly be packing his bags. Bag.

He studied photographs, took more copies, made additional notes.

“There you are.”

Griff’s head jerked up as Muriel Arlington sailed into the room. Today she wore a tweed skirt and a yellow sweater
set. Her pearls looked real. Not that he would know.

“Do you plan on dining with us tonight, Mr. Hadley?”

“I... hadn't thought about it. Do you need an answer now?”

“It would certainly be helpful.” She gave him a tight smile.

Griff weighed the value of more face-to-face time with the Arlingtons against the strain of more face-to-face time with the Arlingtons. “I'll probably be working through dinner,” he said. “But thank you.”

“Oh, you're to come and go as you please, Mr. Hadley,” she said with that brittle friendliness. “Daddy made that clear.”

“Even so I'll try to stay out of everyone's way,” he promised her.

Her gaze fell on the photo album Griff had been studying, moved to the stack to the right of him. “You see, this is the very thing I was afraid of.”

“I'm sorry?” Griff asked. So much for the notion of being able to work in private. Were the Arlingtons taking shifts?

“This. This. You.” Her small, plump hand indicated Griff and the collection of albums. “Is anyone supervising you?”

“Supervising me? I... no.”

Muriel pulled out the chair across from him and plopped down. She regarded Gemma's journal for a long, long moment. Then, as though hypnotized, she reached for it. She opened it—and then just as quickly closed it again. Griff did not know what to make of the expression that fleetted across her face. Pain? Embarrassment? Remembrance? Whatever that emotion was, it was gone as she stared at him from across the table.

Griff stared back at her.

“Go on,” Muriel said. She nodded at the album he had been studying. “If you have questions, I'll answer them.”
“Uh, thank you.” Was she really going to sit there and watch his every move? What did she think he might do? Steal photos? Pocket objets d’art? Or was this something else entirely?

“I met Mrs. Shelton,” Griff said slowly.
Muriel’s mouth pursed in a quickly repressed smile. “So I heard.”
He smiled too. “It's not like Brian's kidnapping is a secret. I don't understand why everyone is so against this book.”

“That is because you’re young and unsophisticated.”
Griff’s eyes widened, but before he could respond, Muriel said, “You have no concept of what it was like for us. The police were bad enough. The reporters were worse. We had sightseers. Can you imagine how difficult that was for a family like ours?”

“I guess it would be difficult for any family.”
“Of course. But we are private people. This book you propose to write is going to start it all up again.”
He said neutrally, “I don’t think that's true.”

“As I said, you're young and unsophisticated.”

“You know, I’m not that young. And I’ve been working as a reporter my entire adult life. It's true that my book will remind people of the case, but I don’t think you’re going to have out-of-towners tramping through the flowerbeds.”

Muriel’s eyes met his with surprising directness. “You think my concerns are superficial, shallow. I know. You have no idea what it is to be someone whom everyone else watches, looks up to.”

“That's true,” Griff said, disliking her more with every passing minute.
“Our family tragedy was exploited for national entertainment. And now when it's mostly forgotten, you want to stir it all up again. Not, as you’ve said yourself,
because you think you can shed any new light on the case. You’re simply interested in the human drama.”

“I didn’t mean I couldn’t bring a fresh perspective. It’s been twenty years after all. I just meant I don’t believe I can crack the case—a cold case—when the FBI failed.” As he said it, Griff wondered if he was being entirely honest. Didn’t he maybe hope just a bit that given time and distance, he might be able to uncover some telling bit of information, something that might make it possible to know for sure what had happened that night?

Of course he did. He was trying to keep his expectations in check, but yes. Any writer would hope the same.

“What questions do you have for me?” Muriel asked.

“None yet. It’s hard to know what to ask before I’ve had a chance to—”

“I’d rather get them out of the way.”

What a difficult woman. Was she deliberately being as awkward as possible? Griff grimly considered her pale, bland features.

“You must have some idea of what questions you want to ask,” Muriel prompted. “You said you’ve been doing this your entire adult life.”

Yes and no. This wasn’t like some of the other crimes Griff had written about. With an adult casualty there were always plenty of questions, starting with the character of the victim. But in this case, What was Brian like? Did Brian have any enemies? wasn’t relevant. Brian’s character was not a factor. Brian had been a target strictly because of the family he had been born into.

“Did you enjoy the party that night?”

She looked at him in disbelief. “Isn’t that like asking Mrs. Lincoln how she enjoyed the play?”

“I don’t think so. I think sometimes it’s easier to
remember details when you’re focused on something tangential to the thing you’re trying to recall.”

Muriel’s pale eyes narrowed. “What exactly do you think I’m trying to recall?”

“Everything. Anything. Anything that might be useful now. Did you enjoy the party? It was supposed to be costume, right? The theme was A Midsummer’s Night Dream.”

“No,” Muriel said. “No, I didn’t particularly enjoy the party. And yes, the theme was A Midsummer’s Night Dream, but our costumes weren’t supposed to be based on the play. How ridiculous. That was something else the papers got wrong. The décor was based on A Midsummer’s Night Dream. The costumes were supposed to be from the 1920s. It was typical of Gemma’s ideas.”

“It sounds imaginative.”

“Oh, Gemma was very imaginative. She hired a projectionist to show the movie, the 1935 movie, using the small woodland area in the garden as a screen. It was ridiculous. No one could see anything. It was just flickering black-and-white shadows against the trees.”

“Did you want to see the movie?”

“Of course not. No one wanted to see an old movie like that.”

Griff wouldn’t have minded. He liked old movies. Even old movies of Shakespeare’s plays.

“Why didn’t you enjoy the party?”

“As I said, it was Gemma’s kind of thing, not mine. It wasn’t really Matthew’s kind of thing either, but she could always wind him around her little finger.”

Griff smiled sympathetically. “Did you dress up?”

“Yes,” Muriel said reluctantly. “Gemma dragged Mike and me to a shop in Chelsea that sold vintage clothing.”

“Mike is your sister Michaela?”
“Yes.”
“And you all lived here in this house?”
“It’s not as though there’s a shortage of room.”
“No. True.”

Reluctantly, Muriel said, “Gemma and Matthew talked about getting a place of their own, but Daddy couldn’t bear the idea of being separated from his first grandchild. And then afterwards… I don’t think Gemma cared enough about anything to worry where she lived.”

“They didn’t have any more children, Matthew and Gemma?” He knew they hadn’t; he was simply giving voice to his curiosity. “Maybe it would have helped.”

“You don’t replace a child as though it were a puppy with distemper.”

“I know. I just meant…” Yeah, it had probably been a dumb comment. Griff changed tack. “Had there ever been any previous attempts at kidnapping a member of your family? Threats?”

“Threats, yes. Threats are common for people like us.”

Griff swallowed the first smartass comment that came to mind. “So you don’t take that kind of thing seriously?” He had noticed and wondered about the fact that there was no apparent security presence on the estate.

“We take serious threats seriously. Mostly what we get are letters from cranks. People asking for money and threatening to kill us if we don’t give it to them. Those are turned over to the detectives at the Nassau County Police Department.”

“Were you surprised when Odell Johnson turned out to be Brian’s kidnapper?”

“Surprised? Hardly. I’m the one who pointed the police to Johnson. I thought of him instantly. And of course I was correct. They found the ransom money underneath the floor of the toolshed in the house where he was renting a
room. He admitted everything.”

That wasn’t accurate. Johnson admitted writing the ransom note and picking up the money, but he staunchly denied actually kidnapping Brian, which maybe made sense if he had killed Brian. Any chance for leniency, clemency, would be kaput from the minute Johnson admitted to killing a four-year-old, whether by accident or not.

“That’s helpful, thank you.”

“That’s it? Those are all the questions you have?”

“For now.”

“All right. If anything occurs to you, I’m right here.” She did not mean it figuratively. She picked up another album and began to flip through the pages.

Griff said, “Well, but I don’t want to keep you from—you probably have a million things to do.”

“This is more important,” Muriel assured him.

It seemed she meant it, because she did not leave the table once. Not in three hours. Hoping to discourage her, Griff determinedly looked through the albums, not responding to her sighs or murmurs from across the table as she also browsed. She was driving him nuts though.

Especially aggravating was the way she kept Gemma’s journal in her own personal space. She didn’t open the journal, though every now and then she absently straightened it or traced a finger across the cover. He couldn’t tell if the possessiveness was conscious on her part or not. He wanted to ask her to pass the journal to him, but that was equally irrational possessiveness on his part. Plus he was leery of precipitating another family drama. He wondered if Michaela had had a chance to present her case to Jarrett yet, and how that had gone.

He was still here, so maybe that was the answer.

Finally, just as Griff was seriously considering leaping
across the table to throttle her, Muriel looked at the delicate silver watch on her meaty wrist. “It’s time for luncheon.” She looked at Griff expectantly.

“Sure, go ahead,” Griff told her, trying not to sound relieved.

“You’ll be taking your break as well?”
“I don't eat lunch usually.”
“You’re welcome to lunch with us, you know.”
“Yes. But I should probably work.”
Muriel tried to insist, but Griff remained politely obstinate, and in the end her desire for lunch proved stronger than her need to keep him under surveillance.

He watched her consider taking the journal with her—she actually picked it up—but then she returned it to its place on the table. He exhaled a long sigh of relief as she left the room and vanished down the long hallway.

While the morning was not a write-off, he certainly wasn’t making the progress he’d hoped. Although that was partly his fault for letting Muriel get to him.

He half rose, reaching across the wide table for Gemma’s journal, dropping it as someone behind him cleared their throat. It took a second or two to spot Jarrett Arlington standing on the landing above him.

Jarrett was smiling, but there was something odd in his expression as he gazed down at Griff. “I didn’t mean to startle you,” he said apologetically, and now his expression was ordinary enough. “I wondered if you’d like to stop for lunch? I was thinking we could dine in my study.”

How. The. Hell? There was no way Jarrett could have come through the hall entrance. There was a small door to the right of the fireplace, but it was in Griff’s line of sight, and anyway, he wasn’t so preoccupied he could have missed Jarrett walking up that narrow circular staircase. There had to be a door leading onto the second tier of the
library, but he couldn’t see one.
   “Is there a hidden door up there?” Griff asked.
   “Yes,” Jarrett answered easily. “One of the bookshelves swings out.”

How long had Jarrett been standing there watching him? Had he listened in on Griff’s conversation with Muriel? Not that there was any reason he shouldn’t, but it left Griff feeling uncomfortable and unhappy knowing he could be spied upon. Maybe a dramatic way of putting it, but that was what it amounted to.
   “Are there a lot of secret passages or secret doors in the house?”
   “One or two. But they’re not secret.” Jarrett smiled tolerantly down on him. “Lunch?”

He actually was hungry, now that he thought about it. Besides, lunch with Jarrett was an opportunity too valuable to miss. “Yes, thanks.”

Griff swiftly climbed the circular stairs to the second landing.
   “Is Muriel making a nuisance of herself?”
   Griff remembered that heavy sigh he’d given when Muriel left the room, and his face warmed. “Er…I know she’s trying to be helpful.”
   “Then that’s more than I know,” Jarrett said. “How is your investigation going? Are you finding what you need?”
   “Yes. Thank you. I was just about to start reading Gemma’s journal.”
   “Ah.”
   “Did she keep other journals?” Griff reached Jarrett, who had moved to stand next to a section of the bookcase which did indeed swing out to offer a view of a long dark hallway.

Jarrett hesitated. “She did, yes. All her life Gemma kept a journal. But losing Brian changed her. She never really
got over it. I don’t believe she would have wished for those thoughts to be shared with anyone. Except Brian, of course.”

“Of course.”

Jarrett smiled, ushering Griff into the passageway. Surprisingly, the interior hall was carpeted and paneled. Light fixtures with frosted glass globes were positioned every few feet although they were not lit, perhaps because an oblong of daylight fell across the open end of the passage, offering watery illumination.

“Does everyone have access to this passage?” Griff asked. Was this how Brian’s kidnapper had avoided discovery within the house? It made sense.

“No. This passage only leads to the master bedroom and the master study. I’m the only one who uses it.”

“But if someone knew it was there?”

“Only the family and the household staff know about these walkways.”

In other words everyone on Long Island knew. Jarrett said, “I should probably warn you that Pierce is joining us for lunch.”

“I just lost my appetite.”

Jarrett laughed. “That’s why I waited to tell you. I think you and Pierce got off on the wrong foot.”

Griff threw a look over his shoulder. “Is there any other possibility with that guy? He tried to buy me off last night. Did he happen to mention that?”

“Yes, he told me.” Jarrett sounded as untroubled as ever. “He really is trying to do the right thing, Griffin. He believes he’s protecting us. That’s his job.”

Griff said nothing. He believed Pierce Mather to be an arrogant and obstructive ass, but he wasn’t the first arrogant and obstructive ass he’d had to deal with, and he wouldn’t be the last.
“Pierce has always been a bit of an overachiever.” Jarrett’s voice floated from behind. Jarrett was beginning to remind Griff of the Cheshire Cat with his mysterious comings and goings and oblique pronouncements. Did anything shake him?

What had Jarrett been like twenty years ago? How had he handled Brian’s disappearance? How long had he remained confident of Brian’s return? Would that certainty have been reassuring or infuriating for Gemma and Matthew, especially as the years passed?

Griff’s speculations were derailed as Jarrett said, “Through the years, we’ve occasionally had young men show up claiming to be Brian.”

“I didn’t realize that.”

“Of course none of them had anything but the most superficial resemblance to Brian. They weren’t even well-thought-out scams, just hungry young hustlers trying their luck. Pierce made short work of them, as you might imagine. But I’m afraid the result is that Pierce has become cynical toward his fellow man in his old age.”

“He’s not that old.”

“The Pierces of this world are born old. But don’t let him scare you away, my boy.”

“I’m not that easily scared.”

“I know,” Jarrett said. “That’s what I’m counting on.”
Chapter Six

Like Jarrett the day before, Pierce stood at the arched window, staring down at the star-shaped courtyard. He turned, unsmiling, as Griff preceded Jarrett into the study through the door in the bookcase.

Did Pierce ever dress in anything besides expensive suits by Italian designers? This afternoon’s ensemble was an impeccable olive gray. His shirt was snowy white, his skinny tie an elegant silk creation of tiny bronze and navy Milligan flowers. Where Griff came from men did not wear ties with flowers unless they wanted to get beaten up. Pierce apparently dressed with impunity. But then, Italian suits aside, Pierce looked like a guy who could handle himself. He’d probably had boxing lessons. Heck, he’d probably had fencing lessons.

“Hey there,” Griff said, because what else was he going to say? They couldn’t both stand there stone-faced and silent. Maybe Pierce hadn’t been born old, but he’d been born a hard-ass, no question.

“Jarrett seems to feel I owe you an apology for last night,” Pierce said. It wasn’t exactly stiff, but it wasn’t warm and fuzzy either.

“Not me,” Griff said. “Jarrett is the one you should be apologizing to for trying to go behind his back.”

Jarrett chuckled. “Well said, my boy.” He patted Griff’s shoulder.

Pierce looked less amused. “Let’s call it a test. If you’d agreed, that would have told us everything we needed to know.”

“Let’s call it what it was,” Griff said. “A bribe. With a few threats thrown in.” He shrugged. “That’s okay. I’m not easily discouraged.”

Pierce’s dark brows drew together in a forbidding line.
“You’re very…plainspoken, aren’t you?” Griff suspected Pierce had originally intended to phrase that differently but remembered Jarrett’s presence in time.

“Yes. I am.” It was a legacy of his mother, who had been a blunt and forthright woman. Sometimes painfully so.

To his surprise, Pierce laughed. “Okay. I don’t mind plainspoken.”

“That’s a relief.”

Pierce’s eyes narrowed as though he wasn’t sure if Griff was still being plainspoken or merely sarcastic.

Griff smiled.

Lunch was served at a low table amidst a comfortable grouping of leather chairs and sofas. The meal consisted of French dip sandwiches, which Griff had never had before, but were apparently a favorite of Pierce’s, and had been prepared in his honor. The sandwiches were made of thinly sliced, slightly rare roast beef piled onto warm baguettes which were then dunked in small bowls of au jus. They were served with homemade French fries and ice cold beer.

“Is this organic beef?” Pierce asked.

“I don’t know, but we won’t tell Muriel,” Jarrett replied.

Pierce grinned, white teeth sinking into crusty bread. He had thrown his tie over his shoulder to protect it from the juice, a gesture that seemed almost disarming. Jarrett winked at Griff, and Griff realized that Jarrett Arlington was genuinely fond of Pierce. Pierce was not merely a legal advisor. He was a family friend, had probably known Jarrett all his life. So maybe that better explained both the guard dog mentality and Jarrett’s tolerance for it.

It also meant Griff needed to be extra careful of Pierce. It was unlikely he was going to be able to get on Pierce’s good side, assuming Pierce had such a thing, but it would
be wise to avoid getting on Pierce's bad side.

“These are really good,” Griff told Jarrett. He hastily wiped at his chin with a linen napkin. “I've been missing out.”

“Wonderful. Now you have a new favorite.” Jarrett beamed. It was hard not to like him. There was something warm and quizzical and grandfatherly about Jarrett. But Griff reminded himself that in his day Jarrett had also been a ruthless and cutthroat businessman.

Pierce said abruptly, “Jarrett believes you have some legal questions for me.” He sat on the sofa across from Griff, exuding an almost disconcerting virility. How could someone that groomed—Griff wouldn’t have been surprised to learn that Pierce got pedicures or even body waxes—seem so...masculine? Not just masculine. Powerful. It wasn’t the expensive clothes or air of entitlement. It wasn’t even necessarily communicated by the way Pierce held himself or his body language, because at the moment he was hunched over the table trying not to drip *au jus* on his immaculate crotch. Despite the heavy aftershave and the buffed nails and the handmade shoes, Pierce seemed more intensely male than any guy Griff knew.

It was distracting.

Which was annoying.

Did Pierce know the effect he had on others? Did women routinely throw themselves in his path? He didn’t wear a wedding ring, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t married. Actually he didn’t wear any rings, and he seemed to Griff like the type who would wear his big showy Harvard law school ring. Maybe he hadn’t gone to Harvard. Maybe he was divorced. Yes, Griff could easily imagine Pierce with a string of beautiful, discarded exes. No one ever being quite good enough for Pierce.
“No?” Pierce asked, and Griff realized he’d been sitting there scowling across the table.

He snapped out of his preoccupation. “Did you go to Harvard?”

Pierce’s brows drew together—his usual expression around Griff. “Yes. What does that have to do with anything?”

Griff hadn’t meant to ask that, it had just popped out. “I just—”

“Believe me, any legal questions you’ve got, I can answer,” Pierce said.

Jarrett smoothly intervened. “Pierce is the son of my oldest and closest friend. Tommy Mather was also my legal advisor and Pierce took over the practice when Tommy retired. We have every confidence in Pierce. You can speak freely, ask him whatever you like.” Jarrett smiled at Pierce and then Griff.

“I know that as your eldest son, Matthew was your heir,” Griff said to Jarrett. “And I know Brian was Matthew’s heir. Since Matthew did not survive to inherit, does that mean your estate goes to Marcus as the next son?”

“What do you think this is, Downton Abbey?” Pierce asked.

This time the glance Jarrett directed at Pierce was not as warm. “It’s a reasonable question.” To Griff he said, “When I made Matthew my heir I was following the precedent set by my father and his father before him, and yes, that precedent was based on English laws of inheritance. Winden House was built in an era when this country’s wealthy aped the English aristocracy. It was very common for the sons and daughters of the wealthy to head for England and try to marry into the nobility. In fact, two of the great ladies of this house were of English ancestry.”

Jarrett paused to sip his beer. Griff had got that wrong
—his assumption that people like the Arlingtons would never deign to drink anything but cocktails in crystal glasses. Jarrett drank his Jever with evident gusto.

Griff felt Pierce staring at him, but he resisted meeting that challenge. He was too aware of Pierce. It made him feel on defense. It was disturbing to be so acutely conscious of someone he didn’t even like. Maybe it was Pierce’s suit. Griff had never seen a man outside of GQ magazine wear a suit that tight. It wasn't tacky, but that kind of tailoring accentuated Pierce’s broad shoulders, trim torso, muscular legs, narrow hips. It just seemed more sexy than a lawyer should dress.

“After Matthew…” Jarrett paused infinitesimally before continuing briskly, “Both Muriel and Marcus felt they should be my legitimate heirs, Muriel as my eldest child and Marcus as my remaining son. They both made good cases, but ultimately I decided that the precedent for the entire estate going to the eldest male child was outdated, and that it made sense to divide everything between my three remaining children. With one provision. Pierce can give you the legalese.” He nodded to Pierce.

Pierce said, “Skipping the legalese for a moment, what the provision amounts to is that if Brian does turn up alive, the new will is null and void. Everything reverts to the original will.”

“Provided I’m still alive and kicking,” Jarrett put in. Pierce assented. “Provided the estate is not already in probate.”

So much for the precedent of the entire estate going to the eldest male child being outdated. “Is that commonly known?” Griff asked.

“Commonly known? No,” Jarrett said. “My children know the terms of my will, of course. Is that what you mean?”
Not exactly, although that was part of the question. He couldn’t forget the theory that Johnson had had a partner, that the kidnapping had been an inside job. As far as Griff could see there had been no motive for anyone within the family to get rid of Brian, because not only could no one predict Matthew’s untimely death, but there was no guarantee that Matthew and Gemma would not have other children.

Or was there? He made a mental note to pursue that line of inquiry. Also Matthew and Gemma had died in a boating accident. Was there any doubt their deaths had not resulted from an accident? It was an interesting question, but not one he felt he could pose with Jarrett sitting right there.

He asked instead, “What happens if by some miracle Brian did show up after the will was in probate?”

“That would be a miracle all right.” That earned Pierce another of those rare frowns from Jarrett. Pierce pushed his empty plate from the edge of the table, flipped his tie back into place, and said, “It depends.” He launched into a dry—deliberately dry, Griff suspected—explanation of inheritance laws and inheritance taxes.

The gist seemed to be that if Brian showed up once the will was in probate, the estate would be re-divided four ways. If Brian showed up after the estate had been distributed, Brian would receive a cut of whatever assets remained.

“That’s the basic idea,” Pierce said. “The fundamental principle underlying the revised will is one of fairness. Is it realistic? In practice there would be challenges, appeals, suits and countersuits. The estate would be tied up in court for decades.” The glance he gave Jarrett was apologetic. “I’m sorry, but I’ve seen it happen again and again.”

“I don’t believe that would be the case here,” Jarrett
said. He seemed confident, but Griff sided with Pierce on that one. He too had on-the-job-experience with how the death of a loved one and the subsequent inheritance of property—even when the property amounted to nothing more than a pile of junk with sentimental significance—could turn otherwise fair-minded and sensible people into grasping, avaricious strangers.

“I hope this doesn’t seem like an inappropriate question, but what do your children live on now?” Griff was pretty sure the answer was Jarrett.

“They have trust funds from their mother. As you’ve no doubt surmised they all use Winden House as their home base, though Michaela lives primarily at the house in San Francisco.”

“They don’t have jobs?” Griff asked.

Pierce made a sound somewhere between a cough and a laugh.

“I don’t believe any of my children have what you would consider a real job, my boy,” Jarrett said solemnly, but with a gleam of amusement in his blue eyes. “Muriel has her charity work, Michaela is a painter, or so she informs us. Her husband owns a chain of popular eateries in San Francisco. Marcus…”

Griff waited, but Jarrett didn’t finish the thought. The Arlington riches were Old Money—at least what was now considered Old Money—acquired through the happy fusion of steel and railroads. Steel, railroads and marrying the right women. All but one of the Arlington brides had brought her own fortune, and the family remained among the wealthiest in America, though no longer ranked in the top ten. Not even in the top twenty, but then these days neither were the Vanderbilts or the Rockefellers.

The exception to the bring-your-own-fortune rule was Gemma Watterson who had been an art student when
Matthew Arlington met and fell in love with her.
“What about your granddaughter Chloe?”
Jarrett looked at Pierce who said, “Chloe will eventually inherit through her mother. And of course she has a trust fund.”
Of course. Didn’t everybody?
Griff said to Jarrett, “Were you surprised when Odell Johnson was arrested?”
“Yes.” Jarrett added, “But I would have been surprised whoever had been arrested. It’s still unbelievable to me that anyone could do such a terrible, terrible thing. Brian was a child. He was a delight. Every day of his little life was a gift.” Jarrett’s face quivered with quickly repressed emotion. “Of course being his grandfather I was bound to think he was an extraordinary child, but he was truly… irreplaceable.”
All children were, weren’t they? At least to their own families. Griff almost missed Jarrett’s next words.
“He was a friendly, outgoing child. Completely trusting. Much like Gemma. I think that’s part of why she couldn’t stop blaming herself. I think she felt she should have taught him to be more cautious, more wary.”
“So Brian might not have struggled or screamed when Johnson carried him out of his room that night? Assuming Brian was awake when he was taken?”
“He knew Johnson, so he might have gone with him willingly. Brian loved cars, which is normal enough at that age, and Johnson used to let Brian sit in the front seat of the Rolls when he washed it. I think Johnson could have lured Brian away very easily, but what I don’t understand, what I will never understand is why Johnson would…would not return Brian to us after he received the ransom. He was not a cruel man. I think he was even fond of Brian.”
“That could have been an act,” Pierce said. “Johnson
could have planned the kidnapping from the beginning. His whole purpose in taking a job as chauffeur might have been to familiarize himself with the house and grounds, and build up some kind of rapport with Brian.”

“Yes,” Jarrett agreed quietly. “I suppose so.”

“That’s true,” Griff said, “but it would have been to his advantage to return Brian alive. The manhunt would have been a lot less intense.”

Pierce said, “Maybe he didn’t have a choice.”

“It contradicts Johnson’s claim that he only came up with the idea of asking for ransom because he was bitter about being fired a week earlier.”

“His entire defense was a lie,” Pierce said. “Of course he wouldn’t admit he’d planned Brian’s kidnapping from the start. He was still hoping he could convince the jury that he’d only taken advantage of the existing situation when he made the demand for ransom.”

“For the sake of argument—” Griff began.

Pierce cut across. “If Johnson was telling the truth, then where was the ransom demand from the actual kidnapper?”

“There were other ransom demands,” Jarrett said.

Pierce shook his head. “All discredited. All long after the fact and not one of them credible. Attempts at extortion, nothing more.”

That answered that. Pierce was correct. If Johnson had not been the kidnapper, if he had simply taken advantage of the family’s fear and confusion, then what had happened to the kidnapper? Why had there been no demand for ransom? And if there had been no kidnapper, what had happened to Brian?

Griff considered this objectively. Was it possible Brian could have been taken with a more sinister motive? If ransom had never been the goal, was it possible the plan
had always been to murder Brian?

Buy Stranger on the Shore
The Mermaid Murders  
(Chapters 1 -6)

*From out their grottos at evenings beam,*
*the mermaids swim with locks agleam.*
Walter de la Mare, “Mermaid”

Summer heat shimmered off the blacktop.  
In that shivery, humid light, the big, blond man casually leaning against the silver government-issue sedan—and checking his watch—looked a little like a mirage. No such luck. Senior Special Agent Sam Kennedy was not a trick of the light.

Kennedy looked up, spotted Jason, and grimaced. Maybe it was supposed to be a smile. Probably not, given Kennedy’s reputation.

“Special Agent West,” Kennedy said. His voice was deep, and he spoke with a suggestion of a drawl. “I thought maybe you stopped off to see if you could solve the Gardner Museum heist on your way over here.”

Funny guy, Kennedy. Special Agent in Charge Carl Manning had already warned Jason that Kennedy was not thrilled to be partnered again, let alone partnered with an agent seconded from the Art Crime Team. That’s what happened when you screwed up your last high-profile investigation to such an extent the governor of Wisconsin denounced you on the nightly news. An agent with less seniority would have been “on the beach” for the foreseeable future, but Kennedy was a legend in the Bureau. One of the great “manhunters.” His career would survive, but he was under a cloud, no question. His kind of success earned enemies—and not just from the usual suspects. A successful career wasn’t just about closing
cases—and Kennedy didn't strike Jason as the tactful type.

“Nice to meet you too,” Jason said, reaching the car. Kennedy did not offer his hand, so Jason shoved his own in his pocket. “Just to be clear, I'm supposed to be on vacation. In fact, I busted my ass to get here. I was in Boston about to catch a flight home to L.A.”

“Duly noted.” Kennedy turned away, going around to the driver's side of the gleaming sedan. “You can throw your bag in the trunk.” He reached in and popped the trunk hood.

Jason opened the trunk and slung his brown leather carryall next to Kennedy's black Tumi. That was some serious luggage. The luggage of someone who lived out of his suitcase. Primetime TV notwithstanding, it was rare for agents in the Behavioral Analysis Units to leave Quantico and travel around the country, but Kennedy was the exception that proved the rule.

“We need to hit the road. That girl’s been missing over eight hours already.” Kennedy threw that comment over his shoulder, before sliding in behind the wheel.

Jason started to answer but restrained himself. SAC Manning had clued him in to a few facts about his new—temporary—partner. And, ostensibly, this urgency to get to the crime scene out in rural Kingsfield was all part of what made Kennedy so good at his job—not to mention the reason they were meeting in a diner parking lot instead of the division office at One Center Plaza.

He slammed shut the trunk, walked around to the passenger side, and climbed in. The car was still cool with air-conditioning, so Kennedy hadn't been waiting long.

Kennedy turned the key in the ignition. More cold air blasted out along with news radio. “So you know the area? Your family used to have a vacation home in Kingsfield?”
“That's right.”

“How nice.” Kennedy’s tone was more like Why am I not surprised? He wore too much aftershave. The fragrance as aggressive as everything else about him. Top note sandalwood, bottom note obnoxious.

“I guess so.”

Kennedy threw him a sardonic look as they exited the parking lot. Or at least the twist of his mouth was sardonic. The dark Oakleys he wore concealed his eyes. He looked to be in his mid-forties. Not handsome, but he had the kind of face you didn't forget easily. Although Jason was going to try his best the minute this case was over.

Jason said, “Clarify something for me. The Kingsfield Police Chief asked specifically for you because he thinks he might have a copycat killer on his hands?”

“It's too soon to say, but yeah. That's the concern, of course. No girl is going to go missing in Worcester County ever again that people aren't going to fear it's some kind of copycat crime.” Kennedy began to bring Jason up to date on the case.

It was a swift and concise summation, but then the facts were few. Rebecca Madigan, the teenage daughter of wealthy local residents, had disappeared Friday night while hosting a party for friends. Rebecca’s parents were out of town. The housekeeper had reported the girl missing. A search had been organized, but so far there was no sign of Rebecca.

“There could be a lot of reasons a teenage girl disappears,” Jason pointed out.

“Yep. But like I said, the folks of Worcester County have long memories.”

Yes. With good cause. Jason stared out the window at the slideshow of skyscrapers and historic buildings. Parks, playgrounds...ponds. The dazzle of bright sunlight on
green water. The echo of a young girl’s laughter… He removed his sunglasses, passed a hand across his eyes, and replaced the shades.

Worcester was an old city with a modern attitude. It was only about twenty-four miles from Kingsfield, not much more than a forty-five-minute drive, but it could have been a different planet.

He said, “I remember the original case. You were behind the capture and conviction of Martin Pink.”

“I played a role.” Kennedy was displaying unexpected—and undue—modesty. There was no question the Kingsfield Killings had stopped thanks to Kennedy’s efforts, which was no doubt why the police chief had been so quick to call him in this time. It was a little surprising the Bureau hadn’t waited to see how things developed in the Madigan case, but maybe this was as much about putting Kennedy on ice as finding a missing girl. That was certainly the way it had sounded to Jason when SAC Manning had asked him to cancel his vacation.

“What kind of a party was it?” Jason asked.

“What do you mean?”


Kennedy’s laugh was without humor. “It was the kind of party you throw when your parents are out of town for the weekend.”

“Was everybody invited, or was it private?”

“We don’t have the details yet. You know everything I know.”

Yeah, probably not. Kennedy was old school, one of these lone-wolf types who no doubt preferred to “play his own hand” or whatever bullshit macho phrase his generation used to excuse not being a team player. It made for good TV, but in real-life law enforcement, not
being a team player was how people got hurt. Sometimes you got hurt even when everyone on the team had their eye on the ball. Jason’s shoulder twinged, and he rubbed it absently.

There was a large heart-shaped sign by the side of the road on the outskirts of town. The sign read: IN OUR HEARTS FOREVER Honey Corrigan. The sign had not been there the last time Jason had driven this road. It was probably familiar to Kennedy. He must have passed it a hundred times that long ago summer.

Neither of them spoke, and a couple of minutes later they were out of the dense green woodland and into the shady streets of the picturesque and rustic village of Kingsfield. It was classic New England. Pretty and quaint. White clapboard houses surrounded by wide lawns or gardens of old roses, renovated nineteenth century commercial buildings of red and yellow brick, war memorials—that would be the Revolutionary War—white churches with tall steeples, all artfully positioned around the large and lush village green. Nothing like California, that was for sure. But then that had been the point of spending summers here.

It was a quiet little place, but even so it seemed deserted for a Saturday afternoon.

“Just like you remember?” Kennedy’s voice jarred Jason out of his thoughts.

“ Doesn’t seem to have changed much.”

And that was the truth. It was almost eerie how untouched by time the village seemed. Talk about back to the future. They passed Beaky’s Tavern. Bow windows and a hanging, hand-painted sign featuring a bewigged
gentleman with a hooked nose like a hood ornament.

“When was the last time you visited?”

“Years.” His parents had sold their vacation home right after Honey had disappeared, and Jason had not been back since. He was not going to share that information with Kennedy—even if Kennedy had been listening.

Which he wasn’t. His attention was on the information his GPS provided in crisp, mechanical tones. His large hands moved with easy assurance on the steering wheel, his gaze raked the pretty little shops and cafes.

The police station was located in the center of the village, housed in the former Town Hall building. It was a two-story structure of faded brick, complete with a clock tower. Gray columns supported the front portico. The arched windows had a nice view of the Quaboag River, a blue shadow in the distance.

They parked in the rear beneath a row of maple trees, green leaves so shiny they appeared to be sweating in the heat.

“I’d expect to see a lot more cars here,” Jason said, studying the nearly empty lot.

“Everybody is out searching,” Kennedy replied.

His tone was neutral, but yes. Of course. Of course the entire town—or at least every able-bodied and available resident—would be out combing the extensive surrounding wilderness areas for the missing girl. This child was one of their own. The fact that hadn’t immediately occurred to Jason simply underlined how long it had been since he’d worked a violent crime.

Or at least since he’d worked a crime where there was an expectation of violence. People were always unpredictable. Especially when they felt cornered.

He walked beside Kennedy around the building, feet pounding the pavement in dusty rhythm. The air was hot
and humid, scented of warm stone and daylilies. Kennedy didn’t say a word from the parking lot to the front portico. It would have been helpful to have some kind of briefing on what they were walking into, but Kennedy was not a chatty guy.

They pushed through the old wood-frame glass doors, passed a long row of bulletin boards papered mostly with flyers and notices for community events, though there were a couple of wanted posters too. A matronly-looking officer was busy answering the phones. She barely glanced at their IDs, indicating with a nod that they should proceed down the dark-paneled hallway and then calmly answering the caller on the other end of the line.

They located the incident room on the main floor. Folding chairs had been set up in neat rows to face the cluster of photographs of a very pretty girl—white, mid-teens, blue eyes, and blonde hair—plastering the front wall. The room was abandoned but for one lone uniformed officer who was erasing something on the large, portable dry-erase whiteboard. Jason's heart sank as he recognized Boyd Boxner.

Hell. Of all the gin joints—or police stations—in all the world...

It had been a long time, but Boxner hadn’t changed all that much. Square shoulders, square jaw, square head. Well, maybe his head wasn’t square, but his towheaded crew cut gave that impression.

“Kennedy, FBI.” Kennedy offered his ID again. “This is Special Agent West.”

“We've been expecting you,” Boxner said. He glanced at Jason without recognition—nothing like a badge and shades for camouflage—and that was fine with Jason. “Chief Gervase is directing the hunt for Rebecca. He asked me to escort you to the search site.”
“Let’s get moving,” Kennedy said.
Jason threw him a quick, startled look.
“Or,” Jason said, “maybe we should set up base here and start reading through the witness statements. There are going to be a lot of eyewitness accounts to sort through, and it’s possible there’s some overlooked indicator as to why she might walk away voluntarily. Though I’d also like to swing by the girl’s house. Take another look around.”

A crime scene was a unique and fragile thing. You really only got one chance at it because with each subsequent visit by law enforcement, the scene—and your perception of it—changed, altered.

Kennedy looked as though he’d forgotten Jason was present. He’d removed his sunglasses. His eyes were blue. Arctic blue. A hard and unforgiving color. He turned back to Boxner. “We’ll liaise with Chief Gervase.”

Clear enough. Kennedy was the senior on this investigation. This was not Jason’s field of expertise. By the same token, he wasn’t only there to fill a second suit. He wasn’t trying to challenge Kennedy’s authority, but Kennedy was assuming the local police had already done the groundwork investigation. Jason didn’t like to assume anything.

He also didn’t like getting smacked down in public.
He said, matching Kennedy’s blank face and tone, “Why? Are they short of volunteers? Isn’t the point of our being here to look at the case from an objective and impartial viewpoint?”

Kennedy stared at him for a long, silent moment. It was not a friendly look. Nor the look of someone considering another viewpoint.

“You want me to leave you two to work it out?” Boxner was examining Jason more closely now.
“If you don’t mind, I’d like to have a word with my colleague,” Kennedy said with ominous calm.

“Right. I’ll bring the car around.” Boxner was clearly in no doubt as to who would win this round. The old floorboards squeaked as he departed with the air of someone tiptoeing away from a bomb site.

Kennedy didn’t say a word until Boxner had vanished down the hall. He turned to Jason.

“Okay, pretty boy. Let’s get something straight.” His tone was cold and clipped. “We both know your role here is to run interference between me and everybody else. All you need to do is stay out of my way and smooth the feathers when needed. And in return you’ll be the guy who gets to pose in front of the cameras with Chief Gervase. Fair enough?”

“The hell,” Jason said. “I’ve been asked to try and make sure you don’t step in it again, sure, but I’m not here to hold your cape, Batman. I’m your partner on this case whether either of us likes it or not. And, for the record, I don’t like it—any more than you do.”

“Then make it easy on both of us,” Kennedy said. “You stay out of my murder investigation, and I’ll let you know if I hear about any paintings getting stolen.”

He didn’t wait for Jason’s answer. He turned and followed Boxner down the hallway.
Chapter Two

“I thought they discontinued that model,” the officer behind the reception desk remarked as Jason followed Kennedy out of the incident room. Her name badge read A. Courtney.

Kennedy, several strides ahead, was already disappearing through the glass doors. He had kept his voice down, but it was a carrying kind of voice. Or maybe Officer A. Courtney had ears like a bat.

Jason said, “The engine still runs. But we’ll never find replacement parts for that carburetor.”

She gave a snort of amusement, though all traces of humor disappeared as the phone rang and she reached to answer it.

“No. No news,” she was saying as Jason followed Kennedy outside.

Jason would not have been entirely surprised to find Kennedy had left him at the station house—but no. The black and white idled in front of the portico, spilling exhaust into the sultry summer air.

Jason climbed into the backseat behind the cage partition—which was probably exactly where Kennedy believed he belonged. The too-warm interior smelled of drunks and dogs. Or possibly drunken dogs.

Anyway, he and Kennedy needed to work together long enough to bring this kid safely home, and then he’d never have to deal with Kennedy again. He wasn’t sure who he was more irritated with: Kennedy, SAC Manning for talking Jason into this, or himself for agreeing to join an investigation where he was not going to be able to add a whole hell of a lot of value. The “pretty boy” comment had stung more than he wanted to admit.

Boxner hung up his radio and put the vehicle in motion.
“Rebecca’s a wild girl, but she wouldn’t take off in the middle of her own party. She was only wearing her bathing suit, for one thing. Her car is sitting in the garage. The housekeeper says none of her clothes are missing. Her purse is still at the house. Her cell phone was left on a table on the deck.”

Kennedy grunted, which could have meant yes, no, or don’t talk when I’m trying to think.

Jason asked, “How wild is wild?”

Boxner shrugged. Once again his dark eyes studied Jason in the rearview mirror as though trying to place him. Unlike in Boxner’s case, those sixteen intervening years had made a big difference to Jason. He’d filled out, lost the braces, and cut his formerly shoulder-length dark hair. Nobody who’d known him then would have expected to find him working for the FBI. Including Jason.

“Nothing that required jail time.”

The Madigans were a wealthy local family, so what did that really mean? Did it matter? In most cases the character of the victim determined the initial focus and direction of investigation. If the Madigan girl was the randomly chosen prey of a psychopath, which is what Kennedy and everyone else around here suspected, then character was irrelevant. Victimology was immaterial. Rebecca was just a pawn in a gruesome game of chess.

“Are the Madigans longtime residents?” Jason didn’t recognize the name.

“They moved here from New York about four years ago. Mr. Madigan is a big deal in commercial real estate.”

So Rebecca had moved to Kingsfield right around the time she started high school. New social dynamics. New friends. New enemies. “How did Rebecca fit in?”

“She fit in okay.”

“Is she an only child?”
“No. There’s a younger brother. He’s away at summer camp. They both fit in okay. Her problem is too much money.”

“That’s not such a bad problem to have.”

“No. It sure as shit isn’t,” Boxner said with feeling.

Crime scenes were always chaotic, but the volunteers behind the New Dominion housing development had accidentally stirred up a wasps’ nest, which added to the furor. A dust storm of stinging insects was moving across the ragged field like a small and irate tornado, and the searchers had temporarily retreated to cars and the porches of neighboring houses.

Kennedy observed the situation with his usual deadpan expression and went to seek out the police chief. Judging by the variety of uniforms, it looked like law enforcement personnel from at least two other townships as well the State Police had shown up to aid in the search.

Seeing the number of people gathered—so many tense and tired faces—reminded Jason of the search for Honey sixteen years earlier. He’d done his best to forget, but it was all coming back now. Of course he and Kennedy needed to be here. They needed to understand the scope of what they were dealing with. And if they could see and get a feel for all the players, it gave them an added advantage. He probably should have kept his mouth shut back at the station. If he was going to lock horns with Kennedy, it needed to be over something that really mattered.

He scanned the row of expensive new homes that hadn’t existed sixteen years ago. They were all of the McMansion school of architecture. Oversized and bastardized Colonials or Casa del Huhs.

Between each house stretched a discreet square of
landscaping, wide enough to foster the illusion of privacy without eating up too much acreage. Behind the row of houses to the east was a large empty meadow and then the woods. Kingsfield was surrounded by both state parks and wilderness areas, and despite the uptown airs of New Dominion, this was rural Massachusetts with ten percent of the population living below the poverty line. Some people in these remote areas went entire weeks without seeing another human. The deep woods provided home to deer, bobcats, otters, raccoons, and occasionally larger critters like bear and moose. Jason even remembered stories of a local hunter bagging a Russian boar one autumn.

The real predator haunting these woodlands had not been four-footed.

“Chief Gervase,” Kennedy called.

A man in uniform—medium height, trim and fit as a career soldier—turned from the insignia-decorated circle of men he was speaking to. Just for an instant his weary, strained expression relaxed into surprised relief. “Special Agent Kennedy. You came.”

Until that moment, the only face Jason had recognized had been Boxner’s, but he remembered Police Chief Gervase.

Back then he had been Officer Gervase, not Chief. The then-Chief of Kingsfield, Rudy Kowalski, had been a bluff and beefy man, well-suited to appeasing the town fathers and keeping rowdy teenagers in line. He had been completely out of his depth when the slaughter began. But that had come later. When Honey had been murdered, everybody believed it was a lightning strike. It could never happen twice.

Then Theresa Nolan had been killed. Then Ginny Chapin and Jody Escobar. And so it had gone. Seven girls in all. Jason’s understanding was Kowalski had voluntarily
resigned and the village council had promptly filled his shoes with able and ambitious Officer Gervase. Sixteen years later Gervase was a well-preserved sixty, looking forward to his own retirement. He had gray eyes, a tidy Van Dyke beard, and the perpetual tan of someone who spent a lot of time outdoors.

He came toward them, offering his hand. “Good to see you, Kennedy.” He added wryly, “Christ, you haven’t changed a bit.”

“Sorry it’s under these circumstances.” Kennedy was brisk and unsentimental. Given his investigative specialty, maybe you had to be in order to stay sane. “This is Agent West.”

“Agent West.” Gervase offered a brief handshake and a courteous nod. “Appreciate the help.”

“Chief.”

The chief waved away an errant wasp and said to Kennedy, “You can see what we’re facing. Eden pond is to the east, and the woods are to the west. We’ve finished canvassing the neighborhood, and we’ve completed the search of the immediate perimeter, but there’s still a hell of a lot of ground to cover, and there’s no sign of the Madigan girl. Nothing. It’s like she vanished off the face of the earth.” His voice was flat as he added, “Just like before.”

It wasn’t exactly like before. None of the other victims had been taken from crowded events or peopled areas. Honey had been snatched from Holyoke Pond early in the morning. Theresa Nolan had been grabbed in the high school’s deserted parking lot when she’d left swim practice late one evening. All the victims had been taken from equally isolated or private venues where there were no potential witnesses and no one to sound the alarm until it was far too late.

Having made that misstep about the crime scene,
Jason was resolved to watch and listen. His antagonism for the situation—and Kennedy—was coloring his reactions, and that was not good. Not good for anyone.

“Can you bring us up to speed?” Kennedy asked.

Gervase nodded, but was interrupted by the approach of the grim-faced State Police commander. Kingsfield was a small police department. No detective unit and less than twenty officers, including the chief. That State would be called in was a given.

More introductions followed.

“I thought we’d put all this behind us,” Commander Swenson said. It seemed to Jason there was a hint of accusation in his tone.

Kennedy returned, “We’ll soon find out.”

Given the implication he might have spearheaded the arrest and incarceration of the wrong man, Jason had to give Kennedy credit for that level of cool under fire.

Or maybe Kennedy didn’t realize the whispers had started.

In fairness, the FBI had not been the only law enforcement agency involved in tracking down the Huntsman. True, the Bureau—and Kennedy—had got most of the credit for the apprehension of Martin Pink. Local law enforcement had made the arrest, and a local judge and jury had determined Pink's guilt and ultimate fate.

Gervase was saying, “I’ve got granddaughters about Rebecca’s age. One a little older. One a little younger. If this is starting up again…” He shook his head. “I’m not going to pretend we’ve got the resources to handle this kind of thing anymore now than we did ten years ago.”

“At least you’ve got plenty of reinforcements,” Jason commented as a Worcester County Sheriff's vehicle pulled up alongside one of the Kingsfield cruisers.
Gervase grimaced. “That we do. We've even got cadets from the State Police Academy out here lending a hand. And we had them back then too. Which is why I’m asking for Special Agent Kennedy’s help.”

Kennedy was studying the undulating brown cloud of insects zigging and zagging over the long, empty expanse of grass and wild flowers that served as a green welcome mat to the woods. “You've got it,” he said almost absently. As in…of course they needed his help and of course he would supply it.

It was surprisingly reassuring—or at least Gervase seemed to find it so.

Equally reassuring was the cool, crisp competency with which Kennedy collected and summarized the essential information from the chief.

The party had started at nine thirty the previous evening, and by eleven o’clock every kid in the county was there, draining the Madigan wine cellar dry. At eleven fifteen neighbors had called in a complaint about the noise, and Officer Boxner had swung by and spoken to Rebecca who agreed to “turn down the volume.”

At around eleven thirty, Rebecca had some kind of falling out with her bestie, Patricia Douglas, but everyone agreed the squabble meant nothing and had been almost immediately patched up. And in fact, it was Patricia who had first noticed, around one a.m., that Rebecca was missing.

The remaining and none-too-sober partygoers had conducted an immediate and impromptu search for Rebecca which had been abandoned when they decided she had probably left for her boyfriend’s house.

In the morning Alice Cornwell, the Madigans’ housekeeper, phoned Rebecca’s boyfriend who told her he hadn’t seen Rebecca since leaving the party at around ten
thirty the previous evening. Whereupon Ms. Cornwell had phoned the Kingsfield Police Department.

Kennedy said, “Rebecca intended to party with a few close friends, but word got out and her soiree was crashed by…rough estimate?” There was a perpetually cynical note in his voice that enabled him to use terms like “soiree” without sounding like he was kidding.

Boxner had rejoined them by then. He answered, “Sixty to seventy juveniles. Most but not all of them were from around here.”

“Not enough supervision. That’s the problem with these kids,” Gervase said. “If someone is to blame, it’s the parents.”

Kennedy said, “If someone's to blame, it's the sociopath who took a teenage girl from her backyard.” Still unmoved, still unemotional, he continued, “The boyfriend left at ten thirty. Early in the evening. That sounds like there may have been trouble between them.”

Gervase said, “We interviewed Tony McEnroe first thing this morning. He said he never saw Rebecca after he left the party. He denied there being any problems in their relationship.”

“He would,” Kennedy said. “Officer Boxner said you’ve already interviewed the housekeeper, the neighbors, and the kids who were originally invited to the party?”

“Standard procedure,” Gervase said. There was a hint of hope in his tone as he added, “I guess you’ll want to read over their statements?”

“We'll look them over,” Kennedy agreed. “Assuming we don’t locate Rebecca within the next few hours.”

That was going to be one hell of a lot of he said and she said to sort through. Not that Jason had a problem with paperwork. Tracking stolen artwork was largely done through surfing the web or meticulously following paper
trails. Jason was very good at hunting. The difference was no one's life was ever hanging in the balance when he hunted. The stakes here were almost unbearably high.

Jason’s thoughts broke off as Kennedy turned to him. “Thoughts, Agent West?” His tone was dry as he waited for disagreement or debate.

“I, er, concur.”

Kennedy’s brows rose as though this was an unexpected concession from an unlikely source. He turned back to Chief Gervase. “I take it you’re still gathering statements from the party crashers?”

Jason let out a long, quiet breath. He had never had to work with anyone who detested him as plainly as Kennedy did. Not that he was a member of Kennedy's fan club either, but you had to respect the guy. In fact, when Kennedy had nailed Martin Pink to the wall, Jason, along with pretty much everyone else, had considered him a hero.

That was a long time ago.

Gervase was answering Kennedy. “It’s going to take a while to track everyone down, especially when some of the guests don’t want their parents knowing where they were.”

Jason said, “Chief, can I ask why you’re so sure Rebecca is the victim of a copycat?”

Gervase’s smile was world-weary. “You’re not familiar with the Kingsfield Killings, are you, son?”

Jason wasn’t sure how to answer, and in any case, Gervase wasn’t waiting for a response. “Over the course of six years, a local man by the name of Martin Pink abducted and murdered seven young blonde and blue-eyed women from swimming areas around Worcester County. The press dubbed him the Huntsman.”

“I remember the case. I—”

“Then you know ten years ago your partner was
responsible for catching Pink and putting him behind bars.Except now we've got another blonde and blue-eyed teenage girl missing from a pool party. I don't know about you, but I think that's one hell of a coincidence.”

Kennedy said, “It could be a coincidence. It's our job to make sure one way or the other.”

It could be a coincidence, and it could be a copycat. Copycat behaviors were more and more common thanks to the way violent crime was sensationalized in the “news” and the increased reach social media had given those various outlets of information. Jason had heard of more than one drug dealer legally changing his name to Walter White in honor of *Breaking Bad*, and the number of assaults and murders inspired by *The Dark Knight’s* Joker was frankly depressing. Teens and young adults were especially prone to copycat behavior. It was the nature of the beast. Even so, in the broader scheme of things, copycat crimes were relatively rare.

There remained a third possibility, of course. The possibility that Kennedy had put the wrong man behind bars.

The possibility that the Huntsman was still out there.
The sun rose higher in the blue sky. The day grew hotter, dryer. The swarm of wasps at last dissipated, and the search for Rebecca recommenced in this key sector. Canine teams raced into the woods ahead of the slow-moving lines of volunteers and seemed to be swallowed whole into vast green silence.

It reminded Jason all too much of the search for Honey. Just because they had not managed to find Honey in time didn’t mean they wouldn’t find Rebecca. Especially given that Rebecca’s abductor was not Martin Pink.

Another hour passed, and the search moved farther afield. The lines of volunteers grew smaller in the distance.

As a kid, he remembered thinking how strange it was that the weather was completely unaffected by human tragedy. In the case of a missing child, it should by rights be raining. But no, it was a beautiful summer day. Not a cloud in the sky. And if the air had not been crackling with voices and radios and assorted engines, it would probably have felt tranquil, peaceful.

Anyway, there wasn’t time to stand around feeling whatever he was feeling—mostly uneasy; he had volunteered to help and had been handed the thankless task of coordinating the citizen searcher lists. Minimal responsibility and maximum aggravation. Kennedy, on the other hand, had vanished into the housing development an hour earlier. No doubt he was interviewing the Madigan housekeeper for himself, unhampered by his in-name-only partner.

Unless Jason was prepared to bird-dog Kennedy’s every step—which he wasn’t—he was going to have to try and develop a sense of humor about the situation.

Around four o’clock, Chief Gervase and Boxner
returned to base. Boxner was saying, “I think it’s suspicious.”

Gervase shook his head. “When you’ve been at this job as long as me, you’ll find out that people act guilty for a lot of reasons.”

“And including they’re guilty,” Boxner said.

“Yeah, and sometimes people are guilty about stuff which has nothing to do with our investigation.” Gervase said to Jason, “Have you got a Tony McEnroe on any of your lists?”

Jason shuffled quickly through the sheets on his clipboard. “No.”

“What’s up?” Kennedy’s voice inquired.

Jason’s heart jumped. He hadn’t seen Kennedy, hadn’t noticed his approach, not that it should have affected him one way or the other, but he was intensely, uncomfortably conscious of Kennedy. Or more likely of Kennedy’s dislike.

Kennedy’s pale hair was dark with sweat and rings of underarm perspiration marked his blue FBI polo, so presumably he had been doing something more active than interviewing witnesses. Behind the sunglasses, his face was as impassive as usual as he met Jason’s look.

“Everyone in Kingsfield is here looking for Rebecca,” Boxner said. “Except Tony McEnroe.”

“Not everyone,” Gervase contradicted.

“Everyone who’s free to lend a hand is here.”

This time Gervase didn’t bother to deny it.

“McEnroe is the boyfriend,” Kennedy said. It was not a question. Jason didn’t doubt Kennedy had already committed all the players to memory.

“The boyfriend,” Boxner agreed. “And what a piece of work that guy is.”

Kennedy directed his sunglasses toward Jason, and Jason said, “I’ve confirmed he’s not officially on one of the
search teams.” Then again a lot of people who were out looking for Rebecca had not bothered to officially sign up. McEnroe might be one of them. Presumably he would know any places that were special to her or where she might run to in times of stress.

“If McEnroe was also missing, I'd have said they took off together,” Gervase said. “But we talked to McEnroe first thing this morning.”

“Waste of time on a waste of space,” Boxner said. Gervase said, “The Madigans tried to discourage Rebecca from seeing him, but teenage girls have a mind of their own. Like I said, I don’t like him, but I don’t have any reason to doubt he’s telling the truth about Rebecca.”

“Except he’s not out here in the noonday sun wasting any time looking for a girl he’s supposed to be in love with.”

“Maybe we ought to have a chat with Mr. McEnroe,” Kennedy said.

Jason had become so used to Kennedy treating him as though he were invisible, it took him a second to realize he was being addressed. “Sure! Yeah!”

Maybe he sounded overly enthusiastic because Kennedy’s blond brows rose in what was fast becoming his usual skeptical expression regarding Jason, but not only was Jason happy at the opportunity to hand off his clipboard, he was relieved at the promise of at least some cursory investigation into the possibility Rebecca might not be the victim of a copycat killer.

Despite Kingsfield’s gruesome past, serial killers really were the least likely scenario in most missing person cases. And so far a missing person was all they really had.

“I'll drive you out there,” Gervase said. “Boyd can stand in for me for a little while. Right, Boyd? Nothing you’d like better than to show me up at doing my own job.” He was
grinning as Boyd began to protest.

Jason bestowed his clipboard on Boxner, who gave him another one of those narrow looks—did he really not remember Jason at all?—and followed Gervase and Kennedy to the chief’s SUV.

The chief’s radio was buzzing with updates as they climbed inside. The interior of the vehicle smelled of the little fake pine tree deodorizer hanging from the rearview mirror.

“I don’t believe we’re looking at the end result of a lover’s quarrel,” Gervase told them as he started the SUV’s engine. “I admit I’m curious as to why young McEnroe isn’t out here with the rest of us.”

*Maybe because he knows everyone will be watching him, speculating, whispering.* Jason didn’t say it aloud. He gazed out the window at the tangle of maple, birch, and oak trees, giant ferns, and flowering vines lining the roadside. You could wander a few steps from the road and lose all sense of direction in no time. However, Rebecca wasn’t a small child. She hadn’t wandered away from home and gotten lost.

“I saw you finally solved that case in Wisconsin,” Gervase said as the SUV bumped off the grass and onto the paved road. “Did you really throw the sheriff out the window?”

Kennedy said, “No. I thought about it plenty.”

Gervase laughed. “Well, I guess you’ll weather that okay. Your record ought to speak for itself.”

Kennedy didn’t respond, perhaps because he was conscious of Jason sitting behind them, SAC Manning’s eyes and ears. Not so much. Jason wasn’t going to let Kennedy throw anyone out a window, but he also didn’t plan on reporting back to Manning with a transcript of everything Kennedy said and did.
The towering trees overhanging the rural road diffused the bright sunlight, creating a hazy, almost surreal effect. Tonalism. It reminded him of Whistler’s nocturne painting, those dreamy, pensive landscapes. In fact, Whistler had been born in Massachusetts.

Through the fretwork of leaves he spotted the distinctive black hump of a familiar hillside outcropping. Memory slithered down his spine.

“Our boy lives a ways out,” Gervase was saying apologetically. “Come to think of it, here we all live a ways out.”

“Isn’t this near Martin Pink's property?” Jason asked. Kennedy's head turned his way. Sunglasses met sunglasses.

“I guess you’ve done your homework,” Gervase said. “Yep. Pink lived over that ridge to your right. Lived there with his crazy old mother and his pothead brother. They’re all gone now. Even the house is falling down. Of course, it always was.”

The car hit a pothole.

“How long has McEnroe lived in the area?” Kennedy asked.

“Four or five years. Unfortunately.”

Same length of time as the Madigans, Jason noted. Which meant…probably zilch. Despite the sincere efforts of Hollywood writers to prove otherwise, there were actually a lot of meaningless coincidences in crime investigation.

Kennedy had turned that appraising stare on Gervase. “Trouble?”

Gervase dipped his head from side to side in a sort of noncommittal way. “We've got an ongoing situation regarding a little patch of so-called medicinal marijuana he's cultivating on his property.”
At the lack of response from either agent, Gervase said, “McEnroe is twenty-two. Rebecca is seventeen. So yes, there is always going to be trouble in that kind of situation.”

They passed a stand of battered mailboxes and turned down another dirt road. The tattered green canopy of trees created the illusion it was much later than it was, that the afternoon was growing darker and chillier as shadows lengthened, reached out. The light had a tired, watery look to it.

Jason became aware Kennedy was watching him in the side mirror. The sunglasses made it hard to be sure, but he could feel that steady regard, even if he couldn’t see it.

He was newly, uncomfortably aware of how he must have come across earlier. Brash. Cocky. Contentious. Partly he had been reacting to Kennedy’s not even pretending to consult with him. Partly…he had been irritated with himself for not having the gumption to refuse Manning’s request. You didn’t earn promotions by refusing favors to head honchos—however ill-thought-out those requests might be. His irritation, impatience with the situation, had been acerbated by Kennedy’s obvious displeasure at being partnered with him. But why wouldn’t Kennedy be displeased at being saddled with what amounted to a handler?

A handler with a fraction of his experience with violent crime.

Jason winced inwardly. He didn’t like thinking he had been playing the role of company stooge. That was not who he was. Though very likely that was what SAC Manning was looking for from him. And it was probably how he appeared to Kennedy.

Well, you only had one chance to make a first
impression and...no. So moving forward, he would try not to be such a prick. And maybe Kennedy, who was almost certainly a congenital prick, would stop treating him like the enemy. It would make the job easier for both of them—and allow them to better serve the people they were there to help.

The road jogged to the left, and they pulled through a gate that looked more like a car had busted a wide hole in the sagging fence. The dwelling was a single-story ranch style painted a dusty red. The doors and shutters were an equally faded blue.

The chief parked next to a white pickup truck, and they climbed out.

It was the kind of place where you expected to be greeted by a barking dog, but there was no dog. No sign of any life. Jason felt an uneasy prickle between his shoulder blades.

He rested his hand lightly on the butt of his Glock, and then noticed Kennedy had unsnapped the thumb-break on his holster. So he wasn’t overreacting, wasn’t unduly nervous. His response was appropriate to the situation. He found it harder to be sure these days.

They followed Gervase across the mowed weeds and up the wooden steps to a small platform that served as, well, a small platform. It wasn’t big enough to be a deck, let alone a porch, but it was wide enough to accommodate the three of them. Gervase banged on the peeling wooden screen. Jason and Kennedy waited.

Jason could hear Kennedy’s wristwatch ticking over the pounding of his heart in his ears.

It took several more energetic knocks before a muffled yell from inside the house reached them. At last the front door swung open. A willowy young man leaned against the frame as though he needed the support. His long blond
hair was rumpled, his jaw was heavily stubbled, his dark eyes bleary and hollow. He wore a long-sleeve plaid flannel shirt and Joker boxer shorts.

“I already told you she's not here!” he snarled at Gervase. It was a weary snarl though, as if most of McEnroe’s energy was going into staying upright.

“Okay,” Gervase said evenly. “You already told us. We’d still like to talk to you.”


“You’re thinking of the goddamned DEA. We’re the goddamned FBI,” Kennedy said. “And yes. We’d like a word.”

“How about fuck off?” McEnroe tried to slam shut the door, but he was neither fast nor steady. Kennedy’s hand shot out; he grabbed the edge of the door and gave it a sharp shove. McEnroe staggered and tumbled back, landing on his butt. He blinked up at them in bewilderment from the bare floorboards.

“That’s two words,” Kennedy said.

“Get up, Tony,” Gervase growled. “We’re not here about your crop, so don’t make a bigger ass of yourself than you have to.”

McEnroe climbed ungracefully to his feet and, with several looks of mingled reproach and outrage, led the way into the front room.

The house smelled of cigarettes, bacon, and something vaguely antiseptic. Liniment? Pine-sol? Sea Breeze?

McEnroe flung himself on a sagging sofa upholstered in beige corduroy and glared at them.

“I don’t know what the hell you want from me. I don’t know where Becky is.”
“You do remember she's only seventeen, right?” Gervase said.
“T remember.”
“What did you argue about last night?” Kennedy asked. He remained standing as Gervase took the tan recliner chair across from McEnroe.
McEnroe's eyes widened. “I don’t—how do you know? We didn’t.”
Jason positioned himself next to the front door. It afforded a cattycorner view of the kitchen, which was in the process of either being remodeled or sold for parts.
You could tell a lot about a person by the art on their walls, but Tony McEnroe did not have art on his walls. No photos either. The place didn’t seem exactly untidy so much as under halfhearted and perpetual construction. There was a layer of dust on the floor sander by the window.
Kennedy asked, “Why did you leave her party early?”
McEnroe dipped his head, running a hand through his long, oily hair. Or maybe his hair wasn’t oily. Maybe he just used a lot of product. And not much soap. “I-I just felt like it. It was boring. Too many stupid, snotty kids clogging up the place.”
“Aren’t those stupid, snotty kids the same age as your girlfriend?” Kennedy inquired.
McEnroe shook his head without looking up.
Kennedy studied him as though deciding on the best angle of approach. “Tell us about the party. Walk us through the evening again.”
McEnroe raised his head, glowering. “There isn’t anything to tell. I showed up about nine thirty, which was when the party started. Becky was in a bitchy mood. So after an hour of it, I left. That's it. That’s the entire night right there. I went home and went to bed. The first I heard
she was missing was when you knocked on my door this morning.”

“Alice Cornwell contacted you before she phoned us,” Gervase put in.

“Well, okay. Whatever. I just mean I didn’t see her again. She didn’t come here.”

“You don’t seem particularly broken up over your girlfriend going missing,” Gervase observed.

“She’s not missing.” McEnroe’s gaze was defiant. Gervase looked at Kennedy.

“What does that mean?” Kennedy asked.

“She’s just doing this for attention. I know Becky. This is her idea of getting back at me.”

“Getting back at you?” Kennedy repeated thoughtfully.

“Why would she want to get back at you?”

McEnroe seemed to struggle to put his thoughts into words. At last he said bitterly, “Because she can’t stand it when everything doesn’t go her way. When she isn’t the center of attention. When she’s not the one in control.” Absently, nervously, he stroked his arms through the soft material of the flannel shirt.

“I see.”

Jason could tell Kennedy wasn’t buying it. Personally, he wasn’t convinced either way. For sure, McEnroe wasn’t telling them everything. Most people didn’t tell them everything. Not at first anyway.

McEnroe wiped his pale and sweaty face on his shirtsleeve. “Is that it?”

It was a hot summer day. Too hot for long sleeves. Too hot for flannel.

Jason asked, “How did you get those scratches on your arms?” He felt rather than saw the quick look Kennedy threw him.

It was a shot in the dark, but McEnroe gaped at him,
instinctively tugged at his sleeves, although the cuffs were already covering his wrists, and Jason knew he was right.  

“What? I don’t—I was playing with the cat. Becky’s cat. Snowball. She scratched me. The cat scratched me.” He looked frightened.

“You know what I think,” Gervase said suddenly, heavily. He placed his hands on his thighs, as though about to push to his feet. “I think we’d better finish this conversation back at the station.”

“What?”

As McEnroe jumped off the sofa, Jason tensed, ready for anything. He did not reach for his weapon—he would have been the only one who did—but it was close.

McEnroe was babbling, “You’re crazy, old man! I already told you I had nothing to do with Becky running away. I don’t know anything about it. I don’t want to know anything about it.”

“Maybe you did, maybe you didn’t. There are still questions that have to be answered.”

“I don’t know anything!”

“Son, you can cooperate and come in voluntarily, or I can arrest your ass,” Gervase said. “Up to you.”

“This is crazy!” McEnroe was trembling, wild-eyed as he looked from face to face. “I didn’t do anything.”

Kennedy looked his usual stony self. Gervase looked pained.

“What are you getting so worked up about, McEnroe?” Gervase’s tone grew fatherly, almost reassuring. “It’s routine. You’re the boyfriend, you’re going to be questioned. If you’re innocent, you’ve got nothing to worry about. It’s a couple of hours out of your life.”

McEnroe stared at the police chief and seemed to calm at whatever he read in his expression. He stopped trembling. The wild-eyed look faded.
“I’m not under arrest?”
“Not so far.”
His Adam’s apple jerked. “Can I at least put my pants on?”
“Please do,” Gervase said cheerfully. “Please do.”
McEnroe shuffled out of the room and down the hallway. A door creaked open. They heard the scrape of drawers opening and shutting. The back and forth of footsteps. The slide of a closet door.
“You won’t need your toothbrush,” Gervase said to the ceiling.
Jason said, “I’m going to cover the back entrance.”
The chief was probably right. He’d lasted a long time at his job, so he probably knew his constituency pretty well, but this go-put-your-pants-on-and-come-with-us method seemed a haphazard way to bring in a suspect. Jason could tell by Kennedy’s expression that he too was listening closely to the sounds of McEnroe moving around his room, so maybe they were on the same page here.
He opened the front door and slipped outside, jumping from the steps and moving quietly along the side of the house, carrying his pistol at low ready.
The mowed weeds ran right up to the foundation of the building. They whispered beneath his feet as he passed the living room window and turned the corner of the house.
No screens on any of the windows.
The back of the house faced the woods. There was a half-constructed deck that looked like someone had got bored playing with giant Lincoln Logs, and a brand new hot tub still in its plastic wrappings. Reassuringly prosaic. The back door screen leaned against the red siding, and the door itself was boarded up.
Nobody was leaving that way. Maybe Gervase knew that.

Those windows without screens made him uneasy. Jason crossed the back of the residence, heading for the east side again—in a minute he'd be going in circles—and turned the rear corner in time to see black curtains gusting in the breeze and McEnroe crawling headfirst out the bedroom window.

At the same instant, McEnroe spotted Jason and brought up his arm.

Jason found himself staring down the barrel of a semi-automatic pistol.
Chapter Four

Time stopped.
“Drop your gun,” McEnroe whispered.

Jason did not move a muscle. He could not have
moved if his life depended on it, and there was a good
chance it did. A perfect and boundless stillness washed
through him as he waited for the shot. That terrifying bang
that always came a split second after the worst had
already happened.

“Drop it,” McEnroe hissed. His hand was rock steady.

It wasn’t even fear Jason felt so much as numb
inevitability. He knew he needed to think past the pistol
aimed at him, but he could not tear his gaze from the black
hole of the barrel pointed at his face. A suicide special. A
cheap, compact, small-caliber weapon. Equally special
when used for homicide.

Getting shot in the chest with a .22 or a .25 was almost
always fatal. That high velocity bullet would ricochet
around tearing up organs and everything else in its path
like a murderous pinball machine. Getting shot in the
head…

Jason let his Glock slip from his fingers. It hit the
ground in front of him with a dull thud.

McEnroe slid the rest of the way out the window, pistol
trained on Jason. There was no more than three feet
between them. Too far—and not far enough.

“Don’t move,” McEnroe whispered. “I’ll blow your head
off if you even twitch.”

Jason said nothing. There were no coherent thoughts
in his brain to speak. He had already done the unthinkable
by dropping his weapon.

McEnroe began to walk backward, still leveling his
pistol at Jason. Jason stayed motionless, hands at his
sides. McEnroe should have made him lock his hands behind his head. Like this, he could tackle McEnroe, wrestle him for the gun. He didn’t move.

McEnroe turned and sprinted for the trees.

Jason bent and scooped up his Glock. He could take McEnroe out right now. An easy shot. A clean shot. *Bam.* Right between the shoulders.

*You can’t think about what it feels like to get shot.*

He raised his weapon. Opened his mouth to shout a warning. The words didn’t come.

McEnroe vanished into the trees.

*What the fuck did you just do?*

He *had* to go after McEnroe. It was his job. His duty. He could not continue to stand there like a statue. But he could not seem to…unstick his limbs. He felt paralyzed. His right shoulder was throbbing painfully as though he’d reinjured it. The reality was he was unhurt, and Rebecca’s murderer was getting away.

Metal rings scraped on a metal rod. The curtains next to him suddenly fluttered open, and Kennedy leaned out the window. “Where is he? Where did he go?”

Jason’s lips parted as he stared at Kennedy’s tense, hard features.

He could lie. He could say he didn’t know. That McEnroe had escaped before Jason made it to the back of the house.

The fact he even considered this lie for however brief a moment shocked him. Like it wasn’t already bad enough?

He said through stiff lips, “He ran for the woods. He pulled a gun on me.”

Kennedy shouted, “*Then what the hell are you standing there for?*”

That broke the spell. Jason launched himself after
McEnroe as Kennedy—with a lightness surprising in a man his size—jumped down from the window ledge. 

As Jason’s feet pounded the soft, uneven ground, he scanned the treeline for motion or color. He saw nothing.

It was a relief to run. Dodging bullets was preferable to facing Kennedy. Or his own thoughts.

*What the fuck? What the fuck? How could you have done that?*

He could hear Kennedy shouting to Gervase, but he didn’t hear the words. He didn’t need to. No time to think about any of it now. Somehow he had to make this right. All his focus needed to be on locating and apprehending McEnroe.

In thirty seconds Jason was across the firebreak. He plunged into the shadowy cool of the woods.

It was like passing through the door into a different world. The tall army of trees seemed to absorb all sound. The temperature dropped an instant few degrees, and visibility grew uncertain. He slowed, listening. From a few yards ahead he could hear crashing sounds as McEnroe piled through bushes and brush in his headlong flight. He was making no effort to be quiet, no effort to conceal his passage. He was desperate.

So was Jason. He charged after him.

High overhead a startled flock of birds took flight.

Twigs snapped to his right. Jason brought his weapon up. Several yards down Kennedy was moving on a parallel line with him.

Wouldn’t that be brilliant? Shoot Senior Special Agent Sam Kennedy by mistake?

*You should not be here. You are a danger to yourself and everyone on your team.*

The unbidden thought frightened him, made him angry. It wasn’t true. He had made a mistake, but he would fix it.
He paused.
Behind him came the crackle of a radio, instantly muffled. That would be Gervase coming up from the rear. And ahead of him...more sounds of cracking wood. Quieter now, more surreptitious. McEnroe had stopped panicking and was using his brain.
Where are you?
Jason listened, tuning out Gervase's muted voice speaking softly into his shoulder mic, Kennedy's careful progress through prehistoric-sized ferns...
There. The brush and splinter of something large moving swiftly through dense overgrowth.
Jason charged after, abandoning stealth and relying on sheer speed.
His oncoming rush must have startled McEnroe who suddenly popped up about a yard ahead, red and yellow shirt a sudden flash of color in the blue-green gloom. McEnroe's pale face turned briefly toward him, eyes wide in alarm.
Kennedy was shouting a warning, moving into firing stance.
Christ, don't shoot me. Please don't shoot me...
Jason barreled on, bursting through bushes and tackling McEnroe. His arms locked around a skinny waist—McEnroe wriggled frantically, kicked at him—and they both plunged over the side of an embankment.
There was a sickening dip in Jason's belly as the earth fell away and gravity took hold.
They landed on the hillside, rolled, kicking up dead leaves, pine needles, and loose soil, McEnroe sputtering obscenities all the way down. It seemed a ways, but fortunately it was not a steep drop.
They tumbled to the bottom, Jason on top. He scrambled up, planting his knee in the small of McEnroe's
back and pressing the muzzle of his Glock against McEnroe’s skull. He was shaking with adrenaline and fury as he fumbled McEnroe’s pistol from his back waistband.

“Move again and I’ll blow your head off.”

McEnroe cried, “You broke my fucking leg, man!”

“Good. I wish it was your neck.” McEnroe’s legs seemed to be moving just fine, however, and Jason dug his knee in harder. “Quit kicking. I’m warning you.”

Kennedy came down the embankment at a quick easy jog, holstering his weapon at the sight of Jason atop McEnroe.

He reached the flatland at the same time Gervase appeared over the crest.

“Tony, you dumbass.” Gervase gave the all-clear into his mic.

“You have no right! I didn’t do anything!” McEnroe howled.

“Then why’d you run?” Kennedy asked. He helped Jason haul McEnroe to his feet. McEnroe’s jeans were torn, and there was a long gash in his leg, but it was not life-threatening or even apparently incapacitating. He made another clumsy kick toward Jason.

Gervase pulled his handcuffs out as he reached the bottom of the hill. He snapped them around McEnroe’s skinny wrists. “Now you’re under arrest,” he said.

The satisfaction in his voice made Jason wonder if this was what Gervase had hoped would happen. He hadn’t had more than the most circumstantial of evidence against McEnroe, unlikely enough for a warrant to search, let alone arrest. McEnroe trying to make a run for it definitely strengthened the case against him.

Except…what case? All they had so far was a missing girl, and maybe McEnroe was right. Maybe Rebecca had taken off for reasons of her own.
Why was everyone so eager to believe something worse had happened to the girl?
Gervase hauled his prisoner back up the embankment, McEnroe protesting the injustice and his innocence every step of the way.
Jason started to follow but was halted by Kennedy’s voice.
“You want to tell me what happened back there?”
Kennedy’s eyes were like blue steel.
“I told you what happened,” Jason said curtly. “He pulled a gun on me.”
“You hadn’t already pulled your own weapon?”
He wasn’t going to lie about it. Even if he’d wanted to lie, not having pulled his own weapon in that situation would not put him in a much better light. “Yes. I had.”
“You’re saying McEnroe got the drop on you?”
Had he? Jason was no longer sure who’d had those precious few seconds of advance warning. Had he frozen, or had McEnroe raised his weapon first? He couldn’t remember. There was only one appropriate answer.
He nodded curtly.
Kennedy continued to watch Jason, granite-faced and unbelieving. To Jason’s relief, he did not pursue it.
They followed Gervase up the hill in silence.

“I don’t know,” McEnroe said.
He had been saying the same thing for nearly thirty minutes.
They had already covered the basics. McEnroe was twenty-two, had been born in Dudley, Massachusetts, and had graduated from Shepherd Hill high school. Following high school he had applied to and been rejected by the air force. A stint in junior college had followed, but he had dropped out after his first year. He had held a succession
of low-paying jobs and was currently employed part-time in the local feed store. His income was bolstered by some kind of disability pay. He was unmarried and had no children. Two years ago he had been diagnosed with Lupus which was how he had come by a hardship cultivation registration to grow his own medical marijuana.

"You don’t know what you argued with Rebecca about?" Kennedy inquired. "How much had you had to drink?"

McEnroe shook his head and rested his face in his hands. It was clear to Jason they were not going to get anything useful out of McEnroe, that this was tantamount to trying to squeeze blood from a stone. But it was Kennedy’s party, and Gervase seemed to be enjoying the game of Pin the Tail on the Donkey, so Jason kept quiet.

If the day had illustrated anything, it was that he and Kennedy could have been working for two entirely different law enforcement organizations, so unalike were both the scope and focus of their investigations. It wasn’t just what they investigated, it was how they investigated.

"We argue all the time," McEnroe said. "It didn’t mean anything. I was tired of it, that’s all."

"What kind of things do you argue about?"

McEnroe moaned. And Jason could have echoed him.

"Okay," Kennedy said with suspicious affableness. He knew they had McEnroe for as long as they needed him. There was the little matter of pulling an unlicensed, unregistered Raven Arms MP-25 on a federal officer, not to mention disarming that law enforcement officer, resisting arrest...there were any number of charges with which to hold McEnroe. "What’s going on between Rebecca and Patricia?"

"Huh? How would I know?" McEnroe said with what seemed genuine astonishment.
“They were arguing the night of the party. Were they arguing about you?”
“Me?”
The alarm was genuine.
“How long have you been partnered with him?” Chief Gervase asked, jolting Jason out of his thoughts.
“Me?” Jason said with almost the same emphasis as McEnroe on the other side of the two-way mirror. “I’ve never worked with him before today. This is temporary.”
“Ah,” Gervase said, “that’ll be Wisconsin.”
What exactly had happened in Wisconsin? Jason only knew what SAC Manning had told him, which was that Kennedy had so antagonized the other members of the taskforce through his overbearing and bullying tactics, it had affected the course of the investigation. Kennedy—and the Bureau—had been called out on the evening news by the governor. Jason would have liked to pump Gervase for information, but gossiping about a colleague was out of bounds, so he’d have to do some web reconnaissance that evening. At the very least he needed to know what he’d got himself into.
He made a meaningless sound of acknowledgment.
“You’ll learn a lot,” Gervase said. “Just don’t get in his way. It’s his show and his show alone. He doesn’t like the bit players.”
What the hell did that mean? Did Gervase feel like Kennedy was overstepping his authority? It had been Gervase’s choice—his suggestion, in fact—to leave the interrogation to Kennedy. Just as it had been his decision to bring in Kennedy in the first place. Jason turned to study the older man’s profile. Gervase’s smile was bleak. He continued to watch the interrogation room.
“We’ll be out of your hair before you know it,” Jason said. “I’m supposed to be back in Los Angeles in a day or
two.”

Three days, Manning had told him. A week at the most. Just enough time for Kennedy to reassure and advise the locals. Reassure them no mistakes had been made last time. Advise them on how to proceed this time.

“A day or two? I hope that’s true. I don’t mind admitting I’d prefer thinking McEnroe is our perp to the possibility of a copycat killer. Or…”

Jason nodded. Understandable. Also a lot more likely.

On the other side of the glass, Kennedy was silently reading—or rather pretending to read—through the file on the table before him. He closed the file and said, “Tell me about your relationship with Martin Pink.”

“Here we go,” Gervase said with quiet satisfaction. “He was just playing with him. Now he’ll go in for the kill.”


“You’re neighbors.”

“No, we’re not! Pink’s been in prison for years. Way before I ever moved out here.”

“Are you trying to tell me you aren’t aware the house you’re living in formerly belonged to Susan Parvel’s parents?”

“Is that true?” Jason asked the chief.

“Yep.” Gervase’s face was grim.

“No,” protested McEnroe. And then, defensively, “Well, so what if it did? The property was cheap. That was all years ago. The Pinks are all gone now. Why shouldn’t I live there?”

“I bet a lot of people could tell you why.”

McEnroe blinked at Kennedy’s stern face. He looked increasingly confused and scared.

Kennedy said, “The Parvels used to have one of those big above-ground pools. Susan used to go for long night
swims during the summer. And one evening when she was out there floating in the water, staring up at the stars, Martin Pink came along and dragged her out of that pool. Her parents were out having dinner with friends. There was no one to hear her screams except Pink’s mother and brother over the hill. Pink dragged Susan into the woods where he raped and murdered her.”

McEnroe was gazing at Kennedy like a rabbit hypnotized by a cobra.

Kennedy said, “After their daughter was murdered, the Parvels had that pool taken down and planted a bed of roses in its place. Are you telling me you didn’t know any of this?”

McEnroe shook his head, but whether he meant no or you’re out of your mind was unclear.

Where was this line of questioning going? It made no sense to Jason. It was a horrible story, yes, but what was the point? He glanced at Gervase, and Gervase was smiling with sour satisfaction.

Kennedy said, “And then along comes you, Tony. You rip that rose garden right out without a second thought. And of all things, you replace it with a hot tub. A hot tub. How many young girls did you plan on luring into that hot tub?”

Gervase laughed quietly. He glanced at Jason. “Don’t worry, Agent West. You’ll be back in L.A. with plenty of time to spare.”
“He’s not our guy,” Kennedy said twenty minutes later, rejoining Jason and Chief Gervase in the observation room.

“What?” Gervase’s jaw dropped. “But—but what about the hot tub? What about buying the Parvels’ old house?” He turned to the two-way mirror where they could see Tony McEnroe sitting at the table, crying.

“It’s not even circumstantial,” Kennedy said. “We’ve got nothing on him.”

The chief’s disappointment was approximate to Jason’s relief. He had been increasingly alarmed by the direction of Kennedy’s interrogation. It was comforting to know Kennedy had only been bluffing—it had been a frighteningly convincing performance given the craziness of Kennedy’s line of attack. How many young girls did you plan on luring into that hot tub? In other circumstances it would have been funny, but McEnroe had sure bought it. He believed that any minute now he was going to be arrested for Rebecca’s murder.

Gervase persisted. “He’s the boyfriend of the victim. He fought with her before she disappeared. He doesn’t have an alibi. He’s a doper. That’s plenty right there!”

“It sounds like Madigan fought with half the guests at her party,” Kennedy said. “She was alive and arguing after McEnroe went home.”

“She got mouthy with Officer Boxner when he arrived to tell her to turn down the music,” Jason said. “She was alive and well and still arguing with her guests until one in the morning.”

Kennedy gave him one of those unreadable glances. Gervase shook his head. His disappointment and disgust were obvious.
“He’s lying about something,” Kennedy said. “But I don’t think he’s lying when he says he doesn’t know what happened to Rebecca. I think he believes she took off for reasons of her own.”

“No, I don’t buy it,” the chief said. “Why would she? It makes no sense.”

“I agree. I’m not telling you what I think. I’m telling you what McEnroe thinks.”

Gervase glared at McEnroe and then turned his hostile gaze on Kennedy. “He’s our only suspect. If it’s not him… you know what that means.”

Back to the theory of the copycat killer.

Kennedy shook his head. “It’s way too early to draw that conclusion. To draw any conclusion. There are plenty of possibilities as far as what might have happened to Rebecca.”

“They haven’t even finished today’s search,” Jason said.

“All right.” Gervase sighed, a long weary sound of exasperation. “All right then. You’re the expert. Maybe we will find her today. Although we’re running out of daylight.”

“In the meantime, we’ve got plenty to hold McEnroe on,” Kennedy said. His gaze flicked toward Jason, and Jason knew he was thinking about the fact McEnroe had managed to get the drop on him. His face warmed.

“Okay. I’m heading back to the search site,” Gervase said. “If you want to start reading over statements, I’ll instruct Officer Courtney to make sure you have whatever you need.”

Officer Courtney set them up in an unused office and brought them coffee and a stack of papers.

As usual there was no instruction or information from
Kennedy. Not that Jason didn’t know how to read a witness statement, but he was used to being able to bounce ideas and theories off one of the fifteen other members of the Art Crime Team. His current situation had all the disadvantages of working alone and none of the advantages, because every time he looked up, there was Kennedy frowning over his own reading or directing one of those penetrating stares at Jason.

Let Kennedy think what he wanted. He couldn’t prove it. And it wouldn’t happen again. Today had been…a fluke. The very natural surprise of coming face-to-face with a loaded weapon. That would give anybody pause.

Getting shot, even in the shoulder, wasn’t like on TV. A .22 round tearing through muscles and nerves and ligaments was one very special episode indeed, and as challenging as the physical recovery was, that was nothing compared to the psychological recovery. Having been shot once, the normal human reaction was to wish passionately never to repeat the experience. To do anything to avoid repeating the experience.

Which unfortunately did not necessarily square with the duties and responsibilities of an FBI special agent. Even an agent on the FBI’s Art Crime Team. It wasn’t all lecturing museums and galleries on how to protect their priceless collections. Sometimes it came down to bad guys with guns, bad guys who were ready and willing to blow a hole in your chest to stop you from interfering with their multimillion-dollar business.

No shame in a healthy fear of being shot. It didn’t mean Jason couldn’t still do his job. The shrinks at the Bureau believed Jason could still do his job. And they should know.

His shoulder twinged, and he rubbed it. He was okay. He was fine. Next time he would not be caught off guard.
Next time he would not hesitate.

He reached for another file, flipped it open, and began to read.

Patricia Douglas’s statement was as unhelpful as all the previous statements.

According to Patricia, there had been no argument. She and Rebecca had been joking the whole time. She loved Rebecca like a sister. Everyone liked Rebecca. No, she knew no one who would wish Rebecca harm, knew of no one Rebecca had any kind of serious falling out with, knew no reason Rebecca would leave her own party, knew of no one else who had left the party around the same time as Rebecca.

And if she did know, she wouldn’t be telling Officer Boxner. That came through loud and clear even in Boxner’s nearly illegible handwriting.

The problem with adolescents was they believed they were honor bound to tell adults as little as possible regardless of the situation.

The other problem was they thought they knew everything.

Reading between the lines, yeah, there was a good chance Rebecca had left the party of her own free will. Or at least that was the most likely scenario in the opinion of her friends. And if that was the case, the last thing they were going to do was anything that might mess things up for Rebecca.

It was pretty much the same story as all the others. Everyone had had way too much to drink. No one had seen anything out of the ordinary.

“There has to be something here.”

He didn’t realize he’d spoken aloud until Kennedy said, “There always is. Sometimes you know it’s there by its very absence.”
Very Yoda-esque. *Wise in the ways of aberrant psychology are you, Senior Special Agent Kennedy.*

Then again Kennedy was wise in the ways of aberrant psychology. That's why he was so very good at his job. Reportedly he could read over a profile and tell you whether the suspect had a speech impediment or visited the graves of his victims or had financial problems.

What the hell must his dreams be like?

Not that Jason’s dreams were so wonderful. He dreamed about getting shot. A lot.

The next time Jason surfaced it was to the sight of the police chief ushering Rebecca’s parents into his office. It was obvious who they were. A strained and affluent-looking forty-something male with his arm around an attractive blonde woman with red and swollen eyes. They both wore resort wear and looked like they had come straight from the airport.

You didn’t typically have to deal with grieving parents in ACT. Granted, the way some people carried on about a stolen Picasso, you might think they were grieving the loss of a child, but no. The Madigans were terrified. Desperate for any shred of hope.

“She's still alive?” Mrs. Madigan was asking as the door to Gervase’s office swung shut. “You do think she's still alive?”

Jason glanced over, but Kennedy didn’t look up from the report he was reading. Maybe he didn’t hear it. Maybe after this many years of hunting monsters he had learned to tune it out. Turn off the receptors to other people’s pain.

Maybe you had to in order to do the job.

For once Kennedy didn’t seem to feel Jason’s stare, and Jason let his gaze linger. Kennedy wore gold wire
reading glasses—exactly how old was he?—his thighs in blue jeans looked muscular, his shoulders powerful. The scent of his cologne had faded, replaced by clean sweat and laundered cotton.

Kennedy knew his stuff. No question there. Whatever had gone wrong in Wisconsin, it didn’t make Kennedy the screw-up Manning had implied. Sometimes cases blew up in your face, and sometimes you ended up the scapegoat for local politics. And yes, sometimes maybe you did mess up. But should one case, one mistake, define a man’s career—especially an agent with Kennedy’s impressive record?

Jason forced his attention back to the witness statement before him. Which was the same as all the other witness statements. One minute Rebecca had been there, the next she was gone.

After a time, Gervase ushered the Madigans out of his office. He was kind and comforting, but Jason noticed he was not overly reassuring; Gervase had a lot of experience at this and had learned not to give out false hope.

After the chief saw the Madigans out, he returned to the office where Jason and Kennedy were still cross-checking eyewitness accounts. If you could call see-no-evil-hear-no-evil-speak-no-evil an eyewitness account.

“We’ve called the search off for the night.” His face was bleak. “The light’s gone, and those woods are too dangerous to ask people to wander around in the dark.”

Kennedy nodded.

“There's no sign of her,” Gervase said. “None. The dogs lost the trail a couple of feet beyond the back of the property line. It's like she stepped out of her backyard and vanished into thin air.”

“Or she stepped out of her front yard,” Jason said. Kennedy gave him a curious look.
“We tried that too,” Gervase said wearily. “Front or back, the dogs never picked up her scent more than a foot or so from the Madigan property.”

Jason began, “There’s no possibility—”

“No. None. Every inch of that house has been checked. Basement to attic. Tool shed to pool house. Rebecca is not on the premises.”

The chief seemed to be waiting for something from Kennedy. Kennedy said, “You'll resume the search at first light?”

“Hell, yes.” Gervase's mouth twisted. “By the way, your boy McEnroe is asking to take a lie-detector test.”


“You know as well as I do, the results are unreliable.”

“They are. Don’t you think his willingness to take the test is noteworthy?”


“I think we give him a polygraph.”

Gervase nodded, but he said, “I guess he believes he can beat the machine. I still think he knows where she is.”

Jason said. “I'm not so sure. I think he's telling the truth.”

Kennedy's mouth curved in that humorless smile.

Gervase said, “Did you find another viable suspect in those reports?”

“No,” Jason admitted. “Nothing yet.”

Gervase sighed. He looked very weary. “Well, she could still be alive,” he said with what sounded like forced cheer. “There’s always hope until there isn’t. We might find her tomorrow.”

Kennedy nodded, but it seemed to be at his own thoughts and not the police chief’s words.

Jason said, “If we are dealing with a copycat…”
He didn’t finish it. He didn’t have to. They all knew that if they were dealing with a copycat, Rebecca was already dead.
Chapter Six

“We hope you’ll be very comfortable here at the General Warren Inn. Just ask for Charlotte—that’s me—if you need anything.” The lanky blonde at the motel front desk slid a keycard across the scratched maple counter.

“Thanks.” Jason picked up the plastic card and glanced back at Kennedy, who had already finished checking in and was walking out the sliding lobby doors into the dark courtyard.

It was eight o’clock on Saturday night. After the search for Rebecca had been placed on hold, he and Kennedy had continued to work their way through the remaining statements. They had come up as empty-handed as the volunteers scouring the woods and hills.

Sometimes no news was good news.

The search—both on foot and on paper—would start again at first light.

Charlotte was watching Kennedy too, and as the doors slid shut behind him, she said, “I remember him from the last time. He stayed here then too.”

She looked to be about eighteen, which would have put her around age eight when Kennedy had been in Kingsfield working the Huntsman case. Jason didn’t doubt her though. Kennedy would always leave an impression.

“Did he leave a nice tip?”

Charlotte looked surprised. “He did, yeah.”

Jason winked at her and started to turn away, but she said quickly, “Do you—do you think you’ll find her? Rebecca?”

“Is she a good friend?”

Charlotte shook her head but then nodded. So which was it? Yes or no? Maybe Charlotte wasn’t sure. “I know her. We hang out sometimes. A bunch of us, I mean. What
I wanted to tell you—"
When she didn’t continue, Jason asked, “What?”
“You’re wrong about Tony. He didn’t do anything to
Rebecca. He wouldn’t have any reason.”
“No?”
“It’s over between them. On both sides; Rebecca just
doesn’t want to admit it yet because she likes using Tony
to piss her parents off.”
Charlotte was a cute girl. She had wide blue eyes,
expertly lined in black, and shiny hair bound in two braids.
Not Little House on the Prairie braids, but chic fashion-
magazine-style braids. Jason said, “And you know this
because you and Tony…?”
She blushed. Nodded.
“I see.” Good news for Rebecca’s parents and bad
news for Charlotte’s, in Jason’s opinion.
She raised her chin. “Everyone knows what’s going on
here. Nobody wants to say it out loud, but everyone
knows.”
“What do they know?”
Charlotte’s voice dropped. “The Huntsman is back.”
“No.” Jason wanted to be very clear about this. He
knew only too well how fast rumor spread in a small town.
“Martin Pink is sitting in solitary confinement in a supermax
prison right this minute.”
Charlotte was not impressed. “Everyone knows there
was more than one Huntsma—” She broke off as a tall,
sandy-haired man of about fifty stepped out of the back
office. He wore glasses and a mustache so bushy it looked
fake.
“Charlotte, can I see you in here?”
“Yes, Daddy.” Charlotte left the front desk at once,
throwing Jason an apologetic look.
The man studied Jason, nodded politely, and turned
The General Warren Inn was not actually an inn. It was a motel and a pretty basic one. The Bureau did not typically spring for five star accommodations. Jason’s room appeared clean and functional, and there was a shiny, solid deadbolt on the door—which was not something he’d used to think a lot about, but appreciated these days.

*Everyone knows there was more than one Huntsma*—

Great. Thanks for that thought, Charlotte.

A pair of Winslow Homer watercolor marine prints adorned the walls—nice choice—and the queen-size bed was covered by a navy chintz bedspread that had lost its sheen a few years back. So long as there was a mattress under the chintz, he didn’t care.

As tired as he was, he was even hungrier. He’d skipped breakfast, intending to grab something at the airport, and then there had never been another opportunity to eat. It all felt like a million years ago—which was probably the last time he’d had a real meal. You didn’t join the FBI if you were looking for eight hours a night and regular meal times.

He unpacked his carryall, stared at the ball of wrinkled shirts, and realized he’d have to see about finding a laundromat, assuming this case didn’t wind up tomorrow. What were the chances of that?

*Everyone knows there was more than one Huntsma*—

What the hell had she meant?

He washed up in the tiny bathroom, splashing cold water on his face until he was gasping for air. Drying off with one of the bleach-scented towels, he eyed his reflection. Unsurprisingly, he looked haggard: green eyes shadowed, face drawn. Too many memories—and the
good memories were just as painful as the bad memories. Which is why he had never wanted to come back to Kingsfield.

Anyway. He was here, and he’d have to make the best of it. He had bigger problems to worry about. Like his reaction to finding himself at the wrong end of a semi-automatic. Just remembering turned him cold and then hot with humiliation.

*Jesus Christ.* What a total, fucking disaster that had nearly been. What had *happened* to him?

The eyes staring back from the mirror were wide with horror.

It was okay. McEnroe was safely behind bars, and Jason’s weapon was safely stowed in its holster. Everything was okay. Everything was fine. He would never make that mistake again.

He changed his shirt—only noticing for the first time the bruises and scratches he’d collected in his tussle with McEnroe—shoved his wallet in his jeans, and stepped outside his room.

Two doors down, Kennedy, a tall shadow in the gloom, was locking his own door. Jason’s heart sank.

Kennedy glanced over at Jason. “You want to grab something to eat?” he asked after a couple of beats.

He was clearly as thrilled about the idea of breaking bread with Jason as Jason was at the thought of spending another hour in Kennedy’s dour presence, but since they were both obviously on their way out to eat, it would be too pointed to refuse.

“Sure,” Jason said politely.

“There’s a Chinese place within walking distance. It’s pretty good. They stay open late.”

Staying open late being one of the main things LEO looked for in a restaurant.
“I like Chinese.” Jason fell into step with Kennedy as they walked down the exterior hallway.

Most of the rooms were dark. Below them, the brightly lit pool was an empty aqua rectangle. Kingsfield held few if any tourist attractions. The kind of clientele interested in what Kingsfield was best known for—a series of grisly killings—were not people you wanted to attract.

Kennedy smelled of shampoo and aftershave, so he must have taken time for a quick shower and shave. In contrast, and despite the clean shirt, Jason felt grubby and rumpled.

He followed Kennedy down the open stairs to the courtyard, and they went out through the white iron arches.

Jason didn’t feel like talking about the case, and he couldn’t seem to think of anything neutral to say. Kennedy, seemingly immune to social pressures, strode briskly, aloof as usual.

The streets of Kingsfield were quiet. There was no traffic and very few pedestrians. Lights glowed behind curtained windows and old-fashioned streetlamps were haloed in golden haze. The spearpoint tips of wrought iron railing fences cast militant silhouettes on the pavement as Jason and Kennedy walked past the tidy rose gardens and venerable houses. This did not look like a town where anything bad could ever happen, and yet behind all those shining Kinkadeian windows the topic of conversation tonight would be the latest terrible thing to befall them.

“Now that’s a full moon,” Jason said. “It almost looks like…” He was going to say it looked like Julius Grimm’s 1888 study in oil of the moon and its surface, but realized in time how that would sound to Kennedy, and finished with, “unreal.”

Kennedy glanced at the silver ball slowly rising behind the church steeple, as though verifying for himself that
Jason had not got this wrong too.

He grunted.

What had happened in Wisconsin? Kennedy didn’t wear a ring. Was there a Mrs. Kennedy? Did he have kids? A cat? A home? Or did he just live on the road, traveling from scene of horror to scene of horror, trying to make sense of the senseless?

He seemed so completely and coldly self-contained. Had he always been like that, or had the job made him so?

“Charlotte Simpson, the girl who checked us in at the motel, says she and Tony McEnroe are seeing each other.”

Kennedy stared at him. “Now there’s a piece of information. Did she offer to alibi him?”

“No. Was she at the party? Her statement wasn’t in my stack.”

“Mine neither. But we don’t have statements from everyone at the party yet. Here we are.” Kennedy abruptly turned down a small alleyway. It smelled dank. Moss grew along the walls. They went up a short flight of stone steps, and there sat the Jade Empress.

Despite its grand name, the Jade Empress was a modest establishment. In fact, it was downright tiny. It hadn’t existed sixteen years ago; that, Jason was sure of.

There were no more than six linen-covered tables in the dining room, two of them filled with Asian patrons enjoying deliciously aromatic meals.

Jason’s stomach growled so loudly the petite hostess leading them to their table laughed.

They were seated by a window overlooking the dark alley. Kennedy’s chair squeaked loudly as he lowered his weight onto it, but that was as much about the fragility of the old furniture as Kennedy’s size. The table seemed small too, and Jason wondered if he and his dinner companion would spend their meal knocking knees. He
had to swallow a smile at the thought.

He picked up the menu and studied it. The Good Fortune Special. The Little Empress Special. The Laughing Samurai Special. Safe to say there would be no genial sharing of plates and exotic flavors with Kennedy. That idea also struck Jason as funny, and he decided he must be suffering from low blood sugar.

Kennedy laid his menu aside and gazed out the window.

Jason made his selection—how could you resist something called Bang Bang Chicken?—and put his own menu down.

Kennedy's profile did not invite conversation, so Jason studied the restaurant décor. Jewel-colored paper lanterns, oversized folding fans, and subtly tinted Sansebiao hanging scrolls that looked like they might actually be contemporary originals.

Asian art was not his area of expertise—that would be twentieth century California Impressionism—but he knew a little. Everybody on the ACT knew a little about a lot of art. And they were always learning more. With only sixteen agents to cover the entire country, they could never possibly know enough.

The waiter—short, chubby, and jovial—arrived, and they placed their orders. Jason also ordered a Tsingtao—he felt sure he was going to need a drink to get through this meal—and Kennedy ordered something called Naale Stoutbeer.

The waiter departed, and Kennedy went back to staring out the window.

It began to irk Jason.

They were never going to be pals, but did that mean they couldn't be polite? It wasn't like Jason had begged to be put on this case. He had been tired after Boston—his
first real investigation since returning from sick leave—and had been looking forward to a few days off. It was taking him longer than he’d expected to get back to full speed, and he wasn’t sure why. He was trying to be a team player. A concept clearly foreign to Kennedy.

Jason said, “Gervase wants to believe McEnroe is his guy. I just don’t buy it.”

Kennedy glanced his way, and Jason once again had the impression he’d been all but forgotten. Kennedy seemed to consider. “He pulled a gun on you.”

“Yes.” Jason was not likely to forget it. “I could see McEnroe killing someone by accident or lashing out with fatal consequences. I have trouble picturing him premeditating murder.”

He was surprised when Kennedy said, “I agree. If he’s our unsub, Madigan’s murder was not premeditated. It would have been an accident or a violent impulse aggravated by drugs and alcohol.”

“Gervase views McEnroe as an undesirable. That might be behind his push to have McEnroe go down for this. He’d like to get rid of McEnroe on general principles.”

“Nobody’s a model citizen one hundred percent of the time.”

The waiter brought their beers. Jason picked his glass up. “Cheers.” Kennedy eyes flickered. Jason continued, “I don’t see McEnroe as someone capable of successfully concealing his crime for any length of time. I think he’d panic. I think he’d make one dumb mistake after another.”

Kennedy’s lips curved in a wintry smile. “Probably.”

“You don’t think he’s guilty either.”

Kennedy did not agree or disagree. “I’m having trouble with the timeline. McEnroe left the Madigans’ around ten thirty. Witnesses corroborate that. And we’ve got it on record Rebecca continued to party for the next two and a
half hours as though she hadn’t a care in the world. That
doesn’t mean she wasn’t fuming inside and that she didn’t
eventually storm over to have it out with McEnroe, but
there are no calls to him on her cell phone, and there
wouldn’t have been time for him to return her car to the
garage before people noticed she was missing. One of the
first things her friends did was check whether her car was
still there.”

“Assuming the witnesses are telling the truth.”

“There’s always that.”

“It’s also hard to picture somebody snatching her out of
her own backyard in front of how many witnesses without
someone seeing something. There are about two cleared
acres separating the Madigan property line from the
woods. Not a single tree in that stretch of land. There
wouldn’t be any place to hide.”

“I agree it would be nearly impossible to drag someone
kicking and screaming across that distance without
attracting notice. But someone walking quietly on her own
might make it to the woods unnoticed.”

“You think Rebecca slipped out to meet someone?”

“I think it’s one possibility.”

“I think she’d have taken her phone. Girls her age
always have their phones.”

“You know a lot about teenage girls?” Kennedy raised a
skeptical eyebrow.

“I have a thirteen-year-old niece. She never goes
anywhere without her phone.”

Kennedy made a sound of acknowledgment. Or maybe
that was as close as he got to amusement.

Their meals arrived. Hot and fragrant food on oversized
blue and orange plates that looked like Qing Dynasty
knock-offs. Jason was surprised when Kennedy tore open
the paper-wrapped chopsticks and attacked his dinner with
efficient dexterity.

Jason said tentatively, “The Simpson kid said something to the effect that everyone knows the Huntsman didn’t act alone.”

“That was one theory for a time,” Kennedy replied. “We never found any evidence to support it.”

“Was anyone suspected of being Pink’s accomplice?”

“Pink's brother Dwayne. Deceased.” Kennedy expertly manipulated his chopsticks and popped a shrimp into his mouth. Golden sauce wetted his full lower lip.

“Why do you think the rumors of Pink having an accomplice have persisted?”

“Because it took us—law enforcement—way too long to figure out what was happening, and then to catch the offender. People want to convince themselves that wasn’t a failure on the part of the law, but that law enforcement was up against multiple villains.”

“Hm.” Jason didn’t buy it. He wasn’t sure even Kennedy bought it, but it seemed to be Kennedy’s last word on the topic.

They continued their meal in silence. The food was good, and Jason was very hungry. He had no complaints.

When their chopsticks finally scraped porcelain, Kennedy pulled his credit card out and signaled for the check. “This will go on my expense report.”

Jason nodded. Obviously their meals were going on one expense report or the other. Was Kennedy afraid Jason might view dinner as a friendly overture? No fear of that.

“How long have you been with the Bureau?” he asked as the portly waiter departed after returning Kennedy's card and the leather guest-bill presenter.

Kennedy signed the receipt and gave Jason one of those direct blue glances. “Seventeen years.”
“That's…”
“A long time.”
“Did you start out in law enforcement?”
“No.” Kennedy reached for his wallet. His smile was sardonic. “I started out with the Bureau. Why the sudden curiosity? I thought you were the guy with all the answers.”
Which meant what?
“No. I don’t think I have all the answers.”
“I know damn well you don’t have all the answers, Agent West.” Kennedy gave him a slightly derisive smile. He pushed back his chair with a force that rocked the small table and rose. “I’m going to turn in. See you in the a.m.”
That was clear enough. For a second or two Jason toyed with the comedic possibilities of walking a respectful two paces behind Kennedy all the way back to their motel, but Kennedy would not be amused, and anyway, Jason wasn’t quite ready for bed.
He watched Kennedy, a long, pale shadow, descend the narrow stairs to the alley and then stride through the gloom until he vanished from sight. Jason ate the two fortune cookies that had arrived with the bill.
   One fortune read: *Love for a person must extend to the crows on his roof.*
   That would be Kennedy's, clearly. If ever a guy had a permanent case of crows on the roof, it was he.
   The other slip of paper read: *The happiest life ends before death.*
   Great.
   Jason drained the last of his beer and left the restaurant, retracing his steps through the alley and heading back toward the General Warren Inn. As tired as he was, he was also restless, uneasy. Partly it was just the weirdness of being back in Kingsfield after all this time and under these circumstances. Partly…he wasn’t sure.
When he reached the motel, he glanced through the arches and saw the lamp shining behind the curtains in Kennedy’s hotel room. Maybe Kennedy was working late—or maybe he slept with the lights on.

Jason kept walking.

A block up the street he came to the Blue Mermaid pub. He recognized the flirtatiously smiling mermaid on the retro-style hand-painted sign, grinned inwardly, and pushed open the heavy door.

To his surprise the bar was busy. Not packed, but definitely doing a brisk trade.

Jason went to the bar. “What have you got on tap?” he asked the pretty blonde bartender. She had long, pale hair rippling in waves to her shoulders and glittery blue eye shadow. Her lipstick was a neutral color with a hint of gold. It was startling but effective.

She rattled off, “Anchor, Bell’s, Blue Moon, Budweiser, Bud Light, Coors Light, Corona, Miller Lite, Sam Adams—”
“Sam Adams.”
“You got it.”

Jason leaned back against the bar. Talk about memories. Back in the day they had served a decent lunch, and his parents had occasionally come for the burgers and kitschy charm. He had loved this place as a kid. In fact, he couldn’t wait to turn twenty-one so he could come in here and drink.

The motif was pure ahoy-thar-be-a-shipwreck! relying heavily on clunky wrought iron, broken trunks, and splintered kegs filled with sand and topped with paste junk jewelry. The walls were adorned with pirate flags, fiberglass fish, and kitschy 1950s mermaid memorabilia. The main attraction for his younger self—the pièce de résistance—had been the retro mermaid “tank” complete with plastic seaweed and a giant conch shell.
In actuality the tank was just an ornately framed plate glass window set into the wall and covered with blue cellophane. Once upon a time a succession of scantily clad mermaids had reclined on the glittering blue sand in the room behind the glass, entertaining patrons by genteelly waving their giant rubber fish tails while sipping drinks and reading fashion magazines.

The mermaids had fallen out of favor in the eighties, which Jason always thought was a shame although at seventeen his own taste had run more to mermen. The black curtains drawn across the front of the tank window cast a slightly funereal air over the former exhibit. The bartender set his moisture-beaded glass on a fish-shaped coaster. “Did you want to run a tab?”

Jason shook his head. “What do I owe you?” She told him, and he pulled a couple of bills out of his wallet. “Keep the change.”

“Thanks.” She smiled. “You’re with the FBI, right?” He smiled. “Is it my haircut?” She laughed. “No. It’s your suit.” “I’m not wearing a suit.” “Yes you are. Only it doesn’t have anything to do with your clothes.”

It was Jason’s turn to laugh. She offered a hand. “Candy Davies.” “Jason West.” They shook.

“You think you’re going to find her? Rebecca?” Jason said, “I think we’re all going to do our best. Were you at the party at the Madigans’?”

“Me?” Candy looked taken aback. “How old do you think I am? No, I wasn’t at that party. Getting drunk with a bunch of high-schoolers isn’t my idea of how to spend a Friday night.” “Right. Sorry.”
She tossed her hair in a dismissive gesture. “It’s terrible for her family. Terrible for the whole town. I hope whatever happened, it’s not like…”

“The last time?” Jason finished.

She nodded.

“Do you know Rebecca well?” He sipped his Sam Adams.

Candy’s smile was dry. “I know her. Not well. If you want the truth, I think she’s a spoiled brat. Or at least I sure don’t remember feeling that sense of entitlement at that age. Of course, my parents weren’t rich. Anyway. I’m sorry about what’s happened. She doesn’t deserve to be kidnapped. Or whatever.”

Not kidnapped. There would have been a ransom demand by now. Rebecca had either walked away under her own steam or she had been taken. If she had been abducted, it wasn’t for money.

“I mean, you guys did get the right guy last time?” Candy was only half-joking. A lot of people in Kingsfield were probably asking the same question.

Don’t look at me.

“Yes,” Jason said firmly. “We got the right guy. Whatever has happened to Rebecca, the Huntsman is behind bars.”

One of the patrons at the other end of the bar waved to Candy, and she smiled apologetically to Jason and moved off.

Jason studied the room and revised his original impression. The bar was busy, but the mood was not convivial. In fact, it was a little somber.

The front door swung open, and Boyd Boxner walked in.

Jason considered turning his back to the room, but Boxner would spot him eventually, and what did it matter
anyway? He wasn’t afraid to face Boyd. Whatever he had felt, it was a long time ago.

Sure enough, Boxner’s tawny gaze scanned the room and lit on Jason. A weird expression crossed his face. He sauntered over to the bar.

“Jason West,” Boxner said. “Did you think I wouldn’t recognize you?”

“I assumed you did recognize me. I recognized you.”

This momentarily nonplussed Boxner. He recovered quickly. “So you’re in the FBI.”

“I am.”

“That’s a surprise.”

“It’s a surprising kind of world.”

Boxner was a handsome enough guy, but not the young god he’d been at eighteen. His face was fuller, his waist thicker, his shoulders burly. There was a touch of premature gray in his sideburns. His aftershave was nice though. Something light and herbal and overtly masculine.

He was studying Jason with equal curiosity. His lip curled. “I thought you were going to be the next Jackson Pollock?”

*Jackson Pollock?* Did Boxner actually know who Jackson Pollock was?

“Nope,” Jason said. “It turns out I wasn’t good enough.”

If he thought self-deprecation would divert Boxner, he was wrong.

“No shit. Somehow the girls always fell for it.” Boxner’s expression screwed up into what he maybe imagined was a soulful look. “The sensitive *artiste*. Girls always go for that. Which is pretty funny in your case.”

Right. Because Boxner had been one of the first to figure out that Jason was gay. In fact, he’d probably realized the truth before Jason had. Definitely a late bloomer, Jason.
“I gotta confess,” Jason said mildly, “you remember a lot more about me than I do about you.”

Even in the blue-tinged light, he could see Boxner changed color. *Score.* But it wasn’t true. Jason had had a crush on Boxner for several years. Talk about misguided affections. That was adolescence for you. Boxner had had a thing for Honey and Honey had a thing for Jason and Jason had a thing for Boxner.

Anyway.

Ancient history.

Boxner ordered a beer from Candy. He greeted some of the other patrons at the bar and drank his beer.

Jason could feel they weren’t done though, and sure enough, after a few minutes, Boxner turned back to him.

“I didn’t realize the FBI allowed gays in.”

One thing about training for law enforcement. It taught you to control your temper. And your face. Plus, Jason knew a wide smile was more effective with the Boxners of the world than any amount of huffing and puffing. He grinned and, for good measure, gave Boxner a knowing wink. “Yes. They do.”

Boxner’s face turned red. This time it was irritation, not embarrassment. He wasn’t smart enough to be easily embarrassed. “I would think being gay would make it hard to do your job.”

“Not that I’ve noticed.” What part of his job did good old Boyd imagine he would have trouble with? He almost asked, but really, he didn’t want to hear it. He said, “So, how’ve you been?”

Boxner, however, would not be distracted by chitchat. He sipped his beer and gave Jason a long, brooding look.

“Are you married?” Jason asked. He figured that question coming from him would probably fluster Boxner.

“No,” Boxner said. “Are you?”
Oh, touché.
“No.”

Studying Boxner now, Jason felt rueful amusement at how very wrong his younger self had got it. Boxner was still attractive enough in a blunt, blond way—a bit like a budget brand version of Sam Kennedy—but other than his looks, it was difficult to recall what had been so fascinating about him. Maybe in the end it just came down to Boxner’s certainty, his assurance. Those were mighty rare commodities on the stock exchange of teenage masculinity. Jason, self-conscious and insecure—however well he managed to conceal it—had greatly admired those qualities in Boxner. As an adult he had learned to appreciate men who didn’t assume they were always right or always knew the answer. The adult Jason no longer misread arrogance for confidence.

Boxner said slowly, “It’s kind of a weird coincidence you being back here the same time we’ve got a copycat killer running around.”

That took Jason aback. Both that Boxner took it for granted they were dealing with a copycat killer and that he’d have the balls to imply whatever it was he seemed to be implying.

Or maybe he wasn’t implying anything. Maybe he was just being his normal jerk self.

Jason said, “Yeah, it’s hardly a coincidence since I’m here specifically to investigate.”

“Yep. That’s what’s so weird about it,” Boxner said with grim satisfaction.

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About the Author

Author of over sixty titles of classic Male/Male fiction featuring twisty mystery, kickass adventure, and unapologetic man-on-man romance, JOSH LANYON’S work has been translated into eleven languages. Her FBI thriller Fair Game was the first Male/Male title to be published by Harlequin Mondadori, then the largest romance publisher in Italy. Stranger on the Shore (Harper Collins Italia) was the first M/M title to be published in print. In 2016 Fatal Shadows placed #5 in Japan’s annual Boy Love novel list (the first and only title by a foreign author to place on the list). The Adrien English series was awarded the All Time Favorite Couple by the Goodreads M/M Romance Group.

She is an Eppie Award winner, a four-time Lambda Literary Award finalist (twice for Gay Mystery), An Edgar nominee, and the first ever recipient of the Goodreads All Time Favorite M/M Author award.

Josh is married and lives in Southern California.

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