

BOOK 1 IN THE SUSPENSE-THRILLER SERIES: SUFFER THE LITTLE CHILDREN

THE SILENCE OF CHILDREN

"A compulsive and original
suspense-thriller. If you
love a good mystery with
some WOW! moments, you
need to read this book."

CHRIS
LEWANDO

This work has been awarded the B.R.A.G. Medallion

for recognition of high standard in
an independently published work.

Reviewers' Comments

"...reads like a psychological breakdown of life and all its depravities. Chris Lewando's fiction makes us face our imperfections, our humanity, our compassion, and what's important in life..."

"Wonderful, brave characters: Dad, Deirdre, Greg, Julie, Kev; the peripherals shine as bright as the main characters."

"The Silence of Children covers the seriousness of crimes against children, and the ruthlessness of those who make their fortunes from it, without going into explicit detail."

"Just finished The Silence of Children, and I am blown away. Fantastic book that moved me."

"The Silence of Children was an amazing book. Difficult subject matter but incredibly thoughtful and precise writing."

"Clever ending. I was cursing the author for stopping! It feels like a TV Netflix series the whole way through. There MUST be a sequel planned."

"The Silence of Children is a great read, and once it drew me in, I couldn't put it down until the end. The story became riveting and I read it almost in one sitting. Like all good books it also left me wanting more, and I hope the author will continue the storyline. Overall a great read that I would thoroughly recommend to anyone interested in a great story that could so easily, though hopefully never, be based on fact."

~ **Writing as Chris Lewando** ~

Suffer the Little Children, series:

The Silence of Children

The Price of Children

The Loyalty of Children

The Recovery of Children

Jessie Running

Night Shadows

Stations of the Soul

Daemon Spawn

Dark Seer

Death of a Dream

Mendip Moon (YA)

Waymarks for Authors (non-fiction)

~ **Writing as Daisy O'Shea** ~

(published by Bookouture)

My Irish Home (short)

The Irish Key

The Irish Child

The Irish Family Secret

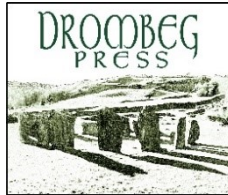
Legend of the Selkie

The Silence of Children

Book 1 in the series: Suffer the Little Children

Chris Lewando

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First Edition

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Cover image by Damonza

Prologue

I love my sister, in the grand scheme of things, but we've never exactly been buddies; well, certainly not since Mom died, and our family kind of fell apart. Dad lost his career as a pediatrician; I took myself off to university and got a PhD in something mind-blowingly boring, as it turned out; and Lauralee zoomed off to the other side of America, married a tedious bore, and morphed into a cookie-cutter Mom.

And there it was: family disintegrated.

I decided I'd climb the corporate ladder in some way, but when I discovered how many other tenacious climbers I'd have to elbow out of the way, I shunted sideways. Dad became apathetic and ended up working a variety of jobs not suited to his intellect. The only one who seemed happy with her lot was Lauralee.

And, boy, how we messed that up for her.

Dad hadn't seen either of us in a while, but it was he who inadvertently brought us all closer than we'd been in a long while. He got us all in a mess too but in all honesty, I don't feel any sense of regret. Instead, I feel energized, reborn. It's just life, I guess. I certainly didn't plan it.

By the time my life took a somewhat scary turn, it was too late to back out. But if someone said to me, now, do you want to go back to your boring life delving into other people's sordid secrets for your boss (a high-flying lawyer), would I say yes? I don't think so.

~ 1 ~

Some people recall their dreams when they wake up. I don't. I have a vague awareness of having been dreaming, but it's gone instantly, a door slammed. I lie for a moment wondering what's bothering me. It's three a.m. and someone's pressing rhythmically on the door buzzer. I listen again, and realize it's my burner buzzing under my pillow. Bleary-eyed, I drag it out to discover a pile of missed calls from an unknown number, and a text. I know who the text is from, of course.

LITTLE FROG. I NEED YOUR HELP. NOW. I'M OUTSIDE. BE QUIET.

Once I would have thought *what the hell?* But in the last few months I've changed. I'm awake instantly. I slide out of bed and throw on my sweats. I grab my fanny pack and stuff my wallet, burner, and pepper spray in it. I ease the door to the living room closed so the faint click of the deadbolt on the front door won't transmit through the building, and slide out. I lock the door behind me, holding my breath again at the faint *snick*. To not lock it would shout loud and clear to Wayne, the FBI guy lurking upstairs, that I'm onto him.

Night in Baltimore holds a strange depth, with its hard lights and dark shadows. It takes a moment to adjust. The city noise, which never stops, drones on in the background. I can't see Dad. Then headlights flash down the street, just once. I jog a couple blocks, and his hand pops out of a window and beckons. I climb in the car.

Dad looks haggard, unkempt. He smiles, but his eyes are lined with exhaustion. “Sorry, Dee. I didn’t want to drag you into this.”

“Into what?”

He flicks his head, and I glance into the back of the car. There’s a girl in the back seat, with a blue fleece blanket decorated with scenes from *Ice Princess* around her shoulders. She has a thin face, surrounded by lank, dark hair. From her absolute and unnatural stillness, she could be a doll, but her unblinking eyes are staring at me emotionlessly, as if she’s gone past the point of terror.

My own heart rate doubles. I wrench myself back, my voice strained. “Dad, what have you *done*?”

“Dee, this is Julie. She needs our help.”

“What happened? Where are you taking her?”

I look back at her again. The girl says nothing, but the faint grimace on her face tells me she knows life has just gone belly up, and she sees in my face that I don’t want to become involved.

“I have someone lined up. Suzanne looked after the children before they were rehomed, but she’s not able... I can’t have a child in the house on my own, because they’d think the worst.” He blinks hard, but a tear escapes.

“My caregiver shot her,” the girl says, from the back. “She’s dead.”

“I didn’t stop to pick her up... Suzanne.” Dad’s eyes are leaking now, openly. “It was what we agreed. If this happened, the child’s life comes first. Julie was waiting for us, just where we’d arranged, but when we got out of the car, they were there, waiting, too. They must have tracked her.”

He starts the car and pulls away quietly.

“How could they track her?” I ask urgently.

“A tracker of some kind. Probably in her shoes.”

“I tossed my shoes out the window”—she nods toward

Dad—"like he told me to," Julie says. "I didn't know they could tag me. I saw him, running after, when we took off. They always found me before. I thought this time was different. I thought this time I'd get away."

"Hopefully you have," Dad says.

"What if the tracker wasn't in the shoes?" I say tightly.

His eyes widen. He says, over his shoulder, "What are you wearing?" The car swerves slightly before he gets control.

"Just clothes."

"Take them off. Everything. Throw them out the window."

Cold hits my gut. "Not here, Dad. It's too close to my home. Wait till we get on the freeway."

The girl moves, shifting around in the back. I see her arms in the mirror, ripping off a T-shirt, struggling with leggings.

"Dad, what if—"

"Just let me drive. I'll explain when we get to the safe house. We have to get the car off the road. They might have got the registration, and we don't know who's out looking for us."

"Jesus Christ," I say faintly.

He takes a sharp breath, his hands tightening on the wheel. For the first time, I realize his shirt is soaked with blood. "Dad! Are you hurt?"

"A nick," he admits.

"How far is the safe house?"

"An hour or so, out on the west freeway."

"Pull over. I'll drive."

"That's my girl."

He gives a smile that echoes the days when Mom was dying, the smile that doesn't reach the eyes. He pulls over. He claws his way around the hood, and I scooch over into the driver's seat. He favors his right side as he sinks carefully into the passenger seat.

"Right. I'm going south for a bit first. We'll ditch the

clothes, then head back. Throw them off if they do have a tracker, or someone finds her stuff.”

About twenty miles south, we reach a bridge across a waterway. I don’t know how trackers work, but I screech to a halt and leap out. I claw gravel from the edge of the road, fill her hoodie pockets, tie everything in a bundle, and toss it over. It sits on the surface for a moment before slowly gathering water. I don’t wait to see if it sinks. I just hope my instinct is right.

I get back in the car and glance at the girl. “Is that everything? No jewelry, hair clasps, anything?”

“Nothin’ else,” she says.

She’s wrapped the blanket around herself, not bothered by being naked in a car with strangers, but maybe she’s used to that. She’s more animated, less doll-like, as though we’ve given her hope.

“Direct me,” I say grimly, pulling a one-eighty, “and don’t damn well pass out.”

He gives a cough of laughter and groans. “Hit the west freeway. Ten miles or so out.”

As we head back to Baltimore, I glance in the mirror. Julie seems to have zonked out, curled up on the seat. I’m hoping the tracker isn’t an implant. Dad lurches forward. I get the impression he’s losing consciousness.

I’m not panicking, but there’s a coldness inside my brain as I shout at him, “Stay with me! Dad! Stay with me!” If he passes out now, I don’t have a clue what I’d do. I head west, and nine miles or so past the junction. As the sun lights the sky behind us, promising a clear day, I yell for directions. “Dad! Where am I going?”

His head lifts heavily, and he points. “There’s a drive, further down on the left.”

I’m hit by a draining sense of relief as we turn into a private drive, down a bumpy track, and circle around the back of a bungalow. It’s colonial style, with a wide porch. Could be

straight out of a Western. I climb out the car, and up three creaking wooden stairs to the back door. I fumble with the keys until I find one that fits. I switch on the inside light and find myself in a large, homely kitchen showing recent signs of occupancy. There's a large window spilling light out onto the car. If there's anyone out there with a sniper's rifle, they couldn't miss. I go back out, and Dad's trying to lift the sleeping girl from the car. I push him out of the way.

"Go on in. I'll get her," I say.

She's heavier than I expect, and I stagger slightly up the steps. Dad reaches out to steady me, but I wonder who is supporting whom.

Inside, he leads the way to a small bedroom and points to the bed. I lay the girl down, still wrapped in the fleece, and pull another cover over her. She makes a small noise in the back of her throat, but doesn't wake. I push the hair gently off her face. Maybe she's older than I thought. The bones of her face shine starkly through gray skin. What happened to you? I wonder, and back out, pulling the door nearly closed behind me.

"Dad, you need to tell me what's going on."

He's slumped on a sofa. "Alcohol," he grunts, and before my flash of anger transmits to words, he's pointing. "Bathroom cabinet. Red container."

Now the light is on him, I see a tear in the jacket he's trying to remove, surrounded by a dark tide of dried blood. I leap forward and ease the jacket off him. In the bathroom I find a substantial medical kit and a red plastic bottle with a spray plunger, which I guess is the alcohol. I bring them all to the living room and wince. I've never seen a bullet wound before. I never want to again. His side, just above the waistline, is ripped open, like a gaping mouth smeared with lipstick. "Not as bad as it looks," Dad says. "Just a surface wound. Pass me that syringe, put the kettle on and bring hot water and paper towels."

He injects himself, presumably with antibiotics and anesthetic, but when I return, he's unconscious, the empty syringe on the floor, his trailing hand slack. I freeze. What the hell am I doing here? Wherever *here* is. It's a waking nightmare.

I heave his feet up onto the sofa, so the gaping wound is facing me. I probe with my fingers. No blood spurts out. It's just under the ribs, but I can't feel any sharp shards of bone. When people say *flesh wound* you imagine something fairly innocuous, but I nearly throw up as I clean the crud away with hot water. I spray the wound with whatever's in the bottle. I pull the edges of the angry lips closed with strips of Band-Aid. I suspect it needs suturing, but that's one step too far for me. I cover everything with a clean dressing. Then, with some difficulty, I wrap a bandage tightly around his torso. Dad's still and gray, and hasn't moved through the whole process. I don't recall a time I touched my father so intimately. It feels wrong, as if I'm violating some social law.

When I'm done, I take a look around the silent house. There's a second bedroom, the double bed covered in a patchwork comforter. There's evidence of feminine occupancy: slippers, a lacy robe, scent on a dressing table. Does this house belong to the woman who died? The one he left behind? I yank the comforter from the bed and cover him with it. He's shifted slightly, but his breathing is regular. I'm hoping he's slipped into a healing sleep, not a coma. I've heard shock does that, but he's the damn doctor.

Now I've taken better stock of my surroundings, I realize it's the kind of home I'd once dreamed of owning. One where a dog could be let out safely each morning, and I could sit there on the porch with a mug of coffee, watching the world go by.

The main part of the house is one spacious, open-plan area: kitchen, dining and living accommodation combined into one L-shaped room. The wooden floor is scattered with rag rugs from another continent, vibrant with a red and green

theme. The furniture is old, the place comfortable with a mish-mash of things that look as though they've been shunted through a few garage sales before landing here. The curtains at the front of the house, facing the drive, are thick, lined to cut out the winter's chill. I pull them closed to shut us in; what I don't see can't hurt me, after all. It's what Dad used to say when we were kids, when faceless black windows were gateways to nightmares. A glass-fronted bookcase leans against one wall with books I recognize from my childhood. I know now that this is his *home*.

Exhaustion hits me, and probably shock.

I make a cup of coffee, put my shoulders back, and swivel my head around a few times. I yawn, but I'm too wired to sleep, scared of what's going to happen next. I sit in a chair opposite Dad and gaze outward, over the kitchen sink, at a hillside where fields meet scrubby brush. In the stillness, I hear birds squabbling over hanging feeders. What if he gets worse and needs a doctor? What happens if the feds or cops turn up? What happens to the girl if they do? Or if they don't. And what had happened to make her agree to run to people she didn't know?

~ 2 ~

A noise startles me awake and I realize I must have dozed off in the chair. I freeze, and crack my eyelids. The girl is staring at Dad. She's wearing a frilly robe that's ten sizes too big for her skinny frame. She reaches out and touches his gray face, maybe to see if he's alive. She must sense me then; she spins around, like a sprinter about to take off. Her face is the picture of terror. We make eye contact, and gradually her tension eases.

"You're his daughter, aintcha?" she says "But you ain't in his crew."

"My name's Deirdre," I respond. "And no, I'm not."

I hadn't been, anyway. Now I'm not so sure. She's real skinny, but taller than she seemed last night. She has the faint drawl of a Southern accent, but her face betrays the hard experience of someone older. Not *where am I, what's going to happen to me*, but a kind of acceptance that this is simply one more time and place in which to survive.

She indicates Dad. "Is he okay?"

"I hope so." My voice is dry with sarcasm. "I don't know what we're going to do if he's not. What happened to Suzanne?"

"They told me to go to the mall. There's a place out back where they keep dumpsters. I was to hide there and wait. It was dark when the car came. I couldn't see who was in it, so I didn't come out. So they got out and was calling my name. I

thought it was safe.” She pauses. “I ran over, and then there was shooting. She dropped dead, but your dad shoved me in the car and drove off, quick.”

“How do you know she was dead?”

“I seen bits of brains coming out her head.”

Hell’s bells.

She turns to survey her surroundings. She explores, prowling as I did, then uses the bathroom. Then she comes back in, asking, “Is there food?”

I indicate the kitchen area. “I haven’t a clue. Take a look.”

I lean over and check Dad, putting the back of my hand on his forehead. He’s cool, which I think is a good sign. No fever hopefully means the wound isn’t festering, but it’s early days. I haven’t a clue how soon these things cut in.

The girl has found granola, and my stomach growls. “Mind if I have some?” I ask. She shrugs. I move slowly, as one would around a feral animal, not wanting to scare her. I eat leaning at the counter, then search the cupboards and fridge. “Toast?” I ask. “Orange juice?”

She nods. When I’d first seen her in the car, I’d thought she was around six-years old. When she spoke, I put her around seven or eight. Now I see she’s older. I’m not very good at judging ages, but she’s definitely pre-pubescent, nine or ten, maybe. And intelligent and lucid. I watch her for a while, then ask, “So, what’s going on?”

“Suzanne found me one day, trying to run. But Mr. Meachum, that’s my caregiver, was right behind me. He was all nice and stuff to her, told her I was bad and disobedient. I thought Suzanne was took in, like everyone else. But when he was draggin’ me off, she gave me this note, secret like, with a telephone number. A bit later, I grabbed a cell when this old geezer was passed out drunk, an’ called the number. Suzanne tol’ me to run away to the mall and hide out back. On Tuesday, before I got locked in for the night. She said she’d come an’ get

me.”

“Why did you want to run?”

“Because I was being sexually abused.”

She says it so matter-of-factly it’s hard to take in.

“Abused?” I echo faintly. “By your caregiver?”

“No, by the other men he brought in. My caregiver was starving me so I’d look younger. That’s what the men wanted. Young girls. I told the social worker, once, but he said I was lying, and they believed him. I was locked up for days for telling, and just given water. Then I had to say sorry, and be extra nice to one of the men before he’d feed me. I said sorry soon enough, I was that hungry.”

Jesus wept. “And what about your teachers, at school?”

Her face hardened, and I guessed she’d been uncared for and dirty, and picked on by everyone who was better off. No, maybe the teachers wouldn’t have interfered. “I didn’t go to no school, anyway, the last year. He kept me home.”

“So, you didn’t know Suzanne at all? Weren’t you afraid of what she wanted you for?”

Her lip curls. “It wouldn’t have made no difference. I’d have died soon enough if I stayed where I was. Soon as I grew to be a woman.” She waved a hand over her flat chest. “The other girl who was with me, she disappeared one day. She tol’ me how it was. They killed her, for sure.”

“How old are you?”

“Eleven.”

“And your parents?”

“Dunno. They went off, left me behind. People found me in the house. Leastways, that’s what they told me. I don’t remember. I was too young.”

“So, you’ve been in foster care all your life?”

She nods, and I realize the word *care* covers a multitude of mistruths. I wince, turning to the window to hide my anger. She’s speaking of her own childhood, her own abuse, with the

rational understanding of an adult.

“Suzanne was gonna find me a real home, she said.” Can-did eyes surveyed me. “I knew she was lying, but it was a nice dream. Sometimes dreams are all I got. But she came and got me, with your dad, just like she said, so I hoped... Only they shot her. Now I dunno.”

There’s movement, and Dad heaves himself to his feet, groaning, holding onto his side.

“You okay?” I ask.

“You did a grand job on me, Dee.” He’s smiling over a wealth of grief. “I see you two have introduced yourselves.”

I make him a cup of coffee as he eases down onto one of the hard kitchen seats. I wonder how long he’s been awake, listening.

“So, Dad, what now?”

“We take Julie to her new parents, as planned. If you can stay for a couple of days, I’d be obliged. I won’t involve you again, I promise.”

He smiles, and I smile, shaking my head, thinking of that folk song Mom used to sing: *promises and breezes all wisp away*. It was one thought better than *cross my heart and hope to die*, anyway.

I want to run away, go home, pretend this never happened, but Dad’s weak from the wound, and the girl needs a chaper-one. That’s why he came for me. And also, because he’d been shot. If he’d crashed the car, he’d have ended up in prison, and the girl would probably have ended up back in the very situation he’d rescued her from. From what I can gather, the authorities were more inclined to believe the caregiver who was selling Julie’s body, than the child herself. Perhaps it was just easier to turn a blind eye, pretend they didn’t see the obvious, because that would have meant taking action, dragging the department into a legal mess.

I keep an eye on the TV, and see a newflash about an

unknown woman's body being found in a mall parking lot. Police suspect it to be a mugging as she had no ID on her, and no purse. Julie's disappearance isn't mentioned. It probably hasn't been brought to the attention of the authorities.

I call work, and after Janine explodes at me for my non-appearance, I say, "Sorry, it was a family emergency." It's not far from the truth; it's not every day your dad gets shot.

"I suppose you'll let me know, in your own good time, when you're coming back to work?"

Her voice holds the warmth of a north wind, and I wonder if she'll use this as an excuse to dump me. I was kind of expecting it anyway. The only trouble being, no income equals no condo. And Janine probably won't give me a reference. I tell her I'll be back in a few days.

~ 3 ~

Within a couple of days, Julie is less pale, and her straight black hair, once cleaned, has the deep, healthy sheen of an eggplant. I wonder if she's got South American blood. She doesn't know. The change isn't just external, either. In just a few days, she's morphed from the angular cynic to an intelligent girl with hopes for a future. Some kids are scarred for life by things they should never have experienced, but Julie's a survivor. She asks what her new family will be like. I guess she's still bothered that she's being sold, like merchandise, to people who will just use her. Dad tries to reassure her, but she retains a wall we can't break through.

Meanwhile, I've invested her with some of my own brand of cynical psychology, which is *never* be persuaded to see a psychoanalyst. Dwelling on bad stuff sets it in mental concrete. You can't change the past, and you can't entirely walk away from it, but you *can* decide to not let it ruin your future.

It turns out that Dad has a set of 'parents' waiting for her. Parents who were rejected for adoption because the guy had been accused by his ex-wife of being abusive. His *new* wife, of ten years, said it was ridiculous, but it was down on his record. The plan was for Suzanne to drive her to the city while Dad went back to work as a bus driver, maintaining his cover in plain sight.

I don't know how many kids he's rescued; he won't say. I know he anguishes over the vast numbers he can't help, but

he's just one man, fighting against a social tide of unfairness. I kind of take this in my stride, after everything else. It's actually a relief to know the detail, because I believe him. Absolutely.

He's evolved a process: once a kid is matched with a new family, the parents relocate to a place where the kid won't be recognized, and neighbors won't wonder how the couple had suddenly acquired a child. Money changes hands, for necessary documentation and ad-hoc expenditure. Dad isn't doing it for the money. Everything goes toward helping the next kid.

I was right, that he and Suzanne had lived here for years. He doesn't tell me outright, but I gather he loved her. Maybe they'd even loved each other while Mom was still alive.

The rational part of me knows that he had to protect his self-appointed vocation, but unease and regrets prick at me, that I've been shut out of this new family unit.

We're sitting out on the porch, enjoying a last-meal kind of freedom. He says he has to drive Julie to New York in two days.

"You're not well enough to drive," I say. "I'll take her, and drop you in Philly on the way. But what do I do, then?"

"Dump the car, preferably somewhere it will get swiped or trashed. Clean it. Get the bus back home, and pretend all this never happened."

Yeah, right. As if I could erase this, like wiping a file from my computer. This episode will be burned like a tattoo on my psyche.

Julie's new parents will be waiting to take her to Auckland. They have relocated their business to New Zealand, and registered for residency as a couple with a daughter. Julie proudly shows me her passport, delivered by courier yesterday morning, but Dad moves it quickly aside, before I can take a proper look.

"People don't need to know your new name, Julie. No one.

Not even me. And when you get there, you must never speak of the old one. Never. No matter who's asking."

Later, when Julie is asleep, he says to me, "I truly didn't want to involve you in this."

"I get it. Julie's life was on the line, not just her future."

"It was," he says, relieved that I understand.

But I'm not entirely sure I do understand. I mean, why am I risking my career, my life, my freedom, for a girl I didn't know a few days ago? Really, it doesn't make sense.

As we drive away from the bungalow, Dad looks behind, and I know he's thinking of Suzanne. The house is infused with her presence—the eclectic clutter, the cleanliness, the patchwork comforter she'd probably made herself. Dad said it's as though she stepped out for a walk and would come back in the door at any moment

As we drive north, he gives me one of those straight looks. "Are you going to tell Laurie?"

My sister has a family. There are limits to what she's able to contain. "Best she doesn't know. But we still have the issue of the people who are trying to find you. You truly have no idea who it is?"

He shakes his head. "I thought it was the feds, but now I'm not so sure. A month ago, we helped another child, quite by accident. He came to us via someone we'd met on the circuit who asked us to take him on. He said his name was Santy, but I don't know if that's true. He said he'd been abused for a couple of years, and they got careless one day, and he ran. He gave me a few details, and it sounded like a pedophile ring, not just some lone pervert. National, even. He said he was moved a few times during the year, to different places. But when we tried to relocate the boy, he ran, which has never happened before. Suzanne said he was a plant. I couldn't believe that a child of that age would be helping them, but who knows what they had

on him? A younger sibling, maybe.”

“So, you think this woman who’s trying to find you is part of a professional pedophile ring?”

“Maybe.”

“Jesus, Dad. What are we going to do?”

He shakes his head and shrugs. This gig was all very well while he and Suzanne remained anonymous, but if they know who they’re looking for, it stands to reason they’ll be watching Laurie and me too.’

I’m nervous the whole drive, checking behind for anyone following, though I suspect it isn’t so easy as they make it seem in the movies. In my rearview mirror, all I really see are indefinable shapes looming, then passing. I glance sideways as they slide by, and catch the glimpse of a face. Then, when they’re in front of me, I see the color of the vehicle. The make eludes me. Any car I’ve ever owned was bought for price, color, and availability. They get me from A to B, and if they do it without breaking down, I love them. I’m not a fast driver. I’m a tarmac tortoise, trundling along well below the speed limit, which encourages everyone to overtake me with grim determination.

Dad sits silently, staring at nothing. It seems as if he’s just taking this in his stride, but I know he’s grieving. Julie is silent in the back, watching the world flit by. She truly doesn’t seem worried about the future, but thinking back, when I’d been her age, I’d often hidden my true feelings from the adults around me. For her own sake, I hope her experiences don’t rise to haunt her after she’s had time to settle back to being a child. According to the literature, girls who’ve been traumatized in that way often struggle to form lasting attachments.

But they deserve a chance to find out if they can.

It’s an hour back to Baltimore, and a couple more to Philly, where Dad jumps out at a gas station and Julie hops into the front. We wave goodbye, as though it’s just another day, and a

couple of hours later I'm pulling into the short-stay parking lot at JFK Airport. I call the number I was given, let them know where we are, and wait.

Now even Julie's biting her lip.

Eventually a middle-aged couple approach the car. They're well-dressed, up-scale people, with smiles like grimaces fixed to their faces. I guess they're wondering, like me, whether the cops are going to leap out of the woodwork. Dad said he never lies to the prospective parents. They know their new eleven-year-old has been raped regularly for years. I hope they know what they're taking on.

We get out, and Julie grimaces back at them, unsure of what to say. The woman's smile softens. "Call me Mom, honey. Come and give me a hug. Everything's going to be fine from now on."

Even I believe her.

There are no introductions. The man grabs Julie's new case, and they walk quickly toward the terminal. Julie turns once to give me a smile, a wave, and a mouthed *Thanks*.

I know I'll never see her again.

A tide of good feeling washes through me, the sort you get when you give someone a gift they've wanted all their lives but never thought they'd get. That self-gratification is followed by a tide of fear. I need to get out of here. I drive the car to the seediest area I can find, wipe all over the surfaces I touched, then open the driver's window in invitation and throw the keys on the seat. With luck, someone will steal the car and any prints I've missed will be overwritten. I crack the burner, break the sim card, and throw the bits in different trash cans as I walk backward thumbing cabs until one stops.

~ 4 ~

But that isn't how my story started. It began with a visit from my sister, a month before that...

In the general scheme of things, I don't exactly hate my job, but there are a million things I'd do instead if I didn't need to earn a living. Today was a screaming waste of time, and I alternated between wanting to swim out to sea or pour boiling oil on my boss. As I navigate the wall-to-wall traffic on my way home, I wonder if there is more to life than this.

It's Friday and the weekend beckons. I have nothing planned to wreck it. Tomorrow I'll have a lazy start. I might take a leisurely jog in the park with my headphones pushing out something soothing, followed by an indulgently long shower. I might read a novel. I'll certainly shop—I'm out of the things that matter, like snacks and wine, and I'll kill time in front of a movie in the evening. By Sunday, I'll no doubt be bored enough to look forward to going back to work. This routine has seen me through several jobs, and I'm wondering whether I should jump ship again.

When my cell rings in the hands-free set, I suspect it's Janine, with an assignment that's going to eat into my weekend. I decide not to answer. I might lack motivation, but I still need time out. Driven by a hunger for social status, she has no concept that my time isn't owned by the firm, that I have a life beyond the office. But then, I reflect, I don't really.

I always assumed that one day I'd find something that really rocked my boat. I mean, everyone has something, don't they? Computer games, sports, stamp collecting, a family...

I've tried out a few hobbies over the years, mainly because acquaintances I know have helpfully tried to entice me into their own leisure activities, but nothing seems to stick. My sister, ever the manipulator, was exasperated with me the last time we met. She's been trying to partner me off for years. *I don't understand you*, she said. *I don't understand me, either*, I'd responded, truthfully. I've had a few relationships, of course—who hasn't? But I was never consumed by the need to slip into the family way. I've seen what it can do to couples, all that spring-bunny love turning to frustrated drudgery and financial nightmare. I'm too lazy to battle through those murky waters.

Sometimes I don't feel that I fit into this life, that I've been transplanted from another planet. Other people think that, too, especially when they hear the English vowels that slip into my conversation. As a kid, I'd tried so hard to lose my English background, but the massive input of social data that you absorb in the first seven years of your life is not so easy to eradicate. Mom and Dad met in Leeds, UK, where she was studying nursing, and he was a young doctor. For me, that time is a distant haze. After Mom got homesick, we relocated to her native America. I spent a few years being angry about being uprooted, but when we went back to England for a visit, when Dad's mom was dying, it felt foreign and strange, and made me feel as though I didn't belong anywhere. After our own Mom died of cancer, Dad relocated us to Baltimore, then Lauralee got married and migrated to the West Coast to become an average American mom, while I drifted through college, then back to my teenage hangout in Baltimore because I didn't know where else to go.

The lights change. The guy in front of me brakes hard, and

I do the same, almost surprised when I'm not shunted from behind. "Dickhead," I mutter.

Then the phone starts up again. Whoever is calling isn't going to go away. I glance at the screen, and my sister's name flashes up. On a Friday evening, when she should be feeding kids, pampering her upmarket husband? I stab the button, vaguely concerned. "Laurie? Is everything okay?"

"I've just landed."

"Landed where?"

"In Baltimore, of course." I'm stunned into silence, and she adds irritably, "I'm staying over. I said yesterday. Don't you check your email?"

A twinge of guilt hits me as I remember seeing an email from Laurie and wasn't in the mood to listen to a monologue about her wonderful children. It's unusual for her, though, to be so last-minute casual. Visits have to be planned when you have kids. I check the date. It's midterm as far as I can see. "What on earth are you doing here?" I ask, finally.

"I need to talk to you. I said in my email."

The one I haven't read. "Is there a problem?"

"No. Well, yes, I don't know."

Well, that's confusing, but I gather there's a problem of sorts. If she's traveled all this way, it's not for a cozy catch-up. I love my sister, in the grand scheme of things, but we have different lives, in vastly different parts of a rather large continent, and we've never exactly been buddies. The lights change and I negotiate a right. "What's the problem?"

"I'll explain when I get there. It's important."

Well, of course, it would be. Whatever crisis she's experiencing has to be analyzed and shared. "I'll get something to eat, and a bottle of wine," I say. I'll need it, even if she doesn't. "Do you need picking up?"

"No, I'll get a cab. See you there."

The line goes dead, and the traffic surges forward.

I screech into the local 7-Eleven and buy two bottles, a frozen stir-fry and quick noodles. A family drama on a Friday night is just what I don't need, and cooking isn't exactly my thing. Back home, I crank up the heat and throw the stir-fry into a wok, only just realizing how hungry I am.

My condo is in what had once been a large private residence, and is now still *select*, meaning only professionals or criminals can afford the rent. I have a touch of imposter syndrome, as I'm neither. I just prefer to spend on a nice place to live rather than socializing or foreign holidays. I don't know my neighbors. There's a network of tiny rooms upstairs once occupied by servants. A guy called Wayne Doring moved in up there, a few months back, when old Ted unexpectedly decided to move out, probably because of the stairs. Wayne's a bean counter, in his mid-thirties at a guess, and keeps himself in shape. The elderly couple, the Smythes, in the condo opposite mine, told me Wayne's an auditor, in one of our brief dialogues. They spend less time here than in exotic locations, but somehow manage to know everything about everybody. I suspect Mr. Smythe was once a gangster, maybe still is, despite his retired status.

The two couples on the ground level I don't know at all, except to say hello and goodbye to at the appropriate times. But actually, I don't want to know them. I like my own company. My sister thinks I'm inhuman, emotionless, but that's because she's a social animal, always visiting or being visited by a huge circle of acquaintances who dress like wannabe film stars.

I do feel alone, sometimes, but I'm not good at relationships. I'd once hoped to get lucky in the man-with-money department, as my sister had, but I'd discovered that partners invade my space. In fact, the longer I live, the more I realize I don't want the money if it comes with more intimate obligations.

Fiction does a good job of serving my sexual needs, and a dog would solve the loneliness issue. My crusty humor wouldn't upset it. It could accompany me on my morning run, keep less hairy predators at arm's length, and live on the sandwiches I forget to eat, but residential restrictions prohibit pets. One day I'll get my own place, make my own rules. Maybe.

By the time Lauralee arrives, the flat is less arctic, the wine chilled and the stir-fry overcooked. She lets herself in. We have keys to each other's places, not that her husband, Tim, likes the idea of me having open access to *his* home. He looks at me sometimes with wounded pride, as if wondering why I don't like him, when I'm darned sure he doesn't like me. I don't *dislike* him, exactly, but what is there to like? He's up his own patootie.

Laurie's chic, as always. Her artfully highlighted brown hair is done up in some kind of clever chignon. She's wearing a designer suit that emphasizes the curves that arrived with her children. Me, I've never succumbed to nature's barbed cravings for little millstones. I've met enough women who spent years regretting whatever hormones had prompted that desire. I took a degree in psychology, and ended up as a therapist for a while, my career decision having wavered in the face of endless years of education. The barrage of negativity was mind-blowingly depressing. I had a rethink, and shunted sideways into the legal profession. It still means training and more exams, but now the women I meet are not on the couch bewailing misfortune, but lining up for divorces, trying to screw as much dough as they can out of the husbands they had once sought so avidly.

'Hi, Laurie,' I greet.

'Hi, yourself,' she grumbles.

Okay, so the trip hasn't put her in a good mood.

"Cool shoes!" I lie, eyeing the heels Lauralee is kicking off.

Darned if I could wear them. Practicality wins over chic every time in my world, and old-lady bunions are simply not worth the risk.

“Nice curtains,” she says, giving my living area a once-over, probably analyzing it down to the last dollar. “It’s about time you bought something of your own for this place. You could do with an interior designer. But those carpets! And you said you were going to buy a table. God, Dee, it’s a barn.”

We exchange awkward hugs and kisses. “I’m comfortable with my barn,” I admit. “And it’s warm. So, to what do I owe the pleasure?”

She shrugs out of the designer jacket and yawns widely. Under the makeup, which she’s managed to retain over a seven-hour journey, she looks drawn. “God, what a day. Wine and food, then I’ll unload.”

“Yippee.”

“For once, could you not be sarcastic?”

“Why? It’s what I do best.”

“How on earth can you be working to help people when you’re so *awful*.”

“Practice. And I don’t help them. Mostly, I help them screw their husbands over.”

I throw an olive into my mouth and set the chipped bowl on the low table. She curls up on one of the couches that bookend the electric fire and dips an olive into the glass of wine I’ve given her. And she thinks I’m uncouth?

I scrape the stir-fry into two bowls and bring it to her with a spoon. “Easier to shovel it in without dripping soy sauce on my couch,” I explain as she grimaces.

I’d actually been looking forward to slipping into next to nothing, snuggling into my vampire-detective novel. Secretly I dream of an eighteenth-century vampire lover of my own; one who is immaculately groomed, well spoken, loves me to the ends of the earth and can bite nicely on demand. I wouldn’t

admit that to anyone, of course. I'd stuffed my latest book under a cushion before Lauralee arrived.

We eat in silence for a while, then I lean my head back and close my eyes. I'm not in the mood for a domestic challenge; though, if she wants a divorce, I'd be happy to oblige. Even people as wholesome and *nice* as Tim have dirty linen in the closet, and it turns out that I'm good at finding it.

~ 5 ~

When I'd chosen to study psychology, it had been with all the youthful enthusiasm of someone who was going to change the world, and just hadn't decided how. I thought I could help people, not to mention pulling in a reasonable living at the same time. It hadn't taken long out in the real world to discover that I couldn't handle the never-ending litany of dissatisfaction. Relocating into the world of law had almost been a similar mistake, until I'd been asked to do a little delving into a case Janine was working on, as her usual private eye, Ellis, had disappeared off the face of the earth. *They'll probably find his body in some gutter*, she'd said gloomily. It was inconvenient of him, whatever. That accidental assignment saved me. I discovered something I was good at, which took me out of the office. At the time I'd even been contemplating marriage as an alternative to boredom, and look back on the near miss with a faint shudder of horror.

Finally, Lauralee opens up. "Remember when we were kids?"

"Which bit, specifically?"

"Before Dad lost his job."

"Before he was sacked, you mean."

"I think he jumped before he was sacked, but that's not the point. I meant, when we were apparently happy."

Like all kids, I recall some and forget more, but she's talking about before everything changed. When we were a

family with a full-time mom, and a dad who was a doctor, when we lived in our own home, with an acre of woodland. We thought Dad quit his job to nurse Mom, but we later discovered he'd been accused of snatching a baby from the hospital. It was something of a scandal. He didn't seem to mind too much not being a doctor anymore, but Mom was wasting dying of cancer, which I hadn't known. Mom's death came as an overwhelming shock to Laurie and me. We'd been pampered children, sprouting into belligerent teenagers who saw nothing but their own needs, and Mom had wanted it to stay that way. I'm not sure I would have done that, but the choices people make aren't always the best ones.

After she died, Dad went on to build a new career as a bus driver in Baltimore, half a continent away from where we'd been living. It was in Baltimore that Lauralee and I survived the teen minefield, de-flowered but otherwise relatively unscathed. It was here that our paths diverged wildly.

I'm drowsy with wine and warmth. It's kind of nice having her here without Tim or the kids in tow. Lauralee is tired. I see her eyelids droop, then she flicks awake. "Do you recall the murders?" she asks.

She means the kids who disappeared. "Not really. I remember Mom gave us bus money and told us not to walk home because there might be bad men."

"And we used to get the bus down to the corner, spend the money on candy, and walk home. I've got the cavities to prove it."

I smile in recollection. "Me too. They warned us about cavities, but didn't tell us kids were being abducted."

"Raped and murdered," Laurie corrects.

"You don't know that."

"Nobody knows, but when kids just disappear, it's obvious, isn't it?"

I'd been only vaguely aware of what was going on back

then, twenty years ago. But it bothers me now, that absence of bodies. The kids who were never found. Lauralee has prodded me awake.

“I remember the pervert took girls and boys,” she says.

“Yeah, that’s strange, all right.”

I know a little more about these things now. Perverts usually have a preference. Unless whoever took them was a trader, kidnapping to specific customer requirements.

She stares into some horrific distance. “One moment there’s a living, breathing child, the next, an empty space.”

“Yeah, that’s harsh.”

“Three were taken from our school,” she adds.

I hadn’t known *that*. A scary thought, actually, because it suggests that the perv had had eyes on our school. Over the five years we were in Phoenix, several kids had vanished from our neighborhood, but as a kid, if you don’t know them, it’s academic. God knows what they went through. No one does, except the bastard who stole them. Everyone assumes it was a man, of course. I’m talking about serial disappearances, carried out by sexual perverts, not the odd baby-snatching by a woman desperate to be a mom, like the one Dad was accused of enabling. As if it was his fault. I’d looked it up, just once, when I was at college, because Dad had never told me the whole story, and I hadn’t wanted to ask. That baby was never found, but it was assumed, from the professional abduction, that it went to one of the black market’s super-rich moms. Not the same thing at all as being abducted for sex.

But Dad hadn’t suddenly come into a fortune. We never had enough money after he lost his job. He even had to sell our house to pay off Mom’s medical bills. I hadn’t looked up any of the other disappearances from back then; it was ancient history. I wonder why Lauralee is bringing this up now? What I’m sure of is we’ll never know the truth. And the missing kids’ parents will be left forever hanging in some personal

purgatory.

“What’s that got to do with now?” I ask.

She grimaces and stares into the fire. I wait while she mentally churns over whatever it is that’s bugging her. Only something pretty unsettling would have had her jumping on a plane to see me, something she couldn’t say on the phone.

I open the second bottle and top up her glass.

“Thing is,” she says finally, “this girl from our school back then looked me up a couple of weeks back. Valerie Harold. Seems she became a reporter and wanted to ask me what I remembered about the child abductions. As if they hadn’t been done to death back then, and several times since.”

I refrain from sarcasm at her choice of words.

“I wish she hadn’t,” she carries on. “I can’t stop thinking about it.” Her eyes graze mine. “I’m scared for my kids, Dee. I’m scared I won’t be able to save them. I’m scared all the time that I’m going to turn around one day and one of them will be gone: Sammy or Liza. My sweet babies, used for sex and discarded like dirty rubbers. It’s driving me nuts.”

What can I say? Send them to karate school? If she can’t cope now, what chance is there when they go to school, to sleepovers, become teenagers, go clubbing. Jesus, I get it, but— “Laurie, that was twenty years ago. The pervert is probably long dead. We were too young to know much about it.”

“I’m two years older than you. I *remember*. One of the kids who disappeared was from my class.”

“Really?”

“His name was Richard. We called him Dirty Dick.”

“I can’t guess why.”

She winced at my sarcasm. “It was nasty. I’d apologize now, if I could, but I was a kid. I did what all the other kids did, to fit in, you know? No one liked him. He looked like a dork, with his mouth hanging open and snot running down his

face. You *couldn't* like him. He smelled."

"That wasn't his fault."

"No. His family was ghastly, and after he disappeared, I felt awful for being so mean. And since I met with Valerie, I've had this recurring nightmare where he turns up at the playgroup, and he always looks the same, like he did when he went missing, except now he'd be thirty-six. And the way he looks at my kids, it's kind of like a warning. Like he's trying to tell me something. Like my kids are going to get taken and abused, and he's doing it to get his own back."

"That's what having kids does to you. The poor kid's been dead for years, and no one comes back from being dead, except in films and books. So, what was she after, this Valerie person?"

"She was doing a follow-up on Dirty Dick. Richard Ryan. She said she wanted to meet someone who had actually known him. She was the grade below me. She'd never met him. Didn't know he existed till he turned up missing."

"Why did she think you *knew* him? Just because he was in your class?"

She looks guilty. "There was a bit of an issue about bullying. Me and a few others got ticked off. Dad told me to be nice to him. That would be in the school records, I guess."

"And were you? Nice to him, I mean?"

"Not really. I just never said *really* nasty things anymore. Then, afterward, I kept thinking if I'd just been nicer perhaps it wouldn't have happened, that it was kind of my fault."

"That's crazy." I stare at her over the rim of my glass. Her cheeks are vampire-pale with a single flush of red by the cheekbones. My new velour curtains (chosen for the size and price) look like a river of blood in the flickering light of the artificial fire. I feel a prickle of premonition. This isn't some cozy, sisterly gathering. "Why would she look up some kid from school? As if you'd recall anything now that would make

a difference. Have they found his body, or something?"

"That's what I wondered, but she said she was just looking for a first-hand account. I couldn't say no, really."

"I would have."

"I'm not hard like you. And I was curious. It was strange, really, because that made me realize how all that nasty stuff with the kids was never mentioned at home. Never. Like it wasn't going on."

"Grown-ups didn't tell kids stuff like that, back then. It's just how it was. Now they're all taught to yell 'stranger danger' when some innocent granddad stops to enjoy watching children playing. So, what did she say that's upset you enough to fly out here?"

That, I guess, is the crux of the matter.

"I don't know, maybe it's nothing." Foreboding slithers through me. "The thing is, she must have done a bit of detective work to find me, because of the way we moved around after Mom died. Then I took Tim's name and all. She traced me from Phoenix to Baltimore to Los Angeles. There must have been other kids in my class who were still around Phoenix, but she'd gone to a lot of trouble to trace *me*."

Something with legs stalks the back of my neck. I wait. Lauralee's instinctive mistrust is probably right.

"Well, I agreed to talk to her. We went out and had a couple of drinks," she carries on. "There was something a bit *pushy* about her."

"*Duh*, reporter."

"Dee, stop! She was asking questions about Richard, but eventually it came around to the baby that went missing from the hospital when Dad lost his job."

"That's totally not the same thing."

"I know, but I got it, then, why it was me she targeted. It had nothing to do with Richard Ryan. It's Dad she's after."

We both mull that one over. Dad had been a pediatrician,

back then. He'd been on duty in the maternity ward, doing the routine check on newborns, when a woman dressed as a nurse had walked in and taken one of the babies. The baby's disappearance had only been noticed when the mother woke and wanted to feed her child. It took a few moments of frenzied searching before the alarm was sounded.

The cops said it was a professional snatch, and later suggested Dad had engineered it. The woman who had taken the baby had been caught on camera, but never identified, and there had never been any proof against Dad. The press hyped it up, and also hinted that he might be the child abductor the police were seeking. Of course, there was no evidence of *that*. He lost his job, his whole career, because the hospital needed someone to blame, and shit sticks. It was all about culpability, keeping insurance costs down. They didn't exactly fire him, really, but he was pushed out, all the same.

Lauralee's right to be worried. Dad changed his name to escape the witch hunt and the hate-calls he'd been subjected to. I realized, later, that was why we moved. Eventually Dad dropped under the radar, so the last thing he needs now is for someone to go bringing it all up again, ruining the new life he's made for himself. "What's her last name again?"

"Harold. She was in the same school as us, but I don't recall her."

"But was it really her?"

Laurie's startled. "It never occurred to me it wasn't."

"So, what made you suspicious enough to climb on a plane to talk to me?"

"Well, she was spinning a line about our poor Dad, how he'd been made a scapegoat. Then she asked, very casually, where was he living now, and how was he doing, and I realized that's what she wanted all along. She couldn't trace him."

Yep, Lauralee's not dumb, for all she acts like it sometimes. "Did you tell her?"

“Of course not. When I realized she was fishing, I told her he was dead. He might as well be, for all the interest he’s taken in his own grandkids.”

“Sis! You lied!” I exclaim, impressed, ignoring her snip at Dad. Then I add, “I’ll bet a dollar to a dime she’s not Valerie Harold, though.”

“But who would be after Dad, now?”

I shrug. “Cops? FBI? Maybe they think they’ve found evidence, or something.”

“Dee, if he has to go through all that again, it’ll kill him. What are we going to do?”

Of course, she means what am *I* going to do. For once I have no ready quip on the tip of my tongue. “I’ll look into it,” I say.

She looks relieved, buck successfully passed. Good ol’ sis. “Will you tell Dad?”

“Yeah, he needs to know. Just in case.”

“I thought that, but his cell’s not picking up.”

I get up and clear the debris into the kitchen. “We’ll thrash it out tomorrow. Right now, I need to sleep. The spare bed is made up.”

She takes the hint. We hug again, but later I suspect she’s lying there awake, as am I.

~ 6 ~

So, there you have it. The cloud that rolled out of a blue sky and dumped a shitstorm in my lap is my sister. On Saturday she grabs the midday flight back to LA, and I promise to do something to make it all go away. I don't know what. But she's a mother, she says, in a way that suggests it's a full-time occupation—as if a full-time job isn't—and off she goes, promising to never again speak to strange women who phone up and want to talk about the past. And Tim the control freak will have his bed nicely warmed when he falls into it tonight. Shame she's not dumping him, which was what I'd initially thought she wanted to talk about.

But what now?

I do a bit of internet research. I find Valerie Harold in the school roster, in the year between Lauralee and me. The name sounds familiar, and when I see the image, I remember. Valerie had been clumsy and overweight. She was always the leftover option in team sports. Her dad had owned the local fast-food joint. I remember him, too; a bruiser of a man. You wouldn't have wanted to get into an argument with her mother, either. There was also a son made in his father's image. I remember Valerie could be a bitch, which didn't make it easy for anyone to feel sorry for her, let alone like her. In fact, that's why I recall her so vividly, having several times been on the receiving end of her vicious tongue.

I search the marriage registers and find a Valerie Harold

from California who'd married Marty Hasselblad. I find her on Facebook and study the hard face and bleached hair. There's a definite connection to the childhood image. She looks twenty years older than me, and doesn't look like someone who would go traipsing over the country trying to get the lowdown on a pedophile story. She isn't just overweight now, but seriously obese. With that, and her main hobby noted as reality TV, I wouldn't put a bet on an active lifestyle. And she wouldn't still be calling herself Valerie Harold, would she?

I hadn't thought to ask Laurie what Valerie had looked like after we'd broached the second bottle. I bet she didn't have the sense to sneak a selfie in the bar with her newfound school chum, either. No, the woman sniffing around is probably a reporter who thought she'd found a sure-fire lottery win. She'd gotten her teeth into a possibility and was going to gnaw it down to the bone. Talk about vampires.

Or she's an FBI agent, after all. Now, that *is* worrying. Maybe they think they've found evidence that links Dad to Richard Ryan? The missing baby incident makes Dad an obvious target, after all. Dad changed his name, back then, to leave the scandal behind, which is on record. What they won't know is that several years back, he'd been chased down by a reporter and changed his name again, only this time it isn't legal. I thought at the time it was paranoia, but now wonder if he was right to cover his tracks. Reporters and feds go bulldog when they get the scent: all bite and no brain.

The worst of it all is that I'm now wondering if there's fire behind the smoke. I mean, how did Dad know how to change his name and secure a false identity in the first place? You watch this stuff on TV, but in real life, how would you contact people like that? He doesn't move in those circles and won't have the kind of cash one assumes would be required. No one wants to believe their old man is a child abuser, but what if there's some truth behind the accusation?

I shiver, and it's not from cold.

I'll have to talk to Dad. But how do I broach it? *Hi, Dad, were you really in on that kid-snatching twenty years ago?* I know how I'd react in his place: dumbfounded, stunned, hurt, shocked, amazed. Especially when asked that by his own baby daughter. There's no point in being sneaky. Dad's highly intelligent behind that mildly surprised look he wears. No, I'll go for straight up. He'll understand that I just need him to deny it, set the record straight between us. People who get on his bus wouldn't guess he reads quantum physics for fun and lives in a shitty little two-bed dump because he likes to spend his money on academic books, and his spare time reading them. That's what the second bedroom is for: books. The one time I visited his latest residence, I slept on the couch because there was no room on the bed, but that was over a year ago.

~ 7 ~

My place of work is a vast, impressive building with acres of glass and space. Janine Dugotti, my boss, calls me in. She's dressed in togs that cost more than my car. You couldn't accuse her of being elegant, though. She's a big, raw-boned woman, while her husband, Leo Maas, is a magazine-pretty dreamboat. I sometimes wonder if he closes his eyes and sees her bank balance when they're making out. He's the accountant for Dugotti and Maas, and they're both interested in Janine making as much money as possible, so they do have something in common, which is more than some married couples have a few years down the line.

"I've got a new one for you," she says, slapping a buff folder on the table. "I'd like you to do an initial sweep. Just find out what we're dealing with. May-Jane claims her husband is unfaithful and wants to get rid of him, but it sounds as if she didn't get a prenup drawn up."

"May-Jane?" I raise my brows. The only May-Jane I know of is a chat-show host who makes a lot of money by being a prize-winning bitch.

Janine sees understanding hit, and almost smiles. "Yep, the very one. We need to prove she's gullible, stupid, and was taken in by a gold digger, before the press gets a whiff and complicates things with rumors and conspiracies. She wants to cover it in her own way on her own show after the event rather than have it blow up out of her control."

“You’ve got to be kidding!”

Her erupting grin is that of a barracuda. If I had teeth like that, I’d get them seen to. “With her TV record it’s going to be *interesting*. Her stud’s got a kind of animal magnetism, I’ll give him that. She interviewed him on her show, apparently, and for some strange reason, they clicked. He’s got macho written all over him. But there’s something strange about it. I mean, have an affair, sure, but why marry the guy?”

I raise one brow, then open the file. He isn’t what I was expecting. White, clean-shaven, and rugged rather than good-looking. He’s wearing black jeans, and a sleeveless vest of the same material, which displays a fine array of tats. He’s looking at the camera through narrowed, hostile eyes, and is straddling a bike with the possessiveness of a lover. “He’s a *biker*?”

“That’s why he got on the show. She interviewed him to get the lowdown on what it was like to ride with a gang. Apparently, his airtime got massive viewing, and he got a fairly good payout.”

I don’t doubt it. Outlaw biker gangs are comprised of anti-social thugs who traffic in drugs, humans, and God knows what else. They take what they please and go where they please, because who’s going to stop them? Collectively, they have no social conscience, but individually? These people aren’t just modern-day travelers, they’re often sociopaths, murderers, and racists. But beneath the collective social outpouring of disgust lies a darker romance. Burdened by debt and poverty, who hasn’t secretly felt the allure of that kind of freedom? I glance up. Janine is watching me.

She nods. “You get it. There’s something behind it, and I want to know what she’s hiding.”

“Publicity stunt?”

“I can’t think of any other reason.”

“Maybe it was true love?”

She gives a dismissive snort. “If so, it’s shelf-life wasn’t too good. The bottom line is, she rakes in cash by exposing other people’s dirty laundry, and wants us to handle this without hanging hers on the line.”

“I left my magic wand at home.”

“Quite. We can’t work miracles, but before we do anything, we need to know what the game is. Go learn and earn.”

I’m intrigued, actually. Janine is probably right to suggest that this isn’t your usual rich-bitch and toy-boy scenario. Instinctively, I feel there must be more to it than that. But one thing I’m pleased about: as the relationship was of short duration, there won’t be kids to fight over. I might not want kids myself, but I hate it when they end up as collateral in domestic cases. I suspect this will be settled out of court once the mudslinging is over.

I’ve gathered info on the obscenely wealthy before. They’re the people who can afford Janine’s services, after all. But I’ve never associated with anyone of May-Jane’s media magnetism. She’s a *celebrity*, stalked relentlessly by a pack of clamoring dirt-hounds. That doesn’t bode well for discretion. It’s a challenge, all right.

People often talk about *the facts of the matter*, as if it’s real knowledge. Usually, facts are little more than where and when and how. They simply provide a framework for analysis: he did that *because*, she was there *because*. And all that *becauseing* is often educated guesswork, because everyone lies. You can’t go back in time and see what really went down. People only see where their own piece fits into the puzzle, especially those trying to hang on to what they have, no matter how they acquired it. And in the end, settlements usually rest on who digs up the best dirt.

There’s little enough in the file. A statement from May-Jane, which pretty much amounts to a page of cold fury from an older woman whose younger kept man has been unfaithful.

Janine's probably right. The silly chump hadn't kept to the first directive of the toy boy: don't upset the gravy train by screwing around.

May-Jane will no doubt make herself available to me, but I doubt the stud will. I peruse the image. Greg's muscular, all right, if you like that cuddly-bear look. With his long, dark hair tied into a ponytail, the classic clean-cut lines of his jaw, and sporting a sultry, come-and-get-it expression under shuttered eyelids, that image could have been lifted from the cover of a biker romance. He'd probably look good in a flowing white linen shirt. And in nothing at all. I look him up on Facebook and don't find him, which is about what I expected.

I look up May-Jane next, and it's hard to know where to begin. There she is, on display to the world. This is me, doing a selfie with some friends. This is me at the studio. This is me with Greg... I check the date. Just a couple of weeks back. Their expressions don't shout antipathy, so his misdemeanors must be fairly recent—but fairly significant, if she's prepared to instantly cast him out of her life without giving them the chance to kiss and make up.

Anyway, the husband has to go, and May-Jane's reputation is to remain unsullied.

The file contains a potted history of Greg the stud. I read the smattering of information. Uneducated, unmarried mother. Ex-biker (so the uniform isn't just cosmetic), suspected of being involved in drug-running and violent crime (aren't they all?). I thought bikers were never *ex*, though, that once baptized they were in for life?

As May-Jane commands a good slice of media attention, I wonder if this isn't all a publicity stunt, after all. Quick-witted, beautiful, American woman of color, who made it in the toxic arena of chat show hostess, fell for a good-looking white stud with a charming smile, a big dick, and not an ounce of education? It doesn't gel. Truly, none of that would matter if

it had been for real. The truth is rarely as exciting as the media suggests.

I get Janine's PA, Sharlene, to find me a link to the relevant show. I'm curious to see May-Jane's body language at that first online connection with Greg. What did she see in him that made her draw him into her life?

But my own life intrudes. I call Dad's cell. The phone dinks back, *number not recognized*. I'd forgotten Lauralee had already tried. He loses his cell for a pastime. So, I email him, say I'm planning to come up at the weekend, let me know it's okay.

I do a bit more foraging on May-Jane. Her self-promotion is overt, but that's who she is. That's why she made it big. But it's kind of provocative, as if she's deliberately trying to make people jealous. She grew up rough enough, in the Monument Street enclaves, but I doubt she still has friends in those circles. In my experience, when a friend makes it good or wins the Lotto, the green-eyed god comes into its own. Climbing out of the poverty pit breaks the code of solidarity, the unspoken promise that they're all in it together to the bitter end. The comet of good fortune tows a fiery tail of bad will.

I'm getting the feeling this one's going to prove interesting.

Then Sharlene tells me that May-Jane is calling in this afternoon. I'm surprised; not that she's on the ball, but that she hadn't demanded that I go to her. But maybe surprise is the point. Get here and be gone before the celebrity-chasers realize what she's about.

She arrives late afternoon, her short dress and heels accentuating muscular, worked-out legs. But I don't get the huge sunglasses; they do nothing except attract curiosity. I caught a few of her shows by accident a couple of years back, when I was ostensibly working from home during office renovations. I found them distasteful, but somehow got sucked in. It took willpower to break myself of a habit I hadn't

intended to get into in the first place. It was a psychologist's nightmare. I saw an endless tide of discontented, frustrated people on her show, and every one of them thought their sorry circumstances were someone else's fault. Maybe they were right. Discontent is largely a by-product of our society, and I wasn't going to change that by watching them bitching. I wondered how May-Jane could distance herself from it. Her show might have been one of the reasons I didn't carry on in the world of psychology. When the whole world's a little strange, what chance do you have to save anyone?

On screen, May-Jane is stunningly good-looking, but as I rise from behind my desk to greet her, I realize the charisma isn't painted on. She's not just beautiful, but has that aura of power that comes from absolute and total self-belief. I can see why she's a star in her somewhat dodgy area of expertise. But maybe she's a safety valve for society, too. People can reach into her world, albeit briefly, and maybe it helps them, just a little, to have been there.

I walk around the desk to greet her. "Hi, I'm Deirdre. Come on over and make yourself at home."

She grazes my fingertips with hers, and we migrate to the cozy corner. The low chairs are upholstered in muted beige: the color of indecision. The table sports a pristine pad of paper, a pen, and a purple off-the-shelf orchid.

Her first words are a challenge. "You're South African?"

Well, that's a new one. "Half English, half undecided. I spent my first few years in the UK. Can't eradicate the accent, sorry."

"I was under the impression I'd hired Janine?"

My smile is as hard as hers. "I collate the data she works with."

I can see her assessing the similarity between me and her own data-gatherers. On her shows, she becomes the arrowhead of all the information provided by her own little

army of helpers, and she always keeps a poisonous barb in reserve for the end game. That's the bit that keeps her fans glued to the screen. Her nod is almost imperceptible.

"Today, I just want the overview," I say. "What happened, and why. But I warn you, it's going to get pretty personal. Are you ready for that?"

She gives me a scathing glance. "This isn't acrimonious. Just sort out the paperwork; I've worked out the detail."

She passes over a single sheet. I scan it. She proposes that her spouse will relinquish all rights to her estate, now and forever.

"The opposition isn't going to accept this."

"Trust me, he will."

"I'm not talking of your husband. I'm talking about his lawyer."

"He won't need one. He's not contesting anything."

"Excuse me for disagreeing. He does need one or we can't act for you, or any decision could be later contested."

She scowls. "Okay, I'll hire one."

"Really, it should to be him."

"Then you'd better advise him."

"So, let me put this on the table," I say carefully. "What you're looking for is an out-of-court settlement, and your spouse will accept these terms?"

"Exactly."

I sit back. "Can I be blunt?"

"I'd expect nothing less."

"You married him with no prenup contract?"

"I trusted him."

"And now?"

"I still trust him."

"Well, it's a shame you chose legal marriage as a test of trust."

"I didn't come here to be lectured. I came here to get a

divorce. I'd be pleased if you would just get the paperwork done as soon as possible."

That puts me in my place. Some people just don't make life easy. Why should they, I guess. She's paying one of the most expensive lawyers in Baltimore, and simply expects delivery. But nothing is as easy as she's suggesting. "Does your husband know you're here?"

"Of course."

"Will he talk to me?"

"Of course. Now, are we finished?"

We've barely started, I think, but nod. If she doesn't want to give me decent information, I'll just have to go digging for it. One thing a good lawyer hates more than anything is to be sidelined by an eleventh-hour gremlin. Of one thing I'm sure: May-Jane's biker dude isn't going to go as quietly as she thinks. I'm guessing there's only one reason he married her: for the money. And I'm guessing the only reason she married him was for media attention. Of course, it might have been true love that just soured somewhere along the line.

Her heels clack unforgivingly all the way to the lift, and I breathe a sigh of relief. She's scarier in person than on screen, and I'm not entirely sure why.

When I check my emails there's a response from Dad.

Working from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays. Visit anytime. Most welcome. Let me know when, I'll stock up on beer. Love, Dad.

~ 8 ~

Information about Greg proves elusive. He seems to have arrived out of nowhere, and who has real information on members of bike gangs? They don't exactly put stuff on Facebook. I can't discover which motorcycle gang Greg was supposedly with. Maybe bikers do manage to lose their identities on the endless caravan to nowhere, despite the obscene amount of personal data gathered by the powers that be. Or maybe he never was with the gangs at all.

I shunt the work aside in exasperation and call Lauralee. "Hi, sis. How are you?"

"We're all so-so, and you?"

"Same as."

"So, did you find anything out?"

"Not really. I just wanted to ask you something. What did that Valerie of yours actually look like?"

I hold the phone away from my ear as she screeches at Sammy to stop annoying Liza. There are a few yells and crashes, then she's back. I wonder if she banged their heads together, which was what Mom used to threaten.

"Sorry about that. What did you say?"

I repeat the question.

"Well, she was, ah, kind of normal-looking. Pointy kind of face. Mousy hair. About the same height as me, a little smaller, maybe."

“Eye color?”

“She wasn’t wearing glasses, but I don’t remember.”

Nondescript, then. That usually means blue-gray. “Was she overweight?”

“No, I’d have called her skinny.”

“Skinny fit-and-muscular, or skinny ill?”

“The latter. I was kind of jealous at first, then I realized she was trying too hard to look ten years younger, like a teenager. She was all bones and wasted muscles, and her head looked kind of too big on a plucked-chicken neck. She was wearing teen-type clothes, too. Probably thought she was the bee’s knees, but in my opinion she just looked daft. Why?”

Ouch, Laurie can be close to bitchy at times. But her description certainly paints a picture. Maybe it was deserved. “The Valerie Harold in our school was overweight.”

“Well, you know, sometimes people reinvent themselves. Maybe she’d been scared of going that way again.”

“Yeah, but she didn’t.”

“Oh. You found her?”

“Yeah. I haven’t worked out who it was who you met, but it wasn’t her.”

“Hell, I feel dumb. I didn’t like her, but it didn’t occur to me she *wasn’t* her.”

Well, I know what she means. “You had no reason to think she was lying. At least you realized something was wrong and stopped telling her stuff.”

“I did, didn’t I?”

She’s looking for reassurance, so I give it to her. “You sure did, sis. I’m going to see Dad at the weekend.”

“Are you going to *ask* him?”

There’s a pregnant pause, during which I realize she’s wondering whether Dad had been involved, after all. Some things between us are communicated loud and clear through silence. “I don’t have any option. You know that.”

“But what if—”

“Look, all I know is he’s our dad. Until someone proves otherwise, I won’t believe anything bad, okay?”

“Sure.”

But the *what if* hangs between us.

The following morning, I don’t enjoy my run at all. Something bothers me as I do one of my usual three-mile routes. I would describe it as a prickling between the shoulder blades. I’m probably just being paranoid; even so, I wish for the umpteenth time I had a dog. I’ve always told myself that the threat of being accosted is statistically small, though I put myself at more risk by running. I’m not an endorphin junkie. Running is a sort of penance, offsetting the office lifestyle, junk food and wine. I might live a little longer with this regime, if it doesn’t get me killed first. I mostly stick to places that are inhabited, and carry enough cash to make it worth a mugger’s while to run off with it rather than duff me up looking for more.

I went to self-defense classes for a while, but they made me feel stupid and inadequate, and I didn’t want to dedicate myself to a lifetime of learning something I’m culturally not conditioned to learn. Dad being a doctor means my childhood lectures were all about being nice to other people, not bashing the shit out of them. So, I don’t kid myself I have the skills to ward off a full-on aggressor. Sometimes it’s best to know your limitations. That’s as good a reason as I can think of for being able to run.

I spend the morning half-heartedly working May-Jane’s case. The hours will be billed to her, anyway; she can afford it. But I’m wondering what the fake Valerie reporter bitch found to lead her down this path. So, I do what I’ve been doing for the last couple of years: gather data. Except that this time it’s my own history. I go back to the child abductions from when

I was little, specifically the spate in my area, but in truth it was too long ago. There are no details, just a few hard facts.

Facts are a good start, but the truth is in the detail.

Child abduction stats within each state are freely available on ECAP, the FBI section that collaborates with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. And there they all are, the missing children; pages and pages of faces. Babies, kids with ribbons in their hair, kids missing front teeth. Have you seen this child? And this one? And this one? Jesus. I had no idea so many kids went missing in America, daily, hourly. I know some will be posted as abductions when it's actually parental disputes, and some will be plain old-fashioned murders, often by a family member, but as Laurie pointed out, there's an unspoken assumption that many are taken for sexual abuse. I know the internet is a porn-sewer, but I had no idea there was so much call for child sex. No idea at all. In the United States, there are hundreds of thousands of registered pedophiles, many of whom have evaded tracking, and probably many more who simply haven't been exposed. My mind gravitates to Dad, and I feel dirty for just wondering.

I recall passing a row of posters in the street way back in my college days, showing the same kid's face: MISSING, 6 JANUARY. REWARD FOR INFORMATION. PLEASE HELP FIND MY CHILD. It had meant nothing to me. Back then, I hadn't envisaged the frantic mother walking around the streets with these posters, showing them to people, sticking them on walls and shop windows. They'd just been wallpaper or graffiti, like the kids' faces on milk cartons. And the various reports on the news about some missing child or other had just flown over my head scattering a vague residue of sympathy. I excuse myself with the thought that I was a child, then. Now, I'm slightly embarrassed. I've never spent much time thinking about missing kids. I guess we all get stuck in our little ruts—jobs, mortgages, loan repayments—and have our own problems. I

sometimes wonder if the daily blasts of bad news bring us, on some level, comfort and relief, glad it's not us.

Lauralee's panic suddenly hits home. It's not statistics, any longer, it's personal. I'm also slightly shocked to learn that a large percentage of children go missing from care facilities rather than from their own homes, which seems a bit out of kilter, given the higher levels of security involved in the various child facilities. Do they run away because the situation has gone from bad to worse? Or do care facilities attract employees who sell the children for hard cash? That those kids are targeted because they're already vulnerable, at the low end of the market, with no rich parents pulling the stops out, seems dramatically unfair.

But my dad had nothing to do with it.

Did he?

He was a doctor and a caring father. I'm good at assessing people. I know when people are lying.

Don't I?

My dad is a good man. Those kids who went missing in our vicinity, back then, were nothing to do with him.

Were they?

And the baby who was abducted from the hospital had nothing to do with him.

Did it?

When people say they go cold, some vampiric quip usually comes to mind. But truly, my head chills as if the blood has rushed earthward, leaving a vacuum behind. I'm light-headed for a moment, staring into space, wondering if I'm going to pass out. I put my hands flat on the desk and breathe slowly. I have to ask him, give him the chance to tell me straight. Then I have to choose whether or not to believe him. He was never tried, there wasn't enough evidence, but once convicted by public opinion, it's forever. It's one of life's little injustices, in that where kids are concerned, rumor is louder than truth or

proof. And sometimes the kids or their parents are just plain stupid, or lying. Like the McMartin preschool sex fiasco. On reading the transcripts during college, I was amazed that someone didn't just stand back and say *Hello! This is all ridiculous*. The original accusations were dumb, the escalating accusations by people who just wanted in on the action, bizarre. The debacle cost the state a shitload of money, and ruined the reputations and lives of a whole family.

I go back to the internet. Abducted kids, I'm informed, are never forgotten. Never found, never rescued, but never forgotten. Good news, eh? I'm intrigued by the forensic imaging that ages the lost every couple of years, to create a visual of what the child might look like now, rather than remain forever frozen at the moment they went missing.

I look up the kids that had gone missing from our school. One after the other, I find them. I stare at each of them with a sense of detachment. Did you make it this far? Do you really look like this now? Can't you tell us what happened? And there was a possible Richard Ryan, his face filled out, not a hint of the snotty-nosed, skinny kid Lauralee had known, but a passably good-looking young man in his thirties.

Valerie had certainly discovered something that set her off, but whatever it was, I'm not seeing it. But what is she doing investigating disappearances from over twenty years ago in the first place? I do one final thing: hide my digital tracks. Because it's about Dad, I'm a little paranoid. I delete all the cookies, then delete everything from the recycle bin. I get this nasty feeling I'd like to reformat the hard drive, too. Not that anyone would guess what I'm trawling for, or why.

Half-heartedly I get back to researching May-Jane's gigolo, more in the hope that the newer searches will obliterate the history, than of discovering anything useful.

I decide to get it over with, and email Dad:

IS IT OK TO COME FRIDAY? I'LL DRIVE UP.

SURE. GREAT. SEE YOU THEN.

~ 9 ~

I slip out of work early on Friday so I can pack a bag, and drive out to Philly. It's a while since we met in person; a year, maybe more, I can't recall. As I'm packing, I have second thoughts about driving, and decide to take the train instead. I can chill out with my new vamp novel for an hour, take my mind off stuff. I check out train times. I should just about make the four thirty, if I'm not lugging a suitcase. I empty everything into my rucksack, and head out in a mad rush for Penn station. If I don't make that one, I'll have to drive anyway, because the six thirty will be jam-packed.

I'm jogging to catch the last Amtrak carriage as the doors are closing, when a belated thought drops inside my skull. When I ran to my condo earlier, the door hadn't been locked. I always lock the door. Part of being a woman living alone in a city, I guess. My imagination has someone creeping about when I'm in the shower or in bed. Did I lock the door on my way back out? I check my bag and find the keys tucked away where they should be. That means I must have locked the door.

Habitual rituals can bypass memory.

This thing with Dad is getting to me. Well, it would, wouldn't it? I'm about to text him when I recall his phone is offline or lost. I email instead.

ARRIVING AMTRAK AT 5.45. WILL GET CAB.

I bury my head in a book. Lothario, the detective in *Crown of Bloody Fangs* is to die for, with his genuinely shy smile that hides his identity, and his let-me-at-you swirling hazel eyes. He's trying to work out who would have killed the King of the Vamps, agonizing over his unfairly short lifespan (only 500 years), only to discover someone framed *him* for the murder. Except that legally it couldn't be called murder, when the guy is already dead. But now Lothario is chained in a roofless room, and a pink dawn is gently breaking... Lordy, how's he going to get out of that one without going up in smoke?

As the train is hauling into Philly station, I still haven't worked out exactly how I'm going to broach the subject with Dad. Then I recall a talk at college, by some guy who was a guru on getting people to talk, and he said always start with *this is how I came to be interested*, and the rest follows on quite naturally. So, that's what I'll do. I'll lead into it with what Lauralee told me, and he'll cotton on, the same way I did. It will ease us both into the uncomfortable detail without me having to utter a bald query.

As I'm heading for the exit, I get an email from Dad saying he's picking me up at the station and he's outside. He doesn't say why, but that's fine with me.

Sure enough, he's in the short-stay. He climbs out of a tired second-hand car, looking like some retired professor, tall, thin and distinguished, wearing the obligatory last-century cords and sweater. He's nothing if not old-fashioned. His hair has receded so much. When did that happen? He's also grown a beard, snow white, clipped tightly to his face.

"Dad," I say, slightly tearful.

"Froglet," he says, at the same time.

I drop my rucksack, and we hug. I blink hard. We part, share a smile, then he picks up my rucksack and grabs my cell out of my hand. "No calls for the weekend."

I smile. "Okay. No calls for the weekend."

No one phones me at weekends, anyway, except Lauralee. He throws my stuff in the back, saying, "I got us two singles for tonight at Loews."

"You didn't have to do that. I don't mind sleeping on the couch."

"Ah, well, I had a bit of a problem. Upstairs had a water leak, and the ceiling in my bedroom is down. I'm being put up while it's being fixed."

"In a five-star hotel?"

"Four and a half. But this is me being kind to you. I'm temporarily accommodated in a dive inhabited by bedbugs and druggies."

"Jesus. What about all your books?"

"Mostly good. I've put them in storage."

He drives in silence, and eventually pulls into the hotel parking lot. "You all right, honey? You're a bit quiet. Let's get some food into you, huh?"

"I could do with a drink first."

"Sure thing," he says, and we head for the bar.

I get a couple of beers, and tell him about the millionaire who wants to leave everything to her cats and doesn't get why her four children would have a right to contest the will. He's amused, but knows I have something else on my mind, and eventually says, "Come on, let's dump your bag in your room, and go eat. Then you can unload."

"I need to check in."

"It's all sorted." From his jacket pocket he fishes a key card attached to an overlarge fob of wood, and dangles it enticingly.

We head up to the third floor, and he throws my rucksack onto the single bed. The rooms are functional, impersonal, the decor designed to lack character. I always feel a little cheated in hotels. I mean, why does it cost so much to simply settle down in a bed for the night? Then I remember Dad's living on

a bus driver's wages and resolve to get the check when we leave.

The dining room is spacious, with tall windows. There would be plenty of light during the day, but presently we see ourselves echoed in the darkening glass against a cityscape of headlights and skyscrapers. I yawn widely, then grin as he expresses wide-eyed mock irritation.

"Am I boring you already?"

"Busy week."

"You're not working on weekends, now?"

"Not unless there's a panic on."

"Ditto. I'm on the school runs these days, a concession to my age."

I didn't want to know that.

Dad orders a bottle of wine. He gets the fish dish and I go for steak. Living on junk food makes me crave real meat when I go out. It's done to perfection, and I see that Dad's enjoying his moment of indulgence, too. I guess in our own way, we've both gone down the singles route. When there's no one at home to impress, you lose the drive to impress yourself.

As if he knows my thoughts, he pushes his plate aside and says, "I still miss your mom, you know."

"Of course you do. I wish I could remember her better. I did a lot of growing up after she died."

"You were eleven. It was a difficult time for all of us in so many ways. Maybe more for Laurie. It wasn't what your mom and I had in mind when we got married."

I try to imagine Mom and Dad as newlyweds. They'd had a traditional church wedding, but minimalistic—no huge assembly of distant relatives coming for a free meal. I'd seen the photos. Mom had looked so vivacious and pretty, Dad so proud, their eyes filled with possibilities. I choke back tears and blink them away. That's the essence of Dad, I think. So contemplative and kind and intelligent, but so unassuming.

“More wine?”

“No point wasting it. Dad, why did we move to Baltimore? Was it the, ah, trouble?”

“Partly. I didn’t want to uproot you kids, really, but I just couldn’t be there anymore, in Phoenix. Not without your mom.”

He drains the bottle into my glass and fills his own with water. His gaze is level. I don’t think he’s lying to me.

After a while he gets to the point. “So, what’s this about, then, love? You didn’t come up just for a visit, much as I’m enjoying seeing you.”

Well, I guess a good pediatrician would have an inbuilt sense of empathy. Perhaps that’s where I get it from, this ability to see through people. I find myself picking at a loose cotton thread on my shirt. “Lauralee came to see me a few days ago.”

“Mid semester?”

See, he gets it straight away. “She had a visit from some woman claiming to remember her from school.”

“Claiming?”

“She said she was looking into the disappearance of a kid in Laurie’s class: Richard Ryan.”

“Ah, yes. I recall him. A really bright lad, abused for years by his father. Not that anyone could prove it. And you came all the way out here to tell me?”

The silence stretches. I don’t know how to say it, after all. Around us the room is busy with people eating, laughing, arguing. There’s a clatter of dishes as someone clears the table behind me.

“Spit it out,” he says, a faint smile on his face. “What else did this woman say?”

“It’s not what she said,” I admit. “It’s just that she threw in asking about you, as though it didn’t matter. Laurie was suspicious, and I think she’s right. We think this woman’s

looking for you. And she's not who she says she is."

"Ah."

"I'm not even sure she's a reporter." He raises a brow. "I'm wondering whether she's a federal agent. She asked Lauralee where you were living."

"And she told her?" he asks lightly.

"Of course not. She said you'd died."

"Goodness! And I thought she was the honest one." He looks proud and astonished at the same time.

I try to smile, and fail. "Dad, do you know what she's after?"

"It's always about the Habershon baby, love."

"You never really told us what happened."

"No, I didn't." He pauses in recollection, then says, "The hospital staff weren't allowed to say what we all thought. Baby Habershon's mother, Gabrielle, had two babies prior to that one. They had both died in early infancy. Undiagnosed crib deaths. After the first, everyone was sympathetic. After the second death, the press labeled her the tragic mom of the year, but as professionals in the hospital, we expressed doubts. When she came in to give birth to the third baby, we held a meeting to decide whether baby number three should be taken from her, for its own safety, but all we had were suspicions. With no evidence that Gabrielle had killed her babies, the hospital board wouldn't act. They couldn't. They were right, in a way. Bringing an action against Gabrielle would have been dramatic and costly and ultimately pointless. But we all *knew* the baby would die if she took it home. All the people in that meeting were subsequently investigated by the board, and by the police. After that baby disappeared, Gabrielle was in the papers again as the most tragic mom who ever lived. *Two babies dead, the third stolen?* It made good copy."

"But I know we were right. I was made a scapegoat of kinds, simply because I made the most fuss. With all the

suspicious and accusations, I felt I couldn't work in the medical profession anymore."

He sighs, and shakes his head. "I should have stayed, weathered the storm. A colleague was keeping a distant eye on Gabrielle. She got pregnant again, a girl this time, who lived. She was named Annie. Because of the previous crib deaths, and the tragedy of the lost child, Annie was monitored for a year or so by Child Protection. She was healthy, happy, and well cared-for. Then Gabrielle moved away. My colleague eventually traced her to Atlanta, and learned that Annie, the fourth child, had died when she was three, apparently having poisoned herself on household cleaning fluid."

"Shit," I say.

"So," he carried on. "You want to know if I removed that child from its mother? Yes, I did."

There was no guilt in his statement, just the hope that I'd understand.

"Jesus, Dad," I say inadequately.

His smile is rueful. "I couldn't admit it, could I, and for what? I wasn't going to tell anyone where the baby was. They would have just given her back to Gabrielle, and I'd have ended up in prison. Your mom was ill, and you and Laurie would have gone into care. And the woman who rescued the baby risked everything, too. The people who were suspicious were right to be. I was one hundred percent guilty, but there was no proof. The surgeon who tipped off the cops about me was on the hospital board, and he believed, like the rest of us, that Gabrielle was killing her babies. He just wanted the heat off the hospital."

"What a turd."

He shrugs. "He was frightened of being implicated. He had children, an expensive lifestyle."

My eyes are glued to his. "But you saved that child's life, and now you're a bus driver?"

He grins. "I like driving buses, less stress than dealing with dying kids. But you're right, I believe we did save that baby's life. I regret not saving Annie, too, but I didn't hear about her until it was too late. And I can't save them all, no matter how much I want to."

"Dad, what happened to... to the baby?"

"He went to a good home. That's all I'll say."

I pick a crumb from the table and grind it between my thumb and fingers. "Jesus, that woman should have been sterilized!"

"At the time I would have agreed with you. And when I heard about Annie, I wanted to kill Gabrielle myself, hypocritical oath be damned."

Correcting him was almost automatic. "Hippocratic."

"No," he says gently. "All the others who were in that meeting with me took that oath; they're all hypocrites. Aside from all the other horrific things that go on in the world, it betrays humanity when a mother deliberately hurts her own child. Those people knew, and were prepared to let it happen to save their own careers. They're all still doctors, making a lot of money."

"And you're not. And Gabrielle's still out there somewhere?"

"I guess. She moved again, and we don't know where she is. Or how many children she's killed. And people would have put *me* in prison?"

I reach over the table and put my hand over his. The tension slides almost visibly from his shoulders.

"Are you going to tell Lauralee?" he asks.

"She'll be fine with it, same as I am. She's stronger than you think. And she's a mother, she'll understand. But I'm curious to know what this mysterious reporter thinks she's discovered, to rake it all up again."

"That's what bothers me, too," Dad says. "Perhaps it's

nothing at all. Maybe she's just turning over old stones, hoping something will crawl out. Forget about her. She won't find anything. Now, do you want dessert, or shall we go back to the bar?" He takes a sip of water and puts the glass carefully between us, like a barrier. Confession time is over.

"But Dad, what about the other kids?" I blurt.

He freezes for a moment, then reaches a hand across the table. "Do you love me, Dee?"

"Of course I do, but—"

"Do you seriously think I could harm children?"

"I didn't mean that, but—"

His gaze is level, sincere. "I've admitted to taking Baby Habershon, but that's all. A lot of children disappear and, believe me, the people who take them usually have a rather different motive than I had, then."

I feel bad for even considering anything else, but what I've just learned is so big it's unreal. My father is a criminal. Did this action make him a vigilante? I suppose it did, in a way. What he did wasn't wrong according to the oath he took as a doctor, but it was still wrong according to the law. "So, what if this Valerie person turns up again?"

"Tell her to get lost. Whether she's a federal agent or a reporter, there's nothing to connect me with Baby Habershon that wasn't shouted about in the papers at the time."

"You lost your career actually giving that child a life."

"Not exactly. All that simply made me re-evaluate what I was doing."

"Still, does he know?"

"No. But his new parents do, obviously. So, do you want dessert?"

"Jesus, Dad! You're a bloody hero!"

"I'll take that as a no?" He pushes his chair back. "Shall we migrate back to the bar?"

As we walk out, he tucks my hand comfortably into the

crook of his elbow. “Chill out, Dee. Don’t go to pieces on me.”

“I won’t, but they’d put you in prison if they found out.”

He looks anxious. “Can you hold out under torture?”

“That’s not funny!”

“No, but seriously, only five people truly knew what I did. Me, your mom, the fake nurse—who’s a decent and lovely woman—and the baby’s new parents. Now you, and Laurie, if you tell her. And everyone who knows has a vested interest in keeping quiet.”

“Mom knew?”

“Your mom knew everything.”

I guess that’s the only thing I miss out on, not having a partner. That total togetherness, the kind of trust that would include complicity in a justifiable crime. I hope Laurie’s capable of keeping this from Tim. He might be too worried about his own complicity to keep it a secret, but then again, he wouldn’t want to implicate himself and his family in a past scandal.

Dad says, in a phony gangsta voice, “So darlin’, if the bitch bothers you again, find out who she is, and I’ll take out a contract.” He pops a faint grin and pats my hand. “That’s better. Now, I haven’t seen you for a long time. Tell me what’s happening in your life. Have you got yourself a good man yet?”

I snort, but he’s changing the subject deliberately, and after all, what more is there to say? My world has just spun in a complete circle. But I know I still love him, despite what he’s just told me. Perhaps even more than before.

The bar is crowded. It has that Friday-night buzz, when people have drunk a little too much too quickly, and the air’s filled with the potential to turn from festive to aggressive in a flash. I’m almost shouting to be heard. I score a couple of seats, and Dad manages to get to the bar. When he brings over the beer, I tell him about May-Jane.

He’s amused. “So, the biter got bit?”

“I don’t know yet. It’s a bit of a strange setup, but I’ll get to the bottom of it.”

“You will,” he says, somewhat proudly. “I was always in awe of that brain of yours.”

The evening disappears, and eventually he pops a kiss on my cheek outside my room. “Sweet dreams, love, and don’t you go worrying about your old dad. I’ve been taking care of myself for a while, now. Always remember, I love you and Laurie.”

“But Dad...”

“What’s to do, little frog? Go and get on with your life. Nothing’s changed that wasn’t changed a long time ago.”

He hugs me hard as I’m nodding.

But knowledge changes a person, of that I’m certain.

~ 10 ~

In the morning, I knock at his door, but there's no answer. I go to the diner, but he's not there. When I check with reception it takes just a moment to discover he'd signed in under a different name and paid cash up front. I suspect he left last night. I stand there at a loss for a moment, then realize he'd said goodbye, in his own way.

I also realize he's driven off with my cell phone in the car.

I get the hotel to call me a cab. When we get to Dad's address, I ask the cabbie to wait as I run to the door. I knock, but there's no answer. It's a ground-floor apartment, so I circle around and find a window to peer through. There's no sign of water damage, and the stuff inside the house isn't his. But I see an outline on the floor where his bookcase had been. I hop back into the cab.

The cabby looks at me in the mirror. "Where now, sugar?"
"Amtrak," I say shortly.

On the way to the station, I realize I don't know Dad at all. He'd lost his career by saving the life of a child he didn't know. How can that make him a criminal? But it does. In the train, it hits me that my disappearing cell phone probably hadn't been a mistake on his part. He'd probably destroyed it at the station, in case I was being tracked. When he was spinning his tale about water damage, I'd believed him. Yet now, in the cold light of day, I realize he was covering his tracks once more. That's why he'd taken it in his stride that I'd come galloping to

Philly with something from his past. It's not his past at all, he's never left it behind.

Which makes me wonder what the hell he's into now.

~ 11 ~

Back in Baltimore I find a pay phone and call Lauralee. I tell her everything. Well, nearly everything.

“He *did* it?” she squeals in my ear, making me wince.

“You can’t tell anyone, though. Not even Tim.”

I hear an intake of breath. “I don’t know if I’m that strong.”

“You have to be. Tim would be so afraid of losing his job, everything, being an accessory and all that. You can’t tell him. I’m only telling you because you need to know. Our dad’s a good guy. Just remember that. He saved that baby’s life.”

“Do you know where he is now? The baby, I mean?”

“He’ll be in his thirties, now. But, no, Dad wouldn’t tell me.”

“So, you don’t know where Dad is, either?” she asks.

“No. Sis, it looks as if he’d planned to move on. As if he was expecting this.”

“You’re making it sound as if he’s guilty.”

“He is guilty. Guilty of doing things other people are afraid to do. He saved that child’s life. But the law wouldn’t see it that way. Think of your kids, the safe life they have. Dad gave that gift to a baby who would otherwise have died. I’m *glad* he’s the sort who couldn’t stand by and do nothing. Not like all those other shits at the hospital.”

There’s another of those silences, then she says, “Dee, someone knows. That woman. You need to find out who she is.”

“I’ll try,” I say. “But remember what Dad said? There’s no evidence now, and there wasn’t then.”

“But she got *something*.”

“She’s chasing shadows. There’s nothing to find. I looked.”

I like to think I’m fairly good at grubbing up dirt, but I’m no private eye. Dad would be better at this shit than me. I don’t tell her that he’s keeping something big from me, and he knows I know. He isn’t just *good* at all this covert stuff, he’s become a pro. And why would he do that unless he’s involved in something else, maybe equally as shady as the disappearing Habershon baby?

Saturday’s a write-off, and Sunday I’m a mess, not having slept. I run to Paterson Park in the morning, to burn off my mental exhaustion. The woodland and pond lend a measure of peace, and I smile at the children throwing bread for the ducks. I go back to a hot shower and spend the rest of the day reading, and downing a bottle of red wine. My latest novel, which I’d been enjoying, takes a turn for the worse. The vampire lover drains his girlfriend quite by accident, then spends the rest of the novel trying to convince his clan that another vampire did it. The vampire detective didn’t even test the greedy lover’s most recent blood type. Duh. I hate it when the plotting is unbelievable. I upend the bottle to make sure it’s finished. If I open a second bottle, I sure won’t be much use at work tomorrow. But despite all the effort, the exercise, the mind-numbing novel, my mind won’t let go. I open the second bottle.

I wake up in a mental fog, my head pounding. I forgot to eat yesterday, which doesn’t help my fluctuating emotions. I’m disoriented and cranky. Probably jogging would be a good idea, but I don’t always do what’s right or clever. Today I skip it, but work still calls. Another day, another dollar.

So, here I am, in my office pretending to multitask, while nursing a throbbing head. I'm supposed to be planning the investigation into May-Jane's Greg, but in truth I'm staring absently at my notes, churning over what I've learned about Dad. He admitted to taking the Habershon baby, and Mom had condoned it, or even helped him plan it, for all I know. That revelation had been a shock. In fact, I wonder briefly if she'd been the pretend nurse who'd taken him, then realize, no way. Dad's colleagues would have known her, and she was already ill, though I hadn't known it at the time. So, who *was* the woman who'd pretended to be a nurse and walked out with the baby? And how would a resident doctor even *know* how to find new parents on the black market?

Overnight, I'd pondered over the kids who had disappeared from our locale, back then. Dad hadn't admitted to being involved, but I realized in hindsight that he hadn't denied it, either. If he is still into something shady, it occurs to me that Valerie might not be chasing something long past, but something more recent.

By confessing to me, Dad's made me an accessory after the fact, and now I've made Laurie one. Had he told me, deliberately, to make sure we'd help keep his secret? Now the thought is in my mind, it seems reasonable. But why now? More than anything, it makes me feel he's letting me know, in his own way, that I need to be careful. I shake my head, but it doesn't drive out a sense of impending doom. I feel as though normality is crashing down around my ears, and I've walked into another dimension. Discovering he's been hiding a secret that huge means anything is possible. When he took that baby, he might have been a good man doing a good deed, but would he truly have had the balls to do that, and the panache to weather the storm when he was suspected?

What he told me of Gabrielle Habershon getting away with murdering her babies makes me feel sick. Even her name is an

affront. I wonder, when her mother named her after an angel, whether she knew she'd given birth to a monster. But maybe the mother was a monster, too. These things can go back generations. God knows how a mother could do such a thing—or live with herself afterward. And why keep having kids, if all you want to do is find nasty ways to kill them? But another sneaky doubt crawls into my mind. Maybe Gabrielle Habershon *was* a Munchausen syndrome by proxy murderer—they're notoriously difficult to expose or prove—but what if she *was* a truly tragic mom, and Dad had stolen her baby? I need to build a mental wall around my emotions. Treat Dad like just another job. Don't make assumptions. Do the research. Get the indelible facts, then do the analysis. If Dad's guilty of abductions that aren't justifiable, I'll report him myself. I might be able to trace Gabrielle, if she's still alive. Then something else blindsides me. Dad said Richard Ryan had been abused by his father for years. Had that been in the papers at the time?

I start on Greg's case while the dad problem is simmering on a back burner. I call his cell. He answers on the first ring, and I half expect him to hang up on me. "Greg, this is Deirdre Hamilton from Dugotti and Maas."

"May-Jane told me she'd hired you."

He sounds intelligent, cultured. I'd half expected an ill-mannered brawler. It just goes to show you shouldn't be judgmental. "Can we meet up for a chat?"

"Okay."

"Good. If you're both going to be reasonable, and not go for some aggressive showdown, it's the quickest route to a settlement. How about you talk, and I let you know if we're getting onto thin ice?"

I sense amusement. "Would you trust you if you were me?"

I smile, but he can't see that. "I wouldn't trust me at all."

He gives a brief laugh. "Well, that's honest. Okay, we'll talk it out."

"Do you want to come by my office, say—"

"I'd rather meet somewhere neutral. There's a coffee shop on the corner by Crazy John's, not far from you."

"You know where I live?"

"It wasn't hard to discover. So?"

"I know it."

"Be there in an hour."

"But, I—" I was listening to the dial tone.

I scribble a few notes, and sling my bag over my shoulder. A walk might just clear my head.

Janine yells at me as I'm passing her door. "Off somewhere?"

"Meeting up with May-Jane's biker."

She inclines her head. "Is that wise?"

"It's less wise for him, and he's agreed. May-Jane knows. I'm just putting toes in the water at this stage, see where he's coming from."

She pauses, considering, then nods once. He's the one who should have said no.

The trees are greening up, and there's a smattering of spring flowers. A slight chill makes the walk energizing. Inside the coffee shop, there's no sign of Greg. I find an empty table, by the window. I'm wondering if he's going to stand me up when I hear the slow thump of a big motorcycle. He bumps it up onto the sidewalk. I don't know bikes, but there's something definitely phallic about the whole power thing as the driver professionally clips the side-stand with his heel and swings his leg over. He pulls off a black, open-face helmet and plonks it confidently onto the seat. Greg's pretty-boy image didn't suggest someone quite this macho, but I should have guessed. He's bigger than I expected, a bit scary in the anticipated

uniform: heavy boots, leather trousers straining over massive thighs, a graffiti-covered leather jacket, unzipped to display a fairly hairy chest straining over a low-cut vest, despite the chill. Yep, a definite case of testosterone, and as far as I know, there's no cure.

The server freezes as he comes through the door, but I can see why May-Jane would have been sucked in. Here's one guy who wouldn't be fazed by her bad language, or even care that she was a celebrity. In a world inhabited by sycophants, I suspect he would have been a breath of fresh air when they met.

As if he comes bearing a bad smell, there's a wave of retreating body language amongst the other clientele. I beckon him over. The retreating wave rushes back as the other coffee junkies realize he's not a threat. Does he know he has that effect on people? I guess he must. You don't dress like that to be liked. He makes his way toward me. I hold my hand out. His grasp, which could have crunched bones, is fairly gentle. There's a faint hint of aftershave in the air.

"Deirdre? Greg."

I answer with a smile. "I guessed."

He squeezes into the bench seat opposite. The server plasters a neutral expression over her curiosity as she comes over to serve us. We must make an odd couple: the office suit and the biker from hell.

"Where are you from? Australia?" he asks.

I try not to roll my eyes. "I spent my first few years in the UK. Can't eradicate the accent."

"Okay. So," he says, avoiding niceties. "Where do we go from here?"

"I'm not sure where *here* is, so why don't you tell me?"

"What did May-Jane tell you?"

"That you were unfaithful. That she wants a clean break. The settlement she is offering is, ah, negligible, so basically, I

just need to know what you're gunning for."

"Ah." He piles some sugar into the coffee and stirs a while. "Well now, the thing is, I don't want anything. I'm not trying to hang on to someone who doesn't want me. Pointless. And I don't need her money. You want me to sign something, get this settled?"

I'm taken aback. "Really?"

"I came into her life empty-handed, and I'll leave the same way."

I stare at him, not sure where this is going. "You could claim half of everything, and we'll work from there?"

He betrays quiet amusement by body language alone. "Are you supposed to be saying stuff like that? Anyway, want and get is two different things, as my dad used to say. When we're divorced, if she wants to help me out, I won't say no."

He had a dad, growing up? That's not what was suggested in the notes. "Why would she help you when you were, ah, unfaithful?"

"That's just the story we agreed."

I take a breath. "Greg, what's going on? Why is she paying us to act for her if you're not going after her money?"

Gray eyes level at mine. "The marriage was legal. The divorce has to be legal. She doesn't want me crawling out of the woodwork with demands, a few years from now. She has her reasons."

We sip in silence for a moment, staring out of the window at the steady stream of traffic. May-Jane and Greg have an agenda, that's for sure, but it doesn't sound like there's antipathy. Well, maybe a little. I press a bit. "Did May-Jane buy you the bike?" I ask.

"Nope. That's my baby." He turns to admire it briefly through the window. "Are you into bikes?"

"Nope. My dad was a doctor. They call them donor bikes in the hospital."

“I could change your mind. A little spice makes living worthwhile. If we’re done, here, I’ll give you a lift back to the office.”

When he smiles, something jolts well below my stomach. Good God, the man has it in spades. I had wondered why May-Jane took up with him, but now I get it. I look down at my office garb, and say, “Not a good idea.”

“Suit yourself. Apparently, I need to hire a lawyer?”

So, they’ve spoken already. “It would be sensible.”

“Okay. May-Jane will pay. Who shall I get?”

“Off the record, if you’re prepared to settle amicably, there doesn’t seem any point hiring a high flyer. I can provide a couple of names of people I think are honest; well, the least dishonest. But after that, it’s your choice. Have you got an email account?”

“Give me yours.”

He grabs my proffered card and slides out of the seat. This is the first hint that he’s not cooperating fully. “Thanks. We’re done, then. Great. You’ve got my cell. If you think of anything, let me know. Meanwhile, just get those papers together and I’ll sign them. Sooner the better. It was a good gig while it lasted.” At the door, he looks back over his shoulder. “Oh, and thanks for the coffee, doll.”

Doll? Well, that’s a first. I watch him swing back over the saddle, pull on the helmet and gloves. As he pulls away confidently, without looking back, it almost seems as though the traffic parts to let him out.

~ 12 ~

I power-walk back to the office and start on Dad's case.

His name is mentioned in a couple of blogs and articles about comparable baby abductions, but that's all I find. It was twenty years ago, when phones were on wires and the net was in its infancy. I find nothing about Richard Ryan except a paragraph about his disappearance, and the fact that the cops had discovered absolutely nothing. There was nothing to suggest he'd been abused by his father. Why did Dad think that?

I phone a research agency. They know me; they don't ask questions. There are too many people researching all sorts of things for all sorts of reasons for them to give a damn. I give them the barest details, and by the afternoon someone has accessed the microfiches in newspaper offices in Phoenix and sent me photocopies of the reports.

Usually my mission is simple: do everything I can to help win the case. It's the opposition's job to challenge it. My personal feelings can't come into it. That's how the law gets as close as it can to the truth: all-out war until one side caves in under the firepower. War is never nice, and victory doesn't always fall to the righteous. I've wracked my brains trying to think of a better path, and all I can come up with is that it's better than what some countries call justice.

But this is the first time I have a personal interest, and it colors perception big time. I'd always *known* that Dad had

nothing to do with the Habershon baby going missing, and now I know that's a lie it challenges everything I've ever believed.

In the back of my mind a gremlin is telling me to let well enough alone, stay clear of what Dad's up to, but with the bogus Valerie on his case, I can't. I'm bothered about what she knows, or what she thinks she knows. It's a strange thing to be doing. Looking into your own dad's past, searching for something that might lie buried beneath common knowledge. I tell myself I'm trying to catch the fall, have the answers before there's any case to answer, but once the seed of doubt has been sown, it grows: is my gentle ex-doctor dad a pedophile?

It's the question I've been refusing to voice, even internally. While I was with him, I had no doubts at all. But now, in his absence, I'm stewing over every little aspect of our relationship, from then to now. I feel sick. I love this man. I've hugged and kissed him. He's my father, for God's sake, he can't be a pedophile. But what if he is?

The articles about baby Habershon read like ancient history. I have no memories to muddy the waters. What strikes me most is how un-newsworthy a baby-snatching is. This one was front page news for just one day. A few days later, on the page where a tiny article states that the baby was still missing, there's a huge article about some politician having an affair with one of his junior assistants. The article that interests me most was written by one Antonio Cavada. It's naïve, badly written, and badly researched. I'm amazed it got published. In it he claims to have been leaked information about a child porn ring, and links several child disappearances in the Phoenix area with my dad's name. You wouldn't need to be a genius to realize it's not whistle-blowing journalism, but circumstantial rubbish. I'm looking for names. I want to speak to real people. I want to know what *wasn't* reported at

the time. Newspapers are reputed to report anything and everything, but I believe they're careful when it comes to unsubstantiated accusations that could rebound on them financially. I call the agency and say I'd like to meet other staff who'd been on the ward when Dad worked there, if they can trace any.

Then I get back on May-Jane's case.

Janine beckons me in when I knock. I sit down, yawn and stretch.

"Long night?" she asks.

"Frustrating weekend. Self-induced headache."

"You spend too much time alone. You need to get laid."

"That's what my dad said." She grins and I manage to force out a smile. "Well, actually what he said is, I need a good man. I've been investigating the possibility that one exists, but the stats don't hold up."

"Getting laid isn't about good men. It's about finding one who hits the spot," she states, with some assurance. I guess Leo must hit the spot.

"Well, I've never discovered one of those. The men I've dated used me to masturbate in, and expected me to make ecstatic noises as they were doing so. I discovered a long time ago that it's best to rely on no one but myself in these matters."

Now she laughs out loud, but briskly changes the subject. "So, what went down this morning with Greg?"

"I have to admit, I don't know what May-Jane's game is. The stud isn't going to contest anything. It's all a scam of some kind, I haven't yet worked out what. He doesn't want May-Jane's money. He said, produce the papers, he'll sign them."

She frowns. It's not good news to hear the golden goose isn't going to lay for you. "If they both want a divorce, and he doesn't want her money, they could just sign a couple of papers and file it themselves."

“May-Jane wants it to be subsequently incontestable.”

“Okay, get them started for me. But see what billable hours you can screw out of it.”

I stand up to leave. “Right. I’ll talk to the girl, Gina—the girl he was apparently unfaithful with. She’s agreed to be named, for some reason.”

“In the meantime, there are a few things I’d like you to check up on.”

She shoves some colored folders across the desk. No rest for the wicked. I snatch them up. “Thanks.”

I find it difficult to care about May-Jane’s divorce. Confused as I am, I know it’s got to be a publicity stunt, and the enigmatic Greg was probably in on it from the get-go. What I can’t get my head around is the unlikely pairing of Greg and May-Jane. It’s plain weird. I phone admin and ask them to get hold of a copy of May-Jane’s marriage license, and details of the wedding. I wonder who witnessed it, and whether there had been any opposition to it. I envisage Greg’s white supremacist gang on one side of the church and May-Jane’s relatives on the other, and nearly laugh out loud at the image.

Gina rolls in an hour later than she said she would and plonks herself down opposite my desk before I can suggest relocating to the comfortable seats. In my experience, people from the most unfortunate backgrounds exude a false air of confidence when they step out of their inhabited world, but Gina seems genuinely unconcerned. She’s filthy, her hair is in rat’s tails, and she’s chewing gum with the relentless determination of a camel. Her clothes could be described as cheap fashion that hasn’t stood the test of time. Over the top of a pair of jeans that don’t have designer holes in them, and a mud-colored top that might once have been yellow, she’s wearing a leather jacket similar to the one Greg had been wearing. It has some kind of

logo on the back. I wonder if she came on the back of Greg's bike.

"Yeah, what?" she asks.

"Yeah what, what?" I echo.

"You're the lawyer-woman what wants to talk to me?"

Want might be overstating the case. "Thanks for coming in, Gina."

"Greg said to. He brought me in."

Well, that's one mystery solved. Maybe it explains the rat's tails, but I doubt it. "You know it's about the divorce. May-Jane thinks—"

"Who cares what that bitch thinks," she sneers. "She stole him from us, and now she wants to shaft him? They'll never let him back in. He was a good guy before she turned him. He thinks the sun shines outta her black hole."

Well, that puts her clearly in the biker set.

"So, just for the record, you haven't had an, ah, affair with Greg while he's been married?"

"Course not. I'm saying that 'cause he asked. Would you fuck your brother?"

I suspect I wouldn't, if I had one. "Greg's your *brother*?"

"Bike brothers. Him and my Steve was wheel buddies. We was buddies. Been together since forever. Rode together, like, till Steve died. Shouldn't've happened," she says, swiping her eyes with her palms.

The caring therapist in me emerges briefly. "Do you want to tell me what happened?"

Her glare is vitriolic. I guess not.

"So, what d'ya want?"

"In the divorce, May-Jane is citing you as the other party in an extra-marital relationship." She looks blank. I reformulate my words. "Did you have sex with Greg while he was married to May-Jane?"

She looks taken aback. "I already said no, didn't I?"

“Well, just for the record.”

“No, I fucking didn’t. When Steve was murdered and I lost the baby, Greg took care of me. Of *course* I don’t mess around with him. But you can say I did.”

“So, you used to ride together? As part of a gang?”

She looks cagey. “We was, before I got knocked up. But that ain’t what this is all about. You want me to sign something, so give it me.”

She’s right, but curiosity is my middle name. If Greg had belonged to an outlaw biker gang, well, he wouldn’t have been there in the first place unless he had a capacity for violence and an utter disregard for society, law, and possibly life. My first impression of Greg, that he’s one scary individual, is probably right. Personally, I don’t know much about outlaw motorcycle gangs, but even the title suggests that they’re very real and dangerous, with a sub-culture of organized crime.

“So, have you any idea what happened between Greg and May-Jane?”

She shrugs. “Dunno. Didn’t think he’d ever marry. And a black bitch? Steve wouldn’t have stood for that. If he’d still been around, Greg woulda run the gauntlet.”

That was kind of what I was expecting. Even though I didn’t know what *running the gauntlet* meant in biker terms, I suspect it was something he wouldn’t have emerged from unscathed. Aside from trafficking in all sorts of dubious merchandise, the gangs are openly racist. If Greg was of the same ilk, how come May-Jane married him? People who are prejudiced to that degree don’t usually hide it well. I’m still fishing, though. “So, do you know how they met?”

“I dunno. Look, I don’t know what went down between them, and don’t give a fuck. But like I told you, it’s got nothing to do with me. But Greg wants me to say I slept with him, so he can dump her, and I’m okay with that. Are we done?”

I fail to see how more done we could be. “Can I call you if

anything else comes to mind?”

She shrugs a lack of interest. I stand up and see her to the door. “Well, thanks very much, Gina. I’m sorry about Steve. And the baby.”

Her eyes blank me out. She doesn’t want my sympathy or empty platitudes.

~ 13 ~

The next morning, I head out early. The park is pretty much my favorite place to run because, though I'm a city girl at heart, it distances me from the daily grind of work and traffic and fumes. At this time in the morning the only people I pass are other joggers. But today I have the place to myself. My feet pound in time with the slow beat crooning into my earbuds.

The attacker comes out of nowhere, and is brutal.

I'm bowled sideways off the path, landing on my hands and knees on dry mulch with a cry of surprise. He grabs my hair in a fist, pulls me to my feet. A knife appears before my eyes and I freeze. I know a moment of absolute disbelief. Then the buds are yanked from my ears, and a soft voice instructs, "Keep it shut and I won't cut your throat."

I'm propelled toward the darker tangle of undergrowth. My limbs don't work properly, I move like a marionette. My body is on autopilot, but the knowledge is clear: he's not after money.

Through the shock, like that flash of lightning that shoots across a blue sky, I'm suddenly calm. The day is clear, birds are singing, and I'm going to die. If I have to go out, maybe birdsong isn't the worst thing to hear. I'm thrust to the ground again, and he's on me, a hand pressing my face into the ground, the other ripping at my jogging pants. Suddenly my compliance turns to fury. I twist, bite his hand as hard as I can, then draw my breath to scream. With an oath, he whacks my

face with a fist. I'm shocked into silence. His hand tightens round my throat. I gag, and drag at his wrist with both hands. I'm losing consciousness. My body bucks involuntarily, seeking air. He eases his grip and the fight goes out of me.

I see him now. I've never seen that face before. He's Caucasian, tidy and clean-shaven, but he doesn't look big enough to be this strong. I waver almost out of consciousness. His mouth is open, panting. He reaches under my T-shirt, rips at my skin-tight sports bra. I cry out with unexpected pain, but the sound is cut off as a hand slams my head into the mulch again. "Quiet!"

Nothing in life has prepared me for this feeling of helplessness, this raw anger, that I can be *used* then disposed of—Lauralee's words flood my brain—like a condom. Whatever he says, he'll hurt me because it turns him on. He'll rape me then kill me, because I've seen his face.

There's a crash in the undergrowth, and my attacker is lifted bodily away. He gives a cry of fury, and as I struggle to my feet, another man draws back a fist and punches him. I should run, but the sheer aggression has me frozen. Then my attacker lunges and shoves my rescuer violently off his feet before taking off at high speed. As my rescuer pulls himself out of a tangle of dead branches, I recognize him. It's the guy who lives in the condo above me: Wayne.

He looks as shocked as I am. "Miss Hamilton? Godsakes! Are you all right?" He pulls a cell phone out of his pocket. "I'll call an ambulance. I'll get the cops."

I jump forward, grab his hand, stopping him. "No, no. I'm okay, really."

My breath catches, and the full terror hits me, now that it's over. Shaking wildly, I sink, fold over, and draw harsh breaths until the panic subsides. He stands back, hands extended, wanting to help, not daring to touch. "We should call the cops. He was going to, ah— There could be other women..." I've

noticed during my time as a counsellor that men can't form the word *rape* unless it's in jest.

"You stopped him," I say harshly, then laugh on a hiccup. "No point. No proof." I know all too well how it goes for women who say they've been attacked. The trauma of that interrogation would be worse than the attack. Even if they found him, it would end up as a circus, and I'd be the victim all over again. My courage fails, and tears rise. "I just want to go home. Please."

He walks beside me all the way, not trying to offer useless words of comfort. I'm grateful he's there. At my door, he asks, "Will you be all right?"

I nod and lock the door behind me. I lean my back against it. I've never been so scared, never in such mortal danger, yet now it's over, the memory is almost surreal. I guess I was hit by adrenaline. Did it really happen? I shower as usual, then happen to see my face in the mirror. I have a huge bruise ripening on my right cheek. More than anything, that jolts me. In hindsight, all the possibilities of what might have happened flood in. I hug my arms tightly around myself. I've had spats, I've argued, been threatened, but this was up close and personal. The real thing. It shocks me that somebody can walk up to me and take away my freedom, just like that. I know, theoretically, how easy it is for a man to overpower a woman, but experience lends a different perspective. In fact, it makes a mockery of my fear of big bruisers like Greg, when just about *any* man can do this to me without my permission. I've been in charge of my own life forever. I've never been manhandled, until now.

I should go to work, and try to leave the flat, but can't. I phone in and ask Janine if I can work from home.

She hears something in my voice. "What's up, Dee? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," I say, knowing I'm not. "I had a bit of a trip

when I was jogging. Did a nose dive, and have a helluva bruise rising. I look like a mugging victim.” I manage a passable laugh.

“Do you need a doctor?” She manages to sound concerned.

“No, I’ll be fine. I’ll just rest up for a bit, take some Vicodin.”

“Okay. Take whatever time you need. If you need anything, I’ll have it couriered over to you.”

“Thanks.”

~ 14 ~

That afternoon there's a knock on my door. I'm pretty sure I know who it is, but still look through the peephole. I've never really taken much notice of Wayne, but the concerned look on his face is welcome. I notice now that he has slightly receding sandy hair, and sallow skin with freckles across the nose and cheekbones. His eyes are a kind of washed-out gray. He's wearing a business suit.

"I've never seen you dressed like that," I say inconsequentially as I open the door.

"I don't think you've ever seen me," he jokes, and I feel that I should be apologizing for the oversight. "How are you doing?"

"Not so good."

"I've heard"—he hesitates, takes a breath—"I read that women who suffer from, ah, attacks like this need counseling."

"I don't do counseling. I'll be fine."

He hands me a card which simply states his name and number. "I have to go to a meeting downtown, but if you need anything at all, shopping, whatever, just call me. Look, you know I jog, too?"

"Lucky for me, I do," I say dryly.

"Yes, well, what I meant was, when you're ready let me know. I'll just follow from a distance if you don't want company."

"I'm not sure..."

“They say if you fall off your horse, the best medicine is to jump straight back on.”

“Thanks. You’re very kind. I might just take you up on that in a couple of days. Right now, I think my horse has bolted.”

Of course, he’s right. I have to go back out there, or the shit who attacked me will have scored a second point: I’ll always be a victim. I’ve taken the first step, locking myself in my own home. But right now, it’s too soon, too raw.

The next day I rise at the normal time and sit on the end of the bed at a loss. I stare at my trainers. I could just do a route around the streets, I tell myself, but I can’t. I’m so angry I want to scream. I can’t go into work, either. I put my hand to my face, which is swollen and tender, and shock hits me all over again. Not some warning slap, but a full-on fist in the face. It’s hard to compute that information. I think about women who live with domestic abuse, and wonder if they get used to it.

When I open my computer, I find an email from Dad. It’s a different email address.

DEE, IT WAS GREAT TO MEET UP. SORRY I HAD TO RUN. I’LL BE IN TOUCH.
GIVE MY LOVE TO LAURIE.

For some reason that enrages me, as though this is all his fault. I hit reply.

YEAH, IT WAS GREAT. WHERE’S MY DAMN PHONE? AND WHAT THE HELL’S
GOING ON? WHERE ARE YOU LIVING?

The moment I hit send I wish I could take it back, but Dad knows he’s upset me and lied to me, so why pull my punches? Other people don’t bother.

Later, I go down to the foyer to check the mail. There’s a pile of stuff from Janine, hand-delivered, a couple of bills, and a tattered brown envelope that I rip open as I’m walking back up the stairs. When Dad said he’d get in touch, I didn’t expect it to be so soon. It contains a newspaper clipping, and a

handwritten note in his almost illegible doctor-hieroglyphics.

MY DEAREST DEE. I'M SO TERRIBLY SORRY ABOUT YOUR CELL PHONE. I RAN OVER IT WHEN I PICKED YOU UP. I WAS GOING TO PAY FOR A NEW ONE, THEN FORGOT. PEOPLE ARE TRYING TO FIND ME. THEY COULD BE TRACKING YOU AND LAURIE, SCANNING YOUR EMAIL AND PHONE. TRY TO BELIEVE ME WHEN I SAY I'M NOT A BAD PERSON. YOUR LOVING DAD.

I stare at the words blankly. I recently learned that he did steal the baby all those years ago, undoing a lifetime of belief that he was innocent. Now he admits that he's being sought by – who? FBI? Or bad guys? I turn the envelope over. No stamp. It had been hand-delivered. Was he here, in Baltimore? Or is he working with someone else? I take out the chewed-up newspaper clipping as I close the door behind me and slide the deadbolt home. It's about some rich kid who crashed his plane a couple of days ago.

RICHARD MATHERS, (36), SON OF RORY MATHERS, THE MULTI-MILLIONAIRE SOFTWARE GURU, DIES IN PLANE CRASH.

So? I read on and learn that the young man had been a high achiever in university and his parents are devastated. Naturally. Richard had been flying his own single-prop kit-plane from their ranch in Colorado when something had gone wrong. He'd died on impact, killing a cow at the same time. Poor cow, I think. I suppose I should say I'm sad for Richard, but I don't know him any more than I know the cow, and he was a product of his upbringing. He'd chosen to be up there in his flimsy, lightweight, rich-boy's toy. Maybe I feel a tiny bit of sympathy for his parents, but these guys live in such a different world from me, they might as well be on a different planet. I don't know why Dad sent it to me.

Three days later I'm going stir crazy. It's my own fault, of course. I don't want to tell people what happened—I imagine the sympathy, ghoulish inquisition, or downright disbelief—

but being alone isn't helping. I call the number Wayne gave me. He answers almost immediately. "Hi?"

"Wayne?"

"Miss Hamilton?"

"It's Deirdre to friends and people who rescue me."

"Deirdre. Are you okay?"

"Yes, except that, well—" It comes out in a rush. "Would you have dinner with me tonight?" There's a bit of a pause, and I immediately feel awkward. "Look, sorry. I shouldn't have asked. You've probably got a girlfriend, or a, ah, not that I'm suggesting... Damn. Forget I asked."

"Wait! Don't hang up! I get it, you just need to talk, need company. It's fine. I'm working away today, but I'll be back around six. Do you need me to bring something?"

"Yeah. Everything really. I'm out of booze, too. Beer or wine, I'm easy."

"Pizza okay with you?"

"Sure."

"Okay, see you then."

What the hell? That's not like me at all. I don't even know the guy. He could be a psychopath or something. Then I recall he was the one who saved me from the psychopath. But just in case, I search for the pepper spray Lauralee gave me. I hold it at arm's length and press fleetingly. It's ten years past its expiry, but there's a hiss and I rush out of the room. Later, I stuff it down the side of the sofa cushion. I should have had it with me when I went jogging. But as I mull over the events of that morning for the umpteenth time, I realize I wouldn't have had a chance to get it out or use it anyway. Whoever took me down had been quick and efficient and, I suspect, waiting for me. All those days I'd had the strange sensation of being watched, well, maybe I had been. Those primal instincts that we ignore day to day, thinking ourselves so *evolved*, are still lurking somewhere deep in our psyche.

Will I stop jogging? If I do, the perv will have impacted on my life forever. Yet I don't ever want to experience that again. Wayne being around to save me was happenstance. Pure luck. Am I going to become one of those paranoid people who jog with one hand in the purse? At this moment it seems likely. Perhaps I should do one of those self-defense classes again, and follow it through this time. *Dee the Dangerous* could be inside me, itching to get out. I don't kid myself for long. I was scared shitless, and the fear of being hurt worse would have stopped me from doing anything but comply.

As work isn't an option, I decide to clean a little. Laurie would approve. Aside from making sure the kitchen isn't a biohazard, cleaning is at the bottom of my list of Important Things to Do on a daily basis, so it gets left until it needs doing, and it needs doing now. Someone once said, *a clean house means a sterile mind*, so years ago I took that as gospel. It's what we do: latch on to the beliefs that suit us.

But I don't want Wayne to think I'm dirty.

As I'm vacuuming around the second bedroom that doubles as an office, I notice something suspect on the floor, and bend down to check. I dab my finger, dubiously, and lift it to my nose. Relieved, I realize it's just a blob of jelly, and laugh at myself. I've had a fondness for peanut butter and jelly sandwiches since I was a child. Then I stop and double-take. I don't recall bringing sandwiches into my office recently, and the jelly is still fresh. A trickle of apprehension rushes through me. Yesterday, I would just have assumed it was me, but today my nerves are jangled. Had my attacker been in here, snooping around, touching my stuff, helping himself to my food? I shake my head at my own paranoia, but the niggle sits firmly behind my eyes like a mild headache.

I recall that strange thought I'd had before visiting Dad, of leaving the door unlocked. Maybe I hadn't left it unlocked, after all. Maybe whoever had entered had been in the house

while I was packing. The thought freezes me for a long moment, then I shake my head and get on. But my mind has jumped into overdrive.

Just as I'm about to empty my trash can into a garbage bag, I notice the brown envelope that Dad's note came in. I'd been so busy checking the contents, I hadn't given it more than a fleeting glance. It looks as if it's been punctured in places with something sharp. I rip it at the seams, flatten it out and hold it up to the light. Pinpricks of light show a pattern that means absolutely nothing to me. If it's a constellation it's not one I recognize. It seems random, but there's a neat, almost calculated precision to the holes. It doesn't have the appearance of having been mashed through the postal system, besides which, I'm almost certain it was delivered by hand.

So, I put the envelope back with the note and article in my desk drawer, and shove all the other papers that are lying around in there, too. May-Jane's divorce, and the other bits and pieces I'm working on aren't anyone else's business. Not that Wayne would be interested. I'm not sure what he is interested in, in fact. This evening has all the potential of an utter disaster and I regret the impulse that suggested I'd like to be with somebody, anybody, just to not be alone. I'd been informed he was an accountant, and there's no reason why an accountant shouldn't be physically fit, but in hindsight, the way he'd fought off my attacker, the way he moved, the way he punched, seemed professional, as though he'd done it before.

When Wayne knocks, I'm pretty much composed.

He enters in a waft of soap and tangy aftershave. Too much aftershave, in fact. I sneeze. I've never been a martyr to manufactured scents. The only bottle of perfume I have ever owned, a present from my last boyfriend, probably because it turned him on, is still half full, and has probably lost most of its potency. But still, I can't knock the man for being clean, and he does look fairly wholesome. I think he must work out

as well as jog.

His head cocks to one side. “You okay with this?”

I nod, and stand back.

“Kitchen in here?” He goes and dumps a cardboard pizza box on the counter. “I’ll toss it in the oven. It was hot when I got it, but not now.”

“Sorry. I’m not one for cooking much. One of these days I might buy a dining table.” I wave my hand over the empty space as if hoping one might magically appear.

“You’re welcome,” he says. “I’d pretty much convinced myself you wouldn’t let me in. I wouldn’t have blamed you.”

Strangely, that puts me at ease.

Wayne shows me the label on a bottle of red. “Merlot,” he says. “I’ll just dunk it in some hot water while the pizza’s warming.”

I want to tell him to hang the hot water and just pour it out, the glasses are ready and waiting, but I don’t want to sound totally crass. He perches on the edge of the other sofa, looking as awkward as I feel, and says, “Look, if you’re not comfortable with this, I can go. It’s not a problem, really.”

I’m grateful to him for that understanding. “No, it’s fine. I don’t want to be alone.”

I fidget, embarrassed, then go out to the kitchen, find plates, surreptitiously giving them a quick buff and polish. I rattle about in the kitchen for a bit, but when I turn back, he’s actually reading my latest novel. Damn. I forgot to hide it. Now he thinks I’m an idiot! Then I realize he’s chuckling quietly to himself.

“It’s good not to take yourself too seriously,” he says as I perch opposite him again. “It’s quite well-written for a spoof.”

I don’t think the author meant it that way, but I nod. “I was enjoying it until a couple of days ago. Now, the thought of some guy getting off chewing at my neck makes me feel quite sick.”

“Right. Time for pizza, I guess. I’ll go serve.”

He really has got a charming smile. He brings in the pizza and pours the wine, and I kind of like the way he takes a big swig of his. A man after my own heart. Maybe this was just what Dad had been suggesting. A nice, clean-cut guy who’s intelligent, and not too precious about his Merlot.

We eat with our fingers, folding the wedges to stop the topping from sliding off. He says something about the news. I say something about the weather. We absolutely avoid talking about why he’s here, which is good, because I’m not quite sure why I need company. When the pizza is demolished, we end up slouched on opposite sofas. I feel awkward, and wish he’d leave, but it would be crass to say *thanks for the grub, I’d rather be on my own now*.

“I’m afraid I only do microwave meals,” he says.

“So do I,” I admit. After watching a few celebrity chefs and fantasizing over the mouth-watering concoctions they labored over, I had hoped to discover some joy in cooking, but no such luck. The time and resultant unappetizing mess simply weren’t worth the effort.

“So, perhaps I could take you out one day, do dinner in a bit more style?”

I could almost hear the tag: no strings attached. “Sure, that would be nice.”

“I’m working on site tomorrow, but I’m hoping to work from home the rest of the week, so if you need me to get anything, just shout.”

“Thanks. What do you do? I mean, if you don’t mind—”

“Auditing. It can be tedious, but it’s like detective work when things don’t add up. It’s not easy when everyone’s trying to fiddle the books without the know-how to do it properly.”

I half-smile.

He gives a faint caught-in-the-act grin. “I used to think auditing was about making sure people were honest, and paid

their taxes, but I soon learned it was about making sure they don't get caught, within reason of course," he adds swiftly. "I don't do accounting for drug syndicates." He glances at a watch, and stands. "Now, I have a bit of homework to catch up on. Are you up for a jog in the morning?"

"I, ah—" Why do I feel like a gauche schoolgirl? I brace myself. "Yeah. I guess."

"Good girl," he says, and for some reason I preen.

He lets himself out. I jump up and drop the deadbolt behind him.

~ 15 ~

I'm studying the article from Dad, trying to understand what the hell it signifies, when I hear the growl of a motorcycle and instantly think of Greg. I look out of the window, and sure enough, there he is. How the hell did he find out where I live? I'm damned sure no one at the office would have told him. But I guess it's not so hard to find things out, these days.

He buzzes and I let him in through the communal front door. When there's a faint rap at my door, I wonder whether I'm being stupid, but open it anyway. He's holding a large manilla envelope.

There's a long moment of silence before he asks, "I suppose I should ask what the other guy looks like?"

I give a faint smile. "If there were a God, he'd be in chains over a fiery pit."

"What, God?"

I laugh. "The guy, of course."

"But as there's no God?"

"He got away."

He hands over the envelope and I take it with a faint lift of the brows.

"Someone from your office said you needed the original marriage certificate. May-Jane asked me to bring it to you."

Interesting. They're not just on speaking terms, but fully cooperating with each other. It adds to my conviction that this is some kind of scam. "Thanks. Did she say I also wanted to

know who the witnesses of the marriage were?”

He’s surprised. “No. But I don’t get why you’d need to know. It’s just a divorce. I said I’d sign.”

“Being told something is simple is a sure way of making me nervous. My naturally suspicious nature is making sure nothing’s going to make a fool out of me.”

I think about shutting the door on him; it’s what we both expect. When I open it wider, I’m as surprised as he is. “Coffee?”

“Wouldn’t say no.”

“You’re bringing down the tone of the neighborhood. I’ll probably have threats and hate mail tomorrow.”

“It’ll give everyone something important to do.”

I smile. I like Greg, but I’m not sure why. My day-to-day life is fairly pedestrian, and he’s an unexpected wild card. I’ve never met a real biker—ex-biker— before but he doesn’t fit my preconceived notion. He plops onto one of my couches and looks around with interest, as though he’s never seen a condo before. Maybe he lives in a trailer, like Gina. But then I recall he must have been living in May-Jane’s mansion this last year, and my condo visibly shrinks to a scruffy rental in need of some TLC. I make mugs of instant coffee and set them on the small table.

“So, are you going to tell me what happened?” he queries.

I’m going to lie, but there’s something about his solid presence that suggests he won’t make light of it. I give him the abbreviated version. “I jog every morning, and a couple of days ago some guy attacked me.”

“He snatched your purse?”

“No, that’s not what he wanted.”

“Ah. And you got away?”

“I’d like you to think I did. Only he was winning hands down, when another guy came along and saved my ass. If he hadn’t—” I left the sentence to the imagination, and grimaced.

“Did you recognize him?”

“No, but I’d know him again. I got a good look, up close and personal.”

He leans back on the couch, which creaks alarmingly as he stretches. I notice a red light flashing on his belt, and point. “What’s that?”

“Beeper. I have to call in.”

Call in where? Does he work? I kind of thought he’d still be living off his wife’s obscenely large income, despite the divorce. He finishes his coffee and plonks the mug down, then looks at the stuff on the table. He takes the envelope that came from Dad, holds it up to the light, then places it carefully over the article about the rich kid, locating the top four holes around the heading. “Aha. Used to play that with my brother when I was a kid,” he says. “Cops and robbers, spies and stuff. Grew out of it, though, along with Superman and Lego.”

He heaves himself up, casting a sidelong glance as I follow him to the door. “You’re not going jogging alone anymore?”

“No. Wayne, upstairs, jogs. He’s going to buzz me when he leaves.”

“Good. Keep safe.”

I close the door behind him. It almost sounds as though he cares. After he’s gone, I put the envelope on the newspaper cutting and blob fluorescent marker over the holes. I’d never played cops and robbers and spies. Laurie and I grew to be social polar opposites, but as kids we’d played nicely with dolls and books, and climbed a few safe trees. Neither of us went down the tomboy route. When I take the envelope away, I’m left with a name: Richard Ryan.

I’m stunned for a second, then something cold washes through me. The millionaire kid who’d killed himself was Dirty Dick? The snotty-nosed kid from Laurie’s class who’d gone missing? I look closely at the grainy picture. Is there a likeness between this and the computer-enhanced image from

the missing child register? Dad said he didn't know anything about the other kidnappings, and now he's fessing up, letting me know Richard Ryan's fate? Not used and abused and dumped in a shallow grave, but placed in the care of people who gave him a privileged new start and a good education. And if he ended it too soon, it was his own damn fault.

"What the fuck?" I whisper.

How could Dad have known this, unless he had been involved? And what about all the other abductions at the time?

~ 16 ~

When Wayne knocks on the door a few days later the next morning, I feel strangely out of sync, nervous, like a kid going to school for the first time. I think it has more to do with Dad's revelation than any fear of getting attacked a second time, particularly when I have my own personal bodyguard. Wayne shoots me encouraging glances from time to time. All the same, I stick to the streets.

As we're heading back toward home, he pulls up and jogs alongside. "You okay?"

I nod. "Fine, thanks."

He casts a curious glance. "That guy, the other day. Was he bothering you?"

"No, it was work. Janine is sending work stuff home for me for a bit."

"Janine? Your boss?"

"Yeah."

"Did you tell her about the attack?"

"No."

Flying the client confidentiality flag tends to sidestep further questioning. I hadn't realized Wayne was at home when Greg called around. He keeps very quiet up there. I now imagine him up there flexing his muscles, wondering whether to come and knock on the door with some excuse, in case I'd needed rescuing again. Just as well he didn't. Greg has never shown any sign of being aggressive, but you don't get to

survive in a motorcycle gang without being able to look after yourself. I think I know who'd come off worse in that scenario. Anyway, Wayne doesn't press for detail. He gives me that slight tightening of the lips that expresses sympathy and empathy, and nods. "Well, you know where I am."

He drops back and follows, the steady thump of his feet on tarmac barely discernible behind me. Since the pizza dinner-date we haven't met up. I get the feeling he wants to. He's the first man in my history to play it cool, though, and wait for me to make my mind up. I don't quite know why I'm hesitating. As Janine once said, jumping in the sack with someone who isn't tying you in emotional knots tends to lay a problem to rest. It either excites your bones or it doesn't, and if he's straight-up crushing on me, why am I not getting quite the right vibe?

He doesn't push, though, and after a few days, I'm used to his presence. He's a solid runner, doesn't get out of breath, and doesn't make small talk, which is good. I like my space in the mornings, using the time to mentally consolidate things I've done at work the day before, and things I have yet to do. So, we get into a pattern. Wayne calls, we go jogging, we come back.

I like to think I'm getting through the whole assault thing; I'm an independent, free woman, after all. The bruise on my face, which had colored up impressively, shows few signs of abating. Once I realize it's going to be a few weeks before I lose it, I gather my courage and go back into work. I have to grit my teeth and smile at the wisecracks that actually aren't wise and aren't funny: *Yeah, but you should see the door...*

Because Richard Mathers is rich and dead, I find a fair amount about him on the internet. There's stuff about his degree in computing, about his high IQ, and about the way his business evolved out of something he'd dabbled in at

university, but nothing gives any indication that he's anything other than Edward and Sally Mathers' son. There are few images of his face, and no matter how hard I study them, it's hard to imagine Dirty Dick's inherent wretchedness in the confident, wide smile this young man had presented to the camera. There are images of the parents at the side of a grave, alongside relatives or friends wearing uniformly deadpan expressions and a variety of expensive black coats and hats. The parents look like grieving parents. Sally is dabbing at her eyes in one image, and Edward has the stony expression of a man who's not giving the press any emotional ammunition.

Richard was an eleven-year-old when he went missing, old enough to know what was happening. I wonder if he had been given a choice: stay with a father who abuses you, or leave them behind and never look back. Was he asked? Did he choose? I doubt his real parents would have been involved. They would have wanted a slice of that obscene wealth. And what about the Mathers? Why pretend this kid was theirs? Had they not been able to have children? Had they taken on an underprivileged kid out of altruism? And where the hell did Richard Mathers' high IQ come from? Then I recall Dad saying he was a bright kid and that his dad had been abusing him. I hadn't found that information in any of the news clips. He might have worked it out because he'd been a doctor, of course. But had anyone else known?

I learn that the Mathers have a history of old money. They'd been living abroad up to the time Richard was eleven, making money in India, Europe, and Australia, and had relocated to Massachusetts specifically to give their son a good old American education, from Deerfield Academy to Harvard. Everyone had liked Richard. He'd had a high-flying financial career that slipped into politics when his gut expanded. His success had been cut short by a fondness for small, homemade planes, which hadn't been the best recipe for longevity. Still,

he'd had fun while it lasted, and he'd left a wife and baby girl behind to inherit his fortune. If he'd started off life as Dirty Dick Ryan, he'd certainly landed on his feet after being spirited away from his parents.

~ 17 ~

On Friday evening, after my first few days in the office, Wayne drops by to take me out on what he insists isn't a date. Just friends, yeah? He drives us down to a local burger joint in his Chevrolet Impala. Either it has an impressive engine, or the exhaust is blown. From the immaculate condition, I suspect the former. I used to wonder if powerful vehicles made up for some kind of inner inadequacy, but I'm beginning to think it's the opposite: ego externalized. To me, cars, bikes, planes, are just ways of getting from one place to another, but some people like to be *seen* doing it. It makes a manly roar as he guns the engine before pulling away, which sends him a notch down in my estimation. He's dressed in a suit and I'm dressed up in my best pair of jeans.

"You look lovely," he says gallantly.

"I have to dress up for work, darned if I want to dress up in my own time," I say. But I had conceded to the occasion, putting on a decent top rather than the usual weekend baggy T-shirt.

Wine is wasted on burgers, so we're downing Bud Lights while we wait.

"So, how come you have such a proficient right hook, for a desk jockey," I ask.

There's a bloated moment, before his face betrays that little-boy-caught-in-the-act kind of grin I'd seen once before. "I used to be a cop."

Well, that explains my uneasy feeling that Wayne had been too damned good with his body language to be a desk jockey. “Why used to be?”

Baltimore was famous for protection rackets and pay-downs. I doubt it’s worse than any other city, but the cops here just got caught. A few years back there had been a massive scandal that had seen many cops de-badged, and some even sent to prison. I wonder if Wayne had been one of them.

As if reading my mind, he says, “I wasn’t kicked out. I left. My partner was gunned down in a domestic. The guy came out shooting. I dragged Amanda behind the car and called it in, but by the time back-up came, and the ambulance, she was gone. I was sitting in the dirt, covered in her blood. Sometimes I think it never washed out. We’d been teamed for long enough for it to really matter.”

“Damn,” I say inadequately.

“I’d been wondering if we were truly doing any good, but that was the moment I knew the pension wasn’t worth it. If I made it that far. While I was a cop, I made a lot of useful contacts, and I’m good with spreadsheets. Taking a course in accounting made sense.” He smiles. “I’ll be more careful not to look like a cop, next time I put down a rapist creep.”

“I sincerely hope there won’t be a next time.”

“Lightning doesn’t strike twice.”

“Actually, it does. Some people just attract it. Can I ask you a question?”

“As long as it’s not “did you ever kill anyone?” The answer to that is yes, by the way, another reason why it was time to leave.”

“I wasn’t going to—”

“It’s okay, it cleared the air.”

“I was going to ask if Mandy—”

“Amanda.”

“Sorry—if Amanda was your girlfriend. You don’t have to

answer,” I add hastily.

“No. But when you’ve worked closely with another cop for a couple of years, you’re as close as family. Unless you’ve learned to hate each other’s guts, of course.”

Which is just another side to family relationships, I add mentally. “But from that to auditing?”

“Big change, but people don’t shoot me if I make a mistake. Well, not so far, anyway. So, why do you work for a bloodsucker?”

I cast a half-smile. “You don’t like lawyers?”

He grimaces. “I had a marriage that ended in vitriol. I wanted to just separate, but Cathy wanted everything. So, she got herself pregnant before filing for divorce. Her plan backfired, though. She miscarried—which upset me for reasons I can’t even begin to fathom. I hadn’t chosen to be a father. It’s not something cops take lightly. But I suppose it’s as well the kid didn’t survive. Yet another kid in a split home, and Cathy probably wouldn’t have let me be a father, anyway.” He shrugs. “In any event, the lawyers bled us dry. Our house had been bought with an inheritance from my parents, but I ended up with sweet fuck all.”

“And Cathy?”

“It pleased me mightily that she ended up with nothing, too.”

“What a bitch.”

“That was my line. But I’m not angry anymore. Just wary.”

The server dumps plates in front of us with a smile. “Can I get you anything else?”

Wayne waves the empty bottles. The server nods and hustles away. The burgers are huge. My mouth waters in anticipation.

“Damn,” I say. “I knew I should get a dog.”

“You’d like a dog?”

“Companionship, garbage disposal and teeth, in one furry

bundle. Sounds good.”

“I can’t claim to be furry, but I can do the other three from time to time.” I give a spontaneous chortle, and he adds, “That’s better. I don’t think I’ve seen you laugh before. It suits you.”

He’s good company, in the end, telling me some amusing anecdotes about his years as a rookie, but he doesn’t mention his partner again. I guess holding someone you knew while she died of a bullet wound would alter your perspective on life.

I tell him some anecdotes from work, but they pale in comparison, and I’m also aware that there’s very little of my work that I can actually share.

“So, basically, you’re a bloodhound for a bloodsucker,” he says.

“Good analogy. I find the meat she can get her fangs into,” I agree. “A bit of detective work, a bit of psychology. Mostly it’s fairly tedious, but at least I’m not totally stuck in the office listening to people’s grudges all day.”

“That’s what I like about what I do now,” he agrees. “Sure, it’s desk work, but under my own terms. And I can mostly work from home.”

I imagine Lauralee’s glee if she could see me now, like some normal person on a normal date. She has me pegged for an old maid. She’d squeak with excitement and have me married off in a jiffy, with a bun in the oven. Not that that’s ever going to happen.

“What are you smiling about?”

“Oh, nothing,” I lie.

He has old-fashioned manners. He puts a hand on my back as we exit, making sure I don’t fall down the steps, and opens the car door for me. At home, I suspect he’s hoping to be invited in for coffee, but I plead weariness, and he accepts it with good grace. He squeezes my hand and doesn’t even try for an air kiss, never mind the full-on investigation of my

tonsils.

Later, in my lonely bed, I think of him in his, and smile.

“Sleep well,” he’d said, but the twinkle in his eye had suggested he knew damn well I wouldn’t.

~ 18 ~

On Saturday, Lauralee phones. There's the usual shrieking in the background, and a bark of annoyance from Tim. So, he's not always the smooth guy he makes out to be.

"Hi, Dee? How's things? Have you heard anything?"

I could tell her about Wayne, but that would be inviting trouble. She sounds flustered. "I take it you haven't updated Timothy about Valerie?" I ask.

"Don't call him that, he hates it."

"He's not listening."

"You'll do it by accident one of these days."

"I might not be able to help myself."

"I really don't get what you don't like about him."

"He's an asshole?"

"He's a good father and husband."

"Saints preserve us, is that enough?"

She takes an audible breath, and I feel a bit mean.

"I got the stuff you sent. It's bizarre. Unbelievable." I'd emailed her scans of the stuff from Dad, and explained about the envelope.

"That's what I thought, at first," I admit, "but why would Dad send it to me if it wasn't true?"

"It's got me worried, Dee."

"An understatement. Does Richard look anything like Dirty Dick? Could it be him?"

Her tone is one of exasperation. "He was ten years old. So

was I.”

“Eleven, Dad said.”

She gives an irritated snort. “But what are we going to do?”

“You mean, what am *I* going to do? I’ll let you know when I’ve worked it out.”

A couple of days later May-Jane’s on the line. “I need to speak to you.”

“Ditto. When can you come in?”

“Can you come out to my place? Today?”

Her place being a twenty-bedroom mansion in a garden the size of Central Park. A slight exaggeration, but you know what I mean. I’d seen it in a glossy mag lifestyle exposé. “Sure,” I drawl, as though I visit places like hers all the time. I have to admit to being more curious about her home than I am about whatever it is she can’t say at the office.

“You know where it is?”

“Yeah.” Of course.

“Right. When you get to the gate, buzz the intercom.”

When I tell Janine where I’m going, she’s pretty miffed that she passed the job to me. In fact, I wonder why she did. She tends to hang on to anything involving celebrities or the super-rich.

At the gate, a camera eye blinks at me. The gate slides open on rollers. I swing up a long drive. A clever bit of landscaping means you can’t see the house from the road. How the other half live, eh? I drive my city hatchback up and park it by the front door as though I’m not awed and tempted to creep around the back. The house doesn’t look that big, but when a maid answers the door, I realize I could squeeze my whole condo into the entrance hall.

“Ma’am would you leave your bag here, miss?”

“Why?”

“Because she said so?”

She says this with a disarming Irish lilt and a pert smile, so I drop my purse on a small table adorned with a massive vase of flowers. It's role-reversal time, I think. Black property owner with white staff. I wondered whether it's a statement, or just accidental. I also wonder why she lives in Baltimore, when Hollywood beckons. But Hollywood is no fairytale for the thousands whose tents line the sidewalks. I wonder if the obscenely rich don't notice as they drive by, or simply avert their eyes, in case poverty is catching.

The maid shows me into a large reception room with a parquet floor. Tall windows are elegantly draped with something that catches the sun, and hand-knotted carpets compete with heavy antique furniture. This is nothing like the modernist room I'd seen in the magazine article I'd found on the internet. She is a lady of contradictions. Or maybe paranoid about keeping her personal life secret. I don't know what I expected, but not this classy sense of stepping back in time. I almost expect May-Jane to be wearing a hoop skirt, but she's quite casual in jeans and an overlarge pink mohair sweater. What I don't expect is to see Greg lounging in one of the wingback chairs, totally at home.

I look from one to the other. Greg winks, and jumps up.

He puts a finger to his mouth and gives me the once-over with an electronic wand. I frown, but he says, "She's clear."

May-Jane says, "Take a seat. I've called for tea."

I perch on the edge of a chair, and she gives an irritated scowl. "Chill out. We're not out to get you. It's just that Greg needs to talk to you and it was easier this way."

"Greg wants to talk to me? About the divorce?"

"Of course not. I'll leave you to it."

And with that, she does.

My confusion rises as I turn to Greg. "Are you *not* divorcing, now? Is this some kind of publicity stunt?"

"Our marriage was the publicity stunt. The divorce is real."

Enjoying my confusion, he adds to it. “The thing is, I used to run drugs.”

I’m sure I really don’t want to hear what he’s going to tell me, but dutifully ask, “Used to?”

“It’s what gangs do,” he explains mildly. “But let’s not get into the rights and wrongs of it. All we did was move it. No one makes people buy the stuff. But the fact is, you get wary because the DEA is always trying to get some mole into the loop.”

“I don’t doubt it,” I say faintly.

“So,” he says, hooking a finger under the pager at his belt. “What you need to know is that this little beast isn’t actually a pager. It flashes when there’s electronic surveillance in the vicinity.” He waits while that bit of information sinks in, then, just in case I haven’t got it, he adds, “So who’d want to bug your place?”

I’m stunned, and probably look it.

“Would it be your boss, your firm?”

“Unlikely,” I manage.

His grin is almost sly. “It’s all right; if you don’t tell me your little secrets, I won’t tell you mine. I just want to know if you need some help figuring it out.”

“I, ah... Why would you want to do that?”

“Firstly, because you’re acting for May-Jane, and I don’t want people sneaking around listening in on things they shouldn’t be listening in on.”

“So not entirely altruistic, then?”

“Not at all.”

“And secondly?”

“Well, if anything develops between us, I certainly wouldn’t want someone listening in on *that*.”

I give a derisive snort.

His face hardens. “Then I wondered if you were working with the DEA, and whether I’d have to take steps, so I looked

into your background.”

My heartbeat increases significantly. I’m left in no doubt that *steps* is a euphemism for something nasty, possibly terminal. I don’t think I’m hiding my fear very well. I rise to leave. “I think I should go. Janine knows I’m here.”

“Sit down. If I wanted to hurt you, it wouldn’t be here.” His pale eyes level at me, “I decided you probably weren’t DEA, though, because you wouldn’t have drawn attention to the bug-tracer. You would have known what it was.” He leans back, crosses his ankles. “If you’re not after me, I’m not your problem; the people who bugged your condo are. They might be monitoring your phones. They might have bugged your car, or at least, put a tracer on it. So, whoever they are, they know you’re here. But they won’t know we’re having this conversation. That’s why I had May-Jane invite you. Do you want my help or not?”

It takes less than a second to process this information.

“Please,” I say in a small voice.

“So, why would someone bug your place?”

If someone’s bugging my place, ten to one the fake Valerie is behind it, and it’s about Dad, but I’m not about to tell Greg that. “I guess it must be something to do with work, but I can’t imagine what. I don’t think I’m working on any cases where people would even know *how* to do that. Mostly we deal with corporate issues, not criminals.”

“You’d be surprised how many people in business *are* criminals. And you can buy anything on the internet these days, including surveillance equipment.”

I’m totally out of my depth. “So, where do we go from here?”

“The thing is, you don’t know how far it goes,” he carries on. “Are they surveilling you 24/7? Are they listening in on your cell? Are they monitoring your emails? Are they monitoring your computer at work?”

I feel more violated than when I'd been attacked.

He casts a sly glance. "They might even have cameras installed."

I flush, feeling exposed. I know why Dad took my phone off me in Philly. He must have deliberately dropped it under the back wheel before driving off, to make sure I couldn't be tracked. The thing that's truly mind-blowing is that he even knew to do that.

Greg's amused gleam widens into a genuine smile at my obvious discomfort. "Don't worry. I'll check your condo. But we'll leave it for a few days, just in case my visit made anyone nervous. You have to carry on in the same way, however you used to behave on your own. Don't change any patterns. Then we'll see what we can find. That good for you?"

"I, ah... thank you. Yes."

On my way home, I swear every swear word I've ever learned, but under my breath, in case my car is bugged. Back in my condo I feel vulnerable. If my place is bugged, someone really has been creeping around in here. I remember the blob of jelly on the carpet in my spare bedroom, and the mental image of a sandwich I'd forgotten to take to work one morning surfaces from the murky depths of my subconscious. Had I really done that? Was the sandwich there when I got back from work? I can't recall. I don't know if I'm inventing the memory. I imagine some sleezy creep picking it up, and munching as he trawls my condo. The thought makes me feel physically sick.

I have never used the security chain, but now I do. I think about changing the locks, but what good would that do? And it would tell whoever is surveilling me that I'm aware. If Greg is right, every sneeze or fart is possibly being recorded for posterity. I wonder if they have bugged the bathroom. Or put cameras in there. When I go to pee, I sit like a lady, with my ankles crossed and my knees firmly glued together.

How is it even possible to behave as if everything were normal? Nothing's normal. Dad is into something I can't fathom. Not just the Habershon baby, though that knocked me for a loop. But Dad's sending me stuff he couldn't know unless he'd been involved. I grab the article Dad sent, and the envelope, and burn them in the sink. I should tell Laurie to delete the email and the copy, but if someone's monitoring my computer, they already know. I wish I hadn't sent it to her. I take measured breaths to slow my heart rate.

When Wayne calls for me in the morning, I instantly see past his disguise. It's easy to see he's not just a paper pusher. And if he's dealing with dodgy accounting, being an ex-cop is probably good insurance. And what better companion than an ex-cop, when it comes to making a girl feel safe?

Another insidious thought arises. Unless he's the one bugging my condo.

~ 19 ~

I decide to act. Janine quibbles, but I'm owed leave, so I'm damned if I'm going to feel guilty about taking it. In a busy office where time is money, the time's never right.

I phone Lauralee. "I'm having a few days off. Coming over on Friday," I say.

"What? Coming here?"

"No, to the South Pole. Of course, there. That's why I said I'm coming over."

"But Tim will be..."

"I'm aware of that. It's unavoidable. He lives there."

"But I..."

"Have you got to ask for permission?"

"Of course not."

"So, do you want me *not* to come?" She knows I'm baiting, but has never known how to counter it, so I add, "Look, it's your anniversary, and I haven't seen the kids for ages. I want to bring them something to make them puke for the event."

"You're so uncouth."

"What's couth, anyway?"

She laughs uncertainly. "Okay, I'll break it to him gently. Should I pick you up?"

"I can get a rental, or a cab."

"I'll pick you up. Let me know when."

"Great. I'll send you the flight schedule. It'll be early evening, probably."

“Can I ask what you’re really up to?”

I imagine someone with headphones on, listening in. Maybe Greg-the-drug-courier sees DEA on every corner. It seems so unreal, but I’m definitely on edge. “Just need a break, sis. We don’t see each other often enough.”

She knows I’m lying, but something warns her not to push it further.

I scabble in my bag to find the card Wayne had given me. I email him to say I’d be away for the weekend, so not to worry. I don’t tell him where I’m going because I have a sneaking feeling he’s getting just a little too comfortable with me, though I’ve given him no reason to think our friendship is any more than that of good neighbours. I slide out of work in the afternoon, slip to the mall, and buy everything new: a weekend bag, casual clothes, a toothbrush, a pair of Nikes, even undies. I get a decadent box of candy for the kids; that’s what aunts are for. I throw in some aftershave for Tim the dork, and a bottle of scent for Lauralee. That covers the necessities. I pick up a cheap laptop and a burner, then, after a pause, pick up a second burner for Laurie. I leave everything else at work. I haven’t a clue what bugs look like, or how small they can be, but I don’t want them traveling with me.

Shit, am I getting like a spy, or what?

I call Greg from my work phone. “I’m going away for the weekend. Do you want a key to my place?”

“Not necessary.” I catch the hint of amusement in his voice. “But I’ll leave checking until you get back. Not a good idea to be seen nosing around in there when you’re away.”

I hadn’t thought of that. Wayne or the Smythes, who’d come back from Iceland last week, would probably call the cops.

I get a cab to the airport. Hopefully, that makes me totally anonymous, if only for a bit. I wish I could speak to Dad. Then, too late, I realize I could have asked Greg if I could borrow his

bug detector. If it's Dad they're after, maybe Lauralee's place is bugged, too.

I'm not entirely sure what Greg's game is, though. I'd always supposed spooks would be the good guys, and Greg is a self-confessed bad guy, but I'm having to rethink my indoctrination. He used to run drugs, by his own admission. But what is he into *now* that he still needs to watch for bugs? I recall his quip about us getting friendly in my condo, and although I have absolutely no intention of going down that road, a shiver trickles through me. What is it about bad guys?

In the airport I buy a newspaper and scan it without interest over a couple of G & Ts in the bar. I find a novel that turns out to hold all the narrative excitement of a two-hundred-page contract. Thank goodness domestic flights don't expect you to be there hours in advance. Soon enough, I'm doing the walk, trying to bite my tongue and not snip at airport security personnel, who seem hand-picked for antisocial skills. On the plane I read for a bit, and have a glass of wine that costs more than a bottle from the store. It's strange not being *connected*; the sense of isolation is disorienting.

At the other airport, I'm shot quickly through the system and out the door, and there's Lauralee waiting by the gate. I wave, we hug, and just for a brief moment, I wish we were closer. I realize that what's wrong between us is probably my fault, because I get irritated with her despite myself. "Is Tim here? Or the kids?"

"No, he's with them, at home. He said we needed some sister time."

Damn, that's generous. I really should try a little harder to like him. We get to her car, and I realize she really means it. She drives us to within a couple of miles of home and pulls into a motel parking lot. "I'm treating you to dinner," she says as we climb out. "And you can tell me what's going on."

“I wish I could,” I say, for once without sarcasm. “And this is my treat.”

I hand her a note, on which I’ve written *My house was bugged. Maybe my phone and my car, too. Yours might be. Leave your purse in the car.*

Her eyes flash to mine, startled, as she realizes instantly it’s to do with Dad. I show her the (new) wallet sticking out of my jeans pocket, indicating that I can get the tab. We both tuck our purses out of sight under the seats, and hope the car doesn’t get broken into. But knowing Tim, it probably has a really loud alarm.

“Is this for real?” she asks, on the way in.

“Real enough to have me spooked,” I answer.

She precedes me into a coffee house sporting the requisite fixed booths and bench seats. The walls are a surprisingly gentle avocado green, though, and the place doesn’t reek of French fries. I mentally shrug. If Laurie is bugged, it’s too late to worry. We have to talk.

“I haven’t a clue what’s going down,” I admit as we peruse a colorful salad bar. “That’s why I’m here. I’m going to go on to Phoenix Monday, and check out a few things.”

“To do with the Habershon baby?”

“Yes, I just want to check out a few facts.”

Her eyes widen. “You don’t really think that Dad...”

She still can’t say it, so I say it for her. “Do I think Dad’s a pedophile? No, I don’t. But he’s into *something* shady, and someone’s onto him. If that reporter, or whatever she is, has latched onto it, so can I. I’ve seen all the stuff that was printed at the time, but I like to see people when they talk, read their body language.”

“This is all kind of surreal.”

“Yeah, but my place is definitely bugged, and I’m damn sure it’s nothing to do with work.”

We squeeze through to an empty booth by the window. I

laugh, suddenly in a good mood. “This is like some kind of child’s game, the sort we didn’t play as kids, so we’re having to make it up as we go along. Dad does a disappearing act and sends me a secret message; you have a reporter or an FBI agent sneaking around; I have some kind of surveillance on me.”

“Might they have followed you here?”

“Maybe, but I got a secretary to book my flights through work, I’ve left my cell phone and laptop in the office, and I bought new clothes on the way. I’ve been rather clever, actually. I don’t doubt they’ll guess where I went, but I’ve given us both breathing space for this talk, at least. In case *your* place is bugged.”

“Holy hell,” she says, wide-eyed. “That’s a real personal violation... It’s like... like worse than being raped.”

“Not exactly,” I say grimly, “but close enough.”

I haven’t told her about the attack, and I’m not going to. I once had a boyfriend who said *I don’t know why women make such a fuss about rape. I mean, it’s just sex, isn’t it?* I told him in no uncertain terms what I thought of his comment. I explained, with exasperation, that it’s about control. It’s about domination, instilling terror into the victim; it’s about taking away liberties and rights; it’s physical torture, and getting high on it. Rape is just the inevitable consequence of the massive hard-on provided by all that stimulation. That, and sometimes murder; although, murder after rape is more often coldly executed to prevent discovery.

I think he got the message.

I added, it’s only *just* about sex to pubescent youths on campus who need to play with apparatus they haven’t yet learned how to master, and men whose brains haven’t yet migrated upward. He had flushed, clearly taking that personally.

Laurie is looking at me speculatively. Realizing I’d drifted

off into a personal reverie, I quickly pick up where I'd paused. "Look, when we get home, don't even mention Dad. Don't say I've seen him. Talk about the kids, whatever. If he asks, say I'm doing research for work.

"It's going to be difficult acting normal, after what you told me."

"I know. But just until I find out what's going on... That's why it's important for you not to tell Tim. If Tim and the kids are acting normally, perhaps no one will notice you're not. In fact, it's likely you're not under surveillance at all. I'm their best bet, in fact, as they probably know I've been in contact with Dad recently." I hand over the burner I'd picked up for her. "Don't phone me from your own cell, and only call when you're not in the house or the car, just in case. This is solely for connecting to my burner. Text first, and I'll let you know if we can speak. I've put my burner number in it. I'll do the same."

"You're scaring me," she says, taking the cell gingerly, as though it's toxic. "I'm afraid you're going to find out something really bad about Dad."

"If I find something bad, it's better to know. But truly, I think Dad's doing something he shouldn't, but for the right reasons, like rescuing that Habershon bitch's baby. So, let's order. You might as well enjoy the freedom, seeing as Tim's given you permission."

She opens her mouth to rise to the bait, then shakes her head, smiling. "You don't change, do you? Have you any idea what Dad's into?"

"Nope. That's the million-dollar question. Dad's not telling, but I wouldn't place a bet on it being legal."

"But you're going to find out?"

"That's why I'm going to start with the child disappearances, back then, because if Dad had something to do with Richard Ryan, then maybe he had something to do

with the others. And maybe he's been doing that all his life, whatever *that* is."

"*Shit*," she whispers.

I smile. "But if he has, you have to agree our dad is one clever dude. All this time, and we never guessed, and if the FBI, or whoever it is, are onto him, it's taken them twenty years. We're kind of his weak link, I guess. That's why they're targeting me. But he knows that."

The kids are in bed when we get to Laurie's, and Tim is wearing a plastic smile that he manages to retain through some small talk. Lauralee's home sparkles. Everything is shiny and clean and tidy. You wouldn't think there were kids within half a mile. Within minutes I'm oppressed by vases and swags and Tiffany shades held up by nymphs and emasculated cherubs.

The house is too warm, and I don't sleep well. In the morning I wake up groggily to hushed whispers outside my door, accompanied by giggling. "Who's there," I growl. "Is that a nice little plump child for my dinner that I hear?"

The door bursts open and I'm pounced on by two pajamaed monsters.

"I surrender!" I yell. "It's in the case!"

As they pull out the boxes of candies, Lauralee comes in, chic in a silk robe. "They're not bothering you, are they?"

"Not at all," I say politely. "I love being wrested from a sweet dream at six in the morning."

She grins. "Who?"

I flush, and her face lights up. Damn, am I going to get quizzed today! I wonder whether to tell her I have jogging dates with a guy who used to be a cop, or admit I'm having naughty thoughts about a reformed criminal. Maybe. In truth, I'd miss neither if they fell off my radar tomorrow. I might tell her about Wayne, I think. Stretch the truth a little. I suspect

Laurie thinks I'm hiding a long-term relationship with another woman, which she'd find okay in anyone except her sister; so, when I throw in comments about my burger date with Wayne, at least she'll know I'm still playing in the ball park, so to speak.

Unexpectedly, I enjoy our day together. It *has* been too long. When our family fell apart, we all drifted. Mom would have been so upset. We take a couple of hours in the mall and I buy things for the kids that they don't need and will probably trash before the day is out. Mom never did that for us; she didn't believe in waste. Maybe Lauralee doesn't either, but it's my prerogative as favorite aunt. Well, only aunt, really.

Then we go to the indoor amusement park and drink lukewarm coffee while the kids screech through net mazes and crash from slides into piles of colored balls. I lose interest after about five seconds, but Lauralee manages to keep her eyes on them throughout our inane dialogue, and yells encouragement from time to time. I belatedly learn one of life's little facts: for kids it's not just about having fun, it's about knowing someone is watching you have fun. It makes me realize I'm missing out on something important. I value my independence, but there sure is something I've offset to keep it.

After an hour, that same loss seems like a bonus.

I don't know where the time goes, though, and soon enough we're back at her gingerbread home, in her stainless-steel kitchen. I'm leaning on the polished quartz counter drinking a glass of wine. Upstairs, Tim's persuading his hyperactive kids into their PJs while Lauralee is efficiently creating some kind of gastronomic delight. She moves with a grace I didn't inherit, and I feel a belt of nostalgia for a stable childhood that was ripped away before I could get used to it.

"What was Mom like?" I ask.

She glances around. "Like?"

“Yeah. You were older than me. I don’t remember her too well. I recall her being ill. Then one day she wasn’t there any longer.”

“It wasn’t that quick. I mostly remember her being cross with us, or sick. There was a long time when she was in and out of the hospital. It was hard for a while, after she died, and Dad had his problems, too. We had Belinda, then. Do you remember?”

I vaguely recall a small, dark-haired woman who took us to school and made us dinners. “Only vaguely,” I admit.

“She wasn’t much more than a kid herself. No training, but Dad trusted her. I wonder what happened to her?” Then she adds, “I wish Mom had been around to meet my kids.”

We’re both silent for a bit, contemplating what might have been. It’s all gone quiet upstairs, then Tim comes in with another bottle from the cellar and pops the cork with panache. “How’re the little ladies doing?” he asks cheerfully. “More wine?”

My spine bristles. I *try* to like him. Really, I do.

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On Monday I head out early, for Phoenix. We say our tearful goodbyes, and I truly mean it. We should see each other more often. I take the Greyhound, which is a lot longer than the flight, if you discount airport hassles. Plus, if someone is on my trail, I might see them. I get a seat in the back of the bus and get a crick in the neck watching cars lining up to pass. I don't catch anyone loitering on our exhaust fumes. But maybe, if I am being followed, they'd have the sense to know where I'm going, and why, and simply pick me up at the bus terminal.

I open the new laptop, put my headphones on, and log on to the internet, only to fall asleep. Kids wear me out just by existing.

I wake up in Phoenix.

The research company had contacted a few people who'd been around the hospital at the time of Dad's fall from grace. The first, Jenny Trebuchet, had been a nurse at the time, and is now a ward sister in the final trimester of her working life. I make my way straight from the bus to the hospital canteen where we had agreed to meet. I buy a tray of carbs and set it on the table between us. She has a sturdy figure and carries a heavy jowl and a thick head of iron-gray curls. She cracks a smile as we introduce ourselves and shake hands. "Don't know what I can help you with. It was over twenty years ago," she says. "You look like Doctor Hamilton, you know."

"Do I? Thanks."

“So, what did you want to know?”

“I’d be grateful for anything that wasn’t in the papers. The real story.”

“So, what, he die, or something? Such a nice man.”

“No, he’s still around. I don’t see much of him. He drives buses now. And reads a lot.”

“Buses? Damn. And in the day, I used to say it’s a shame there weren’t more doctors like him, that cared, you know, rather than just climbing the ladder to those big incomes.”

“So, you liked him?”

“Dr Hamilton was a good man. That baby being stolen had nothing to do with him, and I said it at the time, but no one listened to me, they were too interested in—” She stops and glances around the room. “You’re not recording this are you?” she asks in a hushed voice.

“No.”

“I don’t want to lose my job.”

“I’m not a reporter, and I’m not trying to trip anyone up,” I say reassuringly. “He’s my father. I was a child, back then, but this thing keeps rearing its head. I’m just trying to understand.”

I don’t make the mistake of saying *you have to trust me*, a line that annoys me in too many films. There’s no *have to* about it. Trust has to be earned.

She nods fractionally, and says, “Okay, but I’ll deny everything if you start sharing. That baby Habershon, you know? It was his mother people listened to. The reporters just latched onto the sob stuff. Poor woman, lost her baby and all. But I tell you, she thrived on the attention. Your Dad had it right.” Her voice lowered even more. “We all thought she was a bad one, but, you know, with the clever ones there’s never proof.”

“You didn’t like her?”

“No one did. Oh, she was good, in front of the cameras and

all, but if you caught her off guard, the way she looked at that baby would make your blood curdle. You know what they say: you have to be screened to adopt a dog, but anyone can have a baby. She was one of those people who would have been denied a goldfish. When she pointed the finger at Dr Hamilton, she was getting her own back.”

“What for?”

“He thought she was a Munchausen syndrome by proxy mother and made a fuss. We all thought that, but he was the one who said it out loud. It was her that started the rumors about him taking the baby, later, but she was sneaky. Made it sound like someone else said it.”

“But they were worried about the child, weren’t they? She’d lost two babies already.”

“Not really. Everyone was all over her because she had a new baby, and they were going to do their damndest to make sure this one lived; but the doctor didn’t buy it. He told admin that if she was allowed to take the baby home it would die, too. The hospital board had some kind of a meeting, but decided they had nothing to prove that what he was suggesting was true. They told you father if he contacted the Child Protective Services, which he’d threatened to do, he’d lose his job. It would make things difficult for the hospital, see.”

“Could they do that?”

She looks at me as though I’m stupid. “They *employed* him. He’d need a reference from them. They could destroy his career.”

“They did.”

“Oh, yes. Well, the hospital didn’t want the bother. They didn’t want to get caught in some expensive legal battle. The trouble with infanticide, and Munchausen syndrome by proxy is it’s not stuff you *can* prove most of the time, unless there’s a witness.”

“So, Dad did nothing?”

She pursed her lips and shook her head. “I don’t know. Anyhow, because he made a fuss, and as he was on the ward when it happened, he was the obvious scapegoat. Dr Hamilton had to go through an internal inquiry. I think he left voluntarily, but we all knew he was shunted out.” She leaned forward, her body language screaming vindication, that she was finally able to speak. “He told them that when the baby ended up dead, her blood would be on their hands. He said he hoped they would see her blood every night when they went to sleep, and every time they looked at their own children. It was like a curse.”

“That didn’t get into the papers?”

“No, that was before the baby disappeared.”

“I can’t imagine Dad staying quiet.”

She shrugs. “Who would have believed him? He’d have been discredited by the profession. He was a young man, with a sick wife and two kids. What was he supposed to do? So, the tabloids milked the mom’s sob story, and *she* was given a massive payoff from the hospital—”

I leaned forward slightly. “That wasn’t in the press!”

“No, but I’m sure she was told to keep up the rumors on Doctor Hamilton. It took the heat from the hospital. And I know she was warned if she told anyone about the payoff, she wouldn’t get it. She was given a portion of the money she’d been promised, then the rest after it had died down. Me and a couple of the other nurses knew the score, but we didn’t want to lose our jobs.”

“Did she have any more kids after the baby was stolen?”

“If she did, it wasn’t in the papers, so who knows?”

“Was this the first time a baby had disappeared from this hospital?”

“The only one in all the time I’ve been working here. And, of course, once that happened, security got a lot tighter.” She heaves herself to her feet. “Now, I gotta get back to work. If

you see your dad, you tell him I was asking after him, will you? He's a good man, and I'm not the only one sorry about what happened to him."

"I will," I promise, and watch her stride back into her own world. It gave me a little glow, knowing that she'd liked Dad, and I suspected she'd still quietly admire him if she learned the truth.

One of Dad's erstwhile colleagues, Dominic Proust, now a pediatric consultant at the hospital Dad had worked in, had condescended to give me five minutes of his precious time.

When I get there, I have the distinct impression he'd changed his mind, and we talk with me scuttling alongside him in the corridor.

"Of *course* I remember," he snaps. "You don't pull stunts like that. You don't shout your mouth off."

"Even if it was true?"

"If what was true?"

"That the Habershon mother had killed her previous children. Munchausen syndrome by Proxy."

"Preposterous. The previous deaths were certified as crib deaths. They happen all the time."

"Dad didn't think so. Neither did some of the other staff."

"Thinking something doesn't make it fact. After the accusation was made, the board followed the proper procedures, and found there was nothing in it. Doctor Hamilton was an idiot. He lost his job over something he could never prove."

"He cared enough to try."

Dominic halted abruptly and faced me, wagging a warning finger too close. "Don't lay your father's guilt on me; I wasn't on the ward at the time. It was done and dusted, years back. Now, I've got work to do."

"She did it again, after," I say loudly as he strides away.

He stops and looks over his shoulder at me. “Who did what?”

“That woman. Killed another child. I lay that on you.”

He walks on without another word.

“Asshole,” I say to his receding back.

But he’d made the party line clear enough. The board was there to protect the institution. It was up to the individual to protect himself. The other two people who had agreed to speak to me, a porter and an administrator, both swing the same party line: there was no conspiracy, nothing to hide. They’ve never heard anything bad about the poor woman whose baby had been abducted, and that was that.

But no one truly believes Dad had anything to do with the baby’s disappearance, and no one I talk to has been approached by a reporter revisiting old ground, which was the information I had truly wanted. It’s amusing, in a way. What had happened to Dad back then is history. He was considered to be a nice guy, but a foolish one. No one believed him capable of stealing a child. But I know something none of them know: Dad was guilty as sin.

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My next port of call, of course, is to the Arizona Child Protective Services. I didn't prep anyone for that visit, because I didn't want to trip any hidden flags. I discovered where they were located, and called in. The lady behind the front desk glances up without interest. "Name?"

"Lucy Ferris."

"Who do you have an appointment with?"

"I don't have an appointment."

"Then make one. You can phone in or do it online." There is a minute hesitation. "Is this a child emergency? Are you reporting abuse?"

"No, I just want to get some details about an old case."

She switches to off-mode in the blink of an eye. "All data is confidential."

"It has to do with a baby that went missing twenty years ago."

"Are you the press?"

"It's personal. My mother was implicated in the disappearance," I lie, adding hastily, "she was cleared."

"I'd need a court order to release information about a child, however long ago."

"I realize that. I just wanted to know whether the baby was ever found."

"Why?"

"Peace of mind."

“What was the name of the child?”

“Everyone called him the Habershon baby at the time, after the mother. I don’t know if she was ever named.”

She clicks a few buttons and discovers what I already knew. “Nope. Never found.”

“Was there a father mentioned?”

“I told you, I can’t—”

“It’s just that his name wasn’t in the press, and I know the mother’s dead. If I go and talk to him, he can always tell me to go away.”

She stares at me for a second, as if wondering what the hell I’m up to. I wonder, too. Then she concedes, in terms of absolute finality, “Ms. Habershon never disclosed the name of the father.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

It doesn’t surprise me. A woman intending to breed children to torture and kill probably used men for the seed they carried. Those men probably never knew they were fathers to her children. As that nurse said, you get screened to have a dog, but anyone can have a child. I’m not going to get further cooperation from this quarter, so I make a hasty exit, and feel suspicious eyes burn my back as I walk away. Maybe she cares. But maybe she’s learned that admin in a lost kid’s office is like admin in any other office. Paper comes in, you process it, paper gets filed.

Hell of a way to earn a living.

The last item on my list is Dirty Dick’s biological mother. I have an address from the agency. It seems they’re still in Phoenix. I am cold-calling there, too. I flag a cab and give the driver the address. He raises a brow. “You sure, lady?”

That doesn’t bode well. “Sure,” I say.

“Well, I’ll drop you a couple of blocks off.”

Sounding better and better. But the can of pepper spray is in my pocket. I clutch it as I exit the cab. The area comprises

several apartment blocks with concrete stairs and railed walkways along the front. Enough laundry is hanging out the front to sail a tall ship, and looks as though it had already weathered a few storms. Various people hang over the rails, listlessly watching, as I sidestep a pile of dog crap and try to look as if I know where I'm going.

A kid in brand new Nikes and a fancy clipped hairstyle leans on a wall, picking his teeth with a toothpick, trying to look cool. He's wearing oversized pants that are falling off his skinny ass. "Need anything?"

"Just looking for number 365, West Block."

"Whatever they got, I got," he advises.

"I'm from Housing Assistance," I say.

He winces as if my breath is poisonous, and thumbs to the middle of three identical blocks. When I look around, he's made himself and his ass crack scarce.

The third floor is like all the other floors: rows of blank doors with multiple bolts or no handles at all. Every surface is smeared with graffiti. Not the artistic kind. I rap loudly with my knuckles, then rap again, using the bottom of the spray can. There's loud music pumping out through the walls. The door opens to the stench of stale booze and used nappies. A young woman brushes a limp lock of hair from a greasy forehead and asks, "Who the fuck are you?"

I decide being from Housing Assistance probably isn't a good idea. "I'm doing an update on the missing kids from twenty years back. Big article. Lots of eyes."

The word *lots* pings a result. "They paying?"

"Of course. I have fifty for good info."

She turns around. "Ma! It's some reporter woman. Wants to talk to us about Dickie."

The woman who emerges from the back is rangy, wearing a short dress, high heels and heavy lipstick. Her hair is styled, but stiff, as though it had been set that way with glue about

three weeks ago. She must be the same generation as Dad, but hasn't aged kindly. "What's in it?" she asks.

I glance fleetingly at the young woman, who must be around my age. "Thirty, for half-hour of your time."

She softens slightly, gives an almost imperceptible nod. "I'll get coffee."

I follow the older woman into a living area where a baby lies watching two toddlers tearing pages out of a glossy magazine.

"Little bastards," the woman screeches. She snatches the magazine and clouts one of them around the head with it. The unfortunate recipient wails, setting off the other toddler and the baby, too. The toddlers are wearing nothing but T-shirts and diapers, which are hanging heavy. They're leaking from eyes and noses, too. I guess I'm experiencing what Dad had been dealing with all those years back: distaste and pity combined with futility. Even if I wanted to help these kids or their mother, they're too entrenched in their own lack of worth to even try to claw their way out of it.

The booming music from the back cuts out, leaving misery in its wake. The kids carry on crying. The young woman doesn't rush to the scene, but eventually brings in three mugs of instant coffee. She uses her elbow to clear a space on the tray of a high chair. After depositing the mugs, she snatches the baby off the floor and sits with it on her lap. "Shut up and scoot," she says to the toddlers, handing them each a lollipop. They do. The baby snuffles into silence against her body.

Richard Ryan's mom knows she has nothing that wasn't given a long time ago, so spews out stuff I'd got from the rags, earning her money with volume not content. I guess the woman with the baby is one of Richard Ryan's five sisters.

She says, "Dickie went off to school that day, like any other. It was Friday. He'd get the bus back, he had a free pass, and walked the last mile on his own. But that day, he left as

usual and didn't come home. The bus driver didn't notice Dickie getting off. Assumed it was the same stop as always. When he didn't come home, his dad had some local kids go look for him."

As if calling the father *Dickie's dad* somehow distanced her from the event. "You weren't worried?" I ask.

She shrugs. "He didn't hang out with the other kids much. He was a bit of a loner, but things change. Boys do boy stuff. Anyway, they didn't find him."

"Is his dad still around?"

"Nah, he fucked off, after."

"After Richard went missing?"

"Cops wondered if he had something to do with it, but he didn't."

I didn't challenge the statement. If Richard was being abused, she knew. So, what happened then, when Richard didn't come home?"

"The next day we called the cops. They took three hours to turn up," she says scathingly, adding, "but kids from the Blocks go missing all the time. Runaways. Parties. Just on the lam. They only took it serious on Monday, when he didn't go to school. The teachers said he never missed class. He wasn't like the others; he liked his learning. Was going to go places." She scowls, as though he'd let her down personally by not doing so.

"And what happened, then?"

She grimaces. "They said they was looking. We found a picture from his last birthday, and it was all over the news, on the TV."

"Did you post pictures up around the area?"

"I had five kids at home, and what good was that, anyway?" she says bitterly, "It was on TV. And who takes any notice of pictures of missing kids? They all look the same if it's not your own. You expect to lose some along the way, but not

your only boy.” Her voice hardens, and she makes it clear my time is up. “Anyway, he’s long dead. You said thirty?” She holds her hand out, and I shove thirty in it. “Shar, get my pills, honey.”

I stand to leave, and Sharon, who thankfully doesn’t mention my untouched, cooling coffee, shows me to the door. One foot on the doorstep, I turn and ask, “One more thing. Someone told me Richard had been abused by his father. Is that true?”

The coldness in my voice warns Sharon that this is the fifty-dollar question. I watch as she mulls it over and mentally shrugs. It was so long ago, who cares?

“Ma knew,” she admits, “but she was afraid of him. The bastard got us all, except Jen, who was too young, but he’d of got to her, too, if Dickie hadn’t disappeared. You see, not long before that, Dickie got rushed to the hospital, had his appendix out. Some doc there noticed something, and accused Pops of child abuse, threatened to report him if it didn’t stop.” She adds cynically, “The doc didn’t know he’d already started on me and Sky. I was only six. But I think Pops got scared Dickie would blab to the cops when he turned up. That’s why he ran off. Didn’t want to do time.”

“Do you know where he went?”

“Never heard from him. Best thing ever happened. Ma went crazy, though, for a bit.”

“About losing Dickie?”

“Nah, ’bout Dad running off. Is that gonna get into the papers?”

“No.”

“So, what’s your scam, then?”

I say softly, “I think my dad might have been the doctor who wanted to help Richard. I just want to know what really happened.”

“I’d like to know, too, if you ever find out.”

I give a guilty nod, not meaning it for a moment. I slip her a fifty. She secretes it away quickly, and shuts the door.

The image of that neglected baby travels with me. I wonder if it's a survivor, or one of the ones that will get lost along the way. As I look back over my shoulder, it chafes my conscience to walk away, but what can I do, really? I can't singlehandedly fight the generations of ingrained social conditioning that leads to this kind of poverty, any more than Dad could.

I stay in a cheap motel overnight, scrub grime from body and mind under a long, hot shower, and fly home the following day. I feel truly depressed by the depth of degradation to which some people sink.

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On landing, I take a cab home and try to get my head in work mode, but in all honesty, it pales into insignificance behind my personal issues. May-Jane clambered out of the social pit she was born into; unlike those I saw yesterday. Maybe that's why she's so bitchy to the gripes of the underprivileged. If she could do it, why pity those who don't try? Greg's probably already been paid for his part in whatever stunt May-Jane's pulling, and it's been kind of weird meeting a celebrity I've watched on TV, but I'm annoyed at the feeling of being played for a fool.

If the marriage was a publicity stunt, and the divorce is for real, I want to know why, so that it doesn't rebound on the firm, and on me in particular. I'm just a cog in the Dugotti and Maas machine, therefore expendable. If push comes to shove, I have no doubt I'd be made a culprit to save the firm's reputation, same as the hospital did to Dad. I have no intention of doing anything more, till Greg and May-Jane come clean. Client confidentiality means May-Jane should have told Janine the truth. I can't think of a good reason why she didn't. Rather than go through Janine, I decide to call May-Jane myself.

The number goes directly to a well-spoken personal assistant.

"Put me through to May-Jane, please."

"I'm sorry, May-Jane isn't available right now."

“Tell her it’s Deirdre Hamilton. If she doesn’t speak to me right now, she can look for someone else to whitewash her phony divorce.”

“Just one moment, please.”

The phone clicks a few times, and May-Jane says, “Deirdre?”

I don’t let her get any further. “We need to talk,” I say abruptly.

“Honey, I thought we did talk,” she says in her drawling TV speak. “I hired Janine, and Janine told you what I need.”

“Don’t you dare talk down to me! She asked me to handle the details because I’m good. If you want someone to wash your underwear, hire a lackey. I quit.”

I slam the phone down, totally meaning it, and there’s no call back. Now Janine will fire me for sure. I find I don’t care.

When I get back to my condo, I realize I’d been using my burner. No wonder May-Jane’s PA had tried to blow me off. Unknown numbers are the bane of the modern world. I slam the burner down on the table next to my cell phone. If anyone is listening in, I hope it breaks their eardrums.

I’m not exactly surprised, as the evening draws in, to hear the low growl of Greg’s bike out in the road. When he cuts the engine, my world clicks into silent mode. The buzzer sounds. I freeze in the half-light, but he has more patience than me. He presses the buzzer again and again until I break cover. My voice is nearly a snarl. “Go away.”

“Baby doll, I’m sorry you got upset. I didn’t mean it. Kiss and make up?” he asks. “Come on, open the door.”

“Fuck off,” I growl. “I already quit.”

“I thought you wanted to ride my crotch rocket?”

I snort out a laugh that can’t be contained. “Your *what*?”

“My wheels. This isn’t about May-Jane. Have you forgotten our date?”

“Oh.”

I’m silent for a moment, then press the buzzer that unlocks the entry door, and then unlock the door to my condo. He’s bigger than ever, wearing the usual leather jacket and jeans that have done oily miles. What I’m not expecting is to be greeted by a huge bear hug that lifts me off my feet, followed by a stubbled comment whispered in my ear, “Chill, baby.”

I shiver for reasons I don’t quite understand. He dumps me back on my feet, indicating the ‘beeper’ on his belt, which is flashing red. I’m trapped, and he knows it. “So, where would you like to go?” he asks. I must be looking stupid, for his brows lift. “For dinner?”

“Somewhere expensive,” I grouch. “With candles and damask napkins.”

He’s not fazed. “Okay, I’ll sort it while you slip into something appropriate. It’s fine to wear heels if you’re not driving. And a cocktail dress, preferably cut low at the front and high at the junction.”

Funny guy. I put on a pair of flats, decent pants and a blouse I’d normally wear for work. I grab a faux fur coat Laurie had given me a long time ago, then present him with a tie, so there are no excuses when we get to wherever we’re going.

He smirks. “The ex’s?”

“My Dad’s. If exes leave anything except footprints, it gets burned.”

“I like your style, doll.”

He knots it perfectly above his tee, and I grin, despite myself, and point to my cell on the table as we leave. He gives me a silent thumbs-up.

I’ve never been on a motorcycle, never intended to. He heaves a leg over, puts the bike on an even keel, and kicks it to life. He’s straddled, legs firmly planted, while I wonder what I’m supposed to do. He indicates a footrest and says loudly, “Stand there, and swing her over. Like mounting a stallion.”

Why is it all his words are double entendres? I follow his instructions and end up straddled, with his backside tucked neatly between my legs.

“Arms around my waist. Don’t watch the road, just swing with me,” he shouts over his shoulder, and knocks it into gear.

I suspect he’s driving slowly out of respect for my bike-virgin status, and I clutch him tightly around a couple of corners, sure we’re about to fall over. I’m relieved each time we end up vertical. Tucked behind his broad back, I can’t see where we’re going, but the properties either side flashing past give me a clue. A couple of miles down the road, he pulls in at Christie’s, an upmarket joint I’ve heard of, but never patronized. I can’t see the point in paying three times over for a meal I could get at Delaney’s Deli. The maître d’ does a double-take at the tie hanging from Greg’s neck, and although I see on his face that he’d like to eject us, we’re shown to a table in the farthest, darkest corner of the subtly lit space. I wonder whether they’ve called for backup.

“Nice place,” Greg says, staring openly at the opulence.

“Been here before?”

“Never. May-Jane phoned and sorted it. Said she’d give them a free boost on air if they didn’t throw us out.” Well, that solves one little mystery. “So, how was your weekend away? How’s your sister and the kids and dear Timothy?”

“I didn’t tell you where I was going. Were you checking up on me?”

“May-Jane spoke to Janine. So, did you have a nice time?”

“None of your damn business. What are we doing here?”

“Having a tête-à-tête and some high-class chow?”

“You know damn well what I mean.”

He reaches over, flicks my cheek. “You get a nice bit of color when you’re annoyed.”

A waiter comes over, dressed totally in black, a cloth over his arm, his nose raised. “Is madam ready to order?”

Greg's face tilts to me. "Aperitif?"

"White wine," I say. I glance at the waiter, who begins to unfold a wine menu. "Just bring me a bottle. Something on the dry side with a high alcohol content."

His expression doesn't register a change. "And for you, sir?"

"Water," Greg says, earning a surprised glance from me.

"Don't you drink?"

"I don't want to kill you on a first date."

"It's not a date," I growl as the waiter glides smoothly away. "It's business. You're still married, remember?"

"Theoretically. It was a temporary arrangement."

"Another lie, or am I going to hear the truth?"

"May-Jane wants a kid. We had an arrangement. Three times a week. The rest of the time was mine as long as I didn't sleep with anyone else until she conceived. Which she has."

"Oh," I say faintly. He really is a stud. "But why doesn't she find a nice guy and marry for real?"

"She's gay, and has been in a long-term relationship with another woman."

"She made a name for being a bitch. Being a gay bitch wouldn't change that."

The waiter comes over with a jug of water and a bottle of wine. He opens the bottle and pours a tiny amount into a glass, then, at my glare, continues to top it up before placing the bottle on the table.

I take a large swig and pronounce, "That hits the spot, thanks."

He struts off, offended.

"Why does she hide it?" I continue, "Why isn't she just using it as a publicity stunt?"

"Her public life is an act," he says. "Her private life is her own. I'm surprised you don't get that. She's been with Evelyn for ten years. But Evelyn's white. And the polar opposite of

May-Jane. She hates the media with a passion. She won't even watch May-Jane's show. A year back, some reporter was sniffing around their personal lives, and Evelyn threatened to leave, disappear, if she ended up in the gossip columns. She's capable of it, too. I've never seen May-Jane lose her cool before. She was terrified. That's why she asked me to marry her. Make it big, hit the headlines. It worked, shifted public focus. Got the reporter off her back."

"But why *you*?"

"I did it as a favor."

"You knew May-Jane already?"

"Of course not. I was still with—ah, I was still on the road. Evelyn's my sister."

He was still riding with a racially prejudiced gang. His sister was partner to a black woman. I'm beginning to see the bigger picture. I also realise that I'm being trusted with the truth, and can never tell anyone.

"Why you?"

"The baby will have Evelyn's genes."

Of course. "Does Janine know?"

"No. It's not in our best interests."

"You know I'm not a lawyer, I can't handle the case?"

"You can, pretty much. We just need it to be official. And to include in the documents that I give up any claim on the child in the future."

"Don't you want to know the child?"

He shrugs. "Maybe."

"What if they both die?"

"I'm Evelyn's brother, and executor for her and May-Jane's wills. He grins. "It's more likely that I'll die before I reach that particular bridge, though."

"Are you ready to order, sir, madam?"

The waiter winces as we discard the menu and order medium rare steak and chips, with onion rings. The steaks

arrive succulent and perfect, with a twist of salad garnish on the side. I could have bought a whole cow for the price, but as I'm not paying, I'm not complaining. By the time we leave, the place is getting busy, and I've consumed the whole bottle myself, and I can't recall what the hell else we talked about, but it was companionable and non-stressful.

"Don't fall off," Greg says, handing me a helmet.

"I'm a two-bottle kind of girl. One just tickles the fancy." But I do feel a bit light-headed, all the same. I lean into him and clutch his waist. Being on a bike is strangely up close and intimate. There are times I miss human contact, and on occasion I've chosen to sleep with a date for that very reason, liking a guy just enough to get physical, knowing that it's not going anywhere.

At my door, Greg says, "Are you going to invite me in for coffee?"

"I don't think that's on the menu."

"That was the purpose of the exercise," he reminds me, pointing to his belt, where the surveillance monitor is quietly lurking. I blush fractionally, and hope he doesn't notice.

"If you find something, what can we do, without letting on?"

"If it's not in the bedroom, I'm sure we'll think of something." He catches my look of disgust and grins. "Let's see what's what, first. When we're inside, avoid talking about whatever secret is making people bug you."

"I'm not stupid."

"You've drunk a bottle of wine. I'm just saying."

Point taken. Inside, he casts a quick look around the living room, walks into the kitchen with me, then asks where the bathroom is. I hear him taking a sneaky peek into my bedroom, and the spare one, then he comes back into the living area. As he scopes out my pieces of faux art on the wall, I see he's wearing a tiny earpiece, with a wire disappearing

down into the leather jacket.

I hand him a coffee.

“Thanks. What did you think of Christie’s?” he asks conversationally.

“I don’t think I’ve ever had a steak like it,” I say honestly.

“Well, don’t expect to again. That cow must have had a damn fine pedigree.”

“And the bottle. I could have got a crate for that price.”

“Next time I take you out we’ll take a cab, then I can get tanked, too.”

“I’m not tanked! What do you mean, next time?”

“You were definitely wobbly, and I mean it when I say I’d like to take you out again.”

“You would?” I bite my tongue. The wine is talking, after all.

“I told you; I’m a single man again. Off the hook.”

“Not yet, you’re not.” I try to look annoyed, but think I fail.

“Near enough. I’m impressed by the way you’re handling it. A very professional job. Straight up.”

I nearly giggle. He’s enjoying himself, pandering to whoever is listening in.

“I’m just Janine’s puppet.”

“Still, better for me and May-Jane to do it without getting snarled up in legal battles. You negotiated a good deal for me. Thanks.”

He plumps down onto one of the couches, pulls the pad toward him, and writes:

NO CAMERA. ONE AUDIO BUG. HE POINTS TO THE MIRROR. THE SNEAK IS WITHIN 30-YARD RANGE. RECOMMEND TV OR MUSIC.

I get up to put the TV on, and he waggles his finger negatively.

NOT NOW, LOOKS SUSPICIOUS. ANY CLUES WHO?

I shake my head.

TALK TOMORROW.

I pull the pad toward me and write:

BURNER, CAN TEXT

PROFESSIONAL JOB!

He thumps the mug down on the table making me wince, and rises. “If we’re stopping at coffee, I’ll be off. And thanks again for your help.”

At the door he grabs me, and I squeak, startled, as I’m pulled into a tight embrace.

“The least you can do is give me a goodbye kiss?” Amusement crinkles at the corners of his pale gray eyes as he plants one directly on my mouth. I’m released, and just as quickly, he’s gone. Wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, I engage the deadbolt and the chain. The roar of the bike cuts the night, then fades. “*Damned nerve*,” I mutter, and turn the TV on just to fill the space with noise as he suggested. When I head for bed, pleased to know there are no cameras or bugs in there, I wonder why I’m feeling so out of sorts. I don’t know whether it’s because he kissed me without sticking his tongue in my mouth, or because he left without even trying.

~ 23 ~

The next morning, I answer the door to Wayne.

“You’re not giving up?” he asks, when he sees I’m not dressed for running.

He’s bouncing from one foot to the other, limbering up as we talk.

“No, just tired. Haven’t caught up yet. Flights exhaust me.”

“Tell me about it. Is Laurie well, and the kids?”

“Yeah, great. We should see each other more often, but, you know, life just gets in the way. Don’t let me hold you up.”

He’s itching to say something, and it blurts out. “Look, that guy last night, was he bothering you?”

“No, why?”

“He was leaning on the bell. I nearly came down...”

“You can hear it from upstairs?”

“It’s pretty loud. Normally it doesn’t bother me, but he didn’t let up.”

“It’s fine. Thanks for asking. We’d had a bit of a disagreement, but it’s all sorted. We went out for a meal to kiss and make up.”

His brows rose. “Boyfriend?”

“No, not even a friend. Just someone I’m working for at the moment. We were talking business. No one goes to a lawyer if everything’s hunky-dory.”

“You know, you can call me any time, if there’s a problem, I mean?”

“If someone needs flattening, I’ll yell. Thanks.”

He echoes my grin and waves before jogging off down the stairs. He must have seen me climb on the bike last night, and maybe watched as Greg came in for coffee. It amuses me that he’s jealous.

At work, I update Janine on the fact that that May-Jane’s divorce is not going to be contested, and that I’ve pretty much completed the paperwork.

‘Okay, I’ll check it through today.’

She’s disappointed that we won’t squeeze more out of it, but hopeful that if we’ve done one job for May-Jane, we might get more from her. To be honest, May-Jane could do worse. Janine isn’t the worst shark in these waters, but she’s good at her job.

She pushes a small pile of slim files across the desk. “Potential clients. I’d like you to give these a once-over, see if there’s anything worth taking.”

“I’ll get onto it.”

She gives that horrific smile, which is also a dismissal.

In my office I open the first file. I’m feeling pretty low before I even start. I told Laurie that the past doesn’t matter, get over it and look to the future, but presently the past has wiggled its way through the cracks in my mental armor.

While I was a child, I took it in my stride that my mom died. People talk about trauma, and all that stuff, but children are fairly selfish, and Dad became our mom- substitute before Mom was even gone. In the end she simply faded out of my life, as if she’d gone out one day to get groceries and forgot to come home. I think I was waiting for her for a while, but gradually the expectation evaporated. Now I’m older, I wonder how different my life might have been if Dad hadn’t lost his job, which had provided a fairly upmarket lifestyle, and Mom hadn’t been busy dying. I wondered what it would

feel like to have a normal family to visit on weekends. But you don't get the chance to find out what the alternative might have been. You are where you are in life, and have to get on with it. Or, like Lauralee, pay a small fortune in psychoanalyst fees so they can tell you stuff you should be able to work out for yourself.

I asked Dad what it was like to lose Mom, and he said it was bad, but he was grateful for the time he'd had with her. I can't imagine that: choosing to be with someone, and having them die on you so early. And, he added, your mom told me to get on with living. She was one hell of a woman.

I wish I'd known her better.

Actually, I wish I'd known her at all.

I peruse the files Janine gave me and sift through the details of online companies being sued for dodgy dealings, and pick out a couple of cases the firm might want to take on, but the one that has the most financial promise is a divorce action. Janine just loves those, and it's likely some surveillance duty will get me out of the office. That would suit me fine.

Around three a.m. I'm suddenly awake, heart pounding. For a moment I wonder why, then it hits me. Wayne asked about Laurie and the kids, but I didn't tell him where I was going, and I don't recall ever telling him her name. I stare at the off-white ceiling, and a lot of other things click into place. I'd been surprised when old Ted, upstairs, had upped and moved. He'd lived in the condo forever and maintained he was going to die in it. Wayne had arrived within days of Ted leaving. I guess they must have offered Ted an incentive to move. Or threatened him. I suppose Wayne had expected his charms to work on me, being in the same building, and single, so obviously ripe for a bit of the other. Only we hadn't really made contact. So on to plan B. What better way to make a girl gooey and grateful than to rescue her from a grim situation?

Is he asleep, I wonder, or is he lying there, half dozing, headphones on, ready to spring to attention if I so much as sneeze? Of one thing I'm certain—he's no accountant. His partner didn't die in his arms. He hasn't left the force. He's still a cop, or a fed, or something. And the guy who had apparently tried to rape me is probably his buddy, though they had played the rough and tumble well enough for me to be convinced at the time.

I'm rigid with fury. I'd had the fleeting thought that the rapist was clean-shaven, tidy, and somehow *proficient*. Well, he would be if he'd had training in manhandling people. Damn them both to hell. It had been real enough at the time, and the revelation that it had been a setup won't ever shake the terror of those few minutes from my memory.

I'm not sure I have it in me to play-act with conviction, when what I really want to do is punch Wayne in the nose, not that he'd ever let it happen; but when I get up after a troubled night, I'm determined to play him at his own game. I go jogging with him as if nothing is wrong. I go on to work. I text Greg.

URGENT. GUY UPSTAIRS, WAYNE DORING. FAKE? FED?

Greg's reply is brief.

I'LL LOOK INTO IT.

But a few nights later Dad wakes me in the early hours, sporting a stolen child and a bullet wound, and turns me into a felon.

~ 24 ~

After the trauma of that bizarre scenario, after dispatching Julie to her new life, the bus ride back to Baltimore is uneventful. Though, for the whole journey, I have the crawling feeling between my shoulder blades that the feds are just waiting for a moment to pounce.

By late afternoon I'm letting myself into my condo. It feels weird, as though I've been to a different planet. I kind of expect the flat to be different, changed in some way, like me, but it's the same. Just with that slightly musty smell of having been unoccupied for a week. Except...

I get the hint of something else.

I close my eyes, my senses homing in.

Aftershave!

I trawl around, checking, but I'm not the tidiest person in the world. If papers have been moved an inch, if drawers have been opened and rifled through, I wouldn't know. If I'd been more on the ball, I would have plucked hairs and stuck them across the doorways, but when Dad called at three a.m. my private-eye skills were still dozing. Now they're fully functional.

At the time, I'd called Janine and told her I was taking a few days; a family emergency. But for all Wayne knew, I'd been abducted by aliens.

He knocks on my door in the evening. "Dee! Damn it, I was worried about you! What happened?"

“I went to stay with my sister for a few days. It was Tim, her husband,” I say. “A minor stroke; he was lucky. No brain damage, thank God. He was all for returning to work, but the doctors said slow down, take some time. He loves his job, and he’s going to be bored out of his skull being signed off, but it’s going to bother Laurie more!” I roll my eyes. “Can you imagine?”

I suspect he knows I didn’t go to see Laurie at all, but he can’t exactly call me out on it, can he?

“So, are you coming jogging in the morning?”

“I don’t know. I’m tired. Flights drain me.”

“Sure. Okay, I’ll call anyway. Take care.”

I now believe Wayne is trying to get to Dad through me, and the fake reporter, Valerie, is trying to get to Dad through Laurie. I suppose they must be working together, but whether they’re FBI or something worse, I have no idea. Now, I’m back in the real world. It’s almost impossible to believe that kind of stuff goes on.

But Wayne is real and he *really* wants to know where I was. He’s finding it difficult to fish for information without giving himself away. He’s been getting a little personal, too: brushing hands as if by accident, air kissing me when we part. He thinks he can win me over with perseverance, but now I’m tuned in to his deceit, I see how hard he’s working to contain an arrogance that wants to burst out. He hates that I simply disappeared off the face of his earth for a few days. It rebounds on his professionalism as a crook or spook or whatever. All that chilled-out nice-guy stuff he fakes is flaking from the macho bully lurking beneath.

I’m still buzzing with adrenaline, but I stick with the story Dad and I came up with. Tim’s stroke actually happened, a couple of years back; we simply dumped it into a different timeline. Dad explained that if we use an actual event as the story, it’s easier to recall the detail, to not make bloomers

when enlarging on the lie. I guess that's what he's been doing to me all these years. But I need to end things with Wayne before I slip up and say something dumb.

When he calls for me the next morning, I come out with it straight, when he knocks at my door. "Wayne," I say earnestly, "I'm thrilled that you rescued me. I truly am, and that you've helped me get over it. I've enjoyed your company, and did wonder whether we might end up, like, you know, together."

He crowds a bit closer, a slightly dopey look on his face, and I put my hand flat against his chest. That's when he knows what I'm going to say. "But I've had time to think. Look, it's not going to happen. It hasn't happened."

He tries very hard not to look affronted, but his ego wins. "Don't you like me? Is there something *wrong* with me?"

"You're a very attractive guy. It's just, there's no *buzz* in here when we're together." I press my fist against my own chest. "If we were going to go any further, there should be, and there isn't."

He knows what I mean because he doesn't really fancy me, either. I'm a woman; I know these things. But he'd still make a play for a few rounds in the sack. After all, I'm available as there isn't some other guy in my pants. Not that he's aware of, anyway.

"I'm sorry you feel that way," he says, visibly affronted.

"So am I. But there's no point pretending it's going somewhere when it isn't. I'd like to get back to jogging on my own, now. Like it was before. But really, you've been a fantastic neighbor." I give a bright smile. "We can still be friends, can't we?"

"Sure, if that's the way you want it."

What else can he say? He trots downstairs to jog on his own, his back a ramrod of displeasure. Imagining his scowl, I give a jaunty whistle as I get myself ready for work, knowing he didn't want to jog at all.

But I feel strangely discombobulated.

After Dad woke me in the middle of the night, after he'd been shot and Suzanne killed and I assisted him to kidnap a child, I'm suddenly not me any longer. At least, I'm not the me who was drifting vaguely through life wondering what I was going to do with the rest of it. Now I'm this weird other person who could be slapped in prison for years. Dad can call it *rescuing* all he likes, but in the eyes of the law it would be kidnapping. And I assisted. I feel as if guilt is written over my forehead. I'm confused, wired, changed.

It's surreal, and I'm pretending everything is normal?

Several days pass with me not operating on all cylinders. I can't contact Dad, and there's nothing from Greg. I'm wading through psychological mud. My nights are disturbed, my days unproductive.

When Janine calls me into her office, her face grim, I wonder if I'm about to be made redundant. Surprisingly I don't care. She's toying with a buff folder, picking at the edges.

She spits words like poison. "I called May-Jane and said I'd bring the documents over, but she wants you to do it."

I've never been the subject of her malice, but I've seen it aimed at others and thought she was play-acting. I see now, she wasn't. I wouldn't want her for my enemy. The vitriol in her eyes is like a physical presence.

"Fine," I say lightly. "Did she say when?"

Janine pushes the folder toward me, then bends her head to her papers. "I guess you'd better figure it out between you."

As I leave her office, Janine's hard gaze follows, spiked with calculating speculation. My nice, ordered life is crumbling. No matter how fast I run, sooner or later I'm going to trip and fall into a crack. Maybe it's time to revamp my résumé.

At my desk an email pings into my computer, obviously from Dad:

YOU OKAY, FROGLET?

NO! WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU? ARE YOU ALL RIGHT? MY CONDO'S BUGGED!

A response slides in an hour later with sublime disregard for my state of mind.

OH DEAR, SORRY ABOUT THE BUG. BEST TO EMAIL ME FROM WORK.

No shit!

SHOULD I BE WORRIED?

I almost hear the amusement in his voice, as he replies.

DON'T BE. HELPING CHILDREN IS WHAT I DO, SWEETHEART. IT'S WHAT I'VE ALWAYS DONE. BUT TRUST ME. IF YOU LOVE ME, YOU KNOW I'M NOT A BAD PERSON.

Despite a lifetime of lies, I believe him. I feel as though there's nothing but a partition wall between us, if I get up and walk around the corner, he'll be right there, waiting to hug me. Only he isn't, and I haven't a clue what's going down.

YOU NEED TO TALK TO ME.

BEST IF YOU STAY OUT OF IT, FROGLET.

TOO LATE, DON'T YOU THINK???!!!???

I get no reply, and go home feeling irritated by everything and everyone. Worlds that were previously the domain of newspaper articles are being thrust upon me. What next, I think sourly.

~ 25 ~

The next day, I make arrangements to see May-Jane. Janine is waiting in her glass fishbowl, with that piranha smile. She seems less vitriolic than before, though there's a new chill about her. "Morning, Dee. Thanks for sorting those files. I've decided to take on the Leighton divorce. It looks like an earner. I want you to do the background."

"Sure," I say.

After which, she studiously ignores me, so I take the file, and close the door behind me.

Leighton is a super-rich guy with a token wife. A rich older man marrying a model six inches taller than himself even without the heels. Why do the fools marry these women? We all know why they want them, it's the call of nature, but just write out a contract, for God's sake, then pay them off when a new opportunity presents.

I guess Leighton's ageing ego told him that this pouting bimbo was really turned on by his manly attributes rather than his bank balance, then got all hurt when he discovered a virile lover lurking in the wings.

Being a high-paid call girl must sound like easy money, but pretending to be aroused by an egotistical old guy whose apparatus has sagged must eventually get tiresome. She's probably tucked away a mint in diamonds already, and intends to squeeze him for the big win on the way out. I can't

really blame her, but does she really know what she's up against?

I do a bit of research.

According to various articles, Duke Leighton is a third-generation property developer, his lifestyle funded by a large, scattered tenant base. Some of his properties are prestigious city buildings, but there are many in areas where poverty and violence live hand in hand. He has his own company to deal with the corporate properties, and I've been given details of three letting agents who deal with his domestic properties. I know full well the official portfolio is manufactured. The more people have, the more they avoid giving it away to the tax man. Question: when *do* empire-building psychopaths give it up and become model citizens? Answer: never, they fake it. And their offspring learn to hang on to what's fallen into their laps, with the grim determination of future sociopaths.

Duke Leighton is fairly private, but his wife, better known as Beatty Loveless, the onetime catwalk goddess, has a huge social presence. I watch some of her catwalk footage from a few years back. She has the moves, all right. I suspect half the men who saw her on the catwalk had their legs crossed over their nether brains.

She gave up modeling to become a wife—read: *full-time escort*. And all her activities appear to be centered on her appearance, which I guess is what you'd expect from someone whose looks have generated a substantial income, one way or another. From what I've seen, I doubt I'd like either of the Leightons, but I don't have to be best friends with them, just find out what Duke is worth so that Janine can screw as much as she can out of the estate for her client.

Later, Janine calls me into her office and hands me information provided by Mr. Leighton's lawyer: a list of paid staff, properties, and other capital investments. "Get this: Duke's lawyer is proposing a minimal settlement, based on

services supplied and paid for in advance.”

“She’s not going to go for it?”

“In light of his net worth, it’s a joke in fairly poor taste.” Janine springs a feral grin. “She wants to sting her husband for a large percentage of his worth, and we get a percentage. This is going to be fun.”

“Who’s his lawyer?”

“Bill Devenish.”

Bill has a reputation for being a bully, in court and out of it, and probably does some sort of funny handshake with Duke. I think Janine should be worried. It bothers me that she’s not. “I doubt this is the whole story,” I say.

Her brows rise in that superior expression she does so well. “Of course it’s not. That’s why we employed *you*.”

I get back to ferreting through the internet, to get a handle on the Leightons before going out and about. There’s a pile of dirt on them; after all, they’re celebrities. The gossip pages dwell on the fantasy aspect of being super-rich: lifestyle, clothes, interior design, what functions they attend, and who they brown-nose with. Individuals shout and scream about minor infringements of the law in Duke’s property empire, but it’s all *here today, gone tomorrow*; hot air, nothing followed through. If people don’t pay rent, they should expect to be kicked out, shouldn’t they? Nothing is fair about it, but redundancies, poverty, and homelessness is other people’s bad luck; not bad practice on Duke’s part.

The more serious papers mention Leighton having affiliations with right-wing politics. That doesn’t surprise me. But nowhere do I find any hint that their marriage is on the rocks. Usually some rag-hound sniffs out personal relationship gossip before the couple’s family learns about it, but the most up-to-date images show Beatty hanging on to her husband’s arm—admittedly, she’s leaning down to do it, with that great

rubber-lipped smile she's famous for.

I drive to the Leighton's Disneyland home the next morning. The residence has a manned gate and a short drive, through which a fascia of spectacularly bad taste is visible. Marble pillars and cherubs abound. The staff enter via a smaller entrance at the back, buzzed through by someone presumably checking them on a camera. I camp down the road for a couple of days with a telephoto lens, taking images of everyone who goes in and out.

Duke travels a lot. He has his own jet. And mostly Beatty goes with him. But this week, it seems he's working from home. There's a lot of activity at chez Leighton. Various business suits drive in, stay a few hours, and drive away again. I get their images and car registrations. Some I vaguely recognize from the papers. Oligarchs gather like crows over roadkill when it comes to protecting their empires.

He knows I'm watching.

When Duke drives out, he glowers at me. I'm tempted to follow, but his driver could lose me in an instant. He looks like a professional bodyguard: hard, slim. Kind of deadly attractive, if I'm honest. I don't see him glance my way, but I don't doubt he's logged me and my car in a single glance. I can't get close to Duke, so I follow Beatty for the day. I know she's our client, but I'm finding the whole thing a bit weird. She drives her own car, some little red number, and doesn't seem like a woman on the warpath. In the morning, she goes to an exclusive fitness club for a pump-and-pamper. She shops, then meets another plastic wife for a lunch date. They eat minimally, and giggle a lot. She has her hair done in the afternoon. She must be damn good in bed, because behind her double Ds there's no trace of character. If she's looking to screw her husband over a divorce settlement, there must be more to her than I can fathom, or someone is pushing from behind. Or she's cleverer than I think, and is boring me on

purpose. Is there intelligence lurking beneath the vacuous expression? I'd like to quiz her, but I've been told not to contact her directly, but go through Janine. For a successful woman, Janine's strangely insecure.

Somewhere between sleuthing and tailing, I buy a new burner and text Dad and Laurie and Greg the new number, signing myself *FROG*. Am I getting paranoid, or what? Dad texts back with *ALL GOOD XX*, so I know he's recovering. I don't hear from Laurie, so I assume the Valerie imposter has moved to new hunting grounds. It pleases me that they've shifted attention away from Laurie. She's dedicated to her family, wanting nothing more than a stable suburban lifestyle that trudges into comfortable old age, with grandchildren to spoil. Not my cup of tea. Up to now I haven't discovered what my cup of tea really is, but after my little adventure in the world of law-breaking, I feel energized. I've never thought of myself as brave, that fake rape attempt substantiating the assumption, but my inner heroine is crowing to the skies: I did something illegal! I helped my dad save an endangered child!

And at the same time, it all seems rather tame in hindsight. Dad's tragic moment of excitement had happened before I came on the scene, and from then on, his plan had worked perfectly: the drive to the airport, handing over the kid, disposing of the evidence. And here I am again, back in my normal life.

~ 26 ~

Janine seems to have forgiven me for hijacking the May-Jane case, even though it wasn't exactly my fault. Her glances have reverted to mildly-superior rather than looks-could-kill. She doesn't like May-Jane anyway, even though she admires her success. Now she realizes it's a simple play-and-pay scenario, she's not so interested. She loves to get those teeth into something complex. She'll sting May-Jane a mint for every minute, in any event.

Later in the day I go to meet May-Jane.

This time I'm not impressed by the automatic gates at her mansion. I'm still smarting too much from my visit to the shitty side of Phoenix to be impressed by the lifestyles of the overpaid, although that seems like half a lifetime ago. How could one person have so much, while so many live on the edge of breakdown? It's not just poverty-versus-wealth, it's degradation-versus-decadence. There was a time I'd have said this was my ambition, to live the lifestyle May-Jane clawed out for herself, after a fairly miserable beginning, if you believe the gossip; but now, even if I had the money, I don't think I could do it. I brake in a scatter of stones, and slam the car door shut with little respect for the aura of hushed expense. I leave my purse in the car and hope that Wayne hasn't been able to bug what I'm wearing.

A middle-aged gardener, indolently snipping in a rose bed, stops to stare. The maid shows me through to a patio area,

where Greg is lounging by a kidney-shaped pool, wearing little more than a paperback. His ankles are crossed, and there's an empty glass by his side. I can't help admiring a body that's comfortably fit rather than over-pumped with six-packs and distorted pecs.

He pats a sun lounger next to his. "Wanna get naked? Water's warm."

"I don't get an offer like that every day," I say, and sit primly on the lounger, knees together, shielding my eyes with my hand.

Obligingly, he shunts his sunshade my way. "Better?"

"Better," I agree. "So, what's this all about?"

"Where were you last week?"

"You've been checking up on me, too? I've been quizzed by Wayne, who is convinced I was up to no good. I was visiting my sister."

"No, you weren't. So, what no-good were you really up to?"

"None of your business."

He smiles. "So, how's your dad? After his stroke, I mean?"

"You got *that* from Janine. And actually, it was Tim who had the stroke."

"No, it wasn't. Where did you really go?"

"I saw my dad. Are you surveilling me?"

He pauses, then says, "Yep. For your own protection, of course. You slipped out in the middle of the night to see your dad and didn't take the car."

"The car was probably bugged."

"A tracker," he corrects mildly. "You should be more careful. If I don't know where you are, I can't help you when you get into trouble."

"I didn't need your help. Was that why I was called over here? Doesn't May-Jane want to see me?"

"About the divorce? Doubt it," he says. "I just haven't sent everything back, yet, because if I do, I'll have no excuse to drag

you out here. Unless we make our liaison public.”

He’s placed the paperback on his crotch and I’m half expecting to see it rise. “I have no intention of having a *liaison* with you!”

“Just a little sex? Between friends?”

“That hangdog expression sits better on Wayne’s face,” I say tartly.

“So I gather. He didn’t take the brush-off too well.”

I’m taken aback. “Did you bug my condo, too?”

“Nope. Bugged his.”

My mouth drops open, then I laugh. “Learn anything useful?”

“Oh, yes.”

I don’t like the tone of that drawl. He puts the paperback aside and shrugs into a garish Hawaiian shirt that just about makes him decent. “Come inside, I’ve got something to show you.”

Normally, that would prompt the obvious quip, but Greg’s face is entirely serious. I follow into what looks like a man’s den. There’s a big TV, a TV chair, a desk with a computer, and a tangle of cables and electronics. Motorcycle mags litter a small table. I suspect the cleaners aren’t allowed to tidy. I don’t see any flashy red lights, so assume we’re in the clear.

Greg picks up some photos from the desk and thrusts them at me. The first couple are of Wayne, then the third one makes me stop short. My heart beats a little faster as I see Wayne leaning in through the open window of a car. The occupant is only partly visible, but I’d recognize that face anywhere. It’s the man who attacked me.

Greg catches my expression and says laconically, “Wondered if it was him.”

“So, who is he? Are they FBI?”

“Don’t know. I’m trying to find out. So, are you going to let me know why these people would be after your dad?”

“If I asked for details when you were running drugs, would you have trusted me?”

“So, it’s illegal. And if he’s caught, not only will he do time, so will you.”

I don’t answer; it’s obviously written in my expression.

“Cheer up, doll,” Greg says, amused. “I won’t let the bad guys get you.”

And here am I thinking he’s one of the bad guys, and the feds are the good guys. “So, what do we do now?”

“We find out who the guy in the car is, and who they’re working for.”

“Easy peasy.”

Greg just smiles.

The Irish maid comes in and tells Greg, “May-Jane needs you.”

“Gotta go, doll,” Greg says. “Catch you later.”

I leave, hoping Greg has some kind of plan. But I’m pleased to have my suspicions about the fake rape confirmed. My feelings about Wayne have moved through mild interest to irritation, to outright fury. How dare he use rape as a tool to get close to me? Bastard!

~ 27 ~

I'm leaving the mansion, halfway toward staking out the Leightons' place again, when my burner vibrates in my pocket. It's a text from Laurie.

SHE CAME AGAIN. VALERIE, TO MY HOME! CAN YOU TALK?

I pull in and text back:

GIVE ME FIVE.

I walk away from the car. I don't doubt Greg's right about the tracker, but maybe there's a bug, too. I call her. "Are you alone?"

"In the garden, the kids are in the den."

"What was she after this time?"

"She said she wanted to go over some stuff before finalizing her article, and I said what article, and she said the same old stuff about the child disappearances. Nothing to do with the baby Dad was fired for."

Actually, that worries me more than I let her know. Dad said he didn't think it *was* the feds after him. But if it's not them, it's people who are far worse. At the time, I'd been concerned about Dad's injury, and getting the girl off our hands as quickly as possible. But now, I'm thinking about what he told me. About the kid he tried to help who might have ratted him out. Whoever he has upset didn't know who was rescuing the kids they were abusing. If they know it's Dad, now, none of us are safe.

“What did you tell her?” I ask.

“She said she knows Dad’s alive, and I was lying. I asked who she was really working for, and she wasn’t at all bothered at being caught out. She got heavy and said I’d better tell her, or she’d do it through official channels. So, I told her to stick her official channels up her rear, and get lost, it was all in the past and Dad had nothing to do with it.”

I chuckle. “Damn it, Laurie, I couldn’t have done better myself.”

“I thought it was quite good, on the spur of the moment.” She sounds smug, then adds, “But that’s not all. I held my cell in her face and said I was calling the cops.”

“Did you?”

“No, she turned and walked away quickly, but not before I got a picture of her.”

“Jesus, Laurie, well done!”

“But that means she’s not working for the law at all, doesn’t it? I can email her image to you.”

“Maybe. But feds don’t always tell local cops what they’re up to.” It sounds plausible, even to me. I don’t want to worry her more than she is already. I’m worried enough for both of us. “Look, don’t send it to me. If they’re monitoring my email, they’ll see it.”

“Oh. I didn’t think of that. It’s too late.”

“Oh. Well, it’s done, now. But you were right to be suspicious, and I’m the obvious person you’d go to if you were bothered about something. I’ll see if I can find out who she is.”

“Dee, be honest. What’s Dad into?”

I’m silent for a moment, mulling over the options, but she’s no fool. “Look, Laurie. You’re right. There’s something going on, but he doesn’t want you involved. It’s best if you know nothing. You can’t say anything to anyone, if you don’t know. But don’t mention this to Tim. He’s not as strong as you.”

“He’d go to the cops.”

“That’s what bothers me.”

Her voice regresses to that of a confused child. “Is it bad, what Dad’s doing?”

“Dad’s not bad, Laurie. He’s never been bad. He’s helping abused kids. You should be proud of him.”

“Yes, but— The kids are coming. Gotta go.”

I’m left with a dial tone buzzing in my ear. I hadn’t wanted to tell Laurie anything, but at least now she’ll understand why Dad kept away from her all these years, and know it’s not anything she’s done. Dad would make a great grandpa, but it’s a sacrifice he’s chosen. Maybe now Laurie will see that, too.

The next day, at work, I transfer Valerie’s image from my cell onto a USB drive. Laurie had described her well. She has bleached, ash-blond hair, thin lips, and sallow skin made paler by an uneven lashing of mascara. There’s a hardness to her face that’s difficult to define until I realize there isn’t a wrinkle in sight. Her skin has a strangely smooth, doll-like sheen, her eyes the empathy of glass. Is she FBI? Has a lifetime of dealing with criminals stolen her humanity, or is she one of them? I can’t quite get my head around women who do bad stuff to kids, but when I open my laptop and see her image, I revise that thought. Valerie is like a plastic imitation of a human. An alien. I transfer the image onto a USB and delete the original, though, if someone’s monitoring it, I guess they already have it. I pop the drive into an envelope, address it to Greg, and put it in the mail. God knows what kind of connections he has, but he managed to get an image of Wayne’s accomplice, so we’ll see what he makes of Valerie, the fake reporter.

Dad texts a couple of days later.

FROGLET, PHONE ME. URGENT.

My heart does a bump. Of course, with Suzanne out of the equation, I had wondered whether he would call on me again. I think he must be living in some kind of personal war zone. A soldier dies, you grieve, but the fight goes on.

I truly don't want to get involved. Dad's a saint for doing what he does. Most people wouldn't risk their lifestyle or freedom, or even their life, to save someone they don't know. But I have a deep-set fear of being institutionalized. People say being poor is like being in prison, but they need to be put straight: it's not. Being poor takes away your choices, but being institutionalized takes away your humanity. As a therapist, I visited people in prison and in psych wards. I truly don't want to see either one from the other side.

I slip outside and walk away from the building to make the call. "Dad, it's me."

"Dee, I didn't want to involve you."

"But?"

"There's always a *but*, isn't there?" He laughs. I say nothing, so he clears his throat. "Look, Dee. Something happened. I'm in a bit of a bind. I can't trust anyone, not even the people I work with."

"There are others?"

"A few."

Of course there are. He's probably running an anti-pedophile ring. Perhaps it is the FBI who are after him after all. They really don't like people treading on their toes. "Another child?"

"There's always another child, froglet."

"What the hell did you get another child for, Dad? They know it's you. They're looking for you. My house is bugged. The guy upstairs is listening in on my living room. Lauralee has had that woman Valerie around asking questions..."

"Again?"

"Yes. She came to Laurie's door. Said she knew you were

alive. Laurie sent her packing; but Dad, Laurie's got a family. She's got kids. That woman threatened her."

There's a long silence, and a sigh. "Forget I asked."

Like that's going to happen. "Dad, what do you need me to do?"

"I need you, Friday."

"How? I was lucky last time. That guy who's watching me was taken off guard, otherwise we'd all be in the slammer. If he's a fed. I don't know what he is, to be honest. But he's probably got the front door wired by now. They aren't playing games."

"They?"

"I don't know! You tell me! Him upstairs, and the Valerie woman, and there's at least one other guy, and who knows how many more! You said you didn't think it was the feds, but if it's the other guys, it's worse!"

I wait while Dad mulls it over, but he admits, "It's a conundrum. But can you lose them? Could you drive out to meet me somewhere?"

"My car's probably got a tracker on it, too."

"But if we can think of a way, you'll do it?"

"You're not exactly giving me an option. But Dad, this has to stop. They're already suspicious about my last disappearing act. Even if we get away with it, these people will *know* I'm involved."

"I'm truly sorry. I wouldn't, only..."

"I know, I know, some kid needs my help." I take a deep breath, adding, "Dad? I'm sorry about Suzanne. You loved her, didn't you?"

"I'll always love her."

I almost want to hate him for shutting me out of that part of his life, but I can't. "Be careful, Dad. Please."

"And you, little frog."

I shove the burner deep into my pocket. It's style—or lack

of—is a dead giveaway, and anyone I know would wonder why I needed one. The last time Dad called on me, it was like a storm blowing out of a clear sky, and I just got bowled along. This time I'm truly going to become an accomplice in whatever's going down. God help me, I'm shaking so hard everyone must see it.

I spend a fruitless afternoon watching Duke Leighton's door, stewing over things I can't change, before going back to the office briefly. I might as well pick up some files to read through if I'm going to be sitting about in a car, doing nothing. As I drive toward the car park, I see Janine's husband, Leo Maas, walking away from the front door in close conversation with another man. He's in charge of accounting, working two floors above us, and rarely descends to our floor during the working day. Actually, I get the feeling he's not often at his desk, though now and again he does pop in to Janine with some kind of visiting dignitary in tow.

Leo's wearing an impeccably cut suit, which shimmers faintly as he moves. The man walking beside him is a good head shorter, his shoes, jeans and jacket proclaiming him from a different working environment. There's something vaguely familiar about the slope of his shoulders, but the image won't gel. Maybe I'm wrong. I'm too wired to give a damn, anyway. Strangely, I'm experiencing a burning hatred of Duke Leighton, May-Jane, Janine and her pretty-boy husband, every one of whom is more interested in not just getting enough money, but acquiring an obscene amount of the stuff. But I have to ask myself: before Dad brought me into his world, what have I done to help anyone else? I've never deliberately harmed anyone, but actually, have I done anything at all philanthropic?

~ 28 ~

Several days later, it's Friday, and Dad still hasn't contacted me, so I get on with my job with only half a brain. The other half is nearly climbing the walls with worry. I try to be interested in the Leightons, but I'm not. I don't care if Beatty gets her retirement fund. I don't care if Duke is being shafted. Actually, I hope he is. I have no time for men who allow their lizard brains to control their lives. Surely being civilized means learning to control the animal urges, and employ that small fraction of the brain we're able to access? Apparently, we only use ten percent of what's available. I've often wondered what we'd become, given the chance to use all of it, but the fact is, even that usable ten percent sinks to about three when the lizard brain is allowed to take control.

Dad finally texts, late morning.

CALL ME.

He's giving me the chance to get somewhere we won't be overheard, but I can't help being irritated. It's a bit eleventh hour, and I've been chewing my nails, wondering whether anything is even going to happen, or whether I'd go home and be waiting all night for a call that never comes. I walk out and he answers at the first ring.

"Dad, what the hell's going on?"

"Hello to you, too," he says.

"Crap, Dad, it's not funny. I'm going out of my mind."

“Well don’t. I need you calm and ready to go.”

“So, it’s on? Today?”

“Most assuredly it’s on, but tomorrow. There and back before anyone catches on. Can you pick me up from the bus station?”

“What’s wrong with your car?”

“I’ll tell you when I see you. Is your car safe?”

“I don’t know. I might have to rent a car. Are we driving to Queens?”

“No.”

I get that he doesn’t want to say anything on the phone, but if the burners aren’t safe, we’re in the shit, anyway. I know I’m losing it when I say, “Dad, I can’t do this stuff.”

“Last time, I promise. I’ll check out bus times, and let you know.”

“Okay. But, Dad...”

He’s hung up on me.

When the feds are tracing a call, the bad guys stick to short bursts of communication. I’ve seen it on TV. Does he think someone’s onto him? It might be that he’s being extra careful because of what happened last time. I feel sick. Maybe he’s just playing it safe. But this whole gig is different. He’s coming by Greyhound, and we’re making the drop off the same day. That’s good, but the underlying sense of urgency has me biting my nails again.

I phone Greg from work. “I need to see you. I need your help. Please.”

He doesn’t sound at all fazed by the admission. “I’ll drop by this evening. That okay?”

“Sure. I’ll be there.”

It’s around eight when I hear the roar of Greg’s bike outside. This time I buzz him in right away. “Why on earth do you have to come to my home?” I snap, pointing to the ceiling. “Surely

you can come to the office in work hours, like everyone else?”

“She’s divorcing me,” he says, giving me a wink, “but I’m still her bodyguard during the day.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that.”

“So, you wanna do business over some eats?”

“I haven’t had dinner,” I say doubtfully.

“Well, I’m not doing that posh place, again. You okay with something a bit more downtown?”

“I don’t mind. But I’d rather drive.”

“Scared of my bike?”

“Not enthralled,” I answer.

He shrugs. “Means I can have a few beers. I’d have to sleep here, after. Can’t afford to lose my license.”

I return Greg’s sly smile. That will piss Wayne off big time.

I clean up a bit, dress down, and spray myself with my failing bottle of perfume. We settle into the car, and I ask, “How did you get to meet May-Jane.”

“My sister’s her PA. It was strange how that came about, but, well, it worked out different than either of them expected. May-Jane wanted a black woman, you know, because of the TV image?”

I feel his gaze on me. I concentrate on the traffic.

“Her audience was largely black, to start with. Now it’s everyone, of course. Anyway, the recruitment people sent Evelyn to interview. I don’t know whether they did it as part of the ethical recruitment policy, or whether it was just a mistake. But anyway, she and May-Jane kind of clicked, and she got the job. My sister’s a good PA. Quiet and efficient. Different altogether to me. Except you wouldn’t want to cross her. Anyway, when Dad died, we drifted apart. She went upmarket, and I went to the road. Never could settle to a job with rules and stuff.”

“No, I could see that wouldn’t suit you,” I agree.

As I’m driving, he’s fiddling with a piece of electronic kit,

checking a meter. “No bugs,” he says, finally. “Just the tracker.”

“Can we lose it? The tracker, I mean.”

“Why?”

“I need to be somewhere tomorrow.”

“With your dad?”

“Maybe.”

“If you lose the tracker, they’ll be asking themselves why.”

“I know. But it’s important.”

He frowns. “Well, it’s probably just external, magnetic. When we get back, I’ll knock it off. They’ll be suspicious, but if they find it in the road they won’t know for sure. But next time you park outside, they’ll put it back. You can only play that card once.”

“Thanks,” I say, but I make a mental note to check where it’s located on the car, for the future. Then I wonder what on earth I’m thinking. After this time, I’m never, ever doing it again.

“Did you get the USB drive?”

“Yep.”

“Did you find who she was?”

“Nope.”

“Or the others?”

“Nope.”

“Can you possibly be a little bit more forthcoming?” I cast a sidelong glance, and catch the hint of a grin.

“I’m being really open. You have no idea. Now, turn left, here.”

Greg directs me to a bar I’ve heard of but never visited, because it’s frequented by druggies and bikers. I pull in to the parking lot. “*Woah...*” I whisper. The place is littered with bikes. All big, all black. “Really?”

“Trust me, doll.”

I want to say I’m no one’s damn doll, but now isn’t the

time. He gets out, and leans back in, one brow raised. "Coming?"

I want to say, no, of course not, but I open the door and climb out. I lock the door, wondering whether I'll find the car in one piece when I come back out. *If* I come back out. But if someone steals the car or mugs me, the tracker problem is immaterial.

The air inside is thick with smoke and booze and menace. There's a preponderance of men, all wearing the biker's uniform of oily denim or leather covered in white-painted graffiti and images of bones and stuff. The few women I see, lightly dressed, heavily made-up, flick dead-fish eyes over me. I don't think we're going to be buddies. A couple of pool tables are occupied, the players leaning through a line-up of empties, and the bar stools are all occupied by slouching figures. Greg shoves his way through and leans an elbow on the bar between two scruffy youths. I don't know whether it's his size, or whether he has a reputation, but they lean away fractionally, giving him space.

"Jim, can you do us beers and burgers?"

The man behind the bar has the biggest gut I've ever seen, but the cool expression and scar down one cheek suggests he's not someone you'd want to spar with.

Jesus wept, what am I doing here?

He slaps two bottles on the bar, giving Greg, then me a once-over, lifting a brow. "Thought you was with that black bitch."

"Not anymore," Greg says cheerfully, totally ignoring the slight to May-Jane. I realise he's playing a part, and is good at it. "She was a good lay while it lasted. They have the moves, all right."

A couple of other guys slap Greg on the shoulder as he makes his way back to me. "Follow me," he says.

I follow, to a rickety lean-to, piled high with crates. There

are a couple of empty benches behind tabletops nailed to beer barrels. I slide in and Greg squeezes in too close beside me. The first beer slips down easy. I'm gulping it for Dutch courage, but Greg beats me hands down. His disappears in a single long draft, then he slams the empty bottle onto the table, emitting a reverberating, satisfied belch.

I sit grimly clutching my bottle. Greg leans his head back against the wall and waits, eyes shuttered. Jim finally arrives with burgers wrapped in greasy paper, and a couple more beers.

"Why here," I ask, eyeing the burgers distastefully.

"Disaster mitigation," he replies, taking a long pull at his second beer, before wiping the back of his hand over his mouth. "Damn, did I need that. So, I'm helping you, and you're helping me. If the guys see I'm back with a white girl, I might regain some street cred."

"So why aren't you prejudiced, like them?"

He grimaces. "I was. Before Evelyn introduced me to May-Jane, I was a real dick. Now I have to pretend to be one. These guys don't know I have a sister."

I hear the warning in his statement. "And now you want back in? Why? Are you going to run drugs again?"

"I'm not asking what you and your dad are up to."

Well, that's true. And I'm not going to tell him. I nibble at the edges of the burger, then surprise myself by enjoying it. I'm entirely out of my comfort zone, but my unease is accompanied by a sneaky little thrill of excitement. I'm glad I've got a gorilla at my back, though. I'm hoping he doesn't go native on me. When I dump the greasy paper, he says, "C'mon, I'll introduce you to a few of the guys."

That's not reassuring.

He slides off the bench seat. Clutching my bottle, I follow. He grabs another couple of beers from Jim and wanders up to two guys who are leaning either side of an ancient jukebox

that's seen too many bar fights to play music anymore. They both have long hair, and a few days of stubble. The left one is young, his ultra-skinny frame and sallow skin suggest he's either got some kind of wasting sickness, or is heavy into drugs. The other one is beefy, with enormous hands.

"Guys? How ya doin'?" Greg asks. He shunts a hand in my back, and I lurch forward. "This is Dee." They nod an acknowledgment, but their narrowed eyes give nothing away.

Greg reaches into his pocket and pulls out printouts of Wayne, his friend, and Valerie. "Looking for these guys."

A small spark of interest flits across their faces. Beefy leans forward, peruses, then hawks and spits on the floor. "Nope. What for?"

He points to the middle image. "He mugged my girl. Might be cops or feds. Don't know for sure. Put the word out, eh?"

Eyes flick to me and back to the images. Payback they understand. Greg pushes the paper at them, and the beefy guy folds it and tucks it in his shirt pocket. They nod to each other, complicit, and we move on. Greg offers me the other beer, and when I shake my head, begins to down it himself. I guess he can take a few bottles, but it bothers me that he's knocking them back at such a rate, and intends to sleep over at my place.

We move around to a few more groups, and I'm pretty much paraded as Greg's property, tagged by some invisible code: Greg's girl, out of bounds. They don't want to know about me. They don't want to know where we met, or what I do for a living. But that suits me—I'm unlikely to meet any of these guys in my normal, day to day life, and don't intend to bump into them again in theirs.

Anyway, no one recognizes Wayne, his accomplice, or the Valerie woman. When Greg's disposed of all his printouts and the last two beers, he thumbs the carpark. "Home?"

The car's the same as when I left it, unremarkable and unvandalized. I climb in, and as we drive away, tension I

didn't know I was harboring slips from my shoulders. "Nice crowd," I say.

"I probably wouldn't like the people you hang out with," he retorts mildly.

Actually, I don't hang out with anyone, except at office functions, and I can't see him and Janine getting on. They inhabit different worlds, but when push comes to shove, they're both prepared to bend the law for personal gain.

I park, and Greg walks around the back of the car. His hand brushes the inside back wheel arch and I hear the faint tinkle of something hitting the road.

I make coffee for me. Greg refuses as *it'll make him wanna pee*. As if all that beer won't. He bounces hard onto a sofa. Springs ping. "I sleep here, I guess? Better shut the door. I snore loud when I've had a couple of beers. Wouldn't wanna keep you awake."

"There's a spare bed next door."

"Oh, sure."

I hope Greg's imagining Wayne creeping into my bed during the night. I have the sneaky feeling this will spark a vindictive streak in my eavesdropper.

I lie awake for a while, trying to read, but the antics of vampire lovers pales into insignificance compared to real life. I must have been lulled to sleep by the rough snoring coming from the second bedroom, because I wake to the sound of the kettle singing and realize I've slept deeply, better than I have the last few nights, worrying about Dad and what's going to happen—today, in fact.

I jump when Greg comes in fully dressed. I sit up, pulling the covers with me. He dumps a coffee beside me and sits on the side of the bed, then leans over, hands both sides of me, and kisses me briefly, full on the mouth. I'm startled and clutch the covers to my breast. Then he whispers in my ear, "Gotta go, doll. Sorry I don't have more time. Duty calls."

Whatever you're up to, be careful."

The door closes behind him.

I leap up and lock the door. I hear his bike start up with a roar. I realize it's not only Wayne who's going to wonder what went on in my condo last night. I hope they don't get up a neighborhood petition to move me on.

Dad texts to tell me he's catching the ten thirty bus. When I hop into my car, I'm relieved to see the tracker, a matchbox-sized piece of black plastic, sitting on the road, just inside the back offside wheel. I'm tempted to run it over, but even if I destroy it, Wayne probably has a few more at hand. If it's not damaged, all the more reason for him to suppose it was a genuine accident. Just in case I'm being observed, I pull away casually, fighting the urge to put my foot down. I have no way of knowing whether I'm bug-free. I want to head straight for the bus station, but it's too early, so I drive to the mall a couple of miles away and park.

I grab a coffee and a snack in Starbucks, and sit by the window, pretending to read a paper while looking out for faces I know. My heart is skipping all over the place, and I have to pee twice. I don't think I've ever been this scared. As Greg said, if Dad goes down, I can't claim ignorance. Not once I pick him up, with whatever kid he has in tow.

I have to be honest with myself. I'm doing this for Dad, not for some kid I don't know. There are dreadful things happening in the world, and I'm a sucker for someone who holds their hand out for help, but I've never launched myself into lost causes at the cost of my own life.

By the time I leave Starbucks my foot is jumping relentlessly and I'm getting funny looks from the staff. Maybe they think I'm on drugs, or something, but I don't think

outstaying my welcome is enough for them to call the cops.

I'm lucky enough to find a space at the bus station. Coaches pull in, offload, reload, and drive off, as though this is a normal day. Like at the beginning of one of those disaster movies, when all those people going about their business have no idea it's not a normal day at all. It's like an end-of-the-world kind of day.

Dad's coach pulls in and I watch for him as people trickle off. I gasp in shock. He's dressed in jeans, sneakers and has a baby cradled in one arm, like some dropout granddad. He yanks a pushchair out of storage, and his old-man gray hair doesn't exactly look like a halo.

I jump out, and my wave is a little too frantic. I have to get him away from here. He stops trying to unpack the stroller one-handed, and hauls it in my direction. I rush forward, grab the stroller, and throw it into the trunk as though it's carrying a contagious disease. Dad climbs into the back seat and hunkers down a little. The baby, not a newborn, thank God, begins to snuffle. Dad murmurs sweet nothings in a calm voice while rummaging in his backpack.

"What the hell, Dad?" I say tightly, climbing into the driver's seat.

"Just drive, Dee. Sorry to drop this on you."

"Drive where?" I snap.

He gives a tired smile. "Head south. They're meeting us at the Blue Note truck stop. You know it?"

"I know where it is."

I've never stopped there, though. It's the sort of place Greg probably knows like the back of his hand. The baby gives a mighty wail, and I glance in the mirror. Dad has fished out a bottle, and after a few abortive attempts, manages to get the baby to take a few gulps. It sounds as though it's choking, but eventually settles down to a nasal snuffling and guzzling.

I drive, in a heavy silence of disapproval. When Dad

speaks, it has a distant feel, as though he's justifying things to himself, not me. "I had to. Don't you see? I had to. If Suzanne had been there, she would have... But I couldn't drive, not with a baby. The others were going to help, but – well, they kind of disappeared."

"Maybe they wised up, and left," I suggest nastily.

"What? No." His voice holds a rough note that suggests he's struggling to not cry. "They were good people. They just disappeared. Someone's onto us."

I didn't miss the past tense. "You think they were murdered?"

I glance in the mirror. He nods. "Can't think anything else. They helped so many children. They were there one day, gone the next. I don't know what happened, but I'm pretty sure they didn't just walk out on me. Even if they *had* decided to run, they would have let me know, somehow."

"Feds?"

"Apparently not. My contact in the Bureau said they don't have anything on us. But it's so big, so many people..."

I really want to believe him, but, *shit*, he's stolen another baby! He has a contact in the Bureau! And he really does have nasty guys after him!

"Why did you take it?"

"Her," he corrects reprovingly. "Her name is Yasmin. She's five months old, and has 'fallen from her crib' twice that we know of. Poor people, poor district. Kids die all the time. The Department of Children and Families were informed, but they couldn't do anything. Whatever happens, they usually can't prove anything. Besides, they don't have the time and finances. Proof of negligence is usually discovered during autopsy. It's always too late for the kids."

"But this one—how did you know? How could you be sure?"

"Her brother was on my bus, every day. Seven years old.

Kids talk. I saw the baby's arm was in a cast one day and asked what happened. He'd already told me the baby's dad was a no-good loser, and wasn't going to cough up any dough, and how was his mom supposed to look after another baby without any help? He said his mom didn't want the little half-breed rat, anyway, and that doesn't leave much room for caring, does it? So, anyway, this time, he says, *Mom dropped her down the stairs, but that didn't do it.*"

"Do what?"

"Get rid of the problem. The boy was just parroting his mother. Those are his exact words. That's how I knew."

"You think the mother dropped the baby on *purpose*?"

"Sure, she did. The kid told me as plain as day."

"Maybe it *was* an accident?"

"No. Trust me. I saw the way that woman looked at the baby. Cold, calculating. If Suzanne was around, she'd have done the research; but, sure as hell, that baby was going to die. She'd have wanted me to do something."

The coin drops. "She was the one who got you into this? Right from the start, it was her?"

"I didn't need much persuading. She knew what kind of person I was. She was a nurse, that's how we met."

He stops short, but I'm not surprised. All the time he'd been married, had us kids, looked after Mom, even while she was dying, he'd quietly been falling in love with Suzanne. Maybe not physically. He had too much integrity for that.

"If mom hadn't been ill, would you have left her, left us?"

He's silent for a moment. "I don't know," he admits finally. "But once she became ill, I couldn't leave her, or you two, could I?"

And there it is. I'm weighing his words. He'd stayed with her because he'd once promised *until death do us part*. And because he had kids who were going to be devastated by her death. I wondered why he always referred to her as our mom,

not his wife. I thought I knew my dad, but everything I thought I knew was being turned on its head. Strangely, I'm not upset. Mom had already become a distant figure in my mind, a fading dream recalled in snatches.

"So," he continues. "I made the arrangements. My colleagues were going to help, but suddenly they're gone. I'm sorry I dragged you into this. I didn't want to. But it'll be fine. No one will know. We'll drop her off and both go home."

"As though it never happened?"

His eyes meet my angry ones in the mirror. "No, froglet. Knowing, forever, that we did a good thing."

And that's why I love my dad. He doesn't know the meaning of half measures. There's only black or white, wrong or right. He always said that if you don't act, you're no better than those who deliberately do harm. I had no idea how literally he held to this notion. "What if they trace you to the bus?"

"No one will remember me."

"An older man, alone, with a baby?"

"People don't want to get involved."

I say flatly, "If it's the law, and they suspect it was you, they'll come after me."

And if they start looking at security cameras, they'll find me by the bus stop, picking Dad up, the kidnapped child in his arms.

"If it comes back to you, Dee, I'll give myself up. I'll tell them you thought I was watching the baby for a friend, and that will be the end of it. I'm sorry, Dee. I'm so tired, not thinking straight. You're right. I shouldn't have called you, but I didn't know what to do."

I hear it in his voice: he's near the end of his rope. "Dad," I say in a softer tone. "You can't keep doing this. I know you're doing it for the kids, but you have to stop."

"This is the last time, I promise."

Yeah, and pigs might fly. He's obviously working with a group of people who genuinely care, but what they're doing is illegal. It might be justifiable in terms of humanity, but the law won't see it that way. And now some of those friends are gone. Disappeared. Because of the bad guys, from what Dad says, whoever they are. The whole thing is going belly-up, and Dad is *still* trying to save kids. And he's been doing that the whole time I've been working for the money machine, losing myself in vampire love stories because my spare time hangs on my hands. It doesn't make me feel very good.

I drive at a steady pace. Traffic passes in a stream, and I'm checking that some car isn't sitting on my exhaust fumes. I'm also looking out for faces I'd recognize. Did Wayne get back from his jog to find my car gone? Or had he been at home, looking out the window? I envisage him scooting to his computer, then bolting downstairs to find the tracker outside the house. I imagine him picking it up, staring after me suspiciously. Or did he run to his car, the one with the big growly engine, and try to catch up? I glance in the mirror for about the thousandth time, but I probably wouldn't recognize his car, even if he was sitting on my bumper. Cars all look the same to me, in different shades of boring.

"Here we are," Dad says, a note of relief in his voice.

The Blue Note probably means blue as in movies. It's a seedy dump. Though I don't see any half-dressed hookers lounging about the place, I don't doubt they're here, somewhere, waiting for dusk. The diner looks like the sort of place you'd go if you want to catch something contagious.

"Where?" I say, pulling into the lot.

"By those trees."

"There's a security camera."

"It's been dead for years."

I guess he's been here before, scoping the place out, but I'm relieved to hear it. I pull in where he says, and look around

for the baby's new parents. Expensive wheels would stand out a mile here, but I don't see any. We wait for what seems like an hour, but is probably about five minutes, then a battered blue van pulls up beside us. A man scowls at us through the driver's window.

Dad gives the guy some sort of a signal. The man jumps down and slides open a side door. Dad clambers out and hands the baby gently over. I catch a glimpse of slim female hands reaching tenderly for the child. I'm hugely relieved it isn't male arms. For a second, I'm impressed with their attention to detail. A mixed-race child going to a mixed-race couple. Right.

The door slams, then the van is gone. It takes around five seconds.

Dad shoots me a smile. "Stolen vehicle," he says. "They'll dump it a few miles down the road."

"They forgot the stroller."

"That was for me. They won't need it." He opens the trunk and throws the stroller into the bushes.

"Fingerprints?"

"Trust me. No fingerprints."

I notice something peeling from his fingers. Glue? Being a doctor—an ex-doctor—he'd know stuff like that. Fuck me. "What now?"

He shrugs out of the hoodie, balls it up and throws that into the bushes, too. Then he tips the contents of a water bottle over both. He yanks a battered jacket and tie out of his backpack, and within a moment a somewhat elderly man, down on his luck, climbs into the back and hunkers down.

He lights a Zippo, throws it onto the hoodie, which goes up in a whoosh of flames. We drive away, leaving a mini-inferno raging in the rearview mirror. There go the fingerprints and DNA, I think. One of the bad things about Dad being a doctor is that despite his age his fingerprints are on record. I watch

the flames recede in the mirror, but no one goes running to check.

I drive back toward Baltimore in silence, my mind a confused carousel of nightmare images.

“I won’t involve you again,” he says. “I promise.”

I think again about those flying pigs.

Into the heavy silence, he says, “Drop me half a mile before the junction, the one by the gas station. I’ll get a cab to the bus station. Then go somewhere visible,” he adds. “Pretend you’re having a stress-free day out doing girl stuff. Retail therapy. Buy something. Make sure someone gets you on camera.”

As I pull in, I turn to look him fully in the eye. “Are you going to find out what happened to your colleagues?”

He knows what I mean. I don’t want to wake up one day and find him disappeared, too.

“I’m going to try, but that kind of stuff is outside my area of expertise.”

I don’t know whether he’s asking me to do it, but I don’t offer. I pull in where he indicates. Another camera dead-zone, I suspect. I’m starting to realize how clued-in Dad is about all this stuff. He leans over, pecks a kiss on my cheek, and jumps out.

“What are you going to do?”

“For now, grab my stuff and move on. I’ll let you know. Sorry, froglet,” he adds. “I promise I won’t let it hurt you. Give my love to Laurie. And the kids.” For a moment he looks wistful, then stands back. “Off you go, then. I love you both so much.”

“Yeah, whatever,” I mutter.

I amble round a few places I don’t want to shop in, buy a few things I don’t need, and park my car in various places that are camera-monitored. I take a few selfies for good measure—big smiles, new clothes—and send them flying to Laurie, asking for her opinion. She loves every minute.

A VIRTUAL GIRLS' DAY OUT! WOW! WE SHOULD DO THIS MORE OFTEN, DEE.

A pile of exclamation points is followed by a random selection of emoticons.

But as I drive home, it all seems like a strangely dislocated dream. I didn't really pick Dad up and aid in his latest child abduction, did I? I wouldn't have done something like that. But I did, and I'm still berating myself for a fool.

I'm on tenterhooks for the rest of the day, waiting for a barrage of flashing lights and sirens, but the evening arrives as it always does, without nukes taking out Baltimore or the cops knocking my door down. I try to finish the latest vamp detective book, and realize, quite to my own surprise, that I've grown out of them. I throw it across the room. It was a fun genre while it lasted. Maybe I'll go back to old-fashioned thrillers where larger-than-life people do extraordinary things. I watch a few soaps, watch bits of at least three films that don't grab my attention, then go to bed.

~ 30 ~

When I wake, I realize I've slept soundly. Whether that's because I've been a hero, in Dad's eyes at least, or in spite of it, I don't know. But for some reason I feel zingy and alive. It's Sunday morning, and I'm lounging in a sloppy pair of PJs when I hear Greg's motorcycle outside. I go to the window and look out. He's staring up, and I don't need to be told he wants to speak to me out of earshot of my charming eavesdropper. I grab a robe and run downstairs, tying the belt as I go.

He's still sitting astride his bike, which is on a slow tick over, communicating that a social visit isn't the point. A faint smile materializes, presumably at my attire, but he doesn't make the bedroom quip that's probably on the edge of his tongue. "Busy night?"

"Lazy day. It's Sunday, in case you hadn't noticed."

"Yesterday go okay?"

I scowl, and he shrugs. "Fine. Not my business. But you need to be nice to me."

"Why?"

He slips two fingers into the zipped breast pocket of his leather jacket and shows me the battered image of the Valerie imposter, then shoves it back, out of sight.

"How nice?" I ask.

He points to his cheek. I peck it. Everything's a game to Greg, it seems.

"Haven't got anything on the other two, yet, but this one,"

he flicks his pocket, “is on record.”

“Not FBI?”

“Not by a long shot. Her name is Sonja Stavinski. She did time for soliciting and embezzlement ten years back. According to my source, her name popped up in a blackmail scam, too, but nothing stuck. Your sister needs to be wary.”

“*Blackmail?* But why would she be after Laurie? They don’t have that kind of money.”

“I’m guessing she’s mixed up with all sorts of crime-related activities. She’s using Laurie to get to your dad. And I don’t know what your dad’s up to, do I? Well, maybe whatever your dad’s into, she wants a slice.”

My lip curls. “If she thinks he’s making money, she’s on the wrong track.”

“If what he’s doing is illegal, but he’s not making any money,” he muses, “what’s the point?”

“You wouldn’t get it.”

“Ouch.”

He settles back on the bike and stretches his legs. I imagine the neighbors all peering out of their windows. But the engine noise would certainly interfere with any distance monitoring device.

“Anyway,” he carries on, “one thing I’m sure of: she won’t be working with the FBI. They wouldn’t employ someone with her morals.”

“You’re suggesting the FBI has morals?”

He gives an enigmatic smile. “It’s a long shot, but possible.”

“So, what about—?” I flick my eyes fractionally back to the house. “Who the hell is he working for?”

“Still got the feelers out.”

“But not FBI?”

“I didn’t say that. I said I didn’t know.”

I lower my voice. “Dad’s colleagues disappeared.”

“Gone underground?”

“He doesn’t think so.”

“Ah,” he says. “That’s not good. I presume he has a plan?”

“One would hope so. But he didn’t tell me.”

“So, no more adventures in the offing.”

“No.”

“Keep it that way.” He leans forward and knocks the bike into gear. “And keep safe. See ya, doll.”

Inside, I find Wayne in the hallway, sitting on the bottom step lacing up his running shoes.

“Dee,” he says, all surprised. As if he didn’t know I was outside with Greg. As if he hasn’t just run downstairs, waiting to catch me on the way in.

I smile. I hope it looks genuine. “Going for a run?”

“Want to join me?”

“Lazy day,” I say, indicating my attire.

“Your motorcycle friend comes around here a lot.”

“Not a friend,” I say. “Business. Divorce case.”

“On your day off?”

“I book my own time,” I say. “And it’s nearly finished. Greg’ll be pleased to have it over with, be his own boss again.”

“Greg?”

First name terms. Oops. I paste a fake smile on my face and roll my eyes. “He asked me to call him that. Thinks it makes us buddies.”

He laughs at the joke. What’s he going to do, call me out on it? I indicate the stairs, and he stands to let me pass. I suspect he doesn’t want to go for a run any more than I do, but he’s committed.

“Enjoy,” I say maliciously as he lopes out of the door.

I want to let Laurie know about Sonja, and text her, but there’s no response. Unlike me, she is capable of turning her phone off if she doesn’t want to be contacted. Being Sunday, they might be still asleep, or off on some family outing, to the

zoo or the park or something.

I shower and dress, feeling a little seedy after exposing my PJs to the world, but really, I'm at a loss. I did something yesterday that nearly busted my adrenal gland, but now that it's all over, I'm left with a strange sense of free-floating.

What am I here for? What's life all about, anyway?

But life is what it is, so I busy myself on a brief tidying session, pondering Monday's schedule. I'll be back on the Leighton case. I try to work up some interest, but where's the excitement in chasing dirt on a marriage that was always a temporary arrangement? Dad's rationale gets under my skin, though. He's the original philanthropist, a crusader on the side of right.

All the Leightons are interested in, both separately and collectively, is hanging on to as much dough as possible. All Janine—and her opposition—are interested in, is clawing as much dough out of their respective clients as they can before closing. I don't doubt she'll be onto Bill at some stage, slyly slipping bits of information to him that will add whole carriages to the gravy train, and vice versa. And I'm no better. I've always seen myself as a useful member of society: earning my own living, paying my taxes, securing the right to call myself a good citizen. But Dad has rubbed the glitter off my self-satisfaction. The world isn't right, and he's not going to fix it, but at least he's got the guts to do something good. Aside from Dad, the only one I know who is straight up and honest about who he is, is Greg. And he admits he's a bad guy.

When the evening arrives, I switch on the TV, mainly to see if there's any news of a baby-snatching in Philly, and sure enough, there's a tiny snippet between the story of two corporate giants merging, promising to create 200 new jobs (yeah, right), and another major sex scandal in the world of politics. If a celebrity's baby had been snatched, they would have milked it to death. Instead, they allowed space for a two-

second weepy performance from the pleading mother. Her three older children stand behind her, looking stunned. Visions of a mother out of her mind with grief had plagued my day, but I suspect these kids have never seen their mom cry before. Some actors are better than others, and to my skeptical eye, her performance reeks of calculation as she revels in her moment of TV stardom.

I can't help but agree with Dad on this one.

Monday, I drive to work, and sweep my hand inside the back wheel arch on arrival. Sure enough, another tracker has been fitted. Knowing it's been put back sparks a moment of superiority. They don't know I know, so I'm one up on them. I can dump it any time I want. Except that Greg's right, I can't play that card again without revealing my hand. Although, revealing my hand would almost certainly mean Wayne and his cronies would be forced to reveal theirs.

I don't know what Janine is hoping I'll find on the Leightons, and suddenly I'm annoyed about being out of the loop. Watching them from a distance is like shooting at a target with your eyes closed. I think there's something fishy about the whole thing, and wonder if it's some kind of tax dodge they're all involved in, nothing to do with divorce at all. There's nothing that hits a millionaire's buttons like the possibility of having to pay out the legally required amount of tax. The more people have, the more they jump through hoops to hang on to it.

Is Beatty the brainless bimbo she presents to the world? It's easy to see her that way, but I'm beginning to wonder. She made a pile as a model, and was canny enough to snap up an available fat cat before age drove her out of the fashion world; that circus of smoke and mirrors. Whatever the deal is, I need to get closer, get hands-on, and Janine needs to give me that freedom.

Janine isn't too happy about me insisting on a meeting with her. That's her job, her eyes tell me. But maybe she reads in mine that I'm going to dig my heels in and be awkward.

"So?" she asks, glancing pointedly at her diamond-studded designer watch.

This is going to go well. "I need to know what the story is behind the Leightons."

Her brows arch in pseudo surprise. "You know what it is. Beatty wants half of everything. We just have to establish what he's got. Because he *will* be hiding something."

"We won't find it if he knows we're looking."

"Him knowing you're looking is the whole point."

"I don't get it."

Her eyes go hard. I don't know how she does that without the flicker of an eyelid. "You want the truth? You're a distraction. Just keep badgering him. Keep his eyes on you. I've got someone else researching his portfolio."

And there it is; the kick in the teeth I've almost been waiting for. I'm not the super-sleuth, after all. I'm the stooge. Janine is using me as a sideshow to the main event. "Who?"

She shuffles some papers dismissively. "Not your concern."

"I need to know who it is, in case I bump into him."

The hesitation is so fleeting, I could have imagined it, but I hadn't. So, it's a him, not a her.

"Just get out there and distract Leighton. Be a nuisance. Keep his eyes on you."

"This PI you've got checking up on him—"

"I didn't say it was a PI."

"Well, if you've hired someone else, what does that mean, for me?"

"You've always known this role was temporary."

Actually, I didn't. I kind of assumed I was doing a good job. She glances at her watch again. "We'll discuss your role in

the company when we have this one in the can. Don't forget we're funding your training."

I go back to my office to catch up on some paperwork, but inside I'm fuming at the unsubtle blackmail. I can't become a lawyer without a sponsor, and she knows it. The truth is, I realized a while back that I don't want to be a lawyer. But what else can I do? People talk about being trapped in jobs, and right up to this moment I hadn't felt that way. Now I do. This is my second chance at a career, and I'm blowing it. If I lose this job, and don't have a good reference, I won't be able to afford the condo.

My emotions waver between righteous indignation, humiliation, irritation, and the fear of having to start over. Because Janine is holding all the cards. If I don't do what she wants, she can simply withdraw my funding, kick me out. The implications are huge.

For the first time in my life, I'm irritated at Dad for losing his job, for allowing the chance to become an obscenely overpaid pediatrician to slip out of his grasp. He could have set me and Laurie up with the funds to do our own thing, maybe build a business of our own. Instantly, I hate myself. He lost his career saving a baby's life. But who has Janine taken on to do Ellis's job? When did that happen?

Later, I try to call Laurie again, but there's still no answer at chez Milsom. So much for her telling me off for not checking my messages.

I'm reading the unlikely details of a litigation case, when it hits me like a bolt. The person I'd seen with Leo last week, when I was phoning Dad, could have been Ellis. That's why the stance and the walk had seemed so familiar. I'd been confused by the bald head, but he could have abandoned the seedy comb-over in favor of a shaved head. Did Janine know he was back? How could she not. Damn her. Her sleuth disappears for over a year, and when he comes crawling back,

he gets his old job, with all perks, probably. I hate to admit it, but although Ellis is a slimy bastard, he's pretty hot when it comes to uncovering things people want to keep buried. And the fact that he has no social conscience undoubtedly works well for a top-notch lawyer. But why is he chummy with Leo? Unless I'm mistaken, Janine's other half doesn't involve himself with cases, only with the mechanics of screwing money out of clients. Ellis was Janine's monkey, sifting dirt long before things went to court or payments were due. I thought Janine was angry with Ellis for sliding off her radar, but if she had truly been mad at him, she would have taken him down rather than give him a job. Had it all been play-acting? If so, why? But whatever the reason, it impacts on my future, big time. He's crawled out from whatever stone he's been hiding under, and I've been demoted to stooge. Or had I always been that person, just kidding myself?

As for Ellis, he wouldn't think twice about my feelings. I'm a cuckoo in his well-feathered nest, and he'd kick me out sooner than be my long-lost bro.

And a year ago I was comfortable with my role, my pay grade, my vampire lovers—even if they were between the pages. Now I'm not comfortable with any of it. The more I ponder, the more I realize I've been an idiot. Janine has been using me as an interim measure until her golden boy came back, suggesting that she's known all along where he's been this past year.

When I was offered the job, Dad had advised me not to take it. He'd heard about her before. One of his colleagues apparently called her *a heartless manipulator in a system where only the ruthless survive*. I couldn't deny that he'd warned me, but she'd taken me on at a crossroads in my life, taken a chance on me, and paid out good money to further my education. I had been blinded by that apparent faith in me as an individual, but she was probably just your average

employer choosing someone who fitted the needs of the company, as cheaply as possible.

I suspected, then, that Dad fell off my radar because he didn't like what she stood for, but now I wonder whether it's more than that. Perhaps she's involved, and I was taken on simply to lead them to Dad.

In the circumstances, I have three choices. One, I can lick Janine's boots. Two, I can tell her to stuff her job. Then, there's the third choice. Unethical, but she lives in an unethical world, so might appreciate the irony.

I sit back and do my job for the rest of the morning, giving Janine a healthy smile as she passes the door. She blinks, then walks on, shaking her head, probably assuming I'm taking the obvious choice of boot-licking, accepting her fait accompli, and continuing my education.

~ 31 ~

After lunch, I drive out to the Leightons' place and press the buzzer at the main gate. The small lens of a security camera eyes me. A disembodied voice asks politely, "May I help you?"

"Tell Duke I want to speak to him," I say.

"Please wait."

They know who I am. They've seen the car, and have me on camera. I'm banking on unadulterated curiosity. I just hope it doesn't get me killed.

There's a long silence, then the gate slowly rolls to one side. I drive up to the front of the house and scowl at the fat little cherubs holding court at the top of fake pillars. The man who opens the shiny, overlarge front door is the hitman-cum-bodyguard who was driving the car the other day. He invites me in by standing back and indicating. The interior is overwhelming. Plush with bells on.

"Arms out," he orders. I've never been patted down before, but he does it coldly and efficiently, feeling under my breasts and between my legs. Not for guns, I guess, but for wires. He then produces one of those buzzy things they use at airports to check for metal. Despite my cavity fillings, I pass muster.

"Follow me," he says.

I follow. The whole house bulges with *stuff*, like a feast laid out to impress clientele born without taste buds. Everything is bright, expensive, and loud.

The bodyguard ushers me into what must be Duke's

personal office, a veritable splendor of pseudo-Victoriana, complete with an iron fireplace and an impressive aspidistra. The huge leather-clad desk has probably seen Beatty in action. Behind it, Duke is lounging in a deep-buttoned executive chair, eyeing me through narrowed eyes.

“I thought you’d be wanting to speak to Beatty?” His voice is disarmingly soft and childlike.

“Nope,” I respond, gazing around with awe at two huge oil paintings of Venice, which are surely the most authentic things in this room.

“So?”

I get straight to the point. “I’m being shafted by Janine Dugotti, which deserves a response.”

His smile doesn’t reach his eyes. “I suppose you want to talk money?”

“Nope.”

Those eyes widen slightly. “Revenge?”

“I’ll go with professional bloody ruin.”

“Well, well,” he says, leaning forward, planting elbows on the desk. I thought Janine had a crocodile smile, but Duke can do it without the teeth. “So, talk.”

I tell him about Ellis.

He asks, “So, what do you want from me?”

“The truth. Is Beatty really divorcing you?”

“She is.”

“And she’s really trying to get half of everything you own?”

“She is.”

“Then why the hell didn’t you take out a prenup?”

“I did.”

I’m stumped for words.

He stands up, turns to an ornate cabinet inlaid with mother of pearl, and reaches for a bottle. “Whiskey?”

I nod. Why the hell not. This is bizarre. He pours. I take a big slurp. “Then, I don’t understand.”

“She never read what she signed. In fact, I remain baffled as to whether she *can* read. But she has other talents.” I didn’t ask what they might be. He carries on, “What Janine doesn’t know, because Beatty hasn’t provided the necessary paperwork, is that the fairly substantial payoff, in the light of her choosing to leave, includes everything she’s had from me to date. And in the terms of our agreement, if I divorce her, I pay the cost. If she divorces me prior to the end date of our agreement, she pays all costs, herself.”

“Oh, hell,” I say. Then after a second, I burst out laughing. “Really?”

“Really,” he says. He puts his glass down carefully on the leather topped desk. “So,” he drawls, his eyes like flints. “I need to know if you are going to tell your lovely boss this fact, or whether I have to kill you.”

I’m not altogether sure whether he means it, but the whiskey, which had gone straight to my head, departs, leaving a cold vacuum. “I’m supposed to distract your attention while her pet detective gathers a portfolio of your true worth.”

“And is that what you intend to do?”

“Unless you have a better plan. I think your lawyer is out to shaft you, too. Bill and Janine pretend to be enemies, but I suspect they’re working hand in glove. In fact,” I say, in a lightbulb moment, “they probably always have been.”

He ponders that for a moment, then says decisively, “Right. I see we’re going to get along. You can keep following me. I’ll lead you to some of my less, ah, obvious holdings, to keep your Janine happy and give Bill something to moan about. What’s the name of the detective?”

“David Ellis. Everyone calls him Ellis. He’s been missing for a year or so, but now he’s back. I’m curious to know what happened.”

“I’ll have someone look into it.” He turns a gentle, contemplative expression to me and adds, “Now, Aaron will

show you out.”

The bodyguard comes back in. Duke must have a button under the desk. Probably a gun, too. Pointed directly at the chair I’m sitting in. I’m not deceived for one moment. For a second, I feel sorry for Beatty. He’ll bleed her dry, and she won’t have a clue how it happened. I suspect he’ll only pull the plug on this little game when all the lawyers’ invoices equal her payout agreement. I get the distinct impression Duke would be a very dangerous man to cross. And Beatty truly is as stupid as she seems.

I try to call Laurie, but it goes into voicemail. I text, asking when it’s convenient to speak. Later a text pings in, from her cell to my burner: *Call me at 6*. Damn it, now I’ll have to get rid of my burner, too. On the way home, I pull in, walk 30 yards from my car, and call.

“What’s wrong?” she says.

“Hello to you, too. Are you alone?”

“Tim’s taken the kids to an after-school match. Dee, is everything all right? It sounded urgent, but you said not to email, and I couldn’t call because Tim and the kids were with me the whole time. It was Sam’s birthday. You always forget. We went to that place in Florida where you can go in with the big cats.”

“Jesus,” I say. “Are you out of your mind?”

“It was what he asked for. The kids were allowed to stroke them. They’re real cute. Just big pussy cats.”

I say grimly, “They’re wild animals with six-inch teeth, and jaws that can take a man’s leg off. A child would be a lunch snack. Promise me you won’t do that again.”

“So, what’s so important I had to call you?” She sounds miffed at being told off.

“The fake Valerie.” I hear her intake a breath. “Her name is Sonja, and she’s done time for scams, and possible

blackmail, but I suspect she's into worse stuff. I think she's dangerous. One thing's certain: she isn't FBI."

"But what does she want Dad for?"

"There's only one reason they'd be after Dad."

"He's trodden on their toes," she says flatly.

"Yeah. He saves kids. Maybe he saved one from them."

Her voice rises a notch. "That would make them pedophiles. And if they want revenge, sooner or later, they'll come after me and my family."

There's a long silence between us, filled with a building sense of inevitability. I can't deny it.

When she speaks again, her voice is superficially calm. "What am I supposed to do, Dee?"

"You have to tell Tim."

"He'll want to call the feds."

"If he does, Dad will go to jail, for life."

Her voice is cold. "It was his choice."

I say gently, "Laurie, love. It was Dad's choice to *save* children from these monsters. I get that you're worried about Sammy and Liza, but if *they'd* been taken, you'd want to believe there was someone like Dad out there, fighting for them, wouldn't you?"

"You're working with him, aren't you?"

Jesus, where did that come from? "No, Laurie. I just got caught up in it, same as you. In fact, because of you."

"Except that you haven't got children."

No, I haven't, and that's the crux of the matter. She's vulnerable, I'm not. "Look, I know you don't like guns, but maybe..."

"I have one," she says, surprising me. "I got it when Sammy was born. Just in case."

"What is it? Where is it?"

"In the kitchen. There's a false back in the cutlery drawer. It has bullets in a clip thing you push in from underneath."

Well, at least it's not on the top shelf of a wardrobe, where she couldn't reach it, but Lauralee is conventional, not stupid. "Can you use it?"

"The guy showed me how." Her voice is doubtful.

"Well, get up to scratch. Get Tim to show you. Keep it handy, in your purse. Make sure you know where the safety is. It needs to be *on* in the purse, and *off* to shoot the bad guys."

"This isn't the time for sarcasm."

"I assure you I'm not joking. Tell Tim to get a gun, too. But promise me you won't shoot Valerie if she turns up at the door."

"It's what she deserves."

"You don't know that. And if you shoot her cold, you'd go down for murder."

"If I wait till one of them is taken, it would be too late."

That's exactly what Dad said: it's always too late for the kids. "Lauralee, listen! I don't want to be playing aunt to kids whose mom is in prison for murder."

She's silent for a moment. I can almost feel her panic through the speaker.

"Look," I say, with as much reassurance as I can muster. "I'm trying to find out who she's working with. If I find anything, I'll let you know. Just keep the kids close. Don't let them out of your sight, or Tim's. And if Valerie turns up, let her think you believe she's a fed. Don't let on that you have any doubts about that, okay? Be cross with her, keep telling her Dad had nothing to do with anything. Act dumb. If you do that, they'll hopefully just keep watching us both, hoping to catch Dad making contact. If he does, it'll be with me."

And I already know the lengths they go to: a pretend mugging, a hopeful relationship, bugging my car... I have a feeling they were just love bites before the real blood-sucking action.

I realize I've been pussy-footing around the issue, kind of

waiting for it to play out. If Laurie's kids *are* at risk, that's no longer an option. I hope Laurie can make Tim see sense. Sure, he'll go off his rocker for a bit, but Laurie will let him know the score. If he shoots off to the cops or the FBI with his stories of pedophile rings, the one person they *will* go after is Dad, because it's an easy win. Call me a cynic, but they'd plaster it all over the news about how clever they'd been, grabbing this child-stealer, while the real bad guys would quietly disappear back into whatever sewer they'd crawled out of. And when the flack had died down, the bad guys might just crawl back out to take revenge on Dad's family. I guess Dad knows that, too, but if they're on his trail, he might have run out of options. They might even have disappeared him by now.

On my burner, I tap out a text to Dad, before going back to the car:

CALL ME NOW.

After a few seconds, a message comes back:

WHERE ARE YOU?

I'm about to answer when a chill seeps through my bones. Whoever has that phone doesn't know who they're talking to. If someone else has his phone, it means Dad's dead or in trouble. I take out the sim card, break it, and throw it down the storm drain at the side of the road. I stamp on the burner, and sweep the pieces in after it. I feel bad, as though I'm cutting Dad adrift, but Laurie's right, her kids have to be protected.

They must be pretty convinced Laurie isn't in touch with Dad. Sonja, Wayne and the unidentified guy might suspect I'm involved, but they don't *know*. If they've got Dad, perhaps that's the end of it. But if they think I've been working with him, they'll come after me. And if they think that, maybe Dad's not dead. They'd keep him alive long enough to use him as bait.

I'd like to have a tantrum as I did sometimes as a child—stamp my feet and scream for attention, wanting someone to take control of the situation—but I move as though I'm in a self-contained bubble. I drift into a troubled sleep, get up as normal, wash, dress, clean my teeth and go to work as though it's just another day. I need to act as though I have nothing to hide, that I haven't a clue about being under surveillance. I don't know who's on my case, other than my wannabe bedmate upstairs, and I truly don't know who's side he's on—but whether he's with the good guys or the bad guys, it's all the same to me and Dad right now. So, I stop by work, then jump on Duke's tail. True to his word, he visits one of his property agencies, has a long lunch at an expensive restaurant with a man I recognize as a local politician, then finally leads me to an address that's not listed on the schedule provided by his lawyer.

The windows have bars a prison would be proud of, and the sign above the door states that the building is the BIC Ink Admin Center. I check this online. There's no such company. A small sign on the door says the premises are under surveillance, vandals will be prosecuted. An even smaller sign advises that no cold callers will be admitted. Leighton is in there for half an hour, and when he leaves, I go and rap on the door. Despite my own problems, I'm genuinely curious. There's no buzzer. A camera eyes me clinically. Then an

electronic deadbolt clunks inside, and I walk into a high-tech, open-plan office space, where several women wearing headsets are busy tapping away, talking insistently into their mics. One of them puts aside her headset and rises to greet me. She's middle-aged, comfortably padded, and well-dressed. Her hair is styled, her makeup impeccable.

She nods to me without offering her hand. "Miss Hamilton? I'm Mary, the office manager. Mr. Leighton said you might be coming by. I'm to answer any questions you might have."

"O-kay," I say, confused. "So, what do you do, here?"

"We're a collection agency for outstanding rents on Mr. Leighton's residential properties."

"Ah," I say.

She raises a brow. "We aren't unethical, Miss Hamilton. People avoid paying their rent for many reasons, not all of them genuine. We give people time to provide details and plans for payment of arrears, and make a calculated appraisal of each case before issuing eviction notices."

"But you're operating under a false company banner?"

"Not exactly. We're just not *where* people think we are. We have an aversion to irate tenants with iron bars and threats, or even Molotovs, which happened in our Washington office a few years back. Two of the staff were badly burned, one died in the hospital. She had two children. The man who did it was jailed, but it didn't bring the children's mom back."

I'm suitably chastised. "Is this legal?"

"Pretty much. The registered premises for the collection agency are on the documents provided to your company. It means we can operate here on a level of obscurity—and safety. Mr. Leighton is a good boss."

"Like, some kind of philanthropic do-gooder?" My tone is rife with disbelief.

"Of course not. He didn't become rich by being nice, and

we won't get rich by working here, but he pays decent wages, and is good to his staff. His property empire is a business, not a charity."

"Did he tell you who I am, who I'm working for?"

"Sure. What you don't know is that Beatty was given certain rules to comply with, and hasn't stuck to her agreement. If she had, she would have been set up for the rest of her life. Mr. Leighton doesn't like people who renege on contracts. A couple more years, and he would have retired her himself." She added cynically. "Men like him are always looking out for the next conquest."

I can believe that.

As I trail around after Leighton, I mull over my own problem, and make the only decision I know how to make at this time. I know where Dad lives when he's not in some seedy bedsit in town. If there's any clue to where he might be or who might have taken him, I suspect I'll find it there. If they're keeping him alive to get to me, they'll contact me. If they've killed him already, there's no hurry. But the tracker on the car is a problem. I need to lose it without letting people *know* I've lost it. I have to keep my cool, and that's hard.

Before going home, I buy another burner and text Lauralee:

LET ME KNOW HOW IT GOES WITH TIM.

If he does blow his fuse and go to the cops, I want to know before they come knocking my door down.

Things go quiet for a few days. I hear nothing from Dad, or anyone who might have taken him. I hear nothing from Lauralee, either, but I don't want to badger her. This is some big deal they're working through. So, I follow Duke around, and report some inconsequential facts to Janine, because it

doesn't matter what she knows or doesn't know. Beatty is pretty much dead in the water. But Janine will get her pint of blood even if she loses the case, so I wonder what nasty little surprise Duke has up his sleeve. I hope he's not shafting me at the same time, though I wouldn't be surprised if he was. As Mary said, he didn't get rich by being nice. But I'm hoping at the moment he's choosing to be.

On Thursday, I'm loitering about outside the security zone of Leighton's mansion, thinking about going home, when a security guard walks down and raps on my window. "Mr. Leighton says you're to drive on up to the house."

He waves me in. Once again, Aaron pats me down and shows me into Duke's office.

Duke is standing by the window.

"The garden's looking nice, now," he says. "Are you interested in plants?"

"I can kill one from forty paces," I quip.

I join him at the window. The garden is crammed to the hilt with exotic blooms. Somehow even the huge fountain cluttered with bare-breasted nymphs can't detract from its beauty.

I think Duke takes my silence as approval. "Gardening is good for the soul. You should try it some time."

He nods toward the desk, and I sit as directed. He picks up a piece of paper, and flips it over to me. It has an official-looking logo at the top, and is a discharge notice, from Baltimore City Detention Center.

"David Ellis was there for sex offenses with a minor," he says. "It was a closed court, which is probably why you didn't hear about it. It didn't make the papers. Janine has been fighting in his corner. She eventually discovered that some of the evidence was disallowable, and he was discharged on a technicality."

"So, Janine knew where he was all along?" It was more a

shocked statement than a question, and I add, "Getting someone's sentence overturned on a technicality is usually the result of desperation, not justice. She got him off because he was useful to her."

"Undoubtedly."

"Bitch."

"Exactly."

I'm beginning to like Duke Leighton. "I wonder if, ah..."

"Spit it out," he says.

"I need help," I say bluntly.

His face closes over, and I add quickly. "Not money. It's just that my dad's in trouble, and people have my car bugged. I need to find him. I know where to start, but if I take the tracker off the car, they'll know I'm onto them."

"Who?"

"The people who are trying to get to Dad through me."

He stares at me for a moment. "What kind of trouble?"

"The kind where bad men want to kill him for doing something good."

"I had someone look into your background."

I flush. "Then you know nothing. Dad's a good man. He's always been a good man."

"Good people don't disappear off the radar."

"Once you've been accused of something, it never goes away. Like Ellis being knocked off the sex offender's list. Someone will always be there to accuse."

There's a pause before he says, "You're right, of course. So, it's not the feds after him?"

"Maybe them, too. But I think it's a pedophile ring. He trod on some toes, and some other people he was working with have disappeared. He thinks they've been murdered. Disposed of."

Duke must have pressed that hidden buzzer, because the door behind me swings open. I catch movement in the corner

of my eyes, and swivel.

“Sir?” Aaron says.

“Go out and check Ms. Hamilton’s car for bugs. Don’t remove anything, just let me know the score.”

“Yes, sir.”

He backs out as quietly as he arrived. Duke stands, walks to the ornate, somewhat ghastly cabinet, and raises a brow in my direction. “Whiskey?”

“That last one was pretty smooth,” I admit.

“It’s what one would expect from a fifteen-year-old Dalwhinnie.”

We wait, sipping from chunky crystal glass. Aaron comes back in and glances at me with one brow lifted. “Trackers on both back wheel arches, one inside, behind the back seat, with a built-in audio transmitter.”

I nearly choke on the fifteen-year-old malt.

I think about the consequences of my assumption that there was only one. Had there only been one before? Had they followed me when I picked Dad up and we handed over the baby? Or had they been placed there after I’d managed to lose the first one? Thank God I’d walked away from the car to talk to Dad and Lauralee.

“I suspect these have been placed by two different people,” Aaron adds.

“How would you know that?” I ask.

“The trackers on the wheel arches are the same, the device inside the car is of a different manufacture.”

My mind leaps to the obvious. Wayne put two trackers on the outside, instead of one, so I couldn’t *lose* both by accident. And someone else had placed the one inside. It could have been Greg, either because he’s curious about what’s going on with Dad, or because he has some ulterior motive. Is he working with the bad guys, after all?

There’s almost a twinkle in Aaron’s eyes as he asks,

“Should I remove them?”

“If you do, they’ll know I know. And they’ll only put more back.”

I must have looked flummoxed, because Duke says, “It appears that Ms. Hamilton needs to be sneaky. Break the car. Call a tow truck to take it away and get it fixed. She can collect it next week.” He turns to me. “Do you need anything from the car?”

I shake my head. My cell is in the car, and it can stay there.

“Problem solved.”

They lend me a low sports car of some kind. Silver. It probably has a logo I should be impressed with, but there’s no sense to cars that have no back seats, and you’re just enclosed in a bubble of glass shooting along two inches above the asphalt. There were several vehicles parked out the back, and I’d have preferred the gardener’s truck to this, but for some reason it suits them to lend me this one. I sink into the seat, feeling like a kid sitting at a table that’s too high. I reach down to remove a lipstick from under my butt. I suspect it’s one of Beatty’s vehicles, and this is just a spiteful act. Despite raising the seat, my view of the road is restricted. It’s not a nice feeling.

I switch off the GPS before leaving. I would have pulled the plug, given the chance, thrown it in the vegetable patch on the way out, but it’s hardwired. It occurs to me that the car is bugged, or tracked, at least. I suspect Duke would want to keep tabs on Beatty. But if he does learn where I’m going, or where I’ve been, would it matter? Anyway, my choices are limited: I go and see if Dad’s at his place, or I go home and forget about him, and I can’t do that. If the bad guys are there, of course, I’m toast. But if they are, maybe I can convince them that Laurie is truly innocent. It might be my swan song, my Sydney Carton act of ultimate nobility, but hopefully not. I briefly wonder if I should send Laurie a kind of *I-love-you-goodbye*

text, just in case. But if I did that, she would truly lose her cool, maybe go directly to the cops, and that wouldn't help Dad or me.

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The drive is unpleasant, and not just because of my morbid thoughts. I get why someone like Beatty would want a car like this—it's all about image, proving you can afford one, and all that. But I prefer to not view the landscape from between the wheels of thirty-eight-ton trucks. As they pass me, I feel the car being pulled into the slipstream between the axles, and wince. I imagine the drivers smirking as they pass too close on purpose.

I nearly miss the entrance to Dad's place, but manage to brake and signal just in time, earning myself a blare on the horn from the vehicle on my tail. The driver gives me the finger as he shoots past.

There's an off-white van parked in front of the house. It could be Dad's. It could be anybody's. I climb out warily. I wonder if the bad guys are here, watching, waiting for me to walk in. I take a deep breath and twist the handle on the front door of the house. It opens.

"Dad?" I call.

The words are lost in the thick comfort of this home I'd never known. A fleeting anger fills me. He's had this cozy arrangement with Suzanne for years, while I've been worrying about him being alone in his low-rent apartment. I get why he kept me and Laurie in the dark, but still, it rankles.

I go from room to room, and there are signs that Dad has been here fairly recently. I find I'm holding my breath. The

plates in the sink waiting to be washed haven't grown fungus, and a small stain on the dish rack is damp to the touch. I open the fridge and sniff an opened bottle of milk. It's not off. But Dad wouldn't have left dirty dishes—he's fanatical about cleanliness, which is different from being untidy. I check around again, out in the back, the surrounding yard, beyond which is a largely impassable tangle of untended creeping weeds. It occurs to me that Suzanne and Dad would have done that on purpose: a small haven for wild creatures. But also, making it difficult for an intruder to sneak through from the back.

The house is empty, but there are no signs of a hasty clear-out. No open drawers, ransacked cabinets. Just no Dad. I grab a pen and write *TEXT ME* in capitals by my new burner number and leave it on the kitchen table. If he's still footloose and free, he'll know who it was from. And if someone else texts, I'll lose the burner. Again.

I go and check the front of the van. I peer in through the front window, and I'm surprised to see keys in the lock. I open the door. Does he *want* someone to steal the damn thing? I'm about to reach for the keys when I notice the smell. For a second, I think someone has simply left shopping in the back that's gone off, then I realize it's something far worse.

I open the back door and put my hand in front of my mouth, gagging. The still shape in the back, rolled in plastic, is clearly human.

"Oh God... Dad," I whisper.

I go into the kitchen and find a pair of rubber gloves under the sink. I have to know. I climb in and reach for the shoulder, rolling the body toward me. A child's bloated face comes into view, white and still, eyes like frosted marbles. I jump down, and just make it to the bushes before I empty my guts.

Instantly, I know why the vehicle is here, why the child is here. Dad's being set up. But what springs the trap? I'm coldly

aware of the calculating nature of my thoughts, when I ought to just be climbing into the sports car and putting my foot to the floor.

What springs the trap?

What would Dad do if he found this?

He could bury the child, but I don't think he'd do that, and certainly not on his own property. Then I know, for certain: he'd get in the van, drive it somewhere it would be found. The police would identify the boy, so at least the case of one missing child would be solved. Better for the parents to know, than hope for the next fifty years. So, the trigger will be movement. I hope opening the doors wasn't enough to set it off. But I suspect they'd want the van on the road, with Dad driving it. The police would be notified, the trackers activated, and he'd be caught with the body. What are these guys after? Do they want Dad dead or in prison? I guess the latter would be rather worse for him. But it still leaves me unsure of whether it's bent cops or out and out bad guys.

I run my hands all over the van, under the wheel arches. That would be too easy. I check inside the hood, but find nothing. Then I realize where the tracker will be. Where no one with a shred of decency—like Dad—would want to go looking.

With nothing left in my stomach to lose, I unroll the clear plastic, gagging continually, and there, tucked in the folds is a small black box. I hope there's only one. I throw the tracker on the ground, roll the body back up, and jump out, my empty guts heaving.

My eyes are streaming. I've never seen a dead body before, let alone one in that condition, added to which, it's a child. I double over with the absolute anguish of facing something so unimaginable. A long, half-strangled groan seeps up from the depths of my soul. I feel light-headed, and sink to my knees, head to the gravel, as though I'm praying. The people who

could do this kind of thing are the ones Dad's fighting. He's not going to go down for this, damn them.

I go back into the house and clean everything I touched, and add to the note on the table: *THEY know about this place. I'm coming back for the sports car. Don't touch it. Don't touch the tracker on the drive. Just get out.*

I clean the door handles on my way out and climb into the van still wearing the rubber gloves. I open the front windows and drive. To start with I have no clue where, I'm just driving west, away from Baltimore, trying to see through swollen eyes. Then rationality returns, and at the next opportunity I head south, toward Washington DC.

I call Greg from the burner. He answers after about the fifth ring.

"Did you bug my car?"

There's a hesitation, then, "Yeah."

"Why?"

"Curiosity. I wanted to know what you were into. And maybe I thought I could help."

"So, you know where my car is?"

"In Mackin's Makers and Breakers. With some dodgy excuse for a breakdown, I'm guessing. Which means you're up to no good."

"I need help."

He doesn't prevaricate. "What can I do?"

"I need to be picked up."

"When?"

"Now. I'm in DC."

"I'm on my way."

"I'll text a location. If it doesn't contain the word 'frog,' it's not me."

"Loud and clear."

I drive until I see hospital signs. I don't know DC so well, and don't care what hospital it is. I drive in, park the van on a

no-parking zone, lock the doors, and walk away fast. I'm vaguely aware of someone yelling after me, but pull up my hood and keep walking. It will take them a while to call the tow trucks, to open the doors. By that time, I'll be long gone.

A half-hour later I text my location to Greg. He finds me within fifteen minutes. He hands me a helmet, scanning my blotchy face. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," I say, neither of us believing it.

"So, where do you want to go?"

"Not what or who or why?"

"You're in trouble. Let's get out of here. You can cry on my shoulder later."

I give him directions to Dad's place and clamber up behind him. I wrap my arms around him, and allow myself to feel safe as he roars into the traffic. I throw the rubber gloves to the wind on the way.

He drops me at the entrance to Dad's drive, and I experience a wash of relief when I find the place isn't crawling with cops—or bad guys. I glance briefly in through the kitchen window. My note is gone. I hope it was Dad.

I pick up the tracker, lower myself into the silver sports car and head away from Baltimore once more. I put my foot down and nearly wet myself at the sudden burst of speed. I'd told Greg to go home, but he's following me, a comforting dot in the rearview mirror. About ten miles down the road, I pull into a truck stop. I hesitate for a moment, then climb out beside a wall of trucks. There's one just pulling away. I slam the tracker onto the side and run back to the car. It's not the driver's lucky day.

I'm driving back toward Baltimore, wondering whether my fears were justified, when a stream of flashing blue lights and sirens pass in the opposite direction. As I pass the entrance to Dad's drive, I catch the flicker of flames, but whatever has gone down there, I know I can't stop to check.

I'm nearing Baltimore when my burner rings. It's an unknown number. I answer with silence.

"Dee?" It's Dad's voice, distorted with worry. "Is that you?"

"Convince me you're alone," I say harshly.

"I'm alone, froglet. I got your note. I was at the house when you came back for the car. Just in case the cops turned up. What happened?"

My voice is a little frantic. "You need to get out!"

"Don't fret, I'm gone. I saw the cavalcade. They don't believe in stealth, do they? What *happened*? Why were you even there?"

"I couldn't get hold of you. I thought you were in trouble, so tried to find you."

"That was foolish. If the cops had found you there, I'd have had to give myself up. And if it was the others..."

"Don't tell me off for caring!" I screech. Then I lower my voice. "What happened?"

He is silent for a second. "Sorry, Dee. I got a call from one of my couriers, down south. I rushed off to help, only to find no one there. I have a nasty feeling he's gone the same way as the others."

"They've got your phone. And all the numbers!"

"Calm down. I wondered if it had been compromised. I bought a new one, and texted everyone to trash their burners and contact my new number." He pauses for breath. "I realized something was going down when I couldn't find my guy, and I was pretty wary when I got back and saw that car on the drive. Then I found your note, grabbed a few things, and torched the place the moment you left."

"Oh, Dad." I choke back the lump in my throat. "All your stuff, Suzanne's things. Memories."

If my condo went up in flames there's nothing I'd really mourn. My books could mostly be replaced and I don't like my new red curtains so well now, anyway. But Dad's house,

scented with a dying hint of patchouli, had been filled with the memorabilia of a life and a love.

“It’s just stuff, love,” Dad says quietly. “Suzanne’s always with me. And so is your mom. She would have liked Suzanne. She’d have been pleased I wasn’t alone, after. Don’t worry about me, froglet. I keep documents and cash in a lockbox for this very reason. But you still haven’t told me what happened.”

I outline the basic details, and there’s a long silence before he sighs. “Hell, Dee. You shouldn’t have had to see that. These people are monsters. Are you all right?”

“Of course I’m not all right!” Then I find myself whimpering, “It was a boy, Dad. Abused and discarded like a used rubber. That’s what Laurie said about the missing kids. She’s scared stiff for Sammy & Liza.”

“She’s right to be scared,” he says tightly. “But you did everything like a pro. I’d have done pretty much the same thing you did, but I have an electronic surveillance detector. I’m rather relieved there was only one tracker on the body. If there had been another...”

I fight the urge to be sick again. I knew there had been two trackers on my car. Why did I assume there would only be one on the van? “Dad, what will you do? Where will you go?”

“I have a safe house. It’s you I’m worried about.”

“Jesus, Dad, how many places have you got?”

“There are a few,” he admits. “We have a, ah, wealthy backer.”

“You never told me that.” I have a horrid thought. “It’s not Janine, is it?”

“Of course not.”

“Good. She’s a bitch.”

“I’m glad you finally realized. I have to go. I’ll be in touch by email. I’m ditching this phone. Toss yours, just in case.”

And there he was, gone. I smash the burner open, flick the sim out of the window and the phone a few miles on. They—

whoever they are—had come close to destroying him, but he still isn't giving me anything. Doesn't he realize that if these people pick me up, they'll torture me for information I don't have? For a moment I'm furious with him, but it fades. Of course he knows. What's he supposed to do?

~ 34 ~

It's only been a few hours since I left Duke's mansion, but it seems as if a lifetime has passed as I turn into his drive in his wife's car. The knowledge of what I've seen and done is almost too big to take in. I'm sure I've aged a decade. I yawn to release the tension, and my tired hands search my face for new wrinkles. I don't cry easily, but I'm seeping like a faulty valve. I park beside an eclectic line of expensive vehicles, and I'm sitting there trying to stem the tears when Aaron arrives. He opens the car door and leans in, taking stock of my face.

"Should we be worried?" he asks.

"No one saw the car."

"Sure?"

"Sure."

"Come on in. The boss wants to talk to you."

Duke Leighton's living room is huge, but to one side is a snug fitted with cozy chairs and another drinks cabinet. He pours a round of shots, and I slug mine down in one, before giving him an abbreviated, unemotional version of events.

He listens in silence, picks up a remote and a huge TV screen on the wall lights up. Almost immediately there's a breaking news banner. The plasticized woman on TV reports in a professional, serious tone. *"... a child, missing for three years, discovered dead in a stolen van outside a Washington hospital. The child can't be named yet, but police are*

searching for the youth who dumped the vehicle. Tall, thin, medium brown hair, wearing jeans and trainers and a faded blue hoodie. They have fingerprints on the van, but there's nothing on file..."

"Well, that's probably a lie," I say. "The people who set this up are too canny to leave fingerprints. And mine were logged when I started work, but I was wearing gloves, anyway."

"They have nothing," Duke agrees. "And they think you were a youth. That description was vague enough to be useless."

The anchor goes on to say: *"Investigators are baffled as to why the child was left at the hospital. They found a lead to a small property, but when they arrived, it was an inferno, undoubtedly arson, which destroyed any evidence."*

I breathe a sigh of relief. Duke turns the TV off, cogitates for a moment, then says, "And your dad isn't a pedo?"

"He saves kids. He doesn't kill them."

"You'll swear to that?"

I meet his eyes. "On my life. I've helped him a couple of times."

He stares at me impassively, then eventually nods. "I believe you."

Something cold plummets inside me. What would he have done if he hadn't believed me?

He sums up what I've told him. "So, this Wayne prick is upstairs listening to everything that's going on in your life, and your motorcycle guy, Greg, is listening in on *him*. We don't know who Wayne is working for. Come to that, we don't know who Greg is working for. He sounds altogether too *interested* to be who he says he is."

"Greg just pulled my ass out of the fire."

"Don't interrupt. We don't know who your dad is being set up by. You don't know the identity of the man who pretended to try to rape you. You know who Sonja is, but not why she's

involved. And all of them are after your dad, who's running around like some kind of vigilante superhero. And to cap it all, your boss is using you as a doormat."

"That's about it," I agree. I lean my head back and close my eyes briefly. "I'm grateful to you for today, but really, it's not your problem. None of it is. I suspect Greg's waiting outside to take me home, or storm the walls if I don't make an appearance soon."

Duke's glance snaps to Aaron. "Go tell him she'll be out soon," he orders. He turns to me. "Your car's at Mackin's."

"I know. Greg told me. The tracker inside my car appears to be his."

He grins. "Of course it is. Right. Here's the story for anyone interested enough to ask. You were just doing your job, surveilling me for Beatty's divorce. You couldn't start your car, and Aaron stopped by to help. You don't understand engines."

"Well, that would be true."

He ignores my comment. "He called Reg Mackin for you, and someone came and collected the car. Mackin will tell you what to say when you call around tomorrow for a loan car while yours is being fixed."

"Okay," I say, too spaced-out to argue.

Greg is waiting patiently when I make my way down the drive.

"All okay?"

"I don't think I'll ever be okay again," I admit.

He compresses his lips, and drives me home. He parks the bike and follows me in. I make straight for the whiskey. "Want one?" I ask.

"Depends if I'm going or staying."

"Staying. Please."

He takes off the leather jacket and emits an aroma of soap, oil, aftershave, and a whiff of sweat. It's quite a turn-on. He turns the radio on low, fiddles with some tiny piece of

electronic wizardry, and says, “Radio interference. You can talk, now.”

I sit and plow into the whiskey, my brain somewhere beyond thought. I tell him everything. Next thing I know, he’s sitting beside me, holding me, and I’m crying my eyes out. He doesn’t tell me it’s okay. He doesn’t tell me anything, just holds me.

After a while I dry up, and he gets another whiskey. I’m dozing on his shoulder when he says, “You want a cuddle in the sack or shall I bed down in the other room?”

It’s all so matter-of fact, I take it in my stride.

“I could do with the company.”

“Okay,” he says, and picks me up.

~ 35 ~

I wake with the warmth of a man in my bed for the first time in ages, years, even, surprised to find that, in the end, I'd slept my fill. Exhaustion must have simply cut in at some stage. I vaguely recall undressing. I might have fallen asleep, crying. I remember Greg just holding me while my mind churned over disjointed nightmarish scenes. I know I turned at some stage, reaching out for him, realizing that I wasn't sleepy anymore. But the dead kid looms behind my eyelids, now, at the moment of waking, and although I try to banish it, I know it will haunt me for the rest of my life.

I turn my head.

Greg's lying there on his side, still as a cat, one hand tucked behind his head, surveying me. In the morning light, I see he's comfortably upholstered, carrying slightly more weight than his frame demands, but that's fine by me. Keeping fit is sensible, but to me, men who muscle-build for the sake of it present a conflicting image of narcissism and self-doubt. Or a superiority issue. Or something. Men distort muscles, women hide behind a barrage of makeup. They don't get that what really matters is what's inside the head; the outside form is just a shell. What's inside lasts forever.

He's a surprisingly calming influence, which is just what I need right now. His placid acceptance of what happened yesterday makes it seem like just another day at the office, rather than the tsunami of terror I actually experienced.

“What are you thinking about?” I ask.

“Not thinking anything,” he says. “Just wondering what kind of reception I’m going to get when you wake up.”

“Like, am I going to accuse you of taking advantage when I was upset, or expect a proposal because I don’t do one-night stands?”

“Something like that.”

“I wanted you. I needed you. I enjoyed it. I don’t want a lifetime commitment. I tried that once, and it didn’t suit. Does that answer the question?”

His face creases into a soft smile as he strokes a strand of hair from my face. “Yeah. You up for another round?”

It’s a further half-hour before we fall out of bed. I wonder whether Wayne’s sitting upstairs with his headphones on, wondering why he’s getting an earful of static. After I’ve showered and dressed, I find Greg in the kitchen frying up a breakfast of eggs and bacon. I hope we don’t get ill; I haven’t a clue how long they’ve been here. He brings it into the living room, along with some slices of bread and spread, and we balance the plates on our laps. I discover I’m really hungry. Sex does that to me.

“Why *did* you help me?” I ask as I’m mopping the bread around the eggy remains.

He shrugs again. “You’re treading water. Didn’t seem right to leave you to drown.”

“Even if I *am* up to something illegal?”

“Especially so. Naïve and illegal make bad bedfellows. Whatever your dad’s into, he shouldn’t have involved you.”

“Who said he did?”

“Don’t take me for a fool, Dee.”

For some reason I want him to know the truth. “Dad didn’t want to involve me. His partner got shot. He got shot.”

His fork pauses mid-air. “Seriously?”

“She died. He just had a flesh wound. I dressed it for him.

But without her, he was in a panic, because..."

He held up his hand. "I don't want to know *all* the details."

"And you don't mind that it's illegal?"

"Illegal is my mantra. Shit, the *government* is made up of people who are dishonest, so why should I be any different?"

He flashes a smile. "As long as you promise me your dad isn't a pedophile."

I find myself repeating my words from yesterday. "He saves kids. He doesn't harm them. He's a good guy."

"Okay."

"Just okay?"

"Yep."

I put the plate on the coffee table with a contented sigh. "You're a handy guy to know. *And* you can cook. Bonus."

"Nice to be appreciated. You might as well enjoy it while you can. Prison food leaves a lot to the imagination."

"You speak from experience?"

"I did time." His glance is laconic, hiding a wealth of detail.

"I'm scared shitless of prison," I admit.

"You should be. So, are you philanthropic, like your dad, or just dumb?"

I'm feeling comfortable with what I achieved. I didn't know I had it in me, not when push came to shove. Yesterday I was simply reacting in the moment. Perhaps I'm more like Dad than I would have thought. I hope I saved him. But philanthropic? "Possibly dumb," I decide eventually. "I just wanted to save my dad."

"Nice sentiment," he says. "Hopefully you have, but the trouble with forensics is you don't know what they've found till the cops come knocking at the door."

"And there was me, just getting complacent," I say.

And with that, the image of the dead kid hits the egg I've just eaten, and I rush to the bathroom.

"Okay?" Greg asks again when I emerge white and shaky.

"I keep seeing him."

"There's a trick to it. Every time you almost think of him, think of something positive. Like bashing Wayne over the head with a rubber bat. That's what got me through prison."

I'm confused. "Thinking of bashing Wayne over the head?"

"No, someone else. With a tire iron. But I fixed it when I got out." I don't ask, and a faint smile appears. "Now, though I'd very much like to stay, I have to work."

"Thanks," I say inadequately.

"Any time, doll."

He throws me a quirky expression, and I lock the door behind him.

After he's gone, I realize I'm on a high. It seems that getting away with crime is exhilarating. I'm sure everyone experiences it at least once, even if it's just shafting the IRS of a few bucks or forgetting to go back and pay for a small item that slipped past the cashier's notice; it's a sneaky victory in a tough world. As long as you don't get caught, of course.

There's a knock at my door, and it can only be one of my neighbors. I take a peep, hoping it's the Smythes, back from Timbuktu, or wherever they've been this time, but it's Wayne. I could simply not answer, but it seems foolish to hide behind a door when he obviously knows I'm here. I open the door and realize my mistake as Wayne shoves past me, his eyes searching.

"Has he gone?" His tone is arrogant, annoyed.

"What?"

"The Hells Angel who's *just a client*. Is he gone?"

"I think you should leave," I say tightly.

He barges past, and I follow as he stalks into my living room, where the radio is quietly buzzing to itself. "Jesus, that's annoying," he says, turning it off. "You should get yourself a stereo. Or at least some decent speakers."

“Get out,” I say. “Or I’ll call the cops.” But I know I can’t. I’ve slipped down a wormhole into a different universe where the cops are not my friends.

“I *am* a cop.”

“Were,” I remind him, just in case he’d forgotten his story. “You’re an ex-cop who’s now a bean counter.”

But the way he’d said it was underscored by a sly knowledge.

So, I deduce, Wayne is probably still in law enforcement of some kind. Though, I have to say, his story about a cop partner dying in his arms was fairly convincing at the time. Maybe he isn’t one of the *really* bad guys after all, but there are degrees of bad, and he’s crossed several lines already, what with the whole pretend rape and rescue, trying to sneak past my defenses by lying, and now busting into my personal space.

My expression must have alerted him, as he backpedals quickly. He switches off the arrogance, combing his fingers through his hair with mock self-condemnation. His eyes soften as he says, “I’m sorry. You’re right. I shouldn’t have barged in. I was just worried about you.”

“It’s not your job to be worried about me.”

“You don’t know what you’re dealing with.”

True. “So, what am I dealing with?”

The worried expression deepens to concern. “It’s just that I finally realized why Greg seemed familiar. From the past. When I was a cop. He used to run drugs. He might still. He’s not someone you really want to get friendly with.”

“I know. He also told me he’d done time for it. That means he’s paid his debt to society.”

In reality, I don’t believe social debts can ever be repaid. You can say you’re sorry. You can take the punishment, you can even do good deeds, but the harm done to others can never be expunged. It’s with them forever. My statement takes the wind out of his sails, though. I indicate the front door again.

“You’ve done your bit as a good neighbor. You’ve said your piece. I’m fine. You can leave now.”

“Look, I was worried about you, that’s all. If you ever need help, you know you can call me,” he says, in full-on earnest mode. “Any time. Day or night.”

Yeah, right. Of course, he had only barged in with declarations of fear for my safety after Greg had gone. What a hero.

“Thanks,” I say flatly.

~ 36 ~

When I provide Janine with the details of Duke Leighton's undercover debt and repossession unit, she perks up. "Great. Good work. It doesn't change anything substantial, but it proves he hasn't been open with us." We both know that's par for the course when you're dealing with money. But she isn't displeased, saying, as I leave her office, "We can use that. Keep up the good work." I take that as permission to go out and do some more surveilling.

Only it isn't Duke I want to stalk. It's Janine's husband.

When I leave the premises, Leo's car isn't in its privileged place in the staff car park. I've long suspected Leo isn't an early riser. I'm not in the habit of monitoring his schedule in the office, but the few times I've tried to speak to him on the internal phone, I've had to wait until mid-morning. Either he isn't as single-minded as his wife, or is happy to let her be the major breadwinner.

I have the loan car from Mackin's while my car is being *fixed*, and I'm going to make use of the fact. It might even be that this one is bugged by now—by Wayne and Greg and Duke and the neighborhood watch. Bugs are breeding like mayflies around me. Technology that once belonged in the domain of spy films is now available to everyone. But hopefully no one will mentally have tagged this vehicle as mine. I turn on the car radio just to annoy any eavesdroppers, and drive to Janine's modern but far from modest home.

I don't have to drive far. The property is fairly central, facilitating the social rounds. It's not in the league of Duke Leighton's, of course, but not something your average Joe could afford. Janine and her sidekick aren't into the pleasures of isolated grandeur, being more about being in the center of things. They're into the high-end arty set, by all accounts. She has some pieces on the wall in the office, reminiscent of the splatter that comes of a hangover. I don't doubt Janine can expound on questionable art with glib, meaningless phrases. She's a lawyer, after all.

I'm relieved to see Leo's car parked in the driveway.

I can see a fair proportion of the property from the road. It's bounded by a wall topped with sensors, and an alarm system that probably goes straight to the cop shop, so I have no intention of trying to snoop. I just hunker down and wait. Sooner or later, someone will come calling, or Leo will get his ass out of bed. If he's in for a day watching sports, I'm going to end up brain dead. It hadn't occurred to me to pick up a paperback.

Unfortunately, an hour later, when he does emerge, he drives straight to the office, so I park, call Duke Leighton, tell him the score, and ask if it's all right to tail him today.

"You're surveilling your boss?" There's amusement in his voice. "Any particular reason?"

"I'll explain when I have something. But I need to keep up appearances."

"I'm going shopping after lunch. Wait till then."

I suspect he's enjoying the subterfuge. I'm sure I'm right, when he visits half a dozen classy shops in which he probably has no vested interest, to buy things he doesn't want.

I show Janine the photos, later, and she says, "Great, keep up the good work. Are you on his case tomorrow?"

"Sure," I say.

"Look, you don't need to come in. Take the rest of the week

out, just keep me informed of anything that looks interesting.”

“Will do.” I manage to sound nonchalant, but my radar pings. There’s something going on in the office she doesn’t want me to know about. I can only guess it has to do with Ellis and my shaky job description.

Toward the end of the week, however, I’m not so sure. Leo comes into work at pretty much the same time each day, then goes home. The most exciting event was when he had a lunch date with a client while I chewed at a sandwich in my car.

Leighton, as good as his word, gives me the heads-up when he’s going somewhere that I can follow and take pictures. It’s all a game to him. I wonder if he has any idea how serious it is for me. But then, he knows I’ve got grim problems, because he lent me Beatty’s car. If he got details from the GPS, he’ll be aware it leads to a burnt-out house at the center of an FBI pedophile investigation. He might even wonder whether I had torched the place. But if he’s wondering what I’m up to, he keeps it to himself.

We play tag all week, and on Friday, I’m seriously doubting myself. Leo has gone into work as usual. Leighton doesn’t want to be followed today, so I humor him. I don’t want to find out how Duke would react if I annoyed him. In hindsight, I realize, if he *has* got details from Beatty’s GPS, he’s got something on me that’s quite scary.

I’m just sitting in my car outside the office, wondering what to do, whether to take an early weekend, when I catch the tail end of someone familiar walking around the corner: Ellis. In a second, I’m alert, heartbeat racing. He’s skulking toward the staff carpark entrance rather than going in through the front door, so presumably he’s been provided with a keycard, avoiding the visitor’s log. But he stops, makes a call. I hunker down lower behind the wheel in case he glances my way. He paces for a bit, waiting, then Leo drives back out, and Ellis jumps in the car. Bingo! But why would Leo be with Ellis?

I thought Ellis was Janine's personal snoop. And Leo is just the accountant, isn't he? I follow at a discreet distance, but Leo isn't trying to lose me, and the amazing sleuth Ellis doesn't notice. From their body language, they're like two chums catching up, laughing, joking.

They drive to a small block of condos. I don't see any lights go on, so I have no idea which apartment they visit, but an hour later they come out again, shake hands, and Leo pats Ellis on the arm before leaving. It's comradely and personal. What's all that about? I didn't think they were bosom buddies. Leo drives off, either going home or to work, and Ellis walks half a block before manually unlocking a dented green town car and driving off. I try to trail him, but the traffic beats me within a few blocks, so I go back to the condo block and wait, to see if I can catch him again. I'm assuming he presently resides there. Two hours later, I've seen a mom go in with two screaming toddlers. I've seen a black and white Sylvester cat prowl the place as though he owns it, and I've seen a pizza delivery guy. I'm not good at sitting around chewing my nails, so I get out, pace, and call Laurie.

She answers the phone at the first ring. "Dee?"

"Are you alone?"

Her voice sounds ragged. "The kids have gone to a sleepover after school. But, Dee, Tim knows about that Sonja woman trying to find Dad. He's furious about the whole thing. We're barely speaking."

"Is he there, with you?"

"He's working from home."

"Well, at least he's taking it seriously."

"Dee, I'm going nuts, expecting the cops or the feds to barge in at any minute."

"Keep it together. For the kids."

"Don't lecture *me* about how to look after my children," she snaps. Then, in a lower voice, "Have you found anything

out? Have you heard from Dad?"

"No. I've emailed, but no response. He'll contact me soon," I say with more certainty than I feel. "If anyone does come knocking, check their credentials. Then just be honest. You know nothing about Dad. You haven't seen him in years. Show them the picture of the fake Valerie. Say you came to see me to see if I could help. Say I told you she's an ex-con called Sonja something or other. Act scared. They can verify all that if they want to. Tell them everything we spoke about. Bore them to tears with the detail. I'll contact you when I know more."

"I *am* scared. I don't need to act. Dee, when's this all going to end? How can we just get on with our lives?"

I can't answer that. I don't know how I'm going to get on with my life, either, with the image of the dead kid sitting like a cancer in my brain. I've restrained myself from following the case, trying to find out who he was, what's happening with his parents. I want to jump in and tell them how terribly, terribly sorry I am. I can't undo or change what those people did, but moving the body, not calling the cops; that alone would land me in deep shit. "Bear with me, sis. I'm doing everything I can. If anything comes up, you'll be the first to know," I end lamely. "Gotta go, now, Laurie. Bye."

I cut the call, but I haven't got a clue what to do next. I'm just trawling in the dark, wondering what's going to unravel, but I have a nasty feeling it might be me. I'm almost certain there's a trail, leading from Janine and Leo, through Ellis being in prison, to Dad. I don't know what, or how, but everything is connected. Even me getting this damned job, if I'm not mistaken. Then a woman exits the building I'm watching. She's wearing smart business attire, her blonde hair hanging in a pixie cut. I've never seen her before, but adrenaline hits my gut as I recognize the fake Valerie. And there it is: the link between Ellis, Leo and Dad.

I hunker into my hoodie, phone to my face, and hope she

hasn't noticed. I suspect she'd recognize me from photographs, too. She walks at a fast clip in crippling heels, and when she's a block away, I follow. I mope along trying for that aimless teenager look. I bury my face in my phone, but it seems she's going nowhere more interesting than the mall. She buys cigarettes, then visits a drug store. I hope she's got a really, *really* bad period. As she exits, a gaggle of teenage girls barge past, and in that moment, I lose her. I trawl a few shops, but she's nowhere to be seen. I don't think she lost me on purpose. I hope not, but I curse, hoping my nascent private-eye skills will improve with practice.

I phone Greg while walking back to the car.

"Hiya, doll. Everything okay?"

"Greg, I've just found Sonja. She met up with John Ellis and Leo. Greg, they're all in on it."

I can almost hear him chewing it over. "Who's Leo?"

"Leo Maas, Janine's other half. The firm's accountant."

"And Janine, might she be involved?"

"I don't know, but she's the one who hired me. She told me to stay away from the office today, to keep tagging Duke, and the next thing, Ellis is in there having a meeting with them."

There's a slight pause, then he says, "That Wayne prick was in your condo today."

"You were there?"

"No, the ap sends me info. "I'd hazard a guess he was looking for whatever was interfering with his pickup."

I say in a small voice, "I don't know what to do, Greg. It's about Dad. It's always been about Dad. I don't know what to do. I'm out of my depth."

"Baby doll, if you want my help, you'd best come clean with me about your dad."

"You didn't want to get involved."

"Seems I'm involved anyway. Meet me at Starbucks."

"Now?"

“No time like the present.”

“Which one?”

“You know.”

I think about that, and go cold. The only Starbucks I’ve been to recently is the one where I waited for Dad before picking him and the baby up from the Greyhound. If Greg knows I was there, then who else does? Had I been watched? Had they seen me pick up Dad and the baby?

He’s sitting casually astride his bike when I arrive, and I can only guess from the merest hint of a smile that he enjoys his biker notoriety. I wonder why I trust him. It’s something instinctive, as indefinable as the way I hadn’t quite trusted Wayne from the get-go, despite almost liking him.

He sees me, heaves a leg over, and lopes to the door. In Starbucks I order two coffees from the girl behind the counter. She’s young with ultra-black hair, kohl-rimmed eyes and a face studded with silver. She sneaks a glance at Greg, then flicks back to me as though she *truly* can’t see the attraction. I smile sweetly, and thank her in a hard voice. She blinks twice, and turns away. Perhaps she thinks I do black magic, too.

“Why here?” I ask Greg. I can’t help myself.

“You know I was tracking you.”

“So, you weren’t here, watching?”

He gives a secretive smile. “Should I have been?”

There’s something in the dialogue that niggles, but Greg dispels my brief flash of unease by saying, “The divorce is going through.”

For a moment I’m floundering. Divorce? Then I remember May-Jane, the memory rising like something from a different lifetime. I feel as though I’m living in a parallel universe, with a distinct sense of dislocation from my previous life, the one where I so recently thought I was content, if not happy. “Oh, good,” I say finally.

He winces as he slurps his hot coffee. “Janine didn’t mention it?”

“No. But she doesn’t shout about her failures.”

He smiles at that. We both know she’d been hoping for a prolonged battle involving a vast number of billable hours, so the quick resolution won’t have pleased her. Now I realize why the girl behind the counter is looking at me. She probably recognizes Greg from the media hype, and wonders if I’m someone she ought to know. I guess I look the part of a biker’s moll, in torn jeans and an overlarge hoodie, but I could be a singer or an actress dressed down. Without the makeup, they’re just ordinary people, after all.

Greg eyes my clothes, as if reading my mind. “Undercover?”

I smile tiredly. “Trying. It’s not so easy. I lost Ellis in traffic and I lost Sonja after two shops. And she had heels on, too.”

“But you found her.” He licks his finger and gives me an air point. “And her address.”

“Or Ellis’s. Yeah, good for me. Now what? I can’t inform the cops. I have nothing on her, save the fact that she posed as a reporter to get to my sister. And if they ask why, it all comes back to Dad. And that’s who they’d go after.” I stare at my reflection in the window, and my face looks pale and small, like a ghostly echo of the child I once was.

“So, tell me about your dad,” he reminds me.

How far back do I go? All anyone knows about my dad is that he was implicated in a child-snatching many years ago. They’ve never seen the loving father, the dedicated husband, the gentle giant inside the gray-haired old man. I remember. Scenes come back, not like movies, but in still snapshots of memory. Being pushed on a swing. Being picked up and hugged. Having a Band-Aid put on my knee. Being read to at night. Dad was good with the funny voices. And when I was older, the total dedication he gave to his dying wife, despite

the fact—or maybe because of it—he was in love with another woman. I can forgive him that, if Mom did. She knew about Suzanne. Maybe she guessed the rest. But she couldn't let him go, could she? She was focusing inward, grieving for the life they might have had, the things they never get to finish, the future they'll never get to see.

I find I'm crying silently. Greg reaches over and takes my hand. "Spill it, doll," he says gently.

So I do. He listens without commenting, his eyes never leaving me. I finally grind to a halt. "I'm scared, Greg. I think Wayne's a cop. Sonja and Ellis and Leo are working together. And possibly Janine. I thought I got this job because I earned it, but it was always because I'm Dad's daughter. They're using me to get to him. Whoever *they* are. If they had bugged my car back then, it was probably me who led them to his address in the first place. It's my fault the dead kid was left there. But I don't get why they didn't just wait there, and get Dad when he arrived. None of this makes sense."

"It must make sense to someone."

I give a hiccup of laughter, then have a sudden horrid thought: what if Greg is involved? I thought he hadn't bugged my car or Wayne's condo until after he realized I was already being surveilled. But I only have his word for that.

"Maybe they wanted him to suffer. It would be a living hell in prison as a pedophile, until one of the inmates did him in for real."

"Jesus. That's harsh."

"He must know that," he says, with a vague hint of admiration.

"I guess that's why he's kept himself at a distance from me and Laurie all these years. Not that he didn't want to be our dad; he didn't want us endangered."

"Sounds like your dad is something else. But he's swimming against the tide. Always has been. Charity doesn't

work. Being noble doesn't work. Not at that level. Individuals get saved, but ultimately, he's changing nothing."

"At least he's trying," I snap, swiping the damp from my face. "What have you done to help anyone?"

"I take care of my buddy's girl, even though she hates me, now. I married May-Jane because I love my sister. I'm helping you because— Actually, why am I helping you? You're throwing stones at your own glass house. You're just confirming to me why I went on the road in the first place. Society sucks. People suck. They think I'm a bad guy, but actually, I just don't want to live in a box. It would be in my own best interests to get on my bike now, and go join the guys on the road. I've stayed in one place long enough."

Panic must have registered on my face, because he adds. "Chill, babe. I've never been cast in the role of altruist before. It's kinda weird. So, the way I see it is this. I go check out Sonja's place. Or Ellis's. Depending. You get back on Ellis's case. See if you can find out where the creep goes in the daytime. We'll turn the stones over, see what crawls out. When we get a scent, we start hunting."

I suddenly feel light-headed, unburdened. I haven't a clue where Dad is, I'm still dreaming about the dead kid, I'm still scared to death that they'll go after Sammy and Liza if they can't find Dad, but I'm no longer alone.

~ 37 ~

I head home. As soon as I open the door, I realize Greg hadn't needed to tell me Wayne had been in the condo. There's the merest hint of aftershave hanging in the air. What a prick. I head straight for the radio and turn the knob. Sure enough, it doesn't work. I'll have to buy a new one. We can't use that trick again.

I watch some crap on TV, and don't laugh. It's not funny, and I hate canned laughter. It's irritating, as though producers think I'm not clever enough to know when something's supposed to be funny. But maybe the people who watch that crap do need to be told. And the breaking news is irritating, too. The feds have finally broken a pedophile ring they've been trying to trace for some years, down in Georgia. They have eight men in custody. I wish they'd come and get the ones who I think are after Dad. Next thing, they'll be offering plea deals to those men to try to get some others. Does that make sense? Not in my book.

Later, I doze off into a nightmare, and find the dead kid over and over, only his head keeps turning toward me, those blind eyes seeking, and I know if they find me, something really nasty is going to happen. I jolt awake, my heart rate pulsing out of control, and the dream hangs in the air for a while, making me afraid to go back to sleep. I get up, make a coffee to break the pattern, and search for a box of sleeping pills that are probably long out of date.

But as I'm waiting for the pill to cut in, I question everything. Had Janine taken me on to find out about Dad? What does it have to do with her? Had Ellis really been in prison for child-related crimes? Duke had shown me a photocopy of the document, but it's easy to fake stuff these days. And another thought pops up. If Janine's involved, am I really keeping tabs on Duke Leighton or is he keeping tabs on me? If he is, I've made it easier for him, when I'd thought I was being clever. I know Sonja is after Dad, and she's bad news. I know Wayne is after Dad, and suspect he's part of some big play to pull down a pedophile ring. Wayne isn't a nice guy, because a nice guy wouldn't have done what he did, but it doesn't mean he's *bad* bad. And now *Leo*. My mind is driving me in insane circles. How in hell does Leo fit into the picture?

The person I think of before sinking into a black hole is Greg. What if he's the bad guy, after all? My hand reaches to the space he'd slept in the other night, as though it will help me to understand why I like him. I don't get him at all. I want to believe he's a free spirit, a good guy who's done bad things; not because he doesn't care, but because it changes nothing.

Dad wouldn't agree. He'd quote the butterfly effect, and say that each good deed might generate a thousand good deeds in the future. I think I'm in Greg's mindset, though. For every bad guy who ends up in prison, there are a hundred worse who haven't been caught, and some of those are the guys who put them there.

Really, society sucks.

In the zombie zone before I black out, I realize that Greg would probably be diagnosed as antisocial, misanthropic. He's a biker, he's moved drugs, and God knows what else. He's okay with that. There's no space in our culture for a free spirit, but operating outside of social boundaries doesn't necessarily make a person evil.

Even criminology is dependent on the laws at any given

moment in time, blanketing society with views that might be different in another era. Greg's complicated and I'm confused. All his dealings with me have been open, amusing, caring, even. Or he's good at lying and I'm gullible. Why is he getting involved? Or was he already involved? Did he really come into my orbit by accident?

I can't make everything fit into any kind of sense.

I don't believe everything is pre-ordained, or that humans really are the be-all and end-all of planet earth, though. Nature is far bigger and more complex than we'll ever truly understand. Stretch beyond this planet and we turn out to be less than ants in the cold light of the universe. I do believe in coincidence, to a degree. People have written whole books on chance, breaking it down into a science, like chaos theory, but experience has taught me that most of what goes down in life is a series of decisions made by others, that reach into your personal space like overlapping bubbles in a continually evolving Venn diagram. I have the distinct feeling Greg being here isn't coincidence, but I haven't yet worked out why he could be anything else. Maybe I'm inventing stuff.

I slip over the edge into a black hole of oblivion, questions still battering on the edge of my consciousness.

~ 38 ~

I have a pounding headache, and feel as if I haven't slept. That's the trouble with sleeping pills. They knock me out, but I wake up exhausted, as if my brain has been in overdrive all night but I just don't *remember* what I was thinking about.

Basically, I'm tired, and want it all to go away.

I want my own comfort-bubble of a life back, the one I had half a year ago.

My cell rings from the living room. I glance at the clock. It's late morning on a Saturday. Now I'm working for personal reasons, for my family, there's no excuse for procrastination. I should have been on Ellis's case hours ago. The ringing stops, probably cuts into voicemail. I can check later. I crawl out of bed and down a pint of water with some headache pills to cure the sleeping-pill hangover. The ringing starts again. When I check, it's Laurie's cell. I wonder what stupid panic she's worked herself into. She's not using the burner, so I hope it's just a domestic issue.

"Hi, Laurie, what—"

She overrides me, on a high note of panic. "Dee, it's Sammy. He's... he's gone."

"Gone?" I echo.

"Tim took them to the park. He took his eyes off Sam for a moment to help Liza with her shoe, and he was gone." Her breathing is erratic, too fast. "Dee, the cops are here. I've got to tell them. Everything."

“Laurie, calm down, let’s...”

She shrieks, “Don’t you fucking dare tell me to calm down! It’s Sammy. My child. What would you know? You’re too selfish to have children!”

Well, there it is. The thing that stops us being close. She can be such a self-righteous bitch. What she hasn’t worked out, despite being told, is that I’m too scared to have children, frightened of the future we’re giving them. She thinks she does good work by belonging to a women’s circle, knitting blankets for foreign orphans. Damn, she has enough time, money and space to take in a couple of homeless kids, not knit them stuff, and she thinks I’m selfish?

I can’t bring a child into this world.

But I’d kill to save hers.

Tears rise in my own eyes as she sobs, “Dee, I have to tell them. Because whoever took Sammy did it because of Dad.”

“You do,” I agree. After all, what can she tell them? She doesn’t know where Dad is. Neither of us know. And she doesn’t really know what he’s been up to. Those listening in on our conversation are already as clued in as she is. And if she has the cops on the case, they’ll focus on Dad soon enough. I wouldn’t put it past them to even suggest he’s taken Sam.

“Keep it together, sis, I’m on my way,” I say. “I’ll book a flight and a hire car, and let you know.”

“Sure,” she says in a small voice, although we both know my being there won’t change anything. But at least it shows solidarity.

I send a text to Dad, but it bounces, undelivered. Damn. I forgot we’d both destroyed our burners. I switch on my computer and send a brief email. He deserves to know. But once I do, that email account will close, too, and there will be no contacting him until he contacts me, which he seems pretty keen not to do right now.

I throw some things in a case, and just as I’m about to slam

the lid on my laptop, it pings.

I'M GOING TO CALL YOU ON YOUR CELL PHONE. I WANT THEM TO HEAR.
DAD.

Holy fuck! He said he'd give himself up if he had to, but this is not the time. Giving himself up won't save Sam if *they* have him. In fact, it will do quite the opposite, because if he's not out there trying to save Sam, who is? It was him who said that when it comes to pedophiles, the cops always arrive too late to save the kid. I suspect the whole reason they've taken Sam is to get Dad. Dead, or in prison, it would have the same result in the end. If they know exactly where he's going, and when, he's pretty much handing himself to them on a plate. I tap hastily.

DAD IT'S A TRAP THEY'RE DOING IT TO GET YOU!!!!!!

TRUST ME.

My phone rings. I answer it reluctantly, "Deirdre Hamilton?"

"What do you know, Dee?"

When I hear Dad's voice, I imagine a flurry of activity in some control center down town. Trace the call! Find it! Keep him talking!

"Sammy's gone. He was in the park, with Tim, then the next minute he couldn't see him. That's all I know. Laurie's out of her mind. I'm going to LA."

"Of course," he says. "I'll see you there."

The phone goes dead. Well, you won't trace that, I think. But now they know where he's going. For the first time in years. "So, you got what you wanted, you bastards," I yell out loud. "You low-down, sneaky, lying, cheating fucking bastards! Why don't you get off your asses and find the real bad guys instead of going after an old man who's spent his whole life trying to do good? Dad's not a pedophile. He saves

kids. He doesn't kill them."

The outburst makes me feel fractionally better.

It has also told them I know the room is bugged.

I'm losing it, big time.

I get online and book a flight, leaving in four hours. There are only two seats left, at the front of the plane. I'm not a great flyer, and usually choose the middle seats toward the back, which is insane. Statistics suggest these are safest, but mostly no one survives a plane crash. I pay the premium for not having the foresight to book in advance. Ditto the hire car. These companies squeeze hardest when people need them most. Laurie's always moaning about them trebling the cost of flights when kids are on national holiday.

I run to the loan car. I'm supposed to go to Mackin's and swap it for mine this afternoon, but it will have to wait. I'll send an email; they can pick the car up from the airport.

In fits and starts I accelerate, brake hard, and rev on the tail of Saturday morning shoppers. A driver blasts his horn at me as I squeeze out into the next lane and pass. I give the finger to the five faces staring at me. I've become the kind of driver I hate. And what's the point in hurrying? It won't change what's already happened. I make myself calm down, breathe, slow down, work with the traffic. I'm crying as I'm driving. I clench the wheel too hard. Damn it to hell! I know what these fuckers do to kids. But not our Sammy, surely?

I arrive in good time and make it through airport security without ringing any alarm bells. I wonder if the feds are tailing me, whether they've put a block on my passport, or stuck me on the no-fly list. It's two and a half thousand miles from me to LA, two solid days of driving. Not the kind of drive you want to do in the state I'm in. And I get the feeling if that happened, I'd be two days too late.

As I'm waiting in the airport, my burner buzzes with a text.

HANG IN THERE. YOUR DAD ISN'T STUPID. I'M RIGHT BEHIND YOU.

I look around, automatically, then realize Greg must have listened in on Wayne, and got the gist. I waver between wondering if he's a good guy or a bad guy, but right now I'm short of support.

YOU'RE COMING TO LA?

NOTHING BETTER TO DO.

The weight on my shoulders eases slightly.

I wonder if Leo and Ellis and Sonja and Wayne and his team are coming too. It's almost amusing. The whole shooting match is relocating. Except that none of this is funny at all.

Somehow, I manage to get myself to the plane, and almost at the last minute, Greg is there, passing me in the aisle. I hardly recognize him without his leathers, and he tips me a subtle wink as he passes. I don't acknowledge it, or look around to see where he's sitting. I don't know what he thinks he can do, but I have a guardian angel. I hope.

~ 39 ~

The five-hour flight is a waking nightmare, every minute stretching into an hour. I live each moment with Laurie. Even if they've done nothing bad to Sammy, he'll be terrified. I'm terrified for him. And yes, Laurie's right. I don't know how it feels. But I can damn well imagine. I wonder where Dad is, and how long it will take him to get there. I hope he has the sense to call me, and not just go straight to Laurie's home, or the cops, which amount to the same thing in the end. And what's he going to achieve? Nothing, unless the kidnappers send in a ransom note. Dad for the kid. That's what this is all about, after all. He'd go for that, all right. But the feds wouldn't give Dad up, and it's unlikely the bad guys would return the kid, either. These people don't play by any known rules.

When we disembark, Greg threads through the milling crowd and disappears without so much as a glance my way. While I'm queuing for my hire car, I phone Laurie on her house phone. She answers at the first ring, her voice filled with breathless hope. "Yes?"

"Sis," I say. "Any news?"

"Oh," she says flatly. "No. Nothing."

"Listen, Dad knows. He's coming to help. Don't tell anyone, though."

"Dad? Coming here? What can he do?"

"I don't know. But it's his grandchild, Laurie."

“He hasn’t given much of a damn, so far. He’s got two grandchildren and—” She ends on a sob, realizing he might just have one grandchild, now. If Sammy isn’t found in the first twenty-four hours, statistics suggest he’ll never be found, or turn up dead. She’ll know this. She will have looked it all up. Or Tim will have told her. Then she adds, “The cops have been asking about Dad.”

“Of course they have. I hope you don’t think that—”

“I don’t know what to think.”

“Trust me, Dad cares.”

“How much?”

There’s a bundle of confusion in the question, and I’m not about to try to explain. I reach the rental kiosk and hand over my booking slip and driver’s license. The bored kid behind the desk processes it, points to a place on the document, and says, “Sign here.”

“I’ll be there soon,” I say to Laurie, while providing an illegible scrawl and grabbing the key.

“Sure,” she says flatly.

But the *how* of it bugs me, too. I get why Dad wants to help find Sam, but I don’t get why he wants the feds to know where he’s going to be. But as I drive, it hits me that my first thought was right. The whole shebang has upped and relocated from Baltimore to LA. If nothing else, it’s bringing them all out of the woodwork—feds, pedos, and anyone else who’s involved. I just wonder if Dad’s got the resources to track them. Up to recently, I’d been supposing he’d been working on his own, but he suggested there was a network. How does that work?

I’m on the home stretch, a few miles from Laurie’s, when I hit a diversion sign. I turn left, and reach for the GPS, but just up ahead there’s a cop car. I’m flagged down and dutifully pull in, while other cars are waved through. The cop who approaches is a little older than me, with a gut reaching heavily over a tight belt. He indicates to me to wind down my

window.

“Driving license.” His tone is bored, long-suffering.

I shuffle in my purse, find it, and hand it out. He glances at it and throws a fleeting nod to his partner, who’s standing at the passenger window. That’s when I know I’m in trouble.

“Out of the car, please, Miss Hamilton.”

“What’s this about? I haven’t done anything...”

“Out of the car. NOW.”

This is the bit in the movies where people put their foot down and instigate a chase, but in real life you just do as you’re told. It’s what we’re programmed to do. Besides, his hand is on his holster, and I don’t want to get shot. I climb out of the car.

“Hands on the hood.”

“What the hell for?”

“Just do it.”

He pats me down while the other guy, older, grayer, and fitter, reaches in and grabs my purse from the passenger seat. He riffles through it and holds up the burner, a brow lifted. “What’s this for?”

“It’s not illegal,” I snap.

He gives me that superior smile that says he knows better.

“Hands behind your back,” the one behind me says.

I’m stunned by the loud rasping of plasticuffs tightening around my wrists.

There’s nothing quite as complete as the helplessness of discovering that your hands are no longer your own. This is a first for me, and I truly don’t like it. As I’m ushered into the back of the car, the graying guy throws my cell onto the ground and stamps on it. He keeps the burner. The rear door slams shut on me. I feel sweat beading on my forehead. What’s happening now is too mind-blowing to be real. I’m in trouble, terrified that this is the end of the line. As the driver swings away, other men are throwing the roadblock equipment into

the back of an unmarked white van. But the mesh screen between me and the men is pretty damned real.

I lean forward, trying to sound arrogant. “Where are you taking me? What’s this about?”

They don’t answer. We’re in traffic, not going too fast, so despite the cuffs, I contort, and try the door handle. As expected, it’s immovable. As we pass a car with a middle-aged couple in the front, I belt my shoulders and head against the window, and scream. “I’m being abducted! Help.”

They glance my way, then stare studiously ahead.

The gray cop shunts in his seat to look back at me. “You got any idea how stupid that looks? Sit down and shut up, or we’ll stop the car and I’ll come back there and make you.”

A chill slides through my gut. But he’s right. Who’s going to take any notice of a crazy in the back of a cop car? I sit back down and try to take note of where we’re going, but I don’t know this grim, faceless area at all. We’ve entered a maze of brick and concrete. The windows that aren’t boarded are opaque with grime, the walls overwritten with years of graffiti. We pass a block that’s been leveled for development, and I guess that’s the destiny of the whole half-derelict complex. The car slows by a long building surrounded by tall security rails. A gate on wheels squeals open. We drive through, and the gate slides closed behind us, like the final squeal of a dying pig. Inside, the complex is quiet, with just a few cars dotted about a large parking lot. The car pulls in beside a fire door. The gray cop opens my door and orders, “Mouth. Shut.” He slaps a strip of duct tape over my mouth. He grabs my arm, pulls me out, and marches me through the door. I’m propelled into a vast warehouse space with defunct commercial lighting hanging from the ceiling. High up there’s a row of skylight windows, some broken. A bird flaps silently across the space. At one end there’s a long metal workbench, still inset with a circular saw. I guess it’s a long disused slaughterhouse and

packaging plant; the rust on the jagged sawblades looks like blood stains.

There, four people are waiting: three men I've never seen before, and Sonja. The men are wearing suits too expensive for this environment. Sonja is heavily made-up, and if she thinks she looks chic, she's wrong. As we get closer, I see lipstick leeching into the cig-lines around her mouth. The photograph Laurie sent me didn't do her justice. She's not chic. Close up, with her bleached hair, crow's feet and hard, blue eyes, she betrays no empathy at all.

One man has a buttock perched on the bench and is swinging a leg casually. He's protected his pants with a newspaper. His hair is immaculate, as if he's just been groomed, and there's something extraordinarily compelling about his face. Cold and perfect, like Lucifer personified. A politician, maybe. Certainly a man with money. He slips to his feet, slaps himself down for dust, and rises to greet us. All four are wearing that satisfied expression cats get when the mouse is between their paws.

I've never been as scared as I am now. It's the kind of scared that goes beyond reason. The kind where your body moves on autopilot, while the real you is cowering in a corner of your brain, out of sight. At this moment, I'd be thrilled to discover these guys are feds, but I have a nasty feeling they're the ones who killed the kid, and set Dad up. Which means I know what they're capable of. I know I'm right when the pretty one purrs, "Deirdre Hamilton. How nice of you to join us. You know why you're here, of course?"

I can't exactly answer, so he tells me.

"You know we don't want you; we want Dr. Hamilton. And you're going to bring him here for us. After that, if you behave, you can just get on with your life and forget this ever happened."

The situation is surreal. I wonder why I'm not wetting

myself and crying, because he's lying. I've seen all their faces. I know they intend to kill me once they have Dad, yet for some reason the panic I'd experienced on the drive here drains away. He reaches out and yanks the tape from my face. I wince and gasp at the shock of pain, and try for ingenuous. "Are you feds?"

"Don't pretend to be stupid."

"Okay." I take a deep breath. "So, where's Sammy? Is he all right?"

There's a minuscule pause as he decides how honest to be. The carved perfection of his lips stretches, but doesn't crease his face. It's like seeing a plastic smile erupt on the face of a mannequin. "He's fine. So far."

I see no reason for him to be lying, and a measure of relief hits me. At this moment, I hope the feds *are* tracking me. Maybe they'll find Sammy before it's too late. "Where is he?"

"When your dad comes, we'll let your sister know where to find him."

Yeah, right.

The gray cop hands him my burner, and he thumbs it. "Three numbers. One will be your sister's. One must be your dad. Who's the other?"

I don't answer. If they don't recognise the number, Greg isn't working with them. I feel strangely relieved. Then his fist shoots out and belts me in the stomach. The shock and pain make me throw up instantly. I half fold, but I'm held upright by the phony cops. At least, I hope they're phony. It goes against everything that's moral to think they're real cops, in the pay of these immaculately dressed thugs.

I swallow repeatedly to ease the burning bile in my throat and raise my head.

"That was a tap," he says, when I'm breathing again. "If I'd really punched you, you'd be dying on the floor right now. Whose is the third number?"

“The mechanic. My car’s with them.”

“Why on this phone?”

“It was all I had on me at the time.”

“Which is your dad’s number?”

“First.”

He presses buttons, holds the phone to his ear, then smiles. “Don’t hang up if you want to see your daughter alive.”

There’s a pause. He holds the phone out to me.

“Dad,” I yell, “Don’t—” I’m yanked back with a hard hand over my mouth as he puts the phone back to his ear.

“Get to LA. Ring me.”

There’s a pause while he listens.

“Thought you might be. Ring this number when you get here.”

He cuts the call. His glance skewers me as though I’m already a packaged lump of meat. “Put her in the cold store.”

The door on the cold store is a foot thick, with one of those locks that shunts iron bars into holes top and bottom, worked by a single lever on the outside. Thankfully, no blast of cold air hits me as it’s yanked open. The white paint on the interior blockwork is yellowed and peeling. High above there are rusting rails where meat must have once hung, but there are no hooks. Neither are there windows, and if there was once a handle on the inside of the door, it’s not there any longer. I cast my eyes around, checking for anything I can use to abrade the plastic handcuffs, but the place has been swept clean. Not for my comfort, I’m sure.

I’m tipped to the ground, my ankles are secured with a zip tie, and duct tape is wound several times around my face, covering my mouth and securing my jaw closed, leaving no doubt that they want me to be silent. They leave, and the door slams, enclosing me in darkness so complete my eyes invent shadows. Tears of rage and frustration rise in the darkness, and spill at my total helplessness. I roll onto my side, trying

every which way to rip the tape, but without something sharp, it's useless. I have no doubt that this is where I will end my days. I only hope Dad knows what he's doing, because one thing is sure. They won't trade. If he gives himself up, they'll kill all of us.

In the dark, my ears are tuned to the hollow echoes of an empty space. As there is nothing else to do, my mind scoots over every moment that led me here, including a belated realization: when I'd booked my last-minute plane ticket, there had been only two seats left, at the front of the plane. Yet Greg had a seat behind me. Does that mean he'd booked a ticket *before* I'd called him? Had he known Sammy was missing before I did? A groan of denial forces its way up the back of my sore throat. I curl into a tighter ball, as if that will help. I've slept with Greg, trusted him, put my faith in him, and he's one of them?

Just how huge and insidious is this pedophile network? I shiver a little, realizing I must have lost my tail by accident when I met with Dad in Philly, that first time, by rushing for the train instead of driving. That's why Dad had destroyed my phone on arrival. And I *had* eventually led them to his place, exactly as planned, only I spoiled their little entrapment plan, and Dad went underground again. That's why they took Sammy. That's why they've picked me up. They wanted to put Dad in prison, make him suffer, but they've run out of patience. Now they just want him dead. And everyone else who's involved, including me, and probably Laurie's whole family.

I shuffle over and wedge my back into a corner. I have no idea how long I wait, in the dark, bound like a Christmas

turkey. After a while—several hours, I guess—I’m freezing, and every joint in my body hurts from enforced immobility. The pain is indescribable. Let no one suggest you can get out of this kind of situation. You can’t. And even though I’m not even *trying* to break the plastic, the tiny movements I make, easing from one ache to the next, cause the cuffs to dig further into my wrists and ankles.

I might even have slipped into a state verging on catatonic by the time they come back. It certainly isn’t sleep. A sound like a shot physically jolts me as the door is unbolted and heaved open. The dim lighting in the warehouse is like brilliant sunshine to my half-blinded eyes, and I wince, my eyes watering. I blink rapidly as my eyes adjust to the shadow in the doorway. I recognize the bulk of Greg’s body and, as he comes closer, I make out a faintly sardonic smile.

“Goodness,” he says mildly, crouching down. “We are in a bit of a pickle, aren’t we?”

Fury must be shining from my face, for his lips quirk with amusement. He pulls a knife from his belt, flicks it open, and cuts the zip ties on my ankles and wrists. I grunt from the instant pain of release, and scrabble with numb fingers for the tape on my face.

“Keep still,” he advises, and eases the knife under the tape by my cheek, slicing it carefully. He pulls the gag away, and I stretch my jaw somewhat carefully. He seems undecided about how to handle the rest, but I’ve had enough of this. I grab the loose ends of the tape, grit my teeth, and rip it away, tearing hair out by the roots.

“Ouch,” he says, wincing, then hauls me to my feet and envelops me in a bear hug. “Damn, girl, I was worried I wouldn’t find you in time. Let’s go, before someone comes to check on you. Can you walk?”

I move gingerly, and nod as blood begins to circulate.

Is Greg here to rescue me, or is this just another ruse? At this moment I don't know, but I have to get out of this place. I can give one man the slip, when I need to, but not several of them, so it's a no-brainer. Go quietly. Do what he says.

"How did you get that plane ticket?" I ask.

"When you got one, I just followed."

"They were all gone, except one at the front."

He rubs his thumb and finger together briefly, in a way that says money gets you anything. He could be telling the truth. Who knows? He makes his way quickly to the entrance, surprisingly light on his feet. He cracks the door open and peers around it before flooding the space with a wedge of pure daylight. I didn't know daylight could look so good, and realize I hadn't expected to ever see it again.

"What day is it?"

"Sunday." He glances at a watch. "Ten a.m."

"Jesus."

"Sorry I didn't get here sooner."

He runs to a small side gate some twenty feet away from the one we'd come in through. I limp hurriedly along behind, massaging my wrists and face, trying to get some feeling back. There's a substantial padlock hanging on a bar, which he secures behind us.

"Did you pick that?"

"Padlocks are for wusses. I could teach you. Here we are."

His rental car is a carbon copy of the one I'd been hoisted from, hopefully with different plates; I really don't want to believe he's in it with them. But I don't recall the number, and the bad guys have my purse. We climb in and drive off. I breathe more easily when we're several blocks away from the one-time slaughterhouse.

"Why did they leave me there alone? Why didn't they leave a guard?"

Greg shrugs. "Probably only have a small team over here.

And you wouldn't have gotten out of that room if someone hadn't opened it from the outside."

I shudder. They could have just left me there to die. Then I jolt upright. "Sammy! What if he was back there, where we were?"

"He wasn't. I wasn't about to walk into an ambush, so I scoped the place out for heat signatures before coming in."

His head indicates a black plastic case on the rear seat. It could be a thermal imager. It could be a machine gun, or dirty linen, for all I know. And where did he get it from? "You could see me with that?"

"No, but I knew you were in there, so assumed it was somewhere insulated. Either that, or you were already dead."

Is he for real? I'm still wondering if my rescue is a ruse, but even if it is, I'm inordinately relieved to be enjoying the sensation of freedom, of still being alive. It might be false security, so the sooner I lose Greg, the happier I'll be. I have to learn to look out for myself. It's amazing that Dad has managed to stay alive all this time. I've been involved for just a few weeks, and I'm learning the hard way to trust no one. Up to this point it hadn't occurred to me to get a gun, even though I'd advised Laurie to do just that.

Roads are hurtling by, and I haven't a clue where we are. "Where are you taking me?" I ask.

"Your sister's. That's where you were headed?" He gave a brief smile. "You'll be safe there for a couple of days."

"How do you know that?"

"You'll see. But we need to hook up with your dad. Do you know how?"

If he has an ulterior motive for rescuing me, he just revealed it.

"The thing is, we're all running around avoiding each other," he carries on. "At the very least, we need to let him know he only has one kid to worry about, now."

"I'm not a kid," I grump.

"You're *his* kid. Doesn't matter how old you are."

Well, that's true. "So, how are we going to find him? I've lost both my phones, and he's pretty good at not being found. Speaking of which," I ask casually, "how *did* you find me?"

A faint smile emerges. "I bugged you, of course."

"Bugged *me*?"

"Well, your sneakers, to be precise. A tiny tracking device. It only works in close range. When your phone went offline, and I found your hire car had been returned to the airport, I started trawling outward from the last location I got from your phone. I had to trawl quite a few hours before I got a signal, and that was pretty faint."

I glance down at my feet. "What else of mine did you bug?"

"Your purse. Your cell. Oh, and a few other bits and pieces."

I almost chuckle. I still don't trust him, but damn. "Did you call my burner?"

"No. I guessed they took it. Do you recall your dad's number?"

"No. Who does? He changes it for a hobby. But they already called Dad on the burner. He should be here by now. He'll give himself up to them."

"He's not that dumb. My guess is he'll angle to get Sammy out, first. That's what he's about, you said? Saving kids? Them taking two hostages wasn't bright. And leaving you in that place without a guard was dumb, too. Overconfident. We need to let your dad know you're out. He can bargain to get Sammy back, and if there's an exchange set up, Sammy will be safe. His kidnapping is all over the news, so they're unlikely to go after him any time soon. Kids are easy come by, and it's unlikely Sammy would be able to identify anyone well enough to get a conviction."

"He's only six, but he's not stupid."

“No, but when they take kids, they drug them up to the eyeballs.”

There’s a grim note in his voice, and for the first time since being rescued, I have the feeling he’s on the level. But I can’t risk getting that wrong. I swallow. “So, how do we find Dad?”

“Your sister’s got a burner, you said. Does your dad have that number?”

“I might have told him. I can’t remember.”

“Well, get the burner from her, and call your own. Let the bastards know you’re out.”

“Isn’t that dumb?”

“It’ll stir them up. Put them off kilter. They won’t know how you got out. Don’t tell them about me. I’m your ace up the cuff, doll.”

“Okay,” I say finally. I don’t have a better idea.

I decide to stick with him for the moment, especially if it helps get Sammy back. Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. I won’t hold my breath, but for the first time since Laurie called me this morning, I feel a smidgen of hope. If the bastards want Dad enough, maybe we can persuade them to let Sammy go. There are plenty more kids to abduct, as he said.

When we’re within spitting distance of Laurie’s, Greg pulls over to the curb. He grabs a pen from the dashboard and writes a cell phone number on my arm, before climbing out.

“Where will you be?” I ask.

“Close.”

Okay, so he’s as secretive as ever. “But I’m still bugged?”

“Yep. I can track you any time.”

That twinkle in his eyes was what had attracted me to him in the first place. I make a mental note to find said tracker on my shoes, and see if I can locate any more, although all I have is what I’m standing up in. I clamber over into the driver’s seat.

“Get my number to your dad if you get a chance. Off you go, then. See you soon.”

He slams the door, and in the mirror I see him looking after me as I drive away. Would he do that if he was working with them? But then, if they wanted to get me, they could pick me up any time, so I’ve got no choice but to play along for now.

And I’d still like to know how he got that plane ticket.

Laurie's house is besieged by reporters, and a cop guards the entrance. Yep, Greg's right about me being safe here for a while. I roll down the window and explain that I'm Laurie's sister, and when she asks for credentials, I tell her I was mugged yesterday, which isn't far from the truth. The cop is decidedly skeptical, but puts a radio to her mouth and calls up to the house. I'm waved through. Laurie cracks the door, to a barrage of camera action, and I slip in.

To be honest, I scarcely recognize her. I don't recall Mom so well, but I see her in my haggard sister now. The immaculate, superior icon of middle-class respectability has given way to a mediocrity of indeterminate age. It's the look of a day after the night before, sans hangover pills and makeovers.

"I thought you were coming last night," she says dully, uninterested in what might have stopped me. If she'd stayed up all night, it wasn't on my behalf.

"Jesus, Laurie," I say inadequately.

I wrap her in a hug, and suddenly we're both crying. When I pull away, Tim greets me with a curt nod and a glower, as if he knows it's all my fault his son is missing. I guess, in a strange way, it is, then I revise my thoughts. He must be suffering all the guilt in the world given Sammy was abducted on his watch.

Tim goes back to sit in front of a cartoon with Liza cuddled

close under his arm.

Laurie makes us a coffee as if she's on autopilot, her eyes seeing something beyond what's around us. "I tried to call you yesterday," she says. "Why didn't you answer?"

"I was feeling sick. I didn't want to come to you like that, so I booked into a motel. I chose a good one. When I went out to get something to settle my stomach, I was mugged, and when I got back my stuff was gone."

It didn't sound plausible to me, but her concern flashes briefly. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, but they took everything. I'm going to have to sting you for a loan to get home again. Which reminds me, I need to cancel my cards. If you're not using it, can I borrow the burner?"

She finds it in a mess of stuff on the kitchen counter. "Here, keep the damn thing. I never want to see it again. This is all Dad's fault. I hope he's pleased with himself."

I want to argue at her vicious words, but she's right. I check, but there are no incoming calls except mine. I go out to the yard and ring my own burner. It connects, but there's silence at the other end.

"Hi," I say brightly. "It's Deirdre Hamilton here."

I hear a muttered confab at the other end, then I recognize the voice of the suave, suited man. His tone isn't quite so cool, now. "How in hell did you get out?"

"Houdini's my middle name. So, here's the deal. Give us Sammy back, right now, or I'm going straight to the cop shop. There's an escort waiting right outside my sister's door. Real cops. I already know Sonja. And if you or any of the people who kidnapped me are on their books, or anywhere in the media, I'll identify you. I promise, I'll bring you down."

There's a long silence.

"You know you've just signed your death warrant?"

"You did that when you abducted me. I know the score.

You'll kill me anyway because I've seen you. And because I took that dead kid to the hospital so his parents don't go to their graves still hoping."

"You did that?"

"I did. And I'd do anything to get Sammy back. Even give myself up to you bastards."

"Are you for real?"

"You were never going to let me go, not after I'd seen you. My dad knows that, too. Give us Sammy. If you do that, the media circus outside here will all go away. I'll have to leave sooner or later, go back to Baltimore. You can grab me then. Use me to bargain for Dad. He'll give himself up to you in the hope of saving me, even though he knows you people are scum and will kill us both."

"How do we know you won't just up and disappear?"

"I won't. I want you to leave my sister's family alone."

The line goes dead.

I turn angrily on my heel, step back, and wince.

Laurie's right behind me, her eyes wide, her hand over her mouth. My sleeve has slipped, exposing a raw bondage burn on my wrist, and she's heard everything. Damn. Poor Laurie. I clutch her shoulders, holding her at arm's length, and say in a harsh whisper, "You can't tell anyone. If you tell Tim or the cops, you'll never see Sammy again."

She's gasping in short, panicked breaths. If she doesn't tell them, she'll be condemning me, instead. Her son or her sister? It's a choice she shouldn't have to make; but really, she doesn't have a choice. I shake her gently, then pull her into a hug. "You have to get it together, Laurie," I say softly into her hair. "I love you, sis. It's okay. I'd do anything to get Sammy back for you, and I'm not on my own. There are people helping me. Don't say anything to anyone. Please."

I hold her until she controls herself, and wipes her face.

I know she'll keep quiet.

The cops check in every few hours, but the twenty-four-hour mark has passed, and the dead look in their eyes tells me they don't have much hope. Their only hope, truly, was that Sammy had wandered off, in which case someone would have found him and brought him home by now.

Laurie doesn't blab, but the way she keeps looking at me, well, I'm surprised Tim or the cops don't spot it. She's existing at the edge of reason, on the verge of collapse.

I have a brief dialogue with Greg, tell him what's transpired.

And then we wait.

Three hours later, a cop car comes screaming up the road, and all hell breaks loose. The cop knocks at the door, and Laurie almost collapses. I open the door for her to find the cop beaming from ear to ear.

‘He’s been found,’ he says. I guess cops enjoy giving good news for once. ‘He’s in the hospital. He seems fine. I’m to take you over there, now.’

Tim passes Liza to me, while he and Laurie scramble into the cop car. Laurie turns back to me as they’re whisked away with full-on siren backing, her face flooded with tears. I smile and wave. The same tears spring to my own eyes: relief, joy, and foreknowledge of what’s to come.

“Where’s Mom and Dad gone,” Liza asks.

“They’ve gone to pick up Sammy from the hospital. He wasn’t well, but now he’s better.”

“Oh,” she says on a yawn.

They stay overnight in the hospital, by which time Sammy is alert and wanting to go home. As Greg predicted, Sammy hasn’t a clue what happened. He was confused, dozy with drugs when he was found. He recalls being in the park and a nice lady giving him a popsicle, then waking up in the hospital. The police had apparently received a tip-off that Sammy had been seen in a basement where junkies congregate to wish away their lives, and sure enough, he was found asleep beside a man who had previous convictions for online viewing of

explicit child porn. He swore blind he didn't know how the kid came to be there. He just woke up when the cops raided. I might have felt sorry for him, except for his previous conviction.

It's all over TV: LITTLE SAMMY FOUND ALIVE! The media squeeze every bit of sentiment possible out of the story, as if they had something to do with it.

The cops preen themselves, and move on. Case solved.

The feds disappear back into the woodwork, but as they had quizzed Tim and Laurie relentlessly about Dad, I suspect they're keeping tabs, working on a vague suspicion that he's somehow involved. They would be right, even if they're absolutely wrong about the detail.

A few days later, we're still reeling from the aftermath of emotion overload, trying to make every day seem normal for them. Eventually they'll learn the truth, but by then the family unit will have woven its aura of safety back around the children, sealing them from lasting psychological repercussions.

Dad finally texts Laurie's burner.

CALL ME.

I do, instantly. "Dad, where are you?"

"Dee! Are you all right? They said they had you and Sammy. I was negotiating, then next thing you're there with Laurie on the TV, and so is Sammy. What happened?"

There's no getting away from telling him the truth. Or as much of it as I know. "I don't know what we're going to do, now, Dad, but they'll be after me again, soon as I leave here."

"They want me, not you."

"They want both of us now. I know too much, and I can identify them. My life isn't worth a dime. But yours is. There are plenty more kids to save." I laugh, but it rings falsely, even to my ears.

“Can you trust this Greg fellow?”

I’d told him about Greg saving me. “I really don’t know.”

“Text me his number when I hang up.”

I don’t really have a choice. Greg is either our ace in hand, or he’s the hanging man. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know yet,” he says grimly. “But they’ve already taken the woman I love, and if they kill you in Sammy’s place, I’ll never forgive myself. Nor will Laurie. The guilt would bring her down in the end. It might be that I don’t have a choice any longer. But you know the score. I’m older than you. I’ve had a good life. I’m okay with it. The feds will give you a new identity if I give myself up.”

“Dad...” My voice breaks.

“I love you, Dee. Try to make Laurie understand why I couldn’t get close to my grandchildren.”

“But—”

“No buts, little frog. I think it’s the end of the line. Stay there for a week, while I try to think of something clever. They won’t touch you there; the feds have the place under surveillance. Now, I have to go. Keep well. Be happy.”

I stand a while listening to the buzzing in my ear, then text him Greg’s number, feeling like a murderer.

Laurie and Tim are still reeling from the shock. But once Laurie has Sam back, her fear is for me. I’m sitting with her in the yard, watching the kids bounce on the trampoline. Her face is tight with worry. “But Dee, you have to go to the cops. You have to tell them what happened. Jesus’s sake, it’s your *life* we’re talking about!”

I take her hand and pat it, as if I’m her mom, which is what it feels like. “Dad’s on the case, and he’s got people behind him. We’ll think of something. The main thing was to get Sammy back, and we’ve done that. Dad loves you, you know.”

She knows first-hand, now, why Dad had kept out of her

life, but it's going to take a while for her to really process that information. Especially as it's unlikely that she'll see him again. I'm silent for a moment, contemplating the future, wondering if I'll have one. Because the one thing I do know is that the people we're dealing with will kill me and Dad without blinking.

"Laurie, love," I say finally, "remember what Mom said, right near the end? She said she was glad of the time she'd had with us. That goes for me, too. But you can't go to pieces. You have to be strong, for your kids. Besides, Dad's lived on his wits for a long time. Maybe he'll come up with something, yet."

But neither of us really believe that.

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When I hear the deep thrum of a motorcycle approaching, I rush to the door. Greg's found a bike somewhere, but to me it could be the same one he had in Baltimore: big, black, slouched back with tall handlebars.

Laurie runs, alarmed, as I'm opening the door. "What are you *doing*?" she squeals in dismay.

I shush her. "It's okay, he's a friend."

She's shocked. "A Hells *Angel*?"

"No, I don't think it's that gang," I say teasingly.

Greg puts the bike on the stand as I go out. My feelings toward him vacillate, but unless he's playing some deeper game, he saved my life and, inadvertently, Sammy's. I don't know whether he's a good guy or a bad guy, but that's always been the case, and I'm inordinately pleased to see him. He gives me a bear hug that pulls my feet from the ground. "Still with me, doll?"

"What are you *doing* here?" I hiss. "I thought you were my secret, my ace in the hand?"

"There's no one scoping this place out at the moment."

"How do you know that?"

He gives that enigmatic smile. "I need to get back to Baltimore, but I wanted to check up on you all first. Can I come in, or would she rather I didn't?"

I glance around. Laurie's staring, wide-eyed from the door, and I say, "Well?"

She steps back a fraction, an invitation of sorts. Laurie's looking like her old self, done up to the nines. You wouldn't have known her child had just been snatched from the jaws of hell. She's always been good at hiding behind a social facade, but at the moment she's fragile, frightened of every male who isn't Tim.

Greg fills their kitchen with his unique blend of machismo and engine oil. Tim hovers uncertainly. Liza and Sammy peer around the kitchen door, stunned and curious to see a real Hells Angel in their house, after being told all their lives that bikers who looked like him were *bad men*. Greg surprises me by pulling out two Analogue Pocket games consoles from his jacket, and winking at the kids. The sight of these treasures pulls them to him with a magnetic power, and after a silent query to Laurie, who can scarcely say no at this point, he has the kids hanging on his thighs as he shows them how they work. I didn't get a chance to warn him that Laurie is totally against electronic games, so this is a milestone in their lives. But I don't doubt she'll ration usage with a rod of iron once we're gone.

As we have coffee, I update him on how Sammy ended up back with us. Greg purses his lips, staring at me strangely. Well, I guess I just admitted that I expect to have quite a limited relationship with him. Greg tilts his head toward the garden. I make our excuses and lead him out.

He asks, "Has your dad been in touch?"

"He called me. I updated him on everything I know, which isn't much. I gave him your number."

"Is he still around?"

"I think he's gone back east. I'm hoping he's got some kind of plan, because I sure as hell don't. I thought Dad was just about rescuing the odd child from bad parents, but it's a damn sight more than that. What the hell did he do to upset these people enough to make them go after him like this?"

“I’m curious about that, too. I wonder if the feds are trying to track your dad to get closer to identifying the pedophiles, rather than put him in prison. I still wouldn’t trust them, though, they don’t like vigilantes. But it’s you I’m worried about. You were taken once, and we know they’ll try again, because it’s the only way they can get to your dad. Besides which, you more or less told them it was okay to come and get you.”

I grimace. “It seemed like a good idea at the time. But if we involve the feds, they can track me and get the pedophiles.”

“You’d set yourself up as bait?”

I nod miserably.

“Hmm. At the moment your life has the value of a gambling chip. And if they do use you to get at your dad, you won’t get out alive, you know that? You’ve seen them. I can get you a new identity. You can just disappear.”

“If I disappear, they’ll go after Sammy or Liza again.”

“Give me your dad’s cell. Seems I’ll have to call him.”

I hesitate for a moment, then text it to his burner. Greg nods as his phone beeps. “Okay. We need to work together, if we’re going to save your ass.”

That sounds hopeful, at least. As we stare quietly out over Laurie’s manicured lawn, I shiver, and eventually say, “I think I was living in some kind of fog, before. It’s like that life wasn’t real. When I saw that dead kid, something in me changed. And when they took Sammy, it became personal. Getting a few of these bastards won’t change the world, but I’m getting to think like Dad. They’re going to come after me anyway, but maybe I could bring some of them down when they do. It’ll mean I’ve done something good in my life.”

Grimacing, he says, “It’s your funeral.”

I know he means that literally. “What would you do? If you were me, I mean.”

“Run away, and live to fight another day. You can’t change

the world if you're dead."

"They'd go after Laurie's family. You know I can't do that."

"I know. But I care about you, not them."

"When May-Jane and your sister are bringing up your child, perhaps you'll get it. Not immediately. But something changes in you when it's family." I grimace, and ask a question that's been bothering me. "Greg, are you a federal agent?"

"Nope. But even if I was, I'd say that, wouldn't I?"

I smile. "Then, why..."

"If you hadn't pulled me in to your world, I'd be back on the road. When I said I've run drugs, I have. I'm not undercover anything, okay? I'm doing this because you got under my skin, and because I despise pedos." He adds, "But you'll be pleased to know, the asshole upstairs who's been monitoring you is a fed, not a pedo. If you want to contact them, you know how."

Greg heads back to Baltimore on the bike. He's missed the road, he says. After a while, I decide it's time to follow. I tell Laurie it's all sorted, I'm safe, the feds have it under control. I don't know if she really believes that, but what else can she do? Amusingly, what's bugging her now is me getting *friendly* with one of the biker fraternity. With all the bad guys out there in expensive suits, she's worried about the one who looks bad on the outside. That's stereotyping for you. Anyway, as sisters, we've just about used up our capacity to cohabit. So, I hug the kids, hug Laurie, snap an air kiss toward Tim, and drive myself back to the airport in Greg's hire car. As I leave, she has tears running down her cheeks, as if she knows this is the last time we'll see each other. I hope she's wrong. I hope Greg's wrong. I suddenly feel very alone.

The flight home is uneventful. I sit in the plane just like any ordinary person, when actually I'm changed in ways I can't explain. Home, when I get there, emits an overpowering aura of normality that seems to belong to someone else. How can I simply get back on the treadmill, knowing what's in store?

Wayne knocks on the door a few minutes after I arrive. Gone is any pretense of him being anything but a fed. He's blunt, arrogant, and efficient. I still hate him. But he's a tool in the system, there to be made use of.

"I've been told I can update you on a few things," he says, barging in uninvited.

"Better late than never," I say.

He perches on the arm of a couch, and ticks the items off on his fingers. "One, we have an ongoing operation underway, trying to locate a pedophile ring. You've blundered into it, somehow. We are going to put you in witness protection, until we can decide what to do with you. Two, you can't go back to work for Dugotti and Maas, not after information we've been given."

"If you mean Ellis and Leo," I say, startling him. "I was the one who found them talking to Sonja."

"Well, anyway, we think your connection via work might jeopardize our ongoing operation. Thirdly, we need to speak to Dr. Hamilton. If he contacts you, you're morally and legally obliged to let us know. Fourthly—"

“Stop right there.”

I tick the points off on my fingers. “Firstly, I choose not to go into your witness program. Secondly, I’ll work for who I want, and thirdly, you’re an ass if you think my dad’s going to hand himself over to you. Fourthly, well, you’re just an ass, so I’d like you to leave now.”

“But I haven’t—”

“Out.”

He shrugs, lopes to the door, and turns as he’s leaving. “On your own head. Maybe we won’t come in and rescue you next time you get involved in something outside your pay grade.”

“Wayne?”

“What?”

I punch him square on the nose. It’s not scientific. There’s a scrunching sound and he backs away, clutching his face. Blood drips through his fingers, and for a second, he’s stunned into silence. I wince and shake my throbbing hand. “That’s for the fake rape,” I say, and slam the door on his invectives.

I’ve had regular cancer check-ups most of my adult life, since that hereditary link was discovered in women with breast cancer. But when the letter arrives for my next one, I’m aware it’s a cover. The feds are going to fit me with a tracker. Just a little injection, apparently. I won’t feel it. So, in I go, and dutifully allow myself to be tagged like a migrating bird.

“Everyone will have one of these soon,” the FBI doctor tells me chattily as he anaesthetizes a small area of my thigh and shoves in a hefty needle on a gun handle. “It’ll cut crime down by half.”

Who’s he kidding? It’s one step further toward total subjugation of the little people, like social media and information gathering. In theory, good; in practice, another bar on your prison. And you can bet your bottom dollar if it does come in as mandatory, exemptions will be made for

politicians and those who can afford the bribe. And the bad guys will simply remove them before being bad.

A couple of days later the faint sting of the implant has faded. It doesn't hurt, and I'm left with a tiny lump beneath the skin, and a zit lookalike that will eventually disappear. I hate the alien sensation of knowing I'm fitted with a tracker, though; even if its purpose is to get the bad guys, and just maybe, save my life.

I go back to work, which is even stranger.

Such a lot has happened in a short amount of time, but Janine behaves as if it's another day in the office, as if she doesn't know her husband and Ellis are involved with pedophiles, as if she hasn't a clue. I hate her for that. She'd watched the search for Sammy on the TV, like the rest of the nation, but hadn't realized, apparently, that my absence was because Sammy's mom is my sister. She's loving that connection, and uses the information mercilessly with her clients. She offers sympathy, joy at Sammy's unexpected return to the bosom of his family, and asks if I need time off. I want to slap that glee right off her face, but I say no, I'd rather be at work. In fact, it probably is better than sitting around at home waiting to be snatched. The feds might be tracking me, but I have no great faith in their ability to get me out of this alive.

"So, back on Duke Leighton's case," she says brightly. "You're getting some great information. Keep up the good work."

I guess putting me back on the street makes me an easier snatch than sitting here in the office, but it's not very subtle. I can't help pushing my boundaries. "I thought Ellis was going to do that from now on?"

She stops short, taken aback. "Why on earth would you think that? The thing is"—she leans forward and lowers her

voice—"he was accused of downloading child porn. He didn't, of course. He was set up by a vindictive client, so we helped him out. He tried to get his job back, but he's on the network as a pedophile, even if they cleaned his name from the register, and we can't afford to have him working for us. It could rebound."

I don't mention that only last week I'd seen Leo and Ellis being all back-patting chummy, and with Sonja, who's *definitely* with the bad guys, so who does she think she's kidding?

Greg is keeping away from me. Maybe he's had enough, and has simply avoided the issue by going back on the road, and I haven't heard from Dad, either. If he's got some plan cooking, I'd be pleased to know about it. It's strange to be contemplating my early demise; surreal, like a nightmare without the terror. Of course, I don't actually want to die. I want to go out moaning about my joints in old age; not now, when there are things I haven't done. Lots of things. Dying wasn't part of my more immediate life plan. It's only now that I contemplate my non-existent bucket list, I realize I've done nothing to balance the grand scales on which I might be judged—good, bad, or the shades between. My life has been a bland, unspiced dish. I've been a nobody. All those things you're supposed to want to do before you die—well, I'd vaguely like to do lots of things, but nothing specific comes to mind. Am I that much a waste of space? What's my life been about up to now, anyway?

~ 45 ~

For the next few days, I do a good job of not caring about Duke Leighton, and he does the same for me. Our brief interaction hasn't made us lifelong buddies, though I'd hazard a guess he put two and two together about Sammy being related to me. Then, a week later, after a long brain-dead day of sitting around in my car watching Duke's front gate, I'm on my way out of a burger joint, when a thickset man grabs my arm companionably and walks alongside, whispering, "Be good. Don't make a fuss. Don't make me hurt you."

Something in my brain freezes. I was kind of expecting this, but not yet. He walks me to a secluded corner of the lot, where a car with blacked-out windows lurks. A rear door swings open as we approach. "In you go," he says conversationally.

I grimace and climb in. He slides in after me, and I find myself wedged between two hefty goons. The man who'd grabbed me grins and dangles some plasticuffs from his fist.

"You don't have to do that. I'm being good, like you said."

"Lean forward." This time his tone means business, so I lean. He cuffs my hands behind my back. Then comes the inevitable duct tape over my mouth. He pulls out an electronic wand, waves it over my body, and understanding dawns. Of course, they know I'm tagged. They've probably been tracing me, too. The feds just made it easy for them.

My shoes bleep, he removes them. My bra bleeps. What?

Greg's face appears in my mind's eyes. The goon grins, slices the straps with a knife, and thrusts the mutilated brassiere in one of the shoes. While he's passing the wand over me again, he has a good fondle under the T-shirt, more to upset me than for enjoyment, I'd guess. My jeans bleep. He unzips them, and the two of them struggle to get them off me. He runs the sensor over me again, and my thigh bleeps. Shit. He puts on a sad-clown expression, shoves a cloth under my thigh, presumably to protect the upholstery, buckles the seat belt around me, and produces a razor blade.

"This isn't going to hurt. Much," he says.

My knees are spread, my feet trapped between theirs. The other guy's arm locks around my shoulders. He trails around with the electronic meter to find the spot, and spies the zit. I grit my teeth. This time there's no anesthetic, and it's not a quick stab, but a deep cut. When the razor blade sinks into my thigh, I convulse, then mowl with pain as he hooks out the capsule with a greasy pair of round-nose pliers. He slaps tissue on my leg to soak up the blood, then covers the wound with duct tape.

I have tears running down my face. I hope they think the tears are all about the pain; they're not. I'm terrified. As Greg said, I'm not going to get out of this alive.

The takeout, along with most of my clothes, the tracker, my purse, and my car keys, are shoved into my own car, and we pull out of the parking lot into the traffic. The guy on my right wipes my face down. Not out of compassion, but so the duct tape will stick over my eyes.

We drive for a good hour, maybe longer. Time is difficult to assess when you're judging it on how desperate you are for the bathroom. But eventually we swing up a steep slope, do a tight loop, and stop. A private drive, I suspect. I'm hauled out and marched across tarmac in my bare feet. There's a change in the atmosphere, and I'm inside, with carpet under my feet.

I'm prodded down carpeted stairs, to a carpeted room. The duct tape is ripped off my face, the plasticuffs snapped. I find myself in a bedroom with dinosaur wallpaper and a huge four-poster bed draped with white lace. It's a weird mismatch of decor.

The pretty guy in the upmarket suit appears briefly in the doorway, his face as expressionless as it was last time we talked. He doesn't waste words. "Do you know where your dad is?"

"No. Not since his last place burned."

"Can you contact him?"

"No. You've got my burner."

"You don't seem scared."

"I'm not scared. I'm terrified."

He says nothing more, just gives me a pokerfaced once-over before leaving.

Traumatized might be a more apt description. It would account for my dissociative ability to function, while inside I'm screaming with fear.

The goon who kidnapped me points. "Bathroom's in there. This room's got twenty-four eyes-on surveillance. If you damage anything, we'll hurt you. If you try to get out, we'll hurt you. If you don't eat, we'll hurt you."

His glare reinforces the message.

I get the message and rush to the bathroom as the door closes behind them. I double over and pant. A single sob escapes. I gulp hard, take in a deep breath, and try to avoid losing it altogether. I manage to put the lid back on the panic box and return to the bedroom. I try the door, and rap my knuckles on it. It's not only locked, but completely solid. I suspect the room is soundproofed to hell.

As I'm only dressed in thin panties and a T-shirt, I rip a sheet off the bed and wrap it around me. It lends a false sense of security. Aside from the massive bed, there's just a mirrored

dressing table sporting a small TV. In one of the drawers, I find kid's pajamas in various sizes, and some stuffed toy animals. Bile rises in my throat as I realize the real purpose of this room.

Several days pass in a strangely calm routine. I'm on death row, locked in a comfortable room, waiting for execution. No one knows where I am. I'm on my own. I watch TV. There's nothing about me disappearing.

I sleep. I wake. I worry. But there's nothing I can do.

Three times a day the door opens and a muscle-bound thug indicates for me to move into the far corner while a middle-aged woman silently leaves a tray of food on the dresser, and removes the remains of the previous one. Does she do this when it's a kid in here, crying for its mom, I wonder? I assume I'm at the residence of the pretty guy, in specialist accommodation only his inner circle is aware of. I wonder if there are more rooms like this, for hire, maybe, or whether I'm simply messing up his sex life by occupying his personal playroom.

Inadvertently breathing in the stench of corruption, envisaging what traumas might have unfolded in this room, I understand why Dad got involved. It must have started, all those years ago, with a simple desire to rescue a baby from his murdering mother, escalating from there into full-on vigilante mode.

Outwardly I'm compliant. I don't have the strength card, like Jessica Jones, and I'm not kung foo Sue. Inwardly I'm seething with frustration. I hope Dad, or the feds, or Greg, or someone, gets these guys. I don't exactly give up hope, but my getting out of this situation alive seems a slim possibility. The only way anyone is going to find me is to set up an exchange for Dad; at which point we will both die. I have no illusions.

I guess I'm being monitored. I pace the room, wanting to

scream. Wanting to kick the shit out of something, but I'm too scared of physical retaliation. They won't kill me until they get Dad, but they sure as hell could hurt me. I'm not making peace with myself. I'm not proud of myself. I wish I'd been a better person, all around, like Dad. I hope dying doesn't hurt too much. And I hope that whoever sets up the exchange makes sure to take some of these perverted bastards out with us.

I suspect contact has been made by now, that I'm being discussed like a parcel ready for delivery. The big questions are obviously *how and where*, and *how damaged will the parcel be at the point of delivery?* I had almost expected to be raped before the end game, but maybe these guys all like children, and my boobs just don't attract. How damaged I will be *after* the exchange, of course, is probably a matter for the angels. I think I'm justified in having lost faith in the feds, after the tracker fiasco. And it's strange how the mind keeps on working, planning, making light of a situation that isn't light at all. Dad always said that things don't get better by wishing, but now's the time I wish my fairy godmother would pop out of the woodwork.

On day seven, too early for breakfast, a man I haven't seen before comes into the room. He's wearing camo combat gear and carrying a handgun. He throws plasticuffs at me, and orders, "Put them on."

"Game on," I quip, and ratchet them with my teeth, while ice trickles through my veins.

~ 46 ~

With a bag over my head, my hands cuffed, and hard hands clutching my biceps, I'm led upstairs in just the panties and T-shirt I'd arrived in. I shiver in a fresh breeze. I sense people around, hear the crunch of boots on gravel, hear the metallic sound of guns being primed. There are few words spoken; I suspect the detail has already been thrashed out. I breathe the scent of pines and machine oil with the knowledge that I must make use of my senses while I still have them.

Something goes quiet inside me.

After the long limbo of waiting, it's a relief to be moving.

In the car, I'm sandwiched between two men, and my imagination paints the scene out of a movie: gangsters' cars littered with men and machine guns, pulling away in a spatter of stones and noise. I sense at least three cars, but when we pull away it's quiet, controlled.

What are you supposed to think of before dying? I try to recall my childhood, with Dad and Mom and Laurie, but somehow the image won't gel. All I can think of is a future in which Sammy and Liza grow up without their favorite—only—aunt, who used to buy them candy and the kind of cheap toys their parents didn't approve of. In a very short time, they won't even recall what I looked like.

I don't know how long I'm in the car, but at least my hands are bound in front, not behind, which makes no difference at all, except that it doesn't hurt so much. When we stop, there's

a long silence. Then I'm hauled out, and the bag is ripped from my head.

I find myself on a long country road, with corn stretching out on either side. I want to hear birdsong, see the sky once more. But the only birds around are crows, harbingers of death, and the sky is low and dark with cloud.

There are four cars in our cavalcade, and ten or more men with handguns or rifles. Are they all pedos, or just hired guns without social consciences? About a quarter mile down the road, I spy another cavalcade of several big, black cars. Feds? I don't know. I'm given a shove, and an instruction: "Walk."

I'm frozen to the spot, my legs refusing to move. A rough elbow shunts me forward and I force myself to start walking. The tarmac is cold beneath my bare feet, tiny stones piercing my soles as I walk alone down the middle of the road. And then there's Dad, walking out to meet me. My heart sinks and my knees buckle as I take in his face.

This won't end well for either of us.

As I walk, the prickle of fear between my shoulder blades increases. They are going to shoot me, for sure. How much time do we have?

Oh, Dad, I think, as our gazes lock. This isn't right. This isn't what was promised in those bright days before Mom died, when Laurie and I were contemplating futures, wondering whether to be ballerinas or nurses or pop stars. Tears seep out, despite myself, and as we get close enough for details to become clear, I see tears on Dad's face too. This is the big plan?

We meet, and his arms go around me briefly. My head falls on his shoulder, and I can't stop the sobs from heaving up from somewhere deep inside. At least they let us have this final moment.

"Buck up, froglet," he says. "It's nearly over."

Breath catches in my throat as he plunges a needle into my

thigh. There's a faint tinkle as he drops the used syringe onto the tarmac. He kisses my cheek, pushes me aside, and carries on walking toward the bad guys. Coldness gathers in my head, and I realize he's making it easier for me.

A single shot rings out.

I duck and swivel in time to see Dad flying away from me, spraying blood from a massive wound in his torso.

It's almost incomprehensible. The feds have shot him rather than let him go?

There are shouts of consternation from both sides. Everyone flings themselves on the ground, behind cars, on their knees, and all guns are pointed, with Dad on the ground, me standing in the middle like a neon target.

"Dad," I scream, and try to run toward him, but something belts me in the shoulder, and I spin to the ground. I'm still trying to crawl toward him as consciousness fades to a mayhem of shots and screams. I crumple, my bound hands still reaching toward my dad, who's lying there, on his front, his head twisted toward me, his eyes staring sightlessly.

Consciousness arrives silently, in the form of surprise, relief, and grief. They saved me, after all? But the feds took Dad out, so in a way the bad guys won. I hope they got some of the bad guys, too. I have vague recollections of hearing a barrage of shots, but whatever Dad had injected into me had worked damned fast. Gradually sensation returns. I force my eyelids open and try to focus on a white ceiling that seems to be slowly revolving. My shoulder, where I was shot, hurts like the devil. I must have moved slightly, made a noise, for hands close around mine. I look down. The patchwork comforter seems strangely familiar, as do the hands.

“You’re okay, Dee. You’re fine. You weren’t shot.”

It’s Dad’s voice, so I must be hallucinating, but he speaks again, squeezing my hand, stroking my hair. “I wasn’t hurt, either, love. It was all a setup. But the bad guys think I’m dead. They think you’re dead, too. You can wake up now; it’s all over.”

Tears seep out again, as this information penetrates. I never used to be so leaky. I make a noise that’s supposed to be a chuckle, but sounds more like a cough, and try to form words around a thick tongue. “You did it.”

“We did,” he corrects. “I had a bit of help from Greg.”

An hour later, when I’ve woozily managed to get myself into the shower, when the stench of the past week has been washed

from my body, I clamber unsteadily into clean clothes, still amazed to be alive. I find Greg sitting companionably with Dad in a small sitting room I've never seen before. He heaves himself to his feet to give me a hug. "Still with me, doll?"

"I'm not sure," I say, wincing, as muscles I didn't know I had, complain bitterly. "I'm either dreaming, or in hell."

"Hell?" he asks, amused.

"Well, it's the only place where you're supposed to get any fun in the afterlife. Damn, I hurt. Are you sure I wasn't shot?"

"A rubber bullet got you in the shoulder," Greg says. "I have to say, it was a fine shot, exactly as planned. You have a mighty bruise, in case you didn't notice, but hopefully no lasting damage. They didn't use real bullets until you were down."

"Did they get them?"

"The feds got everyone who was there. Two didn't make it, three are critical, and six are in custody. The feds had one wounded, but that was all. The other guys had big guns, but the feds had more experience."

"And me and Dad? How come we're here, wherever here is?"

"Well, that's the thing. The feds had one plan, the good doctor and I had another. Your Dad offered to give himself up to them on condition they did the exchange. They refused, until he suggested the rubber bullets to take down you and him. They liked that idea."

"We were right in the middle! We could have been shot for real!"

Greg shrugs. "We weren't exactly overrun with options. But this way the feds thought they'd maybe get you and your dad, and if not, you'd be out of their hair. The shooting was over in minutes. It got a bit crazy, what with the arrests, and ambulances grabbing the dead and taking the wounded to hospital."

“I don’t understand how you could even have been there.”

“I had a chat with your dad before he handed himself to the feds.”

“You bugged him?”

He looks affronted. “Would I do a thing like that?”

I give a faint chortle.

He smiles. “Good girl. Anyway, me and a couple of guys I know listened in on the activity. Once the ambulances were called, we were on our way, too. We made sure you and your dad were put in the right one. An agent got in the back with you, and we put the siren on and zoomed away. We stripped him down to his underwear and kicked him out half a mile down the road. He was mightily miffed.”

I feel a faint smile lurking at the way he tells the story.

“Was it Wayne?”

“No.”

“Shame.” I would have enjoyed envisaging his fury and indignation.

“The thing is,” Dad says, “you don’t get to go back home and pick up where you left off.”

Greg adds, just in case I hadn’t gotten it, “You and your dad are now dead in the eyes of the bad guys, and on the FBI’s wanted list.”

I take a better look around the room. There are one or two bits of Dad’s past lying around. The bits he managed to rescue before torching his last place, presumably. “Is this yours?”

“For now.”

“Does Laurie know? That we’re alive, I mean.”

“This didn’t get into the press, which is amazing,” Dad says. “So, she won’t know anything has even happened. We need to think about how to handle it. It wouldn’t be fair to leave her thinking you’re dead, but you can’t see each other, not for a while, if ever. She’ll probably be monitored by the feds from now on, because she’s the only connection to us,

now you've disappeared. Sammy and Liza are unlikely to be targeted again. I don't suppose you can tell us anything about the place you were kept in?"

I tell them what I know, and what I suspect, but it isn't much. "So, we got them?"

"What, the pedo ring? Maybe some. The ones who had you, and were working the exchange, were mainly hired grunts. The smooth guy you described wasn't in the net, so the pedophile ring has been dented but not broken."

"I could identify him," I say grimly.

Dad nods. "It's our hope that you will. From what you say, I suspect he's fairly prominent in society."

"What about Leo and Janine and Ellis and Sonja?"

"Sonja was discovered with her throat slashed. Whoever did that was probably cutting the link. I'd hazard a guess she was the one who kidnapped Sammy, so he might have been able to identify her."

"And the others?"

Greg shrugs. "They might be implicated, but with Sonja gone, there's no connection, no proof. My guy says the feds are going to keep tabs on them for a bit, but they don't have unlimited resources. Now you and your dad have disappeared, the link the feds thought they had is gone, too."

"So, we didn't really achieve a lot?"

"We saved Sammy, and we're still alive," Dad reminds me.

"But you can never go back to your old life," Greg says. "The feds still want your dad, and now you've become an accomplice they'd find some way of sticking you inside. Kidnapping children carries a hefty penalty."

I slump down into a chair, and close my eyes. It's all so much to take in.

Greg pats my hand, and I sense his smile through the words. "Welcome to the other side, doll."

What now? I wonder. But in truth, I know. What Dad's into, I'm into. He'll find me a new identity; he seems to know how. I could go and carve myself another non-eventful life in some other city office, but having survived a near-death experience provided something I never had before: the knowledge that my life should matter in some crazy way.

A few days later, Greg takes off. "I've done my duty," he says. "My divorce is through, there's nothing to keep me here, now. I've been in one place too long. I need to feel the wind in my face."

He gives me a hug, then drives off, leaving a small, dissipating cloud of blue smoke on the still air. I still don't know what or who he is. He's a self-confessed wild card, but at least I know he's not one of the real bad guys. After he's gone, I find a burner he's left me, with one number in it. I suspect it's for emergencies, not just because I want someone to hold me, tell me I'm worth hanging on to.

Greg, and those guys who helped him commandeer the ambulance must know what Dad's up to, but it seems Dad and I are pretty much on our own, and whatever Suzanne did, I'm going to do now. Because one thing I can be sure of: Dad will always be looking for children to save.

Acknowledgments

To all those readers who enjoy my fiction, thank you. Without you, my stories would remain unread, thus defeating the object of the exercise. Thanks go especially to my loyal beta readers and especially to Angela Snowden, editor par excellence, for fine-tuning the finished typescript.

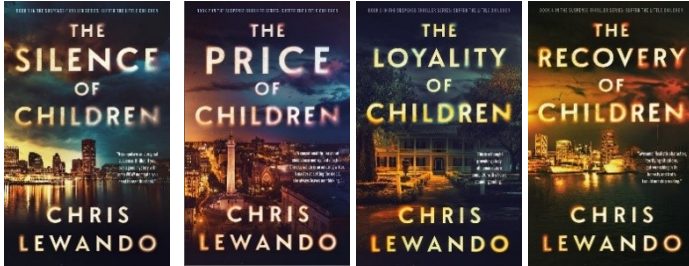
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If you enjoyed the book, I'd really appreciate an online review, preferably on Amazon or Goodreads.

If you find typos, errors, or storyline glitches, don't judge my creative spirit on them. Let me know so that I can put things right.

PS. Some reviewers like to write a synopsis of the plot, which exposes the endgame. This can be detrimental to the next reader's enjoyment of the work. It's best to reflect on the writing style, and your emotional responses: How did the work make you *feel*. Did it grab your attention? Did you want to keep reading? Did the characters come to life? Did you care about them, and wonder about their future after the closing lines? Would you read another work by the author?

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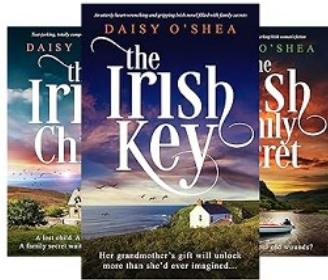
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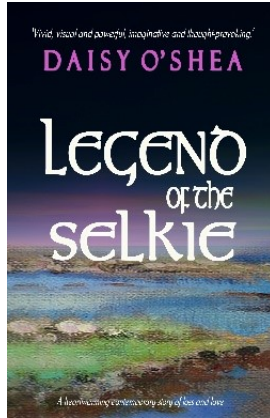
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‘This utterly heartbreaking, completely life-affirming series echoes down the generations, seeking answers to past mysteries. Written in dual timeline, the characters – past and present - come alive off the page.’



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Contact

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