



**EYE OF THE STORM**  
**by Sara Reinke**

© 2006 *Sara Reinke*

Names, characters and incidents depicted in this book are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of the author.

Cover artwork designed and created by Sara Reinke.

Cover art photo credit: Bina Sveda

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage or retrieval system without permission in writing from the author.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This story was written as a sequel to *Resurrection*, a novella-length serialized story originally released from Inara Press.

*Eye of the Storm* was never published in any format, electronic or print, and appears here in its original, unedited version. Although spellchecked and self-edited for content, it may contain grammatical or other errors. As with *Resurrection*, this was part of my short-lived foray into the genre of paranormal thrillers. I'm not an expert on police procedures and that's probably obvious in this story (ha, ha). So I hope you will forgive me any discrepancies or errors and enjoy this free copy of *Eye of the Storm*.

*He who fights with monsters might take care  
lest he thereby become a monster.*

— Friederich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Aphorism 146

## CHAPTER ONE

In the dream, Paul Frances meant to cut off the girl's fingers one by one, using what looked like a stainless steel set of gardening shears.

He could see her terror as he walked toward her. Her large blue eyes, tear-filled and ringed with smeared mascara, grew wide, and her voice escaped in high-pitched frantic mewls as she shook her head slightly back and forth.

"Vthhnnooo," she pleaded. She couldn't be more articulate, thanks to the gag in her mouth: a hard rubber ball held in place with straps of black leather that were belted around her head. He'd found it at a sex shop, in a fetish-toy discount bin.

*Perfect*, he'd thought, as he'd bought it.

The girl sat in a straight-back wooden chair that looked like pictures of early electric chairs he'd seen in criminal justice textbooks. It had arms with manacle cuffs built in so that her wrists were firmly bound. She wiggled her hands, twisting desperately enough that the edge of the cuff scraped her wrists raw and open.

"Vthhnnooo," she mewled again. "Theeeess...!" *No, please!*

She was naked, her pale skin pebbled with goose bumps. He saw her clothes lying in a tumble next to the chair, the remnants of a blouse with pale blue and lime green vertical stripes, a lacy bra, khaki skirt, bikini-style

panties. He'd cut them off of her piece by piece when he'd first delivered her there—the slowness of his actions, the methodical deliberateness with which he had undressed her had terrified her.

Her feet were crossed and lashed together. The end of a length of piano wire, a crude garrote looped taut about her throat and also bound her ankles. Every time she moved her legs, the noose around her neck tightened. She'd fought him enough to that point that the wire had cut through her skin in a thin, bloody seam. It had drawn tightly enough against her windpipe to leave her snuffling for breath. Her attempts to cry at him in implore quickly waned as she struggled to suck in air.

She'd been there for days, bound to the chair. Two lanterns set on opposite sides of the large room provided dim but adequate illumination. The ceiling was covered in crumbling, ruined plaster. The painted concrete walls were faded, chipped and cracked. The floor was littered in plaster and debris; he could hear it crunching beneath the soles of his shoes as he walked toward her.

*Perfect*, he thought.

He had found the shears on a small metal tray resting atop a wheeled dolly, like the sort dental hygienists use to wheel their supplies around examination rooms. There had been an assortment of picks, knives, scalpels and instruments there, all immaculate and glistening in the stark white light.

*Perfect.*

He felt no reservations about what he was about to do. Nothing in his mind screamed at him to stop—not even the part of him that had been a seasoned police officer, a homicide detective, for more than fifteen years. She couldn't pull her hand away, and he slipped the sharpened blades of the shears around her index finger.

She pleaded with him, her voice sodden and choked for breath, stifled around the ball. Paul flexed his hand, closing his fingers around the trigger grasp of the shears. He felt a moment of tension as the powerful blades closed, and then a sharp, wet, satisfying *snict!*

For a moment, less than a second, there was nothing but silence. And then he heard a soft *whap* as the length of her severed finger struck the concrete floor below, the faint scrape as the manicured tip of her fingernail hit the ground.

The girl began to scream. Nearly choked or not, garrote or not, she found the breath and voice to shriek hoarsely. She thrashed in the chair, shrugging her shoulders and when she tried to kick her feet, the line of piano wire whipped tightly. Her cry immediately dissolved into a strangled wheeze.

*Perfect.*

Paul slipped her middle finger between the blades. There was nothing she could do to prevent him. He knew it. She knew it, too. He looked at her face just as he folded his fingers inward again, closing them around the grasp, and to his surprise, he saw it was his younger brother, Jay in the chair. The blond girl was gone, and Jay was there, his large, dark eyes glassy with pain and fright and shock, his breaths

gasping and feeble, his teeth cutting deeply into the flesh of the rubber ball, his lips lined with a thin froth of frantic saliva.

“Theeeesss...!” Jay whimpered, as Paul closed his hand, bringing the blades of the shears together. *Please...!*  
*Snict!*

\* \* \*

Paul sat bolt upright in bed, his eyes flown wide, his body covered in a clammy sweat. His breath was caught somewhere in his throat, a loud, sharp gasp, and for a moment, he had no idea where he was. All he could hear was that soft, resounding *snict!* and all he was aware of was the sensation in his hand, the tension against his palm as he had closed the blades of the gardening shears together against Jay’s finger.

That it had been a nightmare at first eluded him. If he’d suffered nightmares in the past, his wife, Vicki, would always wake him up. He’d groan aloud or squirm too much, something to let her know his distress and she would dig her elbow into the meat of his belly or the small of his back to rouse him.

After a long moment, he realized. He remembered.  
*There is no Vicki. Not anymore.*

He was in bed—not the bed he’d shared with Vicki for twenty years, but a different one, a new bed in a small apartment he called his home. There was no Vicki anymore. Their divorce had been finalized last month, but their separation had occurred almost a year ago.



*Ten months*, Paul thought, shoving the heels of his hands against his brows. *Ten months, three weeks, two days and fourteen hours.*

"Jesus," he whispered, kicking the covers back from his legs. A glance at the bedside alarm clock told him it was shortly after midnight. The night had only just begun, and he wasn't going to be able to sleep through another moment of it.

Again.

"Terrific," he muttered. He rose to his feet and shuffled out of the bedroom. He stopped in the bathroom and relieved his bladder in the dark, with the door standing wide open, his free hand propped against the wall and his eyes closed against a monstrous headache he could feel stirring behind his eyes.

Again.

"Terrific," he muttered once more. He realized his niece Emma was asleep across the hall, and the nosy spattering as he pissed might disturb her. He flapped his hand behind him and swung the door closed just in time to muffle the flush of the toilet, and the unceremonious *clang* as the toilet seat dropped closed again. It had been a long time since he'd had to conscientiously remember to do this, and yet he still did it every time by habit. *Vicki trained me well.*

Emma was his brother, Jay's six-year-old daughter. She was staying with Paul while Jay and his new bride, Jo, were honeymooning in the Bahamas. They would be gone for two weeks, and had left only two days before.

Paul went into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator door. He stood, holding the door wide with his hand, bathed in the bright, golden glow of light spilling from within. He surveyed the contents for a long moment before pulling out a bottle of beer.

*Uncle Paul, you don't have much in here 'cept beer,* Emma had noted with a frown of disapproval on her first night in his company. When he'd pointed out that he had hot dogs in the fridge, and some week-old Chinese leftovers, her frown had only deepened. He'd taken her to the grocery, and, under her direction, stocked up to her satisfaction with a healthy assortment of apples, bananas, bread, cheese, turkey bologna, milk and more.

*Looks like a person lives here now,* he thought, nudging the door to the refrigerator closed with his hip. *There's a nice change.* He twisted off the bottle cap and tossed it into the trash can in the corner. He tilted back his head and drained nearly half the beer in a few deep gulps.

His living room opened out onto a miniscule balcony onto which he could manage to stand upright and out of the rain in some modicum of comfort. A "hibachi terrace," the apartment manager had called it, meaning it was wide enough to wedge a hibachi-sized grill on, but not much else.

Paul eased the sliding glass door open and stepped outside. He'd slept that night as he had every night of his adult life—bare-chested and in a pair of pajama bottoms. Spring had nearly waned to summer, but the night air was still cool against his skin. He lit a cigarette and drew in a deep drag. He exhaled heavily, watching the smoke huff

from his lungs in a sudden, billowing cloud. Emma would scold him if she caught him smoking. He'd promised her he'd quit nearly a year ago, but hadn't. She didn't understand. *Things went from bad to worse, and from there, they just kept getting shittier*, he thought. But you couldn't explain things like that to a kid—things like *divorce* and *alimony* and *visitation arrangements*.

*Or cutting off people's fingers*, a quiet voice in his mind whispered, and he closed his eyes as a slight shiver slid through him. The dream had been bad tonight. Really damn bad.

Again.

He'd grabbed his cell phone from the coffee table in the living room before coming outside. He flipped it open and dialed his brother. He didn't know if Jay could get cellular service in the Bahamas, but figured it was worth a try. After five rings and a burst of static, Jay answered, his voice hoarse and decidedly breathless. "Yeah?"

"Are you on top or bottom?" Paul asked, the cigarette wedged in the corner of his mouth.

"At the moment? Neither," Jay replied. "We just finished with the latter, and Jo's in the bathroom, freshening up before the former. What's going on?"

Jay knew his brother well enough to be completely unalarmed or perturbed by his call, just as Paul had known he would be awake to receive it. "Nothing," Paul said, dragging in on the cigarette again, listening to the paper hiss as the edges burned back, feeling the scrape of smoke against the back of his throat.

"You're smoking," Jay observed.

"I am, yes."

"I know it's moot to keep pointing this out, but I didn't raise you from the dead so you could kill yourself with that shit."

Thirteen months ago, Paul had taken a bullet in the chest, a straight shot delivered nearly square to his heart by a serial killer nicknamed The Watcher. Paul had died within five minutes of receiving the wound. His wife, Vicki, had been there to see it; she had watched him die.

And then, she'd seen him come back to life—even though she couldn't or wouldn't admit it.

Jay Frances could raise the dead. One touch was all it took to restore life to even long-since cold flesh. Paul had always known about his brother's extraordinary ability, and on that day thirteen months ago, he had experienced it for himself.

"Emma's fine," Paul said into the phone, ready to change the subject, unwilling to think about that for too long, much less talk about it. *Just like Vicki.*

"I know," Jay said. "You wouldn't call me with bullshit small talk if she'd cut off her finger or something."

His words, meant in jest, sent a new shudder through Paul. The cigarette dropped from his hand, tumbling to the decorative hedges below.

"Paul?" Jay asked. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Paul said, closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose. "I think so. Probably. Hell, Jay, I don't know."

He'd called Jay because he'd wanted the comfort of his younger brother's voice. Jay was all he had left in the world. Their parents were dead, and now Vicki was gone. She'd taken Paul's daughters with her—sixteen-year-old M.K. and fourteen-year-old Bethany.

The dream had frightened him more than he was willing to admit, and he had called because he wanted Jay to tell him it was nothing; that even though it was the third time he'd had that dream—for three nights, he had imagined torturing the blond girl cuffed to the chair—and that on that evening, he'd imagined Jay's face as he'd cut off her fingers, that he was not going insane.

"It's alright, Paul," Jay told him gently, and at the kindness in his voice, the quiet measure of his words, Paul felt his eyes flood with sudden tears.

*I miss you, Jay,* he thought.

"Thanks for that, kid," he whispered hoarsely. He heard Jo's voice through the phone as she returned to the bed. "I...I'll let you get back to your wife now. Sorry I bothered you, man. It's nothing."

"You didn't bother me," Jay said. "Fifteen minutes earlier or later and yeah, you'd have been bothering me, but for now, we're good."

Paul managed a laugh, shaking his head. "Talk to you later." And then, because the image of Jay's eyes from his dream, filled with fear, glazed with pain and shock, flashed through his mind, spearing his heart, he added, "I love you, Jay."

*I would never hurt you, Jay. Jesus, not for anything. Not for the world. I promise. I swear to Christ.*

"I love you, too, man," Jay said.

\* \* \*

"Lieutenant Frances, do you see any patterns in the recent increases in violent crime in the city?"

Paul blinked at the pretty young reporter in front of him, snapping out of a weary, absent-minded reverie. He was exhausted; three days with less than twelve hours of sleep total were beginning to take a toll on him. And he'd admittedly been distracted by the glimpse of flesh visible where the top buttons of her blouse lay undone and open, draping her collar back in stylish but casual fashion toward her shoulders. Her white shirt was open just enough to award a glimpse of cleavage visible in that narrow margin of space, with her pert and decidedly perky breasts just beneath. He had imagined for a fleeting moment, that in the stark light from the camera nearby, that he could see somewhat through the linen of her blouse, and just make out the floral details in the lace trim outlining her bra cups.

"Lieutenant Frances?" she asked, cocking her head at an angle and raising her brows expectantly. Susan was her name. Susan...something. For the life of him, he couldn't remember. He'd never met her before. She wasn't the usual newshound Channel 11 sent to the municipal center to interview him.

"I'm sorry," he said, shaking his head once. He was too damn old to be ogling. And she was too damn young. "Patterns, you said?"

The reporter, Susan, nodded. "In the recent increase in violent crimes in the city," she offered by way of prompt. It wasn't a live interview, or else Paul would have been in deep shit for his distraction. "You studied the same sorts of trends before cracking the Watcher case, and found a pattern no one else had identified. Do you see anything like that today?"

Paul smiled. She was a newbie, then. Probably fresh off the truck from college. The seasoned veterans of the local news scene never mentioned the Watcher case anymore. That was old hat; yesterday's stale headlines. Every once in a great while, he still fended a phone call or email inquiry from a documentary filmmaker or Discovery Channel program director wanting to interview him briefly about it, but otherwise, it was long since a closed file.

New reporters, however, seized upon it eagerly, just like Susan. The Watcher had been the kind of case to make or break careers. It had sure made Paul's—he'd first been promoted to the head of a task force assigned to apprehend the Watcher, and then, once the case was through, he'd been named Lieutenant.

*And then stuck here, in Public Affairs, another goddamn talking head for the department,* he thought, glancing beyond Susan and her cameraman toward Jason Stewart, his partner—a kid no older than Susan. *Some reward.*

"I think the recent homicides indicate an increase in drug-related activities in the city," he said to the camera. Jason craned his head to catch Paul's attention over the

cameraman's shoulder. He held up a piece of paper, waggling it at Paul. *Mention the tip line again*, it said.

*Get bent, Jason*, Paul thought, frowning slightly.

"Statistically, violent crime rates rise as the weather gets warmer. We're no different than any other major metropolitan area."

Susan pouted in unconscious disappointment. Paul could literally read her mind from the momentary—but admittedly adorable—expression. *There went my big scoop for the day*.

*Sorry, kid*, he thought, resisting the urge to remind her that not having a serial killer loose on the streets was a *good* thing, by most people's definition.

"Okay, I guess that's it, then," Susan said, as the camera light went out, and Paul blinked down at his toes, letting his eyes readjust without the blinding glare. When he looked up, there were still little polka-dots of shadow traipsing across his line of sight, and Susan, the pretty young reporter, was smiling brightly at him, her disappointment passed. "Thank you, Lieutenant Frances. I appreciate you taking the time to speak with me." She held a Channel 11 microphone in one hand, and thrust out the other. "It's really been a pleasure to meet you. I saw you on *Good Morning America* last year. The *Oprah* show, too."

He accepted her handshake, folding his fingers against her small, cool palm. To his surprise, she met his grip firmly, offering him a hearty pump, and not the limp-wristed, delicate sort he was anticipating.

"You're new with 11?" he asked, and she nodded.



"I just started last month," she said, and then she laughed, rolling her eyes. "I know, fresh-faced girl, big new city...it's very 'Mary Tyler Moore.' Everyone keeps telling me. Whatever the hell that means. I've been assigned the municipal beat, so you'll probably be seeing a lot of me."

She offered him her card. *Susan Vey*, it read. Again, Paul found himself all-too aware of the tantalizing view down the front of her blouse. Again, he caught himself noticing how pretty she was, and how young she was—and just how damn long it had been since he had been with a woman.

"I...I'll look forward to it, then," he said to Susan Vey.

As she walked across the broad, granite-tiled foyer of the municipal building toward the revolving glass doors, Paul found himself mesmerized by the *click-click-clack* of her high heels against the polished stone floor, and by the gentle, side-to-side swaying of her shapely buttocks beneath her skirt.

"You gotta love the newbies," he murmured.

"I hear you," said the cameraman with a laugh from beside him. He was loading his heavy camera into a padded carrying case, being mindful not to tangle the long, looping coils of wires as he did. Susan Vey was new, but this guy—David somebody or another—wasn't. Paul had seen him before, plenty of times. He was a good-looking kid in that stereotypical, blond-blue-eyed, Midwestern way. He and Paul had worked together long enough to exchange brief but friendly banter whenever they crossed paths.

"Yeah, well, at least she's got a nice ass," Paul remarked. What *was* David's last name? he wondered. He knew it; David had told him at least a hundred times. It was right on the tip of his tongue...

"She's my sister," David said dryly, his expression shifting, growing less than amused. Almost simultaneously, Paul remembered—and bit his teeth against a groan. *David Vey. Jesus Christ, there goes my foot in my mouth. Not to mention his foot probably up my ass.*

Paul blinked at him, feeling immediately stupid. "Uh," he said. "Sorry."

He turned and ducked into his department, his face flushed. "You didn't mention the tip line," Jason said as Paul breezed past his desk.

"Yes, I did," Paul replied. "Earlier in the interview. Twice at least."

"Hey, McGruff," said a homicide detective named Dan Pierson, leaning into the office doorway as he sauntered by. "Nice interview. I heard every word. I especially liked the line about her ass. You think that'll make the cut?"

"Yeah, get bent, Pierson," Paul replied, smiling in friendly enough fashion as he flipped the other man off. There had never been any love lost between Paul and Dan Pierson—and that was putting the matter kindly. What had started out as a not-so-friendly rivalry before the onset of the Watcher case had only grown more heated and bitter from there, and in the end, Paul had nearly seen Pierson fired for insubordination.

Pierson shook his head and laughed, disappearing from the doorway. As much as he despised Pierson, Paul wished like hell he could follow him upstairs to homicide. It wasn't that the public affairs gig was bad. There wasn't much work involved in it at all. After the Watcher, Paul had found himself an unwitting and instant celebrity. He'd done the local and national media circuits for months, and Robert Allen, the mayor, along with the entire city council had decided he should become some kind of spokesperson for the Metro Police Division. He'd received the Lieutenant appointment and a hefty raise. He had his own office with a nice window view, and a private parking place. It was a comfortable living, and that was precisely why Paul hated it. He'd been a cop the grand majority of his life. It was all he knew. There had been a time when nothing in the world had mattered more to him than his job.

Putting him in public affairs had been pretty much like putting him out to pasture, at least as far as Paul was concerned. Whatever enthusiasm he'd felt for his job, whatever ambition or satisfaction he'd taken in his work, was now all gone.

*Why do they call you that, Uncle Paul?* Emma had asked when she'd heard one of the other detectives call Paul "McGruff."

*It's a joke, kiddo, that's all,* Paul had replied. *You know, McGruff, the cartoon dog on TV.*

*Oh!* Emma had exclaimed, her eyes widening with comprehension. *Oh, McGruff! Take a bite out of crime!* She'd beamed in delight.

*Glad one of us is happy about it*, Paul thought. The other cops called him McGruff because they knew, just like Paul did, that his promotion had emasculated him. The name was a joke, but worse than that, Paul's job had become a joke. *He* had become a joke.

Jason was a pain in Paul's ass. He was one of those kids who had studied anything other than law enforcement in college, but then decided he wanted to be a cop when he grew up. Jason had enlisted in the force, but had never served a day in uniform or out on the streets.

"But the whole segment was supposed to promote the tip line," Jason protested, rising to his feet. "How the community can pitch in to help us solve crimes, how common citizens can become uncommon heroes, just by—"

"I have to go," Paul said, walking into his private office in the back of the department. He leaned over his desk and hooked his blazer off the back of his chair. He glanced at the photos of M.K. and Bethany by his computer screen and felt his heart momentarily ache. The girls came to spend every other weekend with him, and he could talk to them whenever he wanted to on the phone, but that wasn't the same as seeing them day in and day out, being a part of their world. He felt like little more than a spectator now, a cordial stranger to them.

"Go?" Jason asked, as Paul walked past him again, brushing close enough to force the younger man to scramble back a step. He had a dark, tousled mop of hair that never seemed to be combed, and preternaturally large blue eyes. Both features, along with his short stature and slight build,

lent him a nearly adolescent appearance. Paul fought a constant urge to card him.

"Yes, go. I have to pick up Emma from school." Paul shrugged on his jacket and glanced at his watch. "I'm late, in fact. See you tomorrow."

"But I—" Jason hiccupped in protest. Paul closed the office door smartly on him, cutting short his reply.

He walked briskly across the foyer and nearly plowed headlong into a woman walking hurriedly in the opposite direction, her arms laden with file folders. She was juggling these, an overloaded attaché case in one hand, a paper cup of coffee in the other, and her cell phone tucked between her shoulder and her ear. Everything fell in a loud tumble to the floor when she and Paul smacked together, and he yelped, dancing backwards as café latte splashed against his pant legs.

"Damn it—!" he snapped.

"I'm sorry!" the woman exclaimed, dropping to her knees and snatching up the coffee cup. The latte was spreading in a quick pool on the floor, and she grabbed at her fallen papers and files, trying to rescue them from ruin. "I'm sorry. I didn't even see you. I was busy checking my messages, and I'm late for a meeting..."

Her voice faded as she looked up at him. She smiled, her pretty mouth unfurling, softening immediately within him any aggravation he might have ordinarily felt. "Hi, Paul," she said.

"Hi, Brenda," he replied, genuflecting and helping her collect her things. "How are you?"

"I'm fine. My God, it's been a long time. A year, hasn't it?" Dr. Brenda Wheaton was the state assistant medical examiner. Her office was located in the building adjacent to Paul's. When he'd worked as a homicide detective, he'd enjoyed the pleasant occasion to see Brenda frequently.

"Almost," he said.

She was quite possibly the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, and he'd shamelessly harbored a crush on her even before he and Vicki had ever parted ways. But he had been married, and Brenda had been married, and that was all there had ever been.

Brenda had a long sheaf of creamy blond hair that she wore almost constantly in a ponytail fettered from the nape of her neck. She had large, dark brown eyes and almost elfin features. She was from Kentucky, "the backwater, Bluegrass hills," as she liked to say, and she had the most wondrous, lilting, melodic accent he'd ever heard.

She always smelled good to him, too, some kind of light, floral perfume she favored that lingered in the air around her, even after she'd leave a room. How a woman could spend her day conducting autopsies and surrounding herself with death, and still smell so absolutely wonderful was beyond Paul's comprehension.

"I'm sorry about your pants," she murmured. "I'll pay for the dry-cleaning. Just send me a—"

"Forget it," he said, shaking his head. "It's alright. It's my fault. I wasn't looking where I was going."

He helped her rise to her feet, offering her his hand and letting her slip her palm daintily against his. He offered her the stack of file folders he'd collected from the floor, and she smiled as she took them from him, balancing them against her hip. "So how have you been?" she asked. "How is your wife?"

"Divorced," he said. He meant it as a joke, but it came out sounding bitter, and Brenda's smile faltered.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"I'm sorry," he said almost simultaneously, his voice overlapping hers. "I didn't mean that like it sounded. It happened awhile ago."

*Ten months, three weeks, three days and two and a half hours ago, in fact.*

"Me, too," she said, and when he blinked in surprise, she held up her left hand momentarily, demonstratively to display her bare ring finger. "It's a long story, but it was for the best. I guess you know how that goes."

"Yeah," he said, nodding. *Brenda's divorced?* he thought, surprised. "Well, hey, if you ever feel like commiserating together, maybe over dinner or something, we could..."

He hadn't asked a woman out since Vicki had left him. Hell, he hadn't asked a woman out since he'd first approached Vicki more than twenty years ago. But some things never changed and as Brenda's bright expression faded, Paul fell silent, immediately sensing he'd just made a monumental ass out of himself.

"That's really sweet of you, Paul," she said. "But I...I'm sort of seeing someone."

"Oh," Paul said, nodding, stepping deliberately back and away.

"For about three months now," she said. "A detective in the homicide division..."

"Oh," Paul said, inching toward the doors, his shoulders hunched, his eyes cut toward the floor.

"Maybe you remember him? Dan Pierson?"

"Oh," Paul said, feeling momentarily punted in the balls. "Yeah, I remember him."

*What in the hell could she possibly see in Pierson?* Three months was a long time in the dating circuit. That took you definitely past the point of casual dinners and amicable pecks on the cheek. He tried not to think of Pierson kissing her, squelching his fat, greasy lips against Brenda's, or running his hands, his thick fingers up and down her trim, slender body, caressing her curves. The idea that Pierson might be sleeping with Brenda, slipping between her sheets and thighs every night, left Paul vaguely nauseous and more than vaguely dismayed.

"But I'd sure still like to—" Brenda began, and then a folder, which had been wedged precariously at best among the stack balanced at her hip tumbled to the floor, scattering a mess of autopsy photos around their feet. "Damn it!"

"I got it," Paul said, kneeling again. He scooped the photos together and froze when he glimpsed a stark headshot of a corpse lying against the stainless steel autopsy table.



Mascara remained, smeared and apparent on her cheeks. Her skin was the color of putty, a waxen, lifeless grey. Her face was dirty, blood-spattered and bruised. A gag had once been wedged in her mouth tightly enough before her death to leave the corners of her mouth torn. Her pale blond hair was matted with dirt and particles of broken plaster.

"Vthhnnooo," she had mewled at Paul in his dream the night before. "Theeeess...!" *No, please!*

Paul jerked, dropping the photographs as if they'd bitten him. He scrambled to his feet, wide-eyed and stunned breathless. *It...it's not possible*, he thought. *It was a dream. Just a goddamn dream...!*

"Paul?" Brenda asked, alarmed by his stricken expression. She'd started to genuflect, to collect the pictures, but rose again, stepping toward him. "Paul, what is it?" She cut her eyes toward the spilled photos, and then looked at him again. "Do you know her?"

"I...I don't..." Paul said quietly. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the headshot. It had fallen to the ground, but the girl's lifeless face continued looking up at him. Her eyelids hadn't been fully closed. He could see the milky whites of her irises, thin crescents visible beneath the overhang of her lashes. *Just a dream!* his mind screamed. *It's not possible! It was just a dream!*

"She's a Jane Doe brought in this morning," Brenda said, leaning down and lifting the photograph, holding it out toward him. "I've got missing persons running a check on

her, and I'm sending her dentals to the state lab. I can't pull prints from her..."

*No*, Paul's mind moaned at this. *Oh, God, no, it's not possible*

"...because someone cut off all of her fingers, and they weren't found with the body." Brenda tucked her fingertips beneath his chin, forcing his gaze to snap away from the picture. "Do you recognize her?"

"No," Paul said quietly, hoarsely. He stepped back, ducking away from her touch. "No, I...I don't. Just for a moment, she looked like someone...and I thought..."

Brenda's brows lifted in gentle sympathy. "You don't see these for awhile, and the shock of it feels brand new, doesn't it?" she asked. It took him a moment to realize she thought he was acting strangely because he'd gone soft since leaving the homicide division; that the images had affected him.

*More than you know, Brenda.*

"Yeah," Paul told her, forcing a smile. He held her files while she stooped, shoving the autopsy photos into the folder. She stood and smiled as he presented her with her papers again, that broad, strained smile still affixed to his face.

"You sure you're okay?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said. He hooked his thumb toward the doors. "I just...I gotta go. I'm keeping tabs on my niece while my brother's on his honeymoon..."

"He got married?"

Paul nodded. Christ, the last thing he wanted to do at the moment was exchange small talk. His stomach had twisted into a thick, painful knot, and he was afraid that at any moment, he was going to vomit. He was shaking; he folded his arms and stuffed his hands beneath the crooks of his elbows lest she notice. "Yeah, he's off in the Bahamas, and his little girl's staying with me. She's due out of school..." He spared his watch a glance. "...now, so I'd better..."

"Sure," Brenda said, nodding. "I'm running late, too. I should go myself."

Paul nodded again. He turned and walked briskly toward the doors, his gait stiff. "It was good to see you again, Paul," Brenda called after him, but he didn't turn or acknowledge her. He barely made it outside—through the revolving door and then cutting an immediate left. He clutched the balustrade of the terrace overlooking a row of decorative hedges and then retched.

## CHAPTER TWO

“So how was your day at school, kiddo?” Paul asked Emma.

She went to a private school out in the suburbs, someplace small and close-knit and far more expensive than Paul would ever pay. It cost his brother, Jay, nearly as much to send Emma to one year at the Sacred Heart Academy as it had been for Paul to attend one at college. Three years earlier, Emma’s mother, Jay’s first wife, Lucy had died, and Jay had done some major investing with the life insurance money—not the least of which had been setting up a trust account so that Emma could attend private, expensive schools for the rest of her days.

She sat in the passenger seat of his Explorer, the seat belt drawn in a taut diagonal across her white blouse, her hands folded neatly in the lap of her green-and-blue tartan uniform skirt. “It was okay,” she said with a shrug, her dark eyes turned out the window, watching the scenery go by.

He could tell by the tone of her voice that she wasn’t being totally truthful. He leaned over and tugged on one of her ponytails. “You want to tell me about it?”

She shrugged again, but sighed in resignation. “Jamie Alcross told me the Bahamas are in the Bermuda Triangle,” she said. “He showed me on a map. He told me ships and planes get lost in the Bermuda Triangle all the time. They disappear, and all the people with them, and no one ever

finds them. Planes, Uncle Paul. Daddy and Jo went to the Bahamas on a *plane*."

"But, Emma, we've talked to your daddy since they arrived in the Bahamas. Jo, too. They're both there, safe and sound."

Emma sighed again, rolling her eyes. "Yes, but they have to get on a plane *again* to come home," she said.

He blinked. She'd caught him off guard, and just when he'd figured he had the whole problem solved. *Goddamn it.*

He looked out the windshield again and drummed his fingers momentarily on the steering wheel. "There's no such thing as the Bermuda Triangle, Em," he said at last. "It's just a story people made up."

"How do you know?"

"Because it's like monsters," he said. "Flying saucers, Bigfoot and haunted houses. None of that stuff is real."

"How do you know?" she asked again.

He glanced at her. "They teach us that in police school."

Emma's eyes widened momentarily, and then she giggled. "No, they don't."

The corner of Paul's mouth hooked wryly. "Yes, they do."

"If haunted houses aren't real, then ghosts aren't real," Emma said. "And if ghosts aren't real, how come Grandma comes and talks to me sometimes?"

Paul's smile faded. Emma had been little more than a baby when his mother, Delores had died, and yet Emma

claimed to have dreams about her. She had told Paul that Delores Frances told her things, showed her things. It had been Emma's predictions—given to her, she claimed, by the ghost of her dead grandmother—that had helped Paul crack the Watcher case.

*And if ghosts aren't real, why in the hell was I dreaming about that dead blond girl, imagining I was the one who cut her fingers off? 'Cause that's all it was—my imagination. Just a dream.*

*Wasn't it?*

He turned away from Emma, looking out the windshield again. "There's no such thing as the Bermuda Triangle," he said again. "Your daddy and Jo are going to be just fine." He glanced at her again briefly. "I promise."

She looked back out her window. He couldn't tell if she believed him or not. This time last year, she would have accepted his explanations of things without hesitation or question. But every passing year brought Emma closer to that point in life when children came to the dismaying realization that grown-ups weren't always right; that they could lie, cheat, steal and hurt. *Or worse, just be wrong*, he thought glumly.

"Daddy says he wants to buy a house there," she said after a moment, pointing out the window as they drove past a large hillside. At the top of the hill stood a crumbling, hollowed-out building shell, the sprawling, dilapidated remains of an old hospital. A big billboard had been erected at the bottom of the hill. Letters that had been painted in red,

white and blue spelled out: *Coming Soon! Liberty Heights — Townhomes, Patio Homes and Luxury Single-Family Houses!*

"That's the old Liberty Sanitarium," Paul said.

"They're supposed to be tearing it down soon, starting new construction by the summer."

He hadn't realized Jay was considering buying property there. *He might have to wait awhile*, Paul thought. It was no great secret that Milton Enterprises, the contracting company that had purchased the land and planned to raze the existing building to begin work on the new subdivision, had run amok of local historical preservationists who hoped to save the ruins on site. The impending lawsuits and red tape could keep construction at bay for at least another year.

"What's a...sani...tarium?" Emma asked, carefully sounding out each syllable in the unfamiliar word.

"It's like a hospital," Paul replied. "They built them in the old days, like in the 1920s, for people who had tuberculosis." She looked both puzzled and unwilling to try wrapping her six-year-old tongue around that one, and he laughed. "It's a sickness, like the flu, only it's much, much worse."

"Do people die from it?" she asked.

"They did, yeah, way back then." Tens of thousands of people had supposedly died in Liberty Sanitarium, in fact. In its hey-day, it had been considered the most state-of-the-art tuberculosis treatment facility in the United States. The truth of the matter was, most people who entered its halls as a patient never emerged. At the height of the tuberculosis epidemic, it was rumored that one person an hour died

there. A special network of tunnels and chambers had been constructed beneath the building so that workers could store and transport bodies off the premises without the other patients seeing just how many of their fellows were dying.

"What does it do?" Emma asked.

"Toober...tooper...coolis..."

"Tuberculosis," Paul interjected gently. "I'm not really sure. I think it makes it hard for you to breathe, like a bad cold."

"Or smoking," she added pointedly.

Paul did not miss the thinly veiled hint. "Or smoking," he agreed.

\* \* \*

Emma looked out the window as Uncle Paul continued driving. They had passed the Liberty Heights billboard, but traffic was thick, and they weren't moving very fast. If she squinted, she could still spy a glimpse of the red, white and blue lettering through the trees behind them, just above the letters on Paul's truck mirror that read *Objects in mirror may be closer than they appear*.

She remembered the first time her daddy had driven her past that sign, and had pointed to the hilltop. "We're going to look at houses there," he had told her. "They haven't built any yet, but they will soon, and then we can buy one. What do you think?"

He had been smiling. She knew the idea of buying a new house, making a new home with Jo made him happy. He hadn't been happy in a long, long time—not really happy, not even when he'd said he was, not even when he'd



smile. He had missed Emma's mommy. It was like when Lucy had died, it had scraped something out inside of Daddy, leaving him raw and hollow and sad in places, and nothing had filled those holes until he'd met Jo Montgomery.

"It'll be closer to school for you," Daddy had told her. "And closer to the new hospital where Jo's working now."

They lived at Jo's house, but it was small, and Daddy wanted something bigger. He and Jo were thinking about having a baby. They hadn't said anything about it to her, but Emma knew still the same. Sometimes she could tell what people were thinking. Her grandmother would tell her. And Grandma had told her they wanted a baby.

Emma worried that maybe they wanted one because she'd been bad, and they weren't happy with her anymore. She was afraid sometimes that Daddy would love a new baby more than her, and that he'd forget about her. Grandma had told her that wouldn't happen.

*He loves you, lamb, more than anything or anyone in the whole, wide world,* Grandma had whispered inside Emma's mind, and Emma had closed her eyes, imagining Grandma's smiling face. *He always will.*

Grandma had promised, but Emma still wasn't sure—just like she still wasn't sure she wanted to move into a new house at Liberty Heights. Daddy had showed her a picture he'd printed off the internet—a *floor plan*, he'd called it, and he had pointed to a big open square on the page that he said was going to be her bedroom.

“It’s the biggest one on the whole second floor, besides mine and Jo’s,” he said. “See how big that is?”

Emma had smiled and nodded because Daddy was happy, and she had wanted him to think she was happy, too. He’d promised her she could get a puppy when they moved, and that had made her feel a little more enthusiastic about the prospect of a new house, but she still had her reservations.

She had felt uneasy a lot lately. She had been worried about her daddy. *Something bad is going to happen*, Grandma had told her, just before Daddy and Jo had gotten married. Her grandmother usually spoke to her in quiet, kindly tones, even when she had something grim to tell Emma, but when she’d said this, she’d sounded frightened. Sometimes she only knew bits and pieces, things she could offer to Emma in hints and warnings. This had been one such occasion.

*A storm is coming*, Grandma had said, and in her mind, Emma had been able to see Grandma standing in the side yard of the Kansas farm where her daddy and Uncle Paul had grown up. Grandma stood with one hand on her hip, the other drawn to her face so she could shield her eyes as she looked out across the flat plains toward the horizon. Emma had followed her gaze, and had seen a line of ominous black clouds, far off in the distance, a creeping shadow spilled across the proscenium of the sky. *A storm is coming*, Grandma had said again. *Something bad is going to happen, and your daddy is going to be hurt.*

This admonition had not been followed with anything like *unless we stop it*, which is what Grandma usually said.

This led Emma to think—and fear—that maybe Grandma knew something she wasn't telling Emma; that she hadn't said anything else because there was nothing that they *could* do to stop it. *Or we're not supposed to.*

"So what do you feel like for supper tonight, kiddo?" Paul asked, drawing her attention away from the truck's side view mirror.

"I don't know," she replied. *Uncle Paul would never let anything bad happen to Daddy*, she thought. Uncle Paul was a policeman. He was a hero on TV, just like McGruff the Crime Dog in the cartoon commercials. Bad things had happened to Daddy just last year, but Uncle Paul had saved him. A bad man had tried to hurt them, a bad man called the Watcher. Uncle Paul had stopped him. He was gone now, but what the boy at school had told her that day about the Bermuda Triangle had only made her worry worse. What if there were bad men like the Watcher in the Bahamas? How could Uncle Paul stop something bad from happening to Daddy if he was all of the way in the Bermuda Triangle?

"We bought those chicken nuggets the other day," Paul suggested. "Some macaroni and cheese, too. What do you say?"

"We probably ought to have a vegetable, too, Uncle Paul," she told him pointedly, looking at him. *He wouldn't let anything bad happen to Daddy*, she thought again. *I know he wouldn't.*

He smiled at her and nodded once. Until they'd gone to the grocery store together on the night of her arrival, his

definition of vegetables had apparently consisted of canned baked beans. "You're probably right," he said.

\* \* \*

"Hey, lamb. How are you?" Daddy asked her later on that evening.

Emma sat on Paul's couch, holding his cell phone against her ear with both hands and smiling with relief to hear Jay's voice—happy and unhurting—from the other end.

"I'm fine, Daddy. How are you?"

He chuckled, sounding surprised by her question.

"I'm good. Are you and Uncle Paul having fun?"

"Yes." Emma glanced across the room toward the doorway leading into the kitchen. She could see Uncle Paul walking back and forth, his shadow pooled beneath him on the white linoleum floor. He was talking on the cordless phone to M.K. or Bethany. Or maybe Aunt Vicki, now that she thought about it. His brows were narrowed, the corners of his mouth turned downward as he spoke, like he was aggravated or mad.

"Guess what we did today?" Daddy asked. "We went snorkeling. You know what that is? It's like scuba diving, only you don't bring an air tank with you. You don't go very deep."

She thought about asking him if he realized the Bahamas were in the Bermuda Triangle, but pressed her lips together and decided against it. Uncle Paul had told her the Bermuda Triangle wasn't real, and Daddy probably thought so, too. She didn't want him to think she was being silly.

"We had a spelling test at school," she said. "Mrs. Adams said it was a surprise." Emma hadn't thought it was a very fun surprise, though, and neither had most of her other classmates.

"How'd you do?"

"I spelled *orange* wrong."

"Well, that's okay. It's a hard one," Jay said.

After she finished talking to Daddy, she sat on the couch, kicking her heels against the side and listened to her uncle. He'd moved from the kitchen into his bedroom, but his voice was still sharp enough to overhear.

"...that crap, okay, Vic? I'm not a fair-weather parent—I work for a goddamn living. And since I'm still paying most of the mortgage on that goddamn house, I think I should have a say in whether or not my sixteen-year-old daughter gets to date."

Uncle Paul was angry. He was angry a lot now. The lonely, empty place inside her daddy was gone, but now there was one inside of Uncle Paul—only his was a lonely, angry place. Sometimes it seemed to Emma like it threatened to swallow him whole. He and Aunt Vicki had gotten a divorce, and even though Daddy had explained to her that this didn't mean they'd stopped loving one another, or that she couldn't see Aunt Vicki or her cousins, M.K. and Bethany anymore, Emma still knew that Uncle Paul was angry and frightened because of it. He missed them.

"Thanks, Vicki," she heard him say, his voice dry and mean. "Thanks a hell of a lot. Yeah, you, too."

There was a loud clatter as he slammed the phone down against something. "Bitch!" Paul snapped and Emma jumped, wide-eyed. She had never heard her uncle say that word before, and especially not about Aunt Vicki. She sat absolutely still against the sofa, holding her breath, listening. She suddenly wished she hadn't hung up the phone on her daddy. She didn't know how to work Paul's phone to redial him, either.

She heard Uncle Paul sigh heavily, and then the scrape of his bedroom window opening. She heard a soft *snict!* and knew that he'd lit a cigarette. He tried his best not to smoke around her. He usually went outside, or at least on the little balcony off the living room.

After a long moment with no other sounds, Emma slipped off the couch. She tiptoed down the short corridor, past the open doorway to the little bedroom she was using, and toward the larger master bedroom. The light was off in the hallway, and in his room. Night had fallen outside, and there was no illumination whatsoever except for the glow of a streetlamp outside seeping in through Paul's open window.

Emma peeked around the doorway and saw him sitting there, silhouetted in shadows, draped in pale smears of light. He looked out the window, his shoulders hunched almost wearily. She watched him lift the cigarette to his mouth and take a long drag on it. As the cinders glowed brightly, momentarily, she could see his face. His brows were furrowed, his mouth turned in a frown.

He looked like a stranger to her, someone she'd never seen before. Again, she thought about that raw, angry, empty space inside of him, the place left by the divorce. *It's like it's eating him up inside.*

"Uncle Paul?" she said softly, hesitantly.

He glanced up at her, his posture suddenly stiffening. "Hey, kiddo," he said, his voice somewhat hoarse. He reached behind him, flicking on a lamp, and Emma blinked, momentarily dazzled by the sudden yellow glow. "You through talking to your daddy?"

Once her eyes adjusted, she could see that he was smiling at her, his face softened and kind again—the way it always was. The hard-edged and frightening stranger she'd seen sitting in front of his window was gone.

"Yes," she said, nodding.

Paul stood, cupping his cigarette against his palm, as if he didn't want her to see it, even though the stink of smoke was apparent in the air. He walked past her toward the bathroom, and she watched him drop it into the toilet.

"How's he doing?" Paul asked, flushing the commode and stepped back into the hallway. "Are they tired of sun and sandy beaches yet?"

"No," she said. "He...he said they went snorkeling today. It's like scuba diving, he said, only you don't bring an air tank with you."

He smiled as he walked past her. He went into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator door. She heard glass beer bottles jangle musically together as he reached for one.

"Why don't you go ahead and brush your teeth, get your pajamas on?" he said.

She nodded, grateful for the excuse to duck into her room and close the door. Uncle Paul seemed alright now, but she could still picture him in her mind, the angry look that had twisted his face as he'd sat alone in the darkness. *It's like it's eating him up inside.* "Okay," she said.

\* \* \*

Paul dreamed he was in a crowded nightclub. His conversation with his wife

*my ex-wife, she's my ex*

had left him frustrated and angry, and in the dream, this manifested itself in the furious, pounding rhythm of deafening techno music as it shuddered in the air around him and thrummed in the floor beneath his feet. The club was dimly lit, except for the dance floor, which he could glimpse around people crammed about him in staccato, brilliant pulses of neon-colored lights. The air in the club was thick and hot and moist, stinking of cigarette smoke and perfume, spilled beer and sweat.

He imagined that as he shoved and shouldered his way through crowd, he caught a glimpse of his daughter, M.K., dressed in low-riding jeans and a halter top that was more of a bandana than a blouse. He spied her, but then the crowd surged around him, obscuring her from his view and he knew he was dreaming. There was no way in hell M.K. was in a nightclub. He was dreaming of her because he'd been arguing about her with Vicki, his ex-wife earlier that evening.



*Paul, if you'd like to tell her she can't go on dates during her weekends with you, that's fine. Those are your rules. But during the week, she's here with me, and we go by my rules—and I say she can go out with this boy on dates. I've met him and his parents and he's a perfectly respectable young...*

He shook his head, forcing Vicki's words from his mind. *That's not why I'm here.* Though in the dream, he had no idea what he was doing in the bar, he knew there was a reason for his presence, something he was only momentarily forgetting. *It'll come to me.*

He edged his way to the bar and leaned over the edge to flag a bartender. The wooden proscenium of the bar was sticky against his skin. He could see himself, his reflection in the bar's mirrored back wall. He ordered a double-shot of Jack, no splash, no rocks

*When the hell is the last time I drank whiskey? Fifteen years ago? Twenty? Surely to Christ before Vicki and I got married*

and fished his cigarettes out of his pocket while he waited for the drink.

"Can I bum a light?"

He turned to find a young woman standing next to him, shoved into nearly intimate proximity by the sheer, staggering force of the crowd. She was slender and small-breasted, her nipples outlined through the thin fabric of her white, spaghetti-strap camisole top. She wore a red skirt with a hemline that barely covered her buttocks, and a waistline that fell below the defined curves of her hip bones. She had short-cropped, icy blond hair worn in a deliberate

tousle around her face, and for a moment, her resemblance to his wife nearly struck him breathless—Vicki, twenty years ago, when he'd first met in her college, first wanted her, first fallen in love with her.

The young woman held an unlit cigarette between the two forefingers of her right hand, and she smiled at him hesitantly. "Can I bum a light?" she said again, pitching her voice to a near-shout to be heard over the din of the music. "Someone walked off with mine."

She was beautiful, and Paul felt a sudden, powerful jolt of lust. She was twenty years younger than him, at least, but all at once, that didn't matter to him at all. "Sure," he said, and her smile grew more relaxed, less tentative. She leaned forward as he held out his lighter. He cupped his hand to shield the flame, and watched as she lit her cigarette.

"Thanks," she said, exhaling a quick, smart stream of new smoke.

"No problem," he replied. The bartender returned with his whiskey, and Paul fished his billfold out of his pocket. The girl remained at his side, sharing the cut-glass ashtray between them, and he glanced at her. "Can I buy you a drink?"

Christ, he couldn't even remember the last time he'd used a bullshit line like that, but he must not have delivered it too cheekily, because the blond girl smiled again, meeting his gaze and keeping her eyes fixed on his. "I'd like that, thanks."

He had no idea how long they stood together at the bar, talking. In the dream, it felt like hours. Songs came and

went, drinks were ordered and down, over and over, long into the night. Her name, he learned, was Aimee, and she had come to the club that night with a gaggle of girlfriends who had hoped, in vain, to cheer her up following a recent break-up. The friends, it seemed, had all hooked up—running off with her lighter in the process—and leaving her fairly well stranded.

“They meant well,” she said with a shrug, taking a long sip from her latest in a long line of tequila sunrises. She smiled somewhat sadly. “But I don’t think I’m going to feel up to meeting anyone again for a long time.”

“Don’t give up on all of us,” he told her. She’d run out of cigarettes, and started smoking his. He offered her one, holding out the flip-top pack to her, and she smiled into his eyes as she slipped one out.

“Maybe I won’t,” she said.

He dreamed that they went out to his truck together, that in the darkened parking, they tangled together, kissing and clutching at one another. He dreamed that he pushed her back against the side of his truck, the passenger’s side door standing open wide, and that he kissed her deeply, delving into her mouth with his tongue, leaving her whimpering, clutching at his shoulders and hair. He touched her breasts, his hands reaching desperately, urgently up beneath her shirt, falling against her warm, soft flesh, and she moaned against his lips, arching her back. His arousal was nearly painful, straining against the confines of his jeans, and he wanted her. It had been too long since he’d been with a woman last, and he wanted to bury himself

inside of the girl, to take her right there in the parking lot, in the front seat of his truck.

*This has to be a dream, he thought. This can't be real it can't be*

He moved his hands, pulling his shirt tails loose from his jeans so he could unbutton his fly. His fingers brushed against something tucked in the back of his waistband, and he blinked in momentary surprise as he curled his hand around the slim grip of a stun gun. Touching it was like being doused with ice-cold water. He'd been overwhelmed with lust, so ready, willing and eager to take the girl, he was surprised he hadn't thus far shot off in his pants. But the moment his hand touched the barrel of the stun-gun, it was over, utterly extinguished. He remembered. He didn't own a stun gun; didn't know where it might of come from, but he remembered what he meant to do with it, what purpose had brought him to the nightclub that night. He pulled it out, but she didn't even notice. She was too involved in kissing him, in grinding herself against him, mewling at him in implore.

He pushed the twin prongs of the stun gun against the flat plain of her belly, and she paused, stiffening against him, her breath drawing still in momentary confusion. It was all he allowed her. He flexed his finger against the trigger, and saw a wink of bright blue light as the electrical charge seared through her. She jerked against him, convulsing violently, uttering a choked, sodden caw that he muffled with his firm kiss. He pressed her firmly against the truck seat and shocked her again, holding her to prevent her from crumpling to the ground as her knees failed her. He shocked

her a third time and heard a spattering of something wet against the ground, felt hot dampness on his pant leg as she involuntarily voided her bladder of the tequila sunrises he'd bought her.

Once she'd stilled, any cries of protest faded to a thin, gurgling croak from her throat, he reached over her for the glove compartment. He popped it open and pulled out a Ziplock bag. Now he remembered. He didn't know how he could have forgotten. He'd been distracted inside the club because she'd looked so much like Vicki. He'd been distracted in the parking lot, because it'd been too long since he'd been laid, and his lust had overpowered him. He remembered now, though, and he opened the Ziploc bag, pulling out the square of cloth he'd soaked in chloroform earlier.

"Please..." the girl, Aimee, whispered. She was barely conscious, utterly paralyzed, her arms and legs twitching involuntarily, her shoulders shuddering.

"Don't give up on all of us," he told her again, and then he pressed the cloth over her mouth and nose, holding it there until she had succumbed to the vapors and passed out.

\* \* \*

"Uncle Paul?"

Paul jerked, his eyes flying wide at the sound of Emma's voice. He was bewildered and alarmed to find himself standing in his living room, facing the front door of his apartment, his hand against the knob. *What the hell...?*

“Uncle Paul?” Emma said again, her voice wavering and uncertain.

He turned, blinking stupidly around the shadow-draped room. It was still night; the glowing clock on the DVD player said two thirty-seven. *What the hell?*

“Uncle Paul, where did you go?” Emma asked. She stood at the threshold between the corridor and the living room, her hair sleepily disheveled, her teddy bear, Mr. Cuddles, clutched in both hands against her chest.

Go? Paul blinked in new confusion. He glanced over his shoulder at the door and saw it was unlocked. *Jesus, did I go somewhere? Was I sleepwalking? What the hell is going on?*

For a moment, he didn’t remember, but then the dream returned to him in broken bits and fragmented images—the nightclub, the girl, the stun gun. He pressed the heel of his hand against his brow. *That was just a dream. Just a goddamn dream. It wasn’t real.*

But when he looked down, he realized to his bewildered dismay that he was still wearing his jeans and shirt from earlier in the evening, not his pajama bottoms. His shoes were still on. He patted his hip and felt his wallet still tucked in his pocket. *Christ, if I open it, is it going to be short \$40?* He wondered. *Because that’s what I dreamed I spent tonight—forty bucks in whiskey and tequila sunrises.*

“Uncle Paul?” Emma whimpered, her voice little more than an anxious mewl.

He opened his eyes and realized he was frightening her. *You’re not the only one, kiddo.*

"I...I'm sorry, Emma," he said, and he leaned toward a nearby end table, switching on a lamp. He and the little girl both squinted against the sudden glow, and he struggled to smile for her. "I'm okay. I...I was just outside, smoking a cigarette. I couldn't sleep."

He pulled his cigarette pack out of his shirt pocket and shook it demonstratively. There had been almost three-quarters of a pack remaining in the box when he'd walked toward his room to go to bed earlier that night. Now, from the sounds of things, the pack was nearly empty. He flipped the top back and found only two cigarettes. *That's not possible*, he thought, his face ashen. *It was just a dream. Just a dream.*

Emma still stood in the doorway, her large, dark eyes watching him apprehensively, and he tried to smile again as he pushed the pack closed and back into his pocket. *They must have spilled out, that's all*, he told himself. *Maybe I was sleepwalking. I haven't been sleeping good, and that fight with Vicki had me all kinds of rattled. That's all. Christ, that has to be all.*

"I'm okay," he said again, as much to his niece as himself. He held his hand out to her. "Come on, kiddo. It's late, and you've got school tomorrow. Let's go back to bed."

She looked hesitant for a moment and then nodded, slipping her palm against his. "Okay," she said.

He couldn't tell if she believed him or not. Emma was an extraordinarily perceptive little girl, even if she didn't really speak to the ghost of Paul's dead mother. She *wanted* to believe the reasons he'd offered her, that much was

obvious, but whether she, in fact, did believe him was another matter entirely. And he couldn't really blame her.

*Because that's how I feel, too, kiddo.*

\* \* \*

"I'm telling," Bethany Frances said, sitting on the edge of her older sister's bed and turning on the broad beamed, chrome flashlight she held between her hands. The spear of sudden, yellow light pinned M.K. as she ducked back through the bedroom window.

M.K. looked over her shoulder, squinting against the glare. "No, you're not," she growled, as she drew her long leg in over the open window pane. She wore strappy sandals with alarmingly high, wedge heels, tight-fitting jeans low enough on her hips so that the back of her thong panties showed when she bent over, and a halter top that looked like nothing more than a thin scrap of fabric tied behind her neck to cover her breasts. If their mother—or, worse, their father—knew that M.K. was wearing stuff like that, they would have sent her off to a convent.

"Yes, I am," Bethany replied. She was fourteen, and M.K. was sixteen—although on that night, in that outfit, with her heavy sheaf of blond hair brushed straight and hanging loose to the middle of her back, M.K. looked a far cry closer to twenty-one. Which, Bethany figured, was exactly the point. "Mom said you could go on *dates* with Jeremy Laslow. She never said you could sneak out of the house and go clubbing with him. I'm telling."

M.K. closed the window and wiped her hands on her jeans. "No, you're not," she said again. She frowned,



reaching out and snatching the flashlight. "Turn that thing off, would you? Look, Mom doesn't know I was gone, so there's no harm. She's sleeping. She takes those pills now at night—a bomb could go off and she wouldn't know. And Dad isn't here, so what difference does it make? Besides..."

She reached over Bethany's shoulder, switching on her bedside lamp. Bethany could see she was wearing glittery eye shadow and too much lipstick. She smelled like cigarette smoke and something fruity, like wine. M.K. smiled at her sister, hooking the corner of her mouth and one carefully manicured eyebrow in tandem. "Besides," she said again. "If you tell, then you won't be able to go with me next time. And Nathan Darcy was asking about you."

Bethany blinked, any further protest stilled on her lips. Nathan Darcy was a junior, like M.K., while she was only a freshman. But she saw Nathan every day at band practice. He was first-chair trombone, and she played the clarinet. He would talk to her sometimes, rare but wondrous occasions that would leave her flushed from head to toe, her stomach all fluttering, her throat closed up.

"Nathan was there?" she asked, her voice nearly a gulp.

"Sure," M.K. said. She walked over to her vanity table and sat down. She reached for her sandals, unfastening the buckles around her ankles. "He goes all the time. Everyone meets up at Snake Eyes."

"But...that's a bar," Bethany said quietly, her eyes widening.

M.K. laughed. "No shit," she said. She took off her earrings and slipped the large hoops into the drawer of her vanity.

"That's a bar for gay people," Bethany said.

M.K. laughed again. "No, it's not. Gay guys go there, sure. Lesbians, too, sometimes. But Snake Eyes is an *everybody* bar. And they don't check I.D.s too closely—that's all that matters." She pulled a pack of cigarettes and a Hello Kitty lighter out of the drawer and went back to her window. Bethany watched as she opened it again and then lit up. "You're going to love it," she said, exhaling a quick, smart stream of smoke. "They have a great big dance floor."

"But I...I can't get in," Bethany said. *How did you get in, M.K.?* she wondered.

M.K. glanced at her, dropping a wink. "Sure you can." She slipped the cigarette between her teeth and wedged her hand down into the impossibly tight confines of her back pocket. She pulled out a small, rectangular piece of plastic and tossed it beside Bethany on the bed. "I told you. They don't check too closely."

"It's a driver's licenses," Bethany said, bewildered to find M.K.'s yearbook photo on it.

"I know," M.K. replied as Bethany lifted the card and examined it. M.K. only had her permit. She didn't know how to parallel park yet, and thus, had not taken her driving test.

"This says your name is Rachel Adams..." Bethany looked at her. "That you're twenty-three?"

M.K. arched her brow again. "Pretty cool, huh?" she said, grinning. "I'll get you one, too. Then you can go with us."

Bethany's eyes widened again. "No way," she said, shaking her head. She dropped the license like it was hot enough to have burned her fingertips. "That's illegal."

M.K. shrugged, turning back to the window. She leaned out, presenting her ass to her sister so that Bethany could see the string of her thong straining up over top of the waistline of her jeans as she flicked her cigarette out into the yard. "Suit yourself," she said, turning once more. "I guess I'll tell Nathan you're too chickenshit to come. He'll have to find someone else to ask to the homecoming dance."

All at once, Bethany couldn't breathe. "You're lying," she squeaked.

M.K. shrugged again. "Whatever."

Bethany watched as she wriggled out of her jeans. She folded them neatly between her hands and went to her closet, tucking them inside. She didn't hide them, necessarily, but she went out of her way to make sure they were lost in the sea of other blue jeans, pants and tops, so that their mother wouldn't notice them—or how low they were cut—if she went snooping. Not that Vicki Frances ever went snooping through her daughters' things. Ever since the divorce from their father, it seemed like all she did was work anymore.

A year ago, Vicki had been abducted by the Watcher. She'd survived, but she never talked about what had happened to her. *He raped her*, M.K. told a horrified Bethany

*once. I bet that's it. I bet Dad doesn't even know. That's why they got a divorce, though, and why she takes the pills. Because she can't stop thinking about it.*

Vicki took sleeping pills, and M.K. was right; when she was under their effects, there wasn't much outside of a dousing of water that could rouse her.

M.K. unfastened the loose ties holding her halter top in place and hid it away, too. She slipped on an old, oversized T-shirt and then stepped discreetly out of the thong panties. These, she burrowed in a drawer, safe from prying parental eyes.

"Did he really say he wanted to ask me to the dance?" Bethany asked.

"Not exactly," M.K. replied, catching her hair with her hands and pulling it out from beneath the collar of her shirt. "But he thinks you're cute. I told him you were my sister and he asked me to bring you along next week. I told him you were too much of a baby—just a freshman, and wouldn't do it, but he kept on asking. And he kept talking about the homecoming dance. You put two and two together."

She let Bethany sit there and stew over that revelation for a long, fidgety moment while she returned to her vanity. She sat down, dunked a tissue down into a small jar of cold cream and began to dab at her eyes, removing the glittering eye shadow and heavily applied mascara.

"So you still going to tell on me?" she asked after a moment, glancing at her sister through the vanity mirror. "Or do you want to go?"

### CHAPTER THREE

Paul was awake when the sun came up that morning, a glowing hint on the horizon. He'd dozed a little off and on through the night, but anything approaching real sleep had escaped him. After the dream he'd suffered, and the peculiar sleepwalking spell that Emma had snapped him out of, he'd been terrified to close his eyes for too long.

With the dawn came a new resolve to shake the incident from his mind. *It was a goddamn dream*, he thought. *I was mistaken about how many cigarettes were in my pack. I was sleepwalking, that's why my hand was on the doorknob. Nothing more.*

He changed into a pair of cut-off sweatpants and a T-shirt and left the apartment. He ran every morning, a ten-mile circuit around the neighborhood. By the time he returned, Emma would need to get up and ready for school. It worked perfectly. And Christ knew he needed the distraction of a long, fervent run.

He walked down the stairs of the interior foyer in his building, and paused by a bank of steel mailboxes to stretch his legs out. Once he was set, he pushed open the door and stepped out into the brisk, damp morning air. He stepped down from the building stoop and walked down the sidewalk, heading for the parking lot.

"Lieutenant Frances?"

He turned, startled by the beckon and was surprised to find Susan Vey, the new reporter—she of the perky breasts, nice ass and apparently overprotective brother—coming down from the stoop of the adjacent apartment building. She wasn't wearing any make up, and her long hair was drawn back in a hastily secured knot at the base of her neck. She wore a plain white T-shirt that hugged the swells of her yet-perky breasts, and a pair of nylon jogging shorts that awarded Paul an all-too revealing glimpse of her long, pretty legs.

For a moment, he felt a pleasant warmth tingle through him, but then he remembered his dream from the night before

*Don't give up on all of us*

of Aimee and her too-short skirt and miniature breasts, of the fact she wasn't wearing panties and that she had been eager to let him fuck her in a nightclub parking lot...until he had shocked her with a stun gun, that is.

*A stun gun I don't own*, he thought, closing his eyes and shaking his head once. *Goddamn, I didn't hurt that girl. She isn't real. None of it was—it was just a damn dream.*

"Lieutenant Frances, hi," Susan said, catching up to him. She smiled brightly but seemed somewhat perplexed. "I thought that was you. I didn't know you live here...?"

"Yeah, in one-oh-four," he said, pointing to his building over her shoulder.

She laughed. "I'm in oh-five," she said. "How funny! I just moved in last weekend. It's a small world, huh?"

*Getting smaller every day*, Paul thought.

\* \* \*

They jogged together. Apparently, either he was leaving earlier than usual for his run, or she was taking off later, but somehow, they both shared this same daily routine, and yet had never bumped into one another before that morning. She was good company, he discovered; she chattered with the uninhibited exuberance of the young and unjaded, telling him about herself, how she and her brother, David, had grown up on a farm in Missouri.

"He moved out here three years ago," she said. "Mom and Dad about had a fit when I told them I meant to come, too. He offered to let me move in with him—more to shut them up than anything, I think—but I said no. He's moonlighting now, working at the station and doing asphalt work for some construction company, Milton Enterprises. Anyhow, he keeps really weird hours, and plus, I told him and Mom, I don't need a babysitter. I'm twenty-three years old."

Somehow, she was able to match Paul's long-legged stride and still talk without losing her breath. He kept stealing sideways glances at her, noticing—despite himself—how a small triangle of dampness began to bloom on her T-shirt bosom, spreading upward toward her neck. Her perfect, twenty-three-year-old breasts bounced cheerily beneath the white cotton, and he found his mood lightening considerably the further they went.

"So I'm proving myself all over the place," she continued. "First with my folks, and then with my brother, and now at the station, since I'm new—and because some of

the other guys think I landed this gig on account of David. Which is just bullshit. I won the CAPA Award two years in a row at college in Chesterfield. You know what that is? The Communications Achievement in Photojournalism Award. They only offer it to twelve college students nationwide every year. And I won it *twice*."

She glanced at him, her lovely face dewy with a light gloss of perspiration, her cheeks blooming with a combination of weary color and sudden embarrassment. "I'm sorry," she said. "Here I am, just babbling and babbling."

"I don't mind," he told her, and it was the truth. It had been too long since anyone had confided much in him, and sure as hell not his daughters or wife.

*My ex-wife, Vicki is my ex-wife.*

Susan smiled. It was nice, this adorable fascination she apparently held for him...particularly since it was quickly developing into a mutual one of his own. She was a beautiful girl. Looking at her too long left his stomach in an aching, needful knot. He missed having a lover, having someone comfortable and familiar in his life. He missed having someone smile at him like that; having someone who wanted to babble and babble and babble at him.

They continued to run, their paces matching perfectly, and Paul said nothing. He simply enjoyed the sound of her voice.

\* \* \*



"Paul, I need to talk to you," Jason Stewart, his partner said, as Paul walked into the public affairs department. "There's—"

"Not right now, Jason," Paul replied, not slowing his gait in the least. He was in a damn fine mood, chipper in fact, the residual effects of having spent his morning in Susan Vey's company. He wasn't about to lose that pleasant little high over whatever whining bullshit Jason wanted to launch at his ear.

"But, Paul," Jason said, rising to his feet, wide-eyed. "It's important. There's someone—"

Paul opened his office door and blinked in surprise to find Brenda Wheaton sitting in one of the upholstered leather chairs across from his desk. Suddenly, any thoughts of Susan were immediately flushed from his mind, and he found himself seized with an all-new, even more powerful warmth.

"—waiting to see you," Jason finished from behind him.

"Yes, Jason, I'm aware of that," Paul said dryly, awarding the younger man a withering glance over his shoulder. He swung the door shut smartly in Jason's face. "Now."

"Good morning, Paul," Brenda said, rising to her feet. She wore a charcoal-grey pantsuit with a coral-colored blouse beneath, and her long, pale hair caught back in her customary ponytail. She smiled and offered her hand, as if they were little more than professional—and casual—acquaintances.

"Hey, Brenda," he said, slipping her palm against his own. *Christ, she smells good.* "What brings you by this early? Did Jason offer you some coffee?"

He doubted Jason had the wherewithal, or common sense, to do much besides run around in circles, yapping and chasing his tail like a rat terrier, and was admittedly surprised when Brenda nodded, holding up a steaming, Styrofoam cup. "Yes, and a doughnut, too," she said, sitting again. "He's a sweetheart."

*There's one word for it,* Paul thought.

"I wanted to stop by and tell you we've got an I.D. on that Jane Doe from yesterday," she said, watching as he shrugged his way out of his overcoat, draping it against the open hook on the back of his door. He turned, his brows raised in surprise and she nodded. "Yeah, so soon. It didn't take anytime at all once we ran her through missing persons. Her name is Melanie Geary. She's been missing for a little over a week now, last seen at a local nightspot called Snake Eyes. Her father is the head of the English department at Chesterfield College."

"Chesterfield?" he asked. "What was she doing here?"

"She lived here," Brenda replied. "For about a year now. Dan's taken over the case in homicide. He's going to investigate it as a hate crime." When Paul glanced at her, surprised anew, she said, "She was a lesbian. Her girlfriend is the one who originally reported her missing."

Paul shook his head, his brows furrowed. "It wasn't a hate crime," he murmured, his gaze growing distracted as

he thought about his dream, the horrific things he'd witnessed night after night, the things he'd imagined doing to the girl, Melanie Geary. "Hate crimes are impulsive and sudden—violent, over and done with. This was methodical. Someone took their time with her. Burning her, sticking needles into her, the piano wire garrote, severing her fingers... They wanted her to hurt. They wanted her to be afraid. It was personal."

He stumbled, blinking owlishly, as if snapping from a reverie. He felt light-headed momentarily, as if he'd sat up too fast, and he turned, realizing that Brenda watched him, her expression suddenly curious and wary. "How did you know that?" she asked. "The burns, I mean. And the needles. I found cigarette burns and contact marks from the prongs of a stun gun, plus more than a hundred individual puncture marks from small-gauge needle insertions. It's in my autopsy report."

*Which you haven't seen, were the unspoken words she left implied clearly. And which you're not supposed to see, because you're not in homicide anymore. You're McGruff the Crime Dog now.*

Paul looked at her for a long, mute moment. What could he say that wouldn't sound idiotic? "I...I heard Pierson mention it," he said, taking a huge gamble. "I still go up there sometimes, you know. I miss the old times."

She'd said Pierson had been assigned to the case, and he hoped that meant Pierson had already been able to review Brenda's autopsy findings. There was always the chance that this is why she was in the building that

morning—to deliver the results upstairs to the homicide division, but there was no other plausible explanation he could come up with off the top of his ass, so he hoped for the best. *Plus, she's dating Pierson, for whatever reason. She's got to know how he runs his mouth—that if he's seen the report, he's been up there yapping about it to anyone who'd hold still long enough.*

Apparently she did know, because she visibly relaxed and nodded. She smiled somewhat sadly. "I imagine they miss you, too, Paul," she said. "You were a good detective. One of the best." She rose to her feet, slipping her purse over her shoulder, and hefting the overstuffed briefcase that she'd set on the floor. "I just wanted to let you know. Yesterday, when you saw her picture, you seemed so upset, and I..." Her voice faded.

"It was fine," Paul said. "She just...for a moment, she reminded me of my daughter, M.K. She's sixteen, going on twenty-five, and she..." He offered a feeble laugh. "I guess I've been away from it too long."

It was what she wanted to hear, and he had no other explanation for his reaction the day before, so he said it. Brenda smiled again. "I can't believe M.K. is sixteen already," she remarked, and then laughed. "I can't believe my son is going to be sixteen next month. My God, we're old."

"Old, unhip and out-of-touch," Paul agreed as she walked toward the door. "That's what M.K. keeps telling me, anyway."

He didn't add that M.K. only told him this anymore during her every-other-weekend visits, or the rare evenings in which he could catch her at home with a phone call. He imagined by the somewhat forlorn look that came over Brenda's face as she mentioned her son that she would have understood this, however. He didn't know if she had custody of the boy or not, but suspected the latter, given that momentary melancholy. Brenda worked long hours and her duties often forced her to travel across the state. He imagined her ex-husband would have pounced all over that instability in her home life every bit as fervently as Vicki would have with him.

"I have to run," Brenda said, offering her hand again in farewell. "I've got a nine o'clock meeting with the District Attorney over at the courthouse on a capital case."

"Fun, fun," he remarked, accepting her shake. To his surprise—and delight—she stepped against him, draping her free arm about him, thumping her briefcase briefly against his back. The wondrous fragrance of her perfume enveloped him and he closed his eyes, feeling the soft brush of her hair against his cheek.

"It's good to see you," she said. "I've missed you."

She left him standing in the middle of his office, a sappy smile plastered on his face, and a whole new, warm, happy feeling spreading throughout him. For the rest of the day, all Paul had to do was draw the lapel of his blazer toward his face and breathe in the fragrance of her, a sweet and lingering reminder, and that sensation would immediately return.

\* \* \*

"The Chief's office just called," Jason said as Paul walked past his desk to go outside and smoke. "They want a media statement this morning as soon as possible about—"

"Melanie Geary, I know," Paul said, not slowing at all as he left the department. He grimaced at the quick patter of Jason's feet behind him.

"Uh, no," Jason said, looking bewildered. "Paul, they want us to issue a statement about the indictments issued against Milton Enterprises this morning."

Paul paused, turning to him, his brow raised. "What?"

"It came in over the wire—a federal judge has issued indictments against Milton Enterprises for tax evasion. One of the historical groups protesting the Liberty Heights development must have clued them in on it. Who is Melanie Geary?"

Paul shook his head. "Never mind. Why in the hell do they want me to say anything about a federal case? That has nothing to do with us."

"Yeah, but it's going to delay the new construction out there even more—maybe permanently," Jason said.

"And John Milton, the CEO is a personal friend and major contributor to Mayor Allen's campaign. They—"

"Christ," Paul muttered, rolling his eyes. He turned and walked again, fishing out his cigarettes. "Forget it. You do the statements."

"Paul—" Jason began, his voice strained as he hurried after him. He caught Paul's sleeve, staying him. "Mayor

Allen specifically requested that you make the statement. They faxed me an outline of what they'd like for you to—"

"I'm not the mayor's goddamn monkey-boy," Paul said, his brows furrowed as he leaned nearly nose to nose with Jason. "You don't just wind up the nickelodeon and I start dancing for chump change. So you can specifically tell his office I said that, if you'd like. If he wants to stick up for his crooked buddies on the air, he can do it himself."

He turned and stomped off again, his face blazing, his hands folded into fists. *I'm a cop*, he thought. *Not that fat, fucking bastard of a mayor's personal mouthpiece.*

Only he was, and he knew it, and that pissed Paul off more than anything. *I haven't been a cop in over a year. Not a real one, anyone. Not since the Watcher.*

"Hey, McGruff," a detective said at the revolving glass doors. He didn't mean any harm, just offering a passing greeting, but it was the wrong thing to say to Paul at the worst time imaginable. *Because that's what I am now, all I am—McGruff, the mayor's goddamn Crime Dog.*

"Fuck you, Sanders," Paul snapped, shoving his way through the door and outside. He didn't retreat to the corner of the entrance veranda, where he normally went on his cigarette breaks. Instead, he marched down the broad, granite steps of the municipal building and kept on going. He wasn't sure where he was headed.

*Anyplace but here.*

\* \* \*

He didn't make it far, just to the building next door, and the medical examiner's regional office in the basement.

It had been several hours since Brenda Wheaton had come to visit, and he found her now in one of the autopsy bays, draped from head to toe, her hands gloved in overlapping layers of heavy latex, her pretty face all but hidden from view behind a paper mask and a plastic face shield strapped around her forehead. He could smell what she was working on from the doorway, a sweet, charred, stomach-churning stink.

"...subject's stomach is of a size and condition not atypical or abnormal for age," Brenda dictated into a microphone extending from a slender, metal boom from the ceiling. She was in the process of weighing what appeared to Paul to be a large, bluish grey globule of meat on a stainless steel scale, her gloved hands blood-smeared, the front of her white smock peppered. She glanced up as Paul walked across the other-wise empty room.

"You're not supposed to be here," she said. She squinted against the glare of a bright examination light aimed directly into her face. "This is a closed autopsy. There's a sign on the door. Whoever you are, get out."

"Hi, Brenda," he said as he drew nearer. On the steel table before her, he saw a slender corpse, little more than a teen. Her torso had been opened in the standard autopsy Y incision, her chest cavity exposed. The body looked like it had been through a fire; most of the visible skin was blackened and seared, and her hair was gone, lending her the appearance of having been mummified in pitch. Another body on the neighboring table, awaiting autopsy, looked to be in no better condition.



“Paul?” she asked, the tension that had seized her body loosening. “Hey, hi. I didn’t expect to see you again so soon.”

“Still want me to leave?” he asked.

“Sure you want to see this?” she asked and when he nodded, she laughed, flapping her hand. “Okay, then. Let me take some dentals, and then I’ll call for Becky, let her handle the rest.”

He watched as Brenda poured a quick-drying plaster mix into a small, crescent-shaped metal cup. She pried the corpse’s mouth open and wriggled and wrestled the tray within, pressing it up against the charred upper palate. “Fire?” he asked. *Christ, I miss this*, he thought with a mixture of fascination and longing. *I miss you, Brenda. I miss my goddamn life.*

She nodded. “Car crash out in Crawford County,” she said, her voice a distracted murmur, her attention riveted on her work. “About two this morning. Car crossed the median, hit another head-on. Another got them from behind and the gas tank went.”

“Ouch,” Paul said, sucking in a sympathetic breath through his teeth.

She nodded again. He watched as she rocked the metal tray slightly back and forth, sliding her gloved index finger into the corpse’s mouth to try and loosen the vacuum grip against the teeth. He heard a soft pop as the plaster came free, and then Brenda withdrew the expertly cast molding. She set it on a table-top tray beside her, and began

to mix a fresh batch of plaster with which to take impressions of the body's bottom teeth.

"I've sent some tissue samples off to the lab," she said. "Most of their fluids are pretty much boiled, but I think we can run a viable tox-screen off their stomach and liver contents."

"You think they were drunk?"

"I don't know," she said, slipping the dental tray into the corpse's mouth. "It was late. The driver could have fallen asleep." She nodded past his shoulder, to the other body. "But they were young, traveling at speeds I estimate in excess of eighty-five miles an hour. Statistically, it fits." She sighed wearily. "I hate it when they bring me kids in here."

When she was finished with the dental molds, she paged one of her assistants to finish up the routine postmortem examination. She shucked her smock and face gear, stripping her gloves last and scrubbing her hands in a large, industrial metal sink in the far corner of the room. "So what brings you to my neck of the woods?" she asked, glancing over her shoulder as she used a small brush to scrub beneath her fingernails. "You still haven't told me, and I doubt it's because you like the smell."

He laughed. "I thought we could do lunch."

She raised her brow and he felt color rise hotly in his face. "Well, I mean, I thought we could talk about the Geary case, too," he said. "I've been thinking about it. You could bring the file along...?"

Brenda laughed, shaking her head as she patted her hands dry on a paper towel. "I figured there was something else."

She didn't say no, however, or anything like *That's an open case, Paul—it's Dan Pierson's open case—and none of your business*. He took that as a good sign and followed her out of the autopsy suite into the corridor, where the air was decidedly fresher. They walked down the hall to her office, and she unlocked the door.

"I'm not supposed to let you see that file, Paul," she said, walking across the threshold and snapping on the bright, fluorescent lights overhead. Her office was small and cramped, her desk piled high with papers and files, her bookshelves overflowing. The walls were cinderblock, painted a sickly, industrial shade of light blue-green, the floor the same cracked linoleum tile as the rest of the basement.

"I know," he replied. He lifted a framed photograph from her desk. "This is your son?"

She smiled and nodded as she rifled through one of the stacks of folders on her desk. "Bryce," she said. "Yes."

"He's a good-looking boy," Paul said, setting the picture down.

"Thanks," Brenda said. She held something out, and Paul blinked in surprise. *M. Geary*, the file folder tab read, Brenda's impeccably neat handwriting affixed in thick, block letters written in felt-tipped marker. "So where are you buying me lunch?"

\* \* \*

“It’s not that I don’t think Dan can handle this case,” Brenda told him as they sat opposite one another at a concrete picnic table in the park across the street from the municipal buildings. “And it’s not like I don’t think there’s some merit to the direction he’s wanting to take the investigation...”

Paul nodded, flipping through the folder, watching out of the corner of her eye as she tore into a chili dog. Despite the fact she was a dainty little thing, Brenda Wheaton didn’t eat like any woman he’d ever met—and sure as hell not like Vicki, who had lived on an unappetizing regiment of salads, yogurt, lean meats and little else. She’d always tried to get him to eat healthier, too, lecturing him about cholesterol, griping at him about his blood pressure. *The only healthy habit in your life is running, Paul, she’d say. What between your smoking and eating like some kind of human garbage disposal, I don’t know how you don’t keel over dead.*

That had been one good thing to come out of the divorce, at least. He could eat again.

Most women would wrinkle their noses at the idea of a hot dog layered with chili, raw onions, mustard, jalapenos and cheese, but Brenda had already put down one and was laying into a second like she hadn’t eaten in a week. She kept making soft murmuring sounds of delight when she’d take a bite. He was curious about the contents of her file on Melanie Geary—desperately so—but found himself pleasantly distracted by those little sounds of hers, and the fact that she handled her food like a man. *My God, I could fall in love with her.*

"I've just been thinking about what you said this morning in your office," Brenda said, washing down a mouthful of hot dog with a swig from her soda. "About why you didn't think this was a hate crime because she was gay. It makes sense. You're right."

*And let me guess,* he thought, looking down at the folder, feeling like he took a swift punch in the gut as he found a photograph of the victim's hand. There was nothing left of her fingers or thumb, only raw, red, gaping holes punctuated in the middle by wide, stark circumferences of severed bone. *You called Dan and tried to sell him on it, but he wouldn't bite.*

He turned quickly past the photos, but paused at one of the victim's face. Most specifically, her hair caught his attention, the matted bits of white dirt caught and tangled in the strands. "Horsehair plaster," he murmured, reading the crime lab analysis of the particles. He glanced at Brenda, his brow arched inquisitively. "Lead paint chips, asbestos and bits of broken horsehair plaster?"

She nodded. "Found them down her esophageal tract, too," she said. "And her airway. I think the garrote around her neck was drawn so tightly at the end, she had to crane her head back to try and breathe." She demonstrated. "Her mouth would have been wide open. She was straining to suck down any air. I think the asbestos, paint and plaster must have fallen from the ceiling, into her mouth and down her throat."

"So she was someplace old," he said.

“Really old, if there’s horsehair plaster on the ceilings,” Brenda agreed. “I did some research online, and you only find it in houses built before 1930, as a general rule. So that was there, and maybe somewhere down the line before 1971, when the Food and Drug Administration passed legislative restrictions on the use of lead-based paints, someone slapped a coat of whitewash over it. And most old houses have asbestos in them somewhere—insulation in attics, around plumbing pipes, that kind of thing.”

Paul closed his eyes, remembering the crunch of broken plaster beneath his feet in the dream. He could see the room in his mind, the place in which he had imagined Melanie Geary strapped to a chair. It had been old and dilapidated. *Like a basement*, he thought. *It looked like an old basement.*

“There are three buildings close enough to where her body was dumped to fit that age profile,” Brenda said. She reached for her purse, pulling out some folded sheets of paper, which she handed to Paul. He blinked at her in surprise. “I was going to show them to Dan,” she said, somewhat sheepishly. “But then I...”

Her voice faded and she pretended to distract herself with a sip of soda.

*But what, Brenda?* Paul thought. *Why didn’t Pierson listen to you?*

He unfolded the pages and found maps printed off the internet. Brenda had marked the place where Melanie Geary’s body was found—an abandoned lot near a

construction company equipment depot on Lattimer Avenue downtown. She had also circled three locations within a six-block radius of the dump site and printed off their individual property descriptions from the county tax assessment website. All three were overgrown lots, with enormous, hulking, turn-of-the-century homes. The houses, like the yards, were in dire need of work. All were boarded up.

"You could try to get a search warrant for them," Brenda said. "I know the evidence is kind of weak, but the district attorney isn't thrilled with Dan's proposal of a hate crime, either. I know he'd be glad to see if he could get Judge Morrows to move on it any—"

"Hey, hold on a minute, Brenda," Paul said, surprised. "I can't get a search warrant for this. It's Pierson's case. You'll have to take this to him."

"I tried that, but he doesn't want to listen," Brenda said, her brows narrowing slightly. "You're the one who told me this morning you think it's something personal with this guy—that he's a sadist with a grudge. Look what he did to that girl—do you want this guy out roaming the streets while Dan tries to hunt down some nonexistent gaybasher?"

Paul was caught off-guard by the unexpected fervency in her voice. He blinked at her, unsure of what to say, and her frown deepened. "Forget it," she said, rising to her feet. She snatched the file away from him, snapping it shut. "Thanks for lunch. I'll see you around."

She started to walk away, and Paul mentally kicked himself in the ass. "Brenda," he called. "Wait a second!"

He hurried after her and caught her elbow, staying her. "Brenda, I can't get involved in this," he said helplessly. "That's not my job anymore. I'd be stepping all over Dan's ass if I did, and I—"

"I thought you'd enjoy that," she said, meeting his gaze evenly. "I've never understood whatever it is between you and Dan that makes you hate each other like you do, but I've always known it's there. I just never thought it would keep him from hearing me out on a perfectly plausible idea, just because you had it first. And I never in a million years would have thought it would keep you from diving into a good investigation. I thought you said you missed working cases like this."

"I would," he said. "And I do." Jesus, would he ever enjoy the opportunity to dish Dan Pierson a big, steaming helping of shit. *Did he really blow of the idea of anything other than a hate crime just because it was mine?* But Paul knew he didn't have the right, or authority, anymore to do anything to or about Dan Pierson. "I'm out of homicide. There's nothing I can do. It's a big bunch of bureaucratic bullshit, and my hands are tied."

She slipped her arm away. "Yeah," she said. "You're just McGruff the Crime Dog now, right?"

Her words hit him like a slap in the face. He stepped back, wounded, and she turned again, walking away. *She's right*, he thought. *Jesus, for the last year, all I've been doing is bitching and griping about working public affairs, saying how much I missed homicide, and how much I'd give to do it again. And now she offers it to me—she's coming to me for help on an*



*investigation, and what do I do? I give her some whining-ass, talking-head excuse about bureaucracy.*

*I really am the mayor's goddamn monkey boy.*

"Brenda!"

He ran after her this time, sprinting across the grass. She turned to look at him coolly, clearly angry at him, hurt by his seeming dismissal. *She counted on me to be a better man—a better cop—than Pierson.*

"I can't get you a search warrant," he told her. "Not for this case—not for those houses." Her eyes flashed. Her mouth opened to debate, and he cut her off. "But I can call Kyle Nelson over in the Building Code Inspection office and put a bug in his ear. All three of those houses look fit to be condemned to me. Let's see what Nelson says. He can usually have someone out for an inspection in forty-eight hours."

She blinked at him, her expression softening, her mouth unfurling in a hesitant smile.

"It's not the same as sending a C.S.I. team in, I know, but if there's anything there that looks suspicious, then we can use that to secure a warrant. Will that work?"

Brenda's smile widened. "Yes," she said. "Thank you, Paul."

\* \* \*

He returned to his office just in time to deliver Jason's hastily prepared statements about the legal woes of the mayor's bosom buddy to a small gathering of local reporters in the main lobby of the municipal building. Susan Vey was foremost among them, standing at the head of the back,

dressed in a crisp white blouse and a red, short-skirted suit. She smiled at him the whole time he was trying to speak, and he kept feeling tongue-tied for the distraction. His heart might have been harboring feelings for Brenda Wheaton, and his head might have understood that Susan was too young for him, but his groin wasn't listening. Neither was his libido.

"Hi," she said, coming over to him once the dog-and-pony show was over and the other reporters were leaving.

"Hi, yourself," he said, looking down at her.

Her dark eyes sparkled mischievously. "Thanks for the scoop," she said, pretending to pout. When she pushed that full lower lip out in feigned semblance, he felt a shiver pass through him, settling pleasantly somewhere in his balls.

"Hey, I didn't know about either story until I walked in my office this morning," he said, laughing. When she continued to fake petulance, he shook his head, holding up his hands in surrender. "Alright, I swear to God—the next scoop is yours. I call you first. Hell, I'll walk over to your apartment and tell you in person."

Susan met his gaze, the corner of her mouth lifting slightly. "I'd like that."

"Susan, it's the station," her cameraman said from behind them, holding a cell phone out toward her. It wasn't David that day; Susan had told him that morning as they'd jogged, that David had injured himself at his night job with the construction company. He was on disability leave for at least two weeks. "They're wanting a live shot in front of the Liberty Heights billboard at five thirty."

She shrugged at Paul. "I'd better take that."

He smiled. "Duty calls. I understand."

When he returned to public affairs, Jason looked up at him from his desk. "Kyle Nelson from the Building Inspection office returned your call," he said. "He said he wasn't able to do anything after all on those three houses you'd mentioned."

"What?" Paul asked, taking the little slip from a message pad his partner held out to him. He read the words "historic preservation district" and frowned. *Those houses are goddamn junk—practically falling apart! What the hell is this?*

"May I ask why you're interested in having those buildings inspected?" Jason asked.

"Nope," Paul replied, breezing into his office. *This is bullshit and Kyle knows it*, he thought, reaching for his phone. *He didn't say anything about any historic district this morning. Hell, that whole neighborhood is derelict row, and he said so himself! He didn't think there'd be any problem with the inspections.* He didn't close his door, which proved to be a mistake. After a moment, Jason appeared at the threshold, holding several sheets of paper in his hands and looking hesitant.

"I ran a title check on each of those properties," he said, and Paul, looked at him, startled. Jason offered the slim sheaf of papers.

"Why the hell did you do that?" Paul tromped over to Jason and snatched the papers from his hand.

"Because Nelson said those buildings were in a rehab zone, that the houses were on the city historical record,

which didn't make sense. That area is kind of seedy, you know."

Paul glanced at him, and the severity in his gaze made the younger man shy back a step in the doorway. "The houses aren't actually *on* the record yet, is what I found out," he said quickly. "All three of them are deeded to a man named Arthur Sinclair, who's the chairman of the Greater Metropolitan Historical Preservation Society." He nodded toward the papers in Paul's hand, and Paul flipped through them, finding a printed copy of an online newspaper article profiling Arthur Sinclair. *Prominent local architect helps fund local conservation projects*, the headline read.

"He's petitioning the city to have them added to the record," Jason said. "The city is the previous title owners for the properties. Tax forfeitures—whoever owned them before that abandoned them without paying their taxes, so the city claimed them. From what I've been able to find, Sinclair bought them earlier this year for a dollar apiece."

"A dollar?" Paul said.

"Apiece," Jason replied, nodding. "I was going to see if I could find out anything more, like maybe who the original owners were before the city, but I had to work on those media statements. Anyway, I thought it might be something you'd need, you and Dr. Wheaton, I mean."

Paul had nearly softened in his expression toward Jason, but his brows narrowed again as he leveled a stern gaze at the younger man. "What?"

Jason blinked, shying back again. "I...I just meant...I thought it might have something to do with the Melanie Geary case."

Paul's frown deepened. "Were you listening in on us this morning, Jason?"

"No," Jason replied, shaking his head quickly. "No, Paul, of course not, I...I just... You mentioned that name this morning, and I...I looked it up in the records. She was listed as a missing person, but her file was upgraded this morning to murder. Dr. Wheaton handled the autopsy. You said that name this morning when she left—Melanie Geary—and I assumed that's why Dr. Wheaton came to see—"

"Well, that's not why she came, and it's none of your goddamn business anyway," Paul said, planting his hand firmly against the younger man's shoulder and walking him three smart steps backward, out of his doorway. "There is no Geary case, not for us anyway, and this has nothing to do with anything." He wagged the pages in Jason's face.

"I'm sorry," Jason said, looking abashed. He reached for the papers. "I'll just pitch those in the recycling—"

"No, that's alright," Paul said, because he wanted to keep them, and was secretly glad that Jason had thought to look them up on his own. "I'll take care of them."

He closed the door to his office in Jason's face.

## CHAPTER FOUR

“And on the weather front, experts are keeping their eye on Felicia, which has grown from a tropical storm to a Category Two hurricane in just the last twenty-four hours,” said an absurdly chipper radio announcer, as Paul drove Emma home from school that afternoon.

“While the storm is still out at sea, it’s expected to continue strengthening as it moves northwest,” the woman continued. “By the time it barrels across the Bahamas and Cuba by early next week, some are predicting it will be a Category Four. If it continues its current heading and hits the Gulf of Mexico after that, it could only get stronger still—and that has officials in New Orleans nervous. For a coastline that is still recovering from the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, another—”

Paul switched the radio off, and silence filled the cab of his Explorer. *Oh, shit.* He felt the first inklings of a stress headache slithering through his skull. He gripped the steering wheel tightly in both hands, keeping his gaze deliberately fixed on the road ahead, purposely not as much as cutting a glance in his niece’s direction.

“Uncle Paul?” Emma asked, her voice quiet and hesitant.

*Oh, shit.*

"Yeah, lamb?" he asked, trying to smile. The pain in his head grew, throbbing now in the delicate sinuses behind his eyes.

"Daddy and Jo are in the Bahamas."

*Oh, shit.* So that hadn't been lost on her.

"That's where that storm is going," Emma said.

Explaining away the Bermuda Triangle was one thing, but this was something else entirely. Paul figured she remembered enough of the countless pictures and news footage of New Orleans after the devastation of Katrina. Telling her a hurricane was nothing, or no more than a great, big thunderstorm wasn't going to cut it.

"They won't stay there if it comes, Emma," Paul said, turning momentarily to look at her. "Your daddy is a pretty smart guy, and if I know him—which I do—he'll take Jo and get on a plane and come right back home if it looks like the storm is going to be bad."

She looked at him, all dark and uncertain eyes. "You sure?"

He smiled again, despite the fact the movement, the tensing of the muscles in his face, seemed to send a broad swell of pain lancing through his head. "I'm positive."

She might have said something more, but her expression shifted, growing frightened. "Uncle Paul, you're bleeding...!"

Even as she spoke, he felt a bright pain sear through his head, making him wince, a tickling sensation inside of his nose, and then a warm trickle as blood slid out of his right nostril. Paul brought his fingertips to his nose, startled,

and glanced up into the rearview mirror. He felt a sudden rush of warmth and gasped, alarmed, as blood suddenly seeped through his fingers, running from his nose in a heavy flow.

“Uncle Paul!” Emma squealed, frightened.

“It’s alright, honey,” Paul said, his voice clipped and tinny as he pinched his nose firmly. He glanced in all his mirrors, and cut the truck over into the emergency lane, bringing it to a shuddering stop on the side of the highway. He reached past Emma, his bloody fingertips leaving smears against the vinyl of the glove compartment door as he opened it. He pawed inside, grabbing a wad of fast-food napkins. He shoved them against his nose and leaned forward, struggling not to panic.

*Jesus, where did this come from?*

He could still feel blood flowing steadily. He could taste it in his throat, thick and salty and metallic. His hands were shaking, his shoulders shuddering. The blood had scared him almost as much as Emma.

He closed his eyes and jerked as images flashed through his mind, memories as sharp as a broken spear of glass.

*Cutting the girl, Aimee’s clothes off of her slowly, deliberately, while she was strapped to the chair, just as he had Melaine Geary’s...*

“Uncle Paul?” Emma asked again.

*Taking long silver needles, the kind with the handles used in high school biology dissections, carrying a small silver tray of them, a box of one hundred and fifty toward the chair...*



*Aimee whimpers, pleading around the rubber ball in her mouth, and then her voice rips shrilly and she shears her wrists bloody against the manacles as he begins to spear the needles into her, sliding them into folds and crevices, sinking them deeply into the meat of her form*

"God...!" Paul gasped, and he threw the driver's side door open. He leaned out, jerking his hand, the bloodied napkins away from his face seconds before his stomach heaved, and he vomited the thin remnants of his chili dog lunch with Brenda Wheaton. Again and again, his stomach wrenched, and he cried out hoarsely, spitting to get the bile and blood out of his mouth.

"Uncle Paul!" Emma exclaimed, and she began to cry.

When there was nothing left in his gut to come up, and he'd stopped retching, Paul tried to wipe his face with the napkins. He fumbled behind his seat until he found a bottle of water he kept stowed away for emergencies. *This is probably as good a one as any*, he figured grimly, and he splashed a palm full of water against his face, trying to clean himself up.

When he was finished, he looked up in the mirror. His nose had stopped bleeding and the stabbing pain in his head was gone; not even a lingering, throbbing hint of it remained. He could still hear Aimee's voice in his mind, her frightened, tear-choked pleas. *What's happening to me?* he thought. *Christ, am I losing my mind?*

He looked over at Emma. She sat in a huddle on her seat, her shoulders hunkered beneath her seat belt, her hair hanging in her face. She made soft, sniveling sounds, tears

streaming down her cheeks, and his heart ached. "Oh, Christ," he whispered, reaching for her, cupping his hand against the back of her head. "Come here, kiddo."

He unhooked her seat belt and drew her against him, hugging her fiercely. "I'm sorry," he whispered as she clutched at him, trembling. "I'm sorry, Emma. I didn't mean to scare you. I'm alright."

"You...you were bleeding...!" she whimpered, her voice muffled against his coat lapel.

"But I'm fine now. Look." He leaned back so she could see for herself. "No more blood. Something must have flown up my nose. A bug or something."

Emma blinked at him, then his ploy worked and she giggled. "That's gross," she said.

"No, what's gross is if it's still up in there," Paul replied. "Setting up house or something, you know—picking out drapes, ordering cable installation, getting a phone turned on in its name..."

Emma laughed, her fear forgotten. "You're silly, Uncle Paul."

He looked beyond her, out the passenger side window. Through the trees, the heavy undergrowth along the edge of the highway, he could make out a plane of white, red and blue letters visible in hints and peeks through the foliage. The Liberty Heights billboard. If he squinted just right, he thought he could glimpse a distinctive bright yellow Channel 11 news van parked down there, on the narrow, winding access road running parallel to the

highway. Susan had a live shot scheduled there, he remembered.

"You sure you're okay?" Emma asked, drawing his gaze. Her expression had shifted again, responding undoubtedly to his, and he smiled again.

"I promise, kiddo," he said, reaching out and pinching her nose lightly, playfully, making her giggle again. "Come on. Let's go home. There's something I want to try and catch on TV."

\* \* \*

"You just missed him," said Jobeth Montgomery-Frances, Paul's new sister-in-law. "Jay just ran down the hall to get some ice."

"That's okay," Paul said, glancing over his shoulder from the kitchen threshold to the closed door of Emma's bedroom. She was changing into her pajamas after supper, readying for bed, and he'd hoped to talk quickly, privately before she came out to say good-night to Jay. And actually, it had been Jo with whom he'd been hoping to speak. "So how's the weather?"

Jo laughed. "It's beautiful. For now. Sounds like in another two, three days, and it's going to suck."

By seven o'clock that evening, Hurricane Felicia had been upgraded again, this time to a Category Three storm, with top wind speeds in excess of 120 miles-per-hour. She was closing in on the Caribbean quickly, and growing stronger all the way.

"Jay called the airline this afternoon," Jo said. "We were going to call you in a bit and let you know. We're

flying back tomorrow evening. Looks like we'll be back in town by Saturday morning."

"Not going to ride it out, huh?" he asked, making her laugh again.

"Not this time," she said. "Jay's got the flight information written down, but I don't know what he did with it. But he should be back in a few minutes."

"That's okay," Paul said again, sparing another quick look toward Emma's door. "I...I was kind of wanting to talk to you anyway, Jo. Just for a second."

"Sure," she replied. "What's up?"

"I..." His voice faltered, and he walked into the living room. *Christ, I need a cigarette*, he thought, pacing restlessly, rubbing his palm against the leg of his sweatpants, struggling to resist the urge. "After Jay...touched you...did you... Has anything weird happened since then?"

"Weird?" Jo asked. Jo and Jay had met under extraordinary circumstances. She had been murdered in a stairwell at a local mall. He had raised her from the dead. She'd been the first person Jay had ever been able to resurrect completely, body, mind and soul. All of the others before had been restored physically, but had been left in otherwise irreversible vegetative states. Jo had been the first to come all of the way back.

Paul had been the second.

"Yeah," he said, his mouth dry and tacky with anxiety all of a sudden. *Christ, I need a beer, too*. "I just...I've been having some weird dreams lately." *There's a goddamn understatement*. "Strange shit. And I...I think I've been

sleepwalking..." His voice faded as he thought of the missing cigarettes from his pack the night before, of waking up at his front door, his hand on the knob, and having no idea how he'd come to be there. "Anything like that happen to you?"

"No," Jo said. "You feeling okay otherwise? Are you having any headaches? Dizziness? Hearing anything like bells or buzzing?"

She was a registered nurse, and he could tell by the sudden, mild tone she'd adopted that she'd shifted unconsciously into that clinical frame of mind. "No," he said. "Nothing like that." *Except for this afternoon*, he thought, though he made no mention. *I had that weird, stabbing headache and then my nose started bleeding when I remembered hurting that girl, Aimee...*

*Imagined!* another part of his mind cried out. *Imagined it! I imagined that!*

Jo's voice shifted again, growing gentle. "You know, Paul, you've been under a lot of stress lately because of the divorce," she said. "That's a huge change in your life."

*Change, hell*, Paul thought, closing his eyes. *That was the end of my life, whatever I knew of it, anyway. I feel like a stranger now, Jo. Like I've woken up in some godforsaken nightmare and I can't get out—I'm in someone else's apartment, someone else's piece-of-shit job, dreaming someone else's sick, fucking dreams. I don't know who the hell I am anymore.*

He might have told Jay this, if it had been his younger brother on the other end of the line, but it was Jo, and he

said nothing for a long moment, drawing in a deep breath to compose himself.

"They have someone you can talk to through the department, don't they?" Jo asked, her voice quiet and sympathetic against his ear. "Some kind of counseling service?"

*A shrink. She thinks I need to talk to a goddamn shrink. And Christ, maybe I do.*

"Yeah," he said, opening his eyes, blinking in start to find Emma standing in the doorway to the living room, watching him. Her eyes were round, but her expression unreadable. She studied him as if she knew what he was thinking, as if she'd somehow been privy to his thoughts.

He heard Jay's voice through the phone, and Jo's tone immediately shifted again, brightening. "Hey, Jay's back," she said. "Why don't we talk when I'm back in town? I know a couple of really good—"

"That's fine," he interjected mildly, having no intention of saying anything more about the matter to her—or anyone—again. "I've got a little lamb standing here anyway, who I'm sure wants to speak with her daddy."

At this, the word *daddy*, Emma's entire face lit up, her mouth unfurling in a bright smile. She scampered forward, hand expectantly outstretched, and as Paul and Jo each traded phones on their respective ends of the line, Emma cried out happily into the receiver. "Daddy!"

Her enthusiasm reminded him that he was overdue for his own nightly phone call to his daughters—not because M.K. or Bethany ever greeted him with anything like that

innocent, wondrous exuberance, but because he still felt it nonetheless to speak with *them*. He missed them. He walked back into the kitchen, leaving Emma to chatter happily at Jay, and picked up the cordless handset to call home. A knock at his door interrupted him, just as he moved to thumb the pre-set speed dial button. He walked back into the living room, frowning slightly. It was nearly eight-thirty. *Who the hell could this be?*

He opened the door and blinked in surprise, smiling to find Susan Vey on his doorstep. "Well...hi," he said, somewhat dumbfounded.

She smiled at him brightly, her long, dark hair caught back from her face in a ponytail. She wore blue jeans and old sneakers and a grey T-shirt emblazoned with a faded Lake Tahoe iron-on. She damn near took his breath away.

"Hi, yourself," she said. "I hope you don't mind me stopping by so late. You mentioned your building number this morning, and I found your apartment number by looking at the mailbox bank in the lobby." She shrugged, looking sheepish and shy. "Tough investigative reporting there, huh?"

He laughed. She was holding a plate covered in foil balanced against one hand, and he could smell something warm, wondrous and garlic-laden hidden beneath. "For me?" he asked, arching his brow at the plate, wondering how in the hell she'd so accurately deduced that he not only loved Italian, but couldn't cook it—or anything else—worth a shit.

Susan blinked, and her smile faltered. "Oh, uh, no," she said clumsily, drawing the plate against her belly as if he'd reached for it. Bright color bloomed in her cheeks. "No, this is for David. I...I'm just on my way to bring it to him. He's laid up, you know. Hurt his back, and he's pretty much bedridden. I thought I..."

"Sorry," Paul said, trying to rescue her from an obviously uncomfortable moment, feeling awkward and embarrassed himself. "Sorry. I shouldn't have assumed. I just..."

"I could bring you some," she offered. "It's lasagna. I made it myself. It's nothing fantastic, but it's edible..."

"It smells great," he told her. "But that's okay. I...I've already eaten." It wasn't a complete lie. Neither he nor Emma had felt much like eating that night. He'd made her a hot dog with corn chips, and he'd picked and poked at a plateful of his own.

"Maybe some other time, then?" Susan said, and he smiled.

"I'd like that."

"I really just stopped by to see if you'd like to run again tomorrow morning," she said, her brows lifting hopefully. "We could meet out front, if you'd like...? Maybe six-ish?"

"Sounds good," he said, nodding. "Sure. Six-ish it is."

Her smile widened. "Good," she said. "Great. I'll see you then."

They stood in awkward silence for a moment, looking at one another, both of them smiling goofily, and then they



both laughed simultaneously, shaking loose of the moment. "I'd better get going..." Susan said, but she didn't move.

"Your brother's supper, yeah," Paul said, nodding again.

"I'll see you in the morning," Susan said, but still she step away from the doorway. She remained rooted in place, as if waiting for something, expecting something.

*Like she wants me to kiss her*, he thought, blinking in startled realization. It had been a long time since he'd seen that look of hesitant anticipation in a woman's face and he nearly shook his head. *She's young enough to be my daughter. Why in the hell would she want me to kiss her?*

"Well, I...I'll see you, then," he said, deliberately stepping back from the threshold, because if he continued in that immediate proximity to her for too much longer, especially with that look of hopeful longing he imagined on her face, he probably would try to kiss her. *If only to see if I could.*

"Okay," she said, nodding, and thankfully, she retreated, backing away from the door. She turned and walked toward the stairs.

"I'm sorry I missed your live shot," he said, giving her momentary pause. She blinked at him, puzzled. "The Liberty Heights shot you mentioned this morning, when the station called. I tried to get home in time tonight to see it, but I missed you."

"Oh," she said with a smile and a dismissive flap of her hand. "It was cancelled. Something came up. It's just as well. Last time I did a live shot there, one of the protestors

decided to spit in my face on camera. They were up there picketing, trying to stop them from tearing down the sanitarium."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

She shrugged. "One of those things."

"Tough investigative reporting, huh?" he asked, and she laughed.

"You got it."

He watched her walk down the stairs, the dark, wavy length of her ponytail bouncing between her shoulder blades, drawing his gaze inexorably down to the admittedly all-too tempting outward swell of her jean-clad buttocks. Luckily, she was down the stairs and gone from his view before his groin could respond to his admittedly all-too lecherous stare. Hurricanes may be hard to explain away to his niece, but an erection would be even more humiliatingly so.

He stepped back into the apartment and closed the door.

"Was that Claire?" Emma asked.

He turned and found her sitting on the sofa, kicking her heels, watching him curiously. His cell phone was folded closed, resting in the nest of her lap.

"You finished talking to your daddy?" he asked, and she nodded.

"He's coming home!" she said brightly. "Tomorrow night, he told me, so they won't get stuck in the hurricane. He said he'd call you back later to tell you their airplane numbers."

"Good enough," Paul said, even though he had sort of liked having Emma in his apartment, and felt saddened at the prospect of her visit being cut so short. Even though she was a kid, she was company, someone to talk to and he would miss her. "Come on, kiddo. Bedtime for you."

Emma hopped up from the couch and followed him down the hallway. "Was that Claire?"

Paul turned to her, puzzled. "The woman at the door," Emma said. "Was that Claire Boyett?"

*Who?* he thought, mystified. The name meant nothing to him. "No, lamb, that...that was my friend, Susan Vey."

*Who's young enough to be my daughter,* he added mentally.

"Oh," Emma said, looking equally puzzled, for reasons he couldn't explain.

"Who is Claire Boyett?" he asked.

She blinked at him, as if she'd been momentarily lost in thought, and shook her head. "Nobody," she said. She rose onto her tiptoes and he leaned obligingly over so she could kiss him on the corner of his mouth. "Good night, Uncle Paul."

"Good night, Emma," he said.

\* \* \*

It didn't make sense. Emma had asked her grandmother what had made Uncle Paul's nosebleed, what had been wrong with Uncle Paul the last few days. Grandma had told her it had something to do with a woman—*Claire Boyett*, Grandma had called her.

Emma lay in bed, listening to Paul's muffled voice from the living room as he talked to M.K. and Bethany on the phone. The woman at the door hadn't been Claire Boyett. In fact, Uncle Paul had looked confused when Emma had mentioned the name, as if he'd never heard it before in his life. *He doesn't know who Claire Boyett is.*

It didn't make sense. Emma closed her eyes, snuggling her teddy bear, Mr. Cuddles, beneath her chin. *Grandma?* she thought, concentrating fiercely, imagining herself at the Kansas farm where Daddy and Uncle Paul had grown up. That was where she always imagined her grandmother when they would talk. *Grandma, can you hear me?*

*Yes, Emma,* Grandma replied, and now Emma could see her plainly in her mind, standing in the side yard again. The storm Emma had seen on the horizon just before Daddy and Jo had married was even closer now; the sky was dark and filled with black, swollen rain clouds. Emma heard the grumble of thunder overhead, and could smell the strong, distinctive fragrance of encroaching rain.

*The storm is coming, Emma,* Grandma said, the whipping winds had snatched at Grandma's words, making it difficult for Emma to understand her. *It's right next door!*

*I know!* Emma called back, shouting to be heard over the wind. *It's a hurricane, Grandma! It's coming toward the Bahamas, but Daddy and Jo are leaving. They're coming home so they won't get hurt!*

Grandma said nothing. She looked at Emma, drawing the sides of her lavender cardigan sweater more securely

across her bosom to fight the chill in the wind. She didn't approach Emma, as she usually did. She kept a wary distance, and Emma felt powerless to prevent it, as if she couldn't move any closer, even if she wanted to.

*Grandma, who is Claire Boyett?* Emma cried. *You told me her name, but I don't know who she is!*

*You have me to tell you things, show you things,* Grandma said. *Paul has Claire Boyett.*

*But who is she?* Emma shouted. *Grandma, I asked Uncle Paul about her, but he didn't know!*

Grandma looked up at the sky as a particularly loud crackle of thunder sounded. She hunched her shoulders, her expression fearful. *We should go inside,* she said. *We should—*

And then a flashing spear of lightning lanced across the sky and Emma jerked, startled. Her eyes flew wide, and she found herself back in the bedroom at Uncle Paul's apartment, with Mr. Cuddles tucked against her. When she had fallen asleep, it had only just turned night, and the sky beyond her window had been a dusky purple. Now, hours had passed, it seemed; the sky was black, and the streetlight's glow seeped through her curtains.

Emma sat up. *Grandma?* she thought. There was no reply, and she felt anxious and scared. Grandma usually answered her. The storm had frightened Grandma for some reason. *The hurricane,* she thought, and she remembered her grandmother's earlier admonition. *A storm is coming. Something bad is going to happen and your daddy's going to be hurt.*

*But he's coming home, Emma thought. He told me so tonight—he and Jo are leaving tomorrow and they're coming home to get away from the storm.*

She crawled out of bed and opened her door. The apartment was quiet and still. Emma carried Mr. Cuddles by the paw and padded down the corridor to Paul's room. His door stood open, the room draped in darkness. Light from beyond the window spilled across the floor and bed in erratically shaped splotches of stark, pale light. The covers were turned back on the bed, pushed to one side as if Paul had been sleeping there, but had gotten up. The digital clock beside his bed said 12:47 in the morning.

"Uncle Paul?" Emma called softly. She tiptoed into the room and looked all around, but Paul wasn't there. He wasn't in the bathroom. He wasn't in the kitchen, or the living room. He wasn't sitting at the dining room table, or smoking a cigarette out on the patio. He was gone.

"Uncle Paul? Emma called again, her eyes filling with tears. She knew he wouldn't answer; he wasn't there, but she didn't know what else to do. She hugged Mr. Cuddles against her belly and struggled not to cry.

*You have me to tell you things, show you things,*  
Grandma had said. *Paul has Claire Boyett.*

*Is that where Uncle Paul is? With Claire Boyett?* Emma wondered. It didn't make sense. He hadn't known who Claire Boyett was. *Maybe she's not a person, she thought. Maybe she's like Grandma—a ghost. Maybe she shows him things the way Grandma shows me.*

She didn't know, but if that was true, it didn't explain where Paul was, where he had gone. Emma went back to her room and closed the door. After a moment's uncertain hesitation, she pushed the button-lock down on the handle, and locked the door behind her. She scurried back to her bed and ducked beneath the covers, burrowing deeply, dragging Mr. Cuddles with her. All she could imagine in her mind was Uncle Paul from the night before, sitting in his room, smoking a cigarette, his face twisted and different and scary somehow.

*Like he was someone else.*

She shivered, her tears spilling. She thought about going and getting the cordless phone, calling her daddy, but she didn't move. Instead she closed her eyes and repeated in her mind a sort of frantic, frightened mantra. *Daddy will be coming home soon. Nothing's going to happen. Daddy will be coming home soon. Nothing's going to happen.*

\* \* \*

"Here."

Bethany jerked awake, startled by her sister's voice. A flutter of movement near her face startled her all the more, and she sat up, eyes flown wide, her breath caught in a surprised gasp.

M.K. giggled, switching on the bedside lamp. Bethany immediately winced, squinting against the glare. She was still half-asleep and more than slightly bewildered. "What time is it?" she asked, her voice croaking.

"Quarter after two or something," M.K. said. "Look on your pillow."

Bethany looked and saw what her sister had dropped there; the flicker of motion that had startled her. It was a driver's license. Bethany picked it up and blinked in new surprise to find her high school yearbook picture looking back at her, beneath the name *Allison Jane Deavers*.

"Now you can go with us this weekend," M.K. said with a smile. She was dressed from a night of clubbing, smelling like beer and cigarette smoke, her blue jeans too tight and too low, her slip of a tank top cut to her midriff.

"This weekend?" Bethany asked, still staring at the driver's license. It sure *looked* real, down to the computer-embossed holograms on the plastic cover. Whoever she was, Allison Jane Deavers had been born in 1985, making her twenty-one years old.

"Yeah. I told Nathan you were coming and he was really stoked."

Bethany looked up at M.K. "But...we're going to Dad's this weekend."

M.K. shrugged. "So? We can still sneak out. He won't know. I do it all the time. He sleeps right through it—and so do you."

"I...I don't know," Bethany said, looking uncomfortable. She didn't like the idea of lying to their mother, of sneaking out of the house, and she sure didn't want to get caught doing either by their father. Besides, their dad would be hurt if he found out they were sneaking out of his apartment, and she didn't want to hurt him.



M.K. frowned, crossing her arms over her chest. "Bethany, Nathan went to a lot of trouble to get this for you, so don't tell me you've changed your mind."

"Nathan?" Bethany asked, surprised.

M.K.'s frown deepened. "Yes, Nathan. I told you he was excited about you coming. He got that so you could."

Bethany blinked in new surprise at the license in her hand. She'd been watching Nathan Darcy surreptitiously in band ever since M.K. had told her he wanted her to come to Snake Eyes. She'd never once seen him as much as glance in her direction. She'd nearly convinced herself that M.K. was full of shit; that Nathan wasn't going to ask her to the homecoming dance after all. But all at once, she was no longer so certain.

M.K. hopped momentarily on each foot, slipping off her wedge-heeled sandals. "I'm going to bed," she said, walking toward the door, barefooted. "You let me know what you decide. I don't give a shit either way." She glanced over her shoulder as she left Bethany's room. "But Nathan will be awful disappointed if you're not there," she added with a wink, twisting Bethany's stomach in a whole new, anxious, uncertain knot. "See you in the morning."

## CHAPTER FIVE

"Are you alright?" Susan asked Paul as he met her on the front walk running between their adjacent apartment buildings. It was ten after six, the sun barely a pastel glow in the sky, the streetlights still shining with pale coronas of light in the misty, foggy new morning.

"Yeah," he replied. "Sorry I'm late."

He sounded weary. Hell, he felt weary. He had gone to sleep sometime after eleven, tucked beneath his blankets in his bed, and had woken up nearly four hours later sitting behind the wheel of his truck, parked on the side of the road. Although it had been dark, and he'd had nothing but the twin beams of his headlights to orient him, he was pretty certain he had been at about the same point as where he'd pulled off the highway with a nosebleed.

He still didn't know what terrified him more—the fact that he'd apparently been sleepwalking—hell, *sleepdriving*—again, that he'd come to his senses in a place wholly unfamiliar to him, and just as well the goddamn dark side of the moon, or that he'd been dreaming again, his mind tormented while his body had acted of its own apparent accord. He'd dreamed of the girl, Aimee, bound and gagged in the straight-backed chair in a basement someplace where horsehair plaster, lead-based paint and asbestos abounded.

He'd seen her in his mind. He'd secured the piano wire garrote around her neck, tying it to her ankles. He'd

finished with his preliminary tortures—burning her with cigarettes, punching the needles into her body; he knew this in his mind, as distinct as memories, just as he knew he was tired of her...in that fashion.

*Now to get down to business*, he'd thought, as he'd taken the stainless steel gardening shears in hand and set to work on her fingers.

Paul had vomited in his truck at the memory of this, the choked garble of her cries as she'd screamed around the rubber-ball muffle, and the way her eyes had bulged, her face flushing purple with the desperate need for air as she'd struggled, her legs jerking reflexively, tightening the noose around her neck. He'd thrown open the door of the Explorer and leaned out over the road, his stomach heaving.

*Oh, God*, he had thought. *What's happening to me? What in Christ's name is wrong with me?*

He'd sat at the roadside for a seeming eternity, ashen and shaking, gripping the steering wheel with cold, clammy hands. *It was a dream*, he'd thought, over and over again, desperate to convince himself. *Even with the smells, the sounds, the memories...it wasn't real. It can't be real, because if it is, it means...it means...*

"Christ," he had whispered, shoving the heels of his hands over his eyes, trying to physically restrain his mind from considering any further. "What's happening to me?"

"Paul?" Susan asked, cocking her head slightly to attract his gaze, snapping him out of his reverie. "You okay?"

"Yeah," he said again, and this time, he forced a feeble smile. "Rough night, that's all. I didn't sleep good."

"You still feel like running?" she asked. She wore loose-fitting nylon jogging shorts that did nothing to camouflage her long, shapely legs, and a form-fitting, cropped tank top. He had never noticed how strong she was before; her arms and shoulders, visible in full, were toned and sculpted with lean, firm musculature. A momentary admiration of the swell of cleavage spilling out over the tank's scooped neckline was all it took to help him clear his thoughts. Or at least, redirect them.

"Yes," he said, because all at once, the idea of stretching his legs, of feeling the pounding rhythm of the pavement beneath his feet, the resounding impact shuddering through his knees and thighs, and all while watching Susan's breasts bouncing beneath the confines of her shirt, sounded like a blessed escape to him, the perfect way to forget the night before, and what had happened—both real and imagined.

They ran together, side by side, their feet falling nearly in tandem against the black-top. "So how's your brother?" he asked.

"He's good," she replied. "Doped up on painkillers, he told me, so I didn't stay long."

Paul nodded. They continued on in silence for a moment, and then she looked up at him. "Would you like to come over tomorrow night?"

He stumbled, hopping to a surprised halt. "What?"

Susan blushed brightly and burst out laughing, covering her hand with her mouth. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to startle you. I just...I thought we could have dinner together. I could fix some more lasagna. I figure I kind of owe you, since I faked you out last night, with the plate and all..."

*God, she's trying to make up for that,* he thought, and he leaned over, placing his hands against his thighs while he laughed breathlessly. *Jesus, and for a second, I thought she was asking me out on a date...coming onto me...*

"That's really nice, Susan, but you don't have to do that," he said, glancing up at her.

"I know," she replied. As he straightened, she stepped closer, keeping her eyes fixed on his, the corners of her lovely mouth upturning slightly. "I want to."

All at once, Paul's throat constricted, and he gulped audibly for breath. "Are...you asking me out on a date?" he asked, feeling somewhat ridiculous and more than a little astonished.

Her smile widened, her eyes flashing with mischievous good humor. "I am, yes," she said. "Are you accepting?"

He blinked, staring at her for a long, disbelieving moment, and then he laughed shakily, forking his fingers through his thinning blond hair. "Susan, that...that's sweet," he said. "That's actually damn near the sweetest thing anyone's done for me in awhile, but you... It's just that you're..."

"Younger than you?" she asked, arching her brow.

"A lot younger than me," he clarified. "I'm old enough to be your father."

She continued to hold his gaze, at once challenging and engaging him. "Yes," she said. "But you're not."

She stepped even closer, pressing the wondrous swell of her breasts against his chest. He could feel the points of her nipples straining through the thin layers of fabric separating them. He could smell her, a heady, intermingling fragrance of perfume and perspiration, and he could feel her heat seeping through his T-shirt and sweatpants, infusing into his form, stirring him to immediate, uncomfortable arousal.

"Susan..." he began, and then she stood on her tiptoes and kissed him. Her lips pressed against him, lightly, sweetly, and then her tongue slipped against his own. The kiss deepened; she stepped more closely against him, her hands cradling his face. He hadn't kissed any woman but Vicki in more than twenty years. The emotions that rocked through him were rapid-fire and bewildering—amazement, shock, delight, lust, shame, remorse. He didn't know if he should kiss her back or run away. Or worse—pull her into the woods lining the stretch of road they had been jogging alongside, rip aside her thin nylon shorts and bury his sudden, throbbing, aching arousal deeply within her.

A car flew by, its horn blaring, startling them apart. Susan stumbled, losing her footing in the soft loam of the road's shoulder, and he caught her arms, sparing her a fall. She looked up at him, smiling, and oh, Christ, he suddenly

found the latter of his options being the most immediately tempting.

“So is that a yes?” she asked.

“To what?” he asked, shell-shocked and dumbfounded from her kiss.

She laughed. “To dinner,” she said. “With me. Tomorrow night. Is that a yes?”

He nodded. “Yes,” he said. *To that, to anything, whatever you want*, he thought. For the first time in a long time, he found himself thinking, *Christ, if this is a dream, don’t let me wake up. Just let me keep dreaming until after tomorrow night.*

\* \* \*

“You look like hell,” Jason said as Paul walked past his desk for his office.

“Good morning to you, too,” Paul grumbled, pausing long enough at the department coffee maker to pour himself a large, steaming mug full of straight-black joe.

“No, seriously,” Jason said. “Are you alright? You look—”

“Like hell, yeah, you’ve mentioned,” Paul said, kicking the door to his office closed behind him, cutting short any further commentary from his partner.

He sat down at his desk and leaned over, turning on his computer from the tower. He blinked in surprise to notice three stapled sheaves of paper neatly arranged on his desk blotter. They hadn’t been there when he’d left the day before. He perused through them while his computer booted, and realized they were property title and deed

histories for the three houses owned by Arthur Sinclair, the chairman of the Greater Metropolitan Historical Preservation Society.

Paul checked the date and time stamp on the printed pages and realized that Jason had pulled the information together earlier that morning. *The kid must have been in here before the crack of dawn working on this*, he thought, momentarily and absurdly touched. *Why in the hell?*

He was the first to admit he was probably too hard on the younger man. He simply had little time, patience or energy to expend on someone who had never spent a day of his life in the field as a street cop; someone who didn't understand the first thing about the real responsibilities that came with the job. Jason was a paper-pusher, representing everything about the public affairs department and the aspects of Paul's job that he disdained, and in truth, he judged the young officer unfairly for that.

He glanced toward the narrow window flanking his office door and spied Jason looking at him from his desk. At Paul's notice, Jason immediately stiffened, his eyes darting back to his computer monitor. *Subtle, kid*, Paul thought with a frown. *Real subtle.*

His phone rang, and he tucked the receiver between his shoulder and ear as he set about dressing his coffee, adding in three packets of sugar simultaneously to the dark, steaming brew. "Frances," he said. "Public Affairs."

"Hi, Paul," his wife, Vicki, said on the other line.

*My ex-wife, she's my ex*



He felt his face and heart soften, and a deep, visceral ache stoke in his gut. For a fleeting moment, no longer than a second or two, his throat tightened and he couldn't find his breath or voice. "Vicki," he said, with a slight cough to recover. "Hey. How are you?"

He closed his eyes and remembered her, the fragrance of her skin, the flavor and texture of it—of her—against his mouth and tongue, the way she would hiccup for breath when climax came upon her while they were making love, the way she'd always hook her fingers into the meat of his back and sink her teeth lightly, deliberately into his shoulder to keep from crying out loud in release and alerting M.K. or Bethany.

"I'm good, Paul," she said. "How are you?"

*I'm nothing*, he thought, and again, his chest tightened with pain. *God, Vicki, I'm lonely and sleep-deprived and I hate my fucking job and nothing makes any goddamn sense anymore without you and the girls.*

"I'm fine," he said again, and he took a sip of the scalding coffee to wrench his mind from thoughts of her, to give it physical pain to focus on as his lips were burned, because that was an easier distraction to bear than a broken heart. "It...it's good to hear from you. What's up?"

"I wanted to see if you'd heard from Jay and Jo," she said. "That hurricane is all over the news. It's a Category Four this morning, they're saying."

"Yeah," he nodded. He looked down at the papers Jason had left for him, and realized he'd also printed off some copies of online articles about Arthur Sinclair. "I talked

to him last night, in fact. They're flying home early. They'll be in tomorrow night."

The words *on the board of regents for the Metropolitan Free Public Library* caught his attention in one of the biographical pieces on Sinclair. Vicki worked at the Metro Free Public Library as the acquisitions director. In fact, a quick glance at the caller-I.D. display on his phone revealed that was where she was calling from, her desk at work.

"That's good," she said. "I was worried. What a shame they have to cut their honeymoon short."

"Yeah," he murmured, skimming the article without really listening to her. "Vicki, do you know a guy by the name of Arthur Sinclair?"

She was quiet for a moment. "He's on our board of regents," she said at length, sounding somewhat puzzled by the unexpected turn in conversation.

He was looking at a photocopied, black-and-white newspaper image, a picture from a library regents' Christmas ball three years earlier. In the photo, a man in a tuxedo, identified by cutline as Arthur Sinclair was laughing and smiling with someone identified as Howard Minz and Robert Allen, the city's mayor.

"How about Bob Allen?" he asked, raising a thoughtful brow.

"The mayor? He is, too," Vicki said. Her voice had grown somewhat curt, as if she realized his distraction and was annoyed by it. "Look, Paul, I wanted to tell you I'm sorry about the other night. You were right. You should have a say-so in the girls' lives outside of your visitation

with them. I should have talked to you about M.K. dating before telling her it was okay. I'm sorry about that."

The city had sold the three properties to Arthur Sinclair for a dollar apiece. Sinclair and the mayor sat together on the library board. *A little good-ol'-boy networking happening on the side?* he wondered. *Why else would the city sell even piece-of-shit property so cheap?*

"...do you think?" Vicki was saying.

Paul blinked, snapped from his thoughts. "What?"

He heard the sharp huff of her breath over the phone line, and winced. *Ah, Christ.*

"You weren't even listening, were you?" Vicki said, her voice soft but cutting. This was her precursor-to-a-fight tone. He remembered it well. "You weren't paying attention to a single thing I just said."

"Yes, I was," he said. "I just have forty different things sitting on my desk at the moment, and I just walked in the door, and I haven't—"

"It's always something with you," she said. "Isn't it, Paul?"

"That's not—" he began, but she cut him off.

"You didn't listen in our counseling sessions all last year, either," she snapped. "What did you do there the whole time? Look out the goddamn window and think about your work? That's all you ever think about—all you ever thought about. It sure as hell wasn't thinking about me or the girls."

It felt like she'd kicked him in the balls. His stomach tightened reflexively, and again, that deep, insidious pain

seized him. "That's not fair," he whispered, but it was fair and he knew it. He *hadn't* been listening to her. Not then, and not for a long time. It was par for the course with him. "Vicki, please..."

"It's your weekend with the girls," she said. "Try not to forget about that, okay? They'll be ready at six."

"Vic..." he began helplessly, but she hung up on him.

\* \* \*

The day only grew worse from there.

But before it did, Paul tried to distract himself from the piece-of-shit feeling his conversation with Vicki had left with him. *Hell, when doesn't a conversation with Vic wind up with me feeling like shit anymore?* he thought, returning his attention to the papers Jason had printed for him.

The website from which Jason had pulled the information was printed at the very top of each sheet. Curious, Paul turned to his keyboard, opened his web browser and typed in the address. It was the city's Property Value Assessment website. From its online database, he—or any other Joe Shmoe in town—could run a basic check on a piece of property, to ascertain its appraised taxable value. For a nominal subscription fee, someone could access even more detailed information, such as a history of deed transfers. This was a service targeted primarily toward investors and realtors, but Paul shifted his weight and fished his wallet out of his back pocket. He could damn well use it, too.

He pulled out the city's gold card and paid for a year's subscription. *All in the line of duty*, he thought,

smirking wryly as the credit card payment processed online. Once he was able to access the advanced search window of the site, he typed in *Greater Metropolitan Historical Preservation*, then selected *Deed or Title Search* and hit *Go!*

To his surprise, a list of more than three dozen properties resulted. All had been titled to Greater Metropolitan Historical Preservation within the last three years—all former tax-forfeiture foreclosures and all turned over for pennies on the dollar by Metro Government. All but five had since been resold or retitled, including the three properties Brenda had identified near the dump site of Melanie Geary's body. The others were now listed under the titled ownership of Keswick Investment Realty Group.

"Huh," Paul said, frowning slightly. He looked from the computer screen down toward the papers detailing the three houses again. Each one had a small photo included in the property descriptions; tiny, grainy, poorly reproduced, black-and-white images that depicted the homes more as hulking shadows than anything discernable.

"Huh," Paul said again, his frown deepening. Something wasn't right. He could feel it, his veteran police instincts stirring from dormancy to tickle and prod at his brain. He tapped his fingertips against the pages. Something wasn't right. But did it have anything to do with Melanie Geary's murder?

He closed his eyes, and as soon as he did, a stark, startling image

*memory*

lanced through his brain, forcing him to jerk  
reflexively, to suck in a hissing breath through his teeth.

*Going down a long flight of crumbling concrete  
stairs...descending from shadows into full and heavy  
darkness...cutting through it with the broad, pale beam of a  
flashlight...watching the splash of illumination bounce and dance  
off the walls and stairs as I go down...*

In his mind, Paul saw  
*remembered*

reaching the bottom of this long flight of stairs, of  
finding himself in a long, narrow corridor lined on both  
sides by gaping, darkened doorways.

*One...two...three...* He counted as he walked past  
them, fallen plaster and concrete crunching underneath the  
soles of his shoes. He imagined

*remembered*

that he could hear a strange, soft sound from  
somewhere in the darkness, from one of the rooms on his  
left as he approached

*the sixth room...it's the sixth room*

like fingertips scrabbling weakly in gravel, a peculiar,  
quiet scratching sound overlaid with a sodden, soft choking.

*Aimee*

He imagined

*remembered*

coming to the threshold of the sixth door on his left,  
turning the flashlight to direct its beam into the room  
beyond. He could see the girl from his dreams inside

*Aimee*

strapped into the brutal chair, more dead than alive, the piano wire garrote drawn so tightly around her throat, it had cut through her flesh, sinking deeply. Her face was purple, nearly blackened with the need for oxygen, and she was incapable of doing anything more than gasping softly, moistly, feebly for breath, her head craned back toward the ceiling, her plum-colored, swollen lips opened widely in desperation.

Her fingers were gone. All except for her thumbs. They had all been cut off, leaving blood smears on the wooden chair arms, puddles of it congealing on the concrete floor.

*I'm here to cut off her thumbs*, he thought, turning the flashlight beam to the other side of the room, to the stainless steel surgical table on wheels, and the tray full of cutting implements there, the industrial garden shears.

*I'm here to*

Paul jerked at the sound of sharp voices from beyond his office, his mind snapping immediately from his  
*memories*

reverie. He heard footsteps walking swiftly, heavily toward his door, and through the window, saw Jason rise to his feet behind his desk. Paul watched his mouth form the words, *May I help*

and then his office door swung open wide, banging sharply off the wall. Detective Sergeant Dan Pierson stood on Paul's threshold, his brows furrowed, his doughy face set with a disagreeable frown. "You got some damn nerve, Frances," he said.

For a moment, Paul blinked stupidly at him, convinced that Pierson somehow knew what he'd been thinking about—and worse, knew that Paul had dreamed of Melanie Geary's death in similar, horrific detail.

*As if I'd lived it. Sweet Christ, as if I'm the person who did that to her.*

He struggled to find something to say, choked somewhat, but Pierson strode boldly forward, continuing with what was apparently a well-rehearsed diatribe.

"You know what it says on the door to this office, Frances?" he asked. "*Public Affairs*, in big fucking letters. *Public Affairs*. Not *Homicide*. You keep your goddamn nose out of my case files."

Paul blinked at him again. *It wasn't me!* he wanted to shout. *I didn't hurt those girls, I swear to Christ! It couldn't have been me! I...I could never...*

But then he remembered—the missing cigarettes from his pack on the night he'd dreamed of abducting Aimee, the sleepwalking incidents, last night's drive, the dreams that felt more and more like memories.

*I could never...* he thought again, remembering the taste and sensation of kissing Aimee every bit as powerfully and poignantly as he did kissing Susan Vey. He remembered the warmth of her mouth, the texture of her skin, the feel of the stun gun in his hand, the pressure against his palm as he had used the steel shears to cut through flesh and bone.

He felt a tickling in his nose and drew his hand to his face just as a sudden, startling stream of blood spilled from his right nostril.



"...don't care what Brenda might have told you, I am handling this case in my own goddamn—Jesus, Frances, you're bleeding!" Pierson exclaimed, surprised out of his diatribe.

Paul grabbed a wad of napkins out of his desk drawer and shoved them against his nose. He scuttled to his feet, shoving his chair back, and leaned forward, trying to keep blood from spattering on his clothes. He watched in stunned, somewhat numb fascination as it fell in fat, skittering droplets against the papers on his desk, the property descriptions Jason had printed out for him.

*That's how it was when I cut off their fingers...a slow pattering at first against the ground, growing faster and faster until it flowed like a stream...*

Paul uttered a hoarse cry, slapping the papers from his desk with his free hand, sending them scattering. Pierson shied back, his eyes flown wide, and Jason appeared in the office doorway, startled and alarmed.

"Paul!" Jason cried, shoving past Pierson and hurrying to Paul's side. His hands fluttered helplessly around Paul's head, and he made weird, anxious, hiccupping sounds at the sight of the blood, as if he might hyperventilate or vomit. "Jesus Christ, Pierson, what did you do?"

"Me?" Pierson blinked stupidly for a moment, then frowned. "I didn't do a goddamn thing, Scrappy. He just—"

"I'm reporting you to Captain Brady!" Jason cried, still hovering around Paul, his hands slapping and flapping as he tried to get Paul to sit down. In that moment, with his

voice shrill and edged with panic, he sounded idiotically like one of Paul's daughters in the throes of a sibling altercation: *I'm telling on you!*

He snorted, seized with the sudden, ridiculously inappropriate urge to laugh. He choked on blood at the effort.

"You can't come in here and punch him in the nose!" Jason exclaimed at Pierson. "He's a lieutenant! Another department or not, he's your superior!"

"Punch him in the nose?" Pierson said, his eyes flying wide. "Now wait a goddamn—!"

"It's alright," Paul told Jason, though around the napkins and his fingertips, the words came out sounding, *iss awwrie*. He drew the napkins back and took a tentative sniff, the bleeding staved. *For now*, he thought. "It's alright, Jason," he said again, more clearly. "He didn't hit me. My nose just started bleeding." He spared Pierson a glance. "If he'd hit me, he'd be on the floor."

Pierson sneered, but before he could quip out some smart-ass remark, Paul nodded toward the door. "Get out of here, Pierson," he said.

"You butt in my case again, and I'm taking it to the Captain," Pierson said, but he was stepping back, moving toward the door.

"You do what you need to," Paul replied. He met Pierson's gaze evenly for a long moment, and then the other man turned and stomped off, muttering under his breath.

"I'm alright, Jason," Paul said, shrugging off his partner's persistent, fluttering hands.

"I thought he hit you," Jason said. "He came storming in here, spouting and cussing and just barged through the doorway. And then, when I saw the blood—!"

"I know," Paul said, sniffing again. "But it's alright."

He fought the urge to tell Jason a bug had flown up his nose, as he'd told Emma only the day before. Judging by the ashen, stricken expression on Jason's face, Paul doubted he would find it as humorous or reassuring as Emma had.

He went to the men's room and washed his face, splashing cold water over and over as much to clear his mind as to bathe away the blood. He looked up at his reflection in a mirror, patting his face dry with a paper towel. *I'm not going crazy, he told himself. I'm not a murderer. I'm not the one who killed Melanie Geary, who is hurting this girl, Aimee. There is no Aimee. I'm just having bad dreams, that's all.*

*I'm not a murderer.*

\* \* \*

"I'm leaving," he told Jason as he walked past the younger man's desk, returning to his office.

"What?" Jason asked, blinking stupidly, pausing as he typed on his computer keyboard.

Paul went into his office. He fished his key ring out of his pocket and unlocked the bottom drawer of his desk. He pulled out his 9-millimeter service pistol and shoulder holster, and shrugged his way out of his blazer.

Jason appeared in the doorway just as he drew the leather harness over his shoulders. "But we have a meeting scheduled for lunchtime with the mayor's press secretary," Jason said. "I emailed you about..." His voice faded, his eyes

widening with something akin to childlike wonder when he spied the pistol. "What are you doing?"

"Putting on my gun," Paul replied, tugging his sport coat back into place over the holster. "That's what cops do."

*And I'm a cop—I'm a goddamn police officer, not a murderer.*

"But I..." Jason said. "I just...where are you going?"

"Field trip," Paul said. He genuflected and began to gather up the fallen papers he'd knocked to the floor. The sight of blood spattered against the pages from his nose disturbed him, and he wiped at it with his fingertips, smearing it.

"Field trip?" Jason asked as Paul rose to his feet, folding the papers in half and stuffing them down into the inside pocket of his jacket. "I...I don't...what about the mayor's press secretary?"

Paul clapped him amicably on the shoulder as he walked past. "Give him my regards," he said. "You can handle it, kid. I have every confidence in you."

He left the younger man standing alone, sputtering and wide-eyed.

\* \* \*

"You up for some field work, Dr. Wheaton?" Paul asked, leaning through Brenda's office doorway and grinning winsomely.

She looked up from a mountain of paperwork, looking both studious and irresistibly sexy in a pair of narrow-framed, tortoise-shell glasses. She smiled when she saw him, but looked puzzled still the same. "Field work?"

He reached in his coat pocket and pulled out the sheets Jason had printed out. He wagged them at her in beckon, in promise. Dan Pierson would shit a brick to find out Paul was nosing around in his case again, but Paul didn't give a damn.

*I need to get inside these houses, he thought. It's the only way I can prove I'm not going insane—that I'm not a murderer. I need to find where Melanie Geary was killed.*

"A little house hunting," he told Brenda, dropping her a wink. "I've got three in mind I think you'll love. What do you say, Brenda? You game?"

## CHAPTER SIX

"I don't think we should be doing this, Paul," Brenda said, as they shrugged their way into white Tyvek jumpsuits. The outfits—dubbed "bunnysuits" by the city's hazmat squad—covered their clothes, and would protect them from lead paint chips, asbestos and other crumbling debris.

"I mean, besides the fact we don't have a warrant, I don't think you should be going in here after your nose was bleeding earlier," she said.

They stood in the overgrown, weed- and garbage-filled back yard of the one of the dilapidated old houses. The back door was boarded over, but the plywood was flimsy and weatherworn, held loosely in place by a single padlock that could be easily pried loose with a crowbar. Which Paul had happened to bring along. "We don't need a warrant," he said. "We have probable cause—the asbestos and lead paint chips you found in the victim's airway."

Which was a crock of shit, and they both knew it. Pleading probable cause as the grounds for their trespassing wouldn't hold water in a court of law, but Paul figured they could cross that particular and problematic bridge when and as they reached it.

In the meantime, he hadn't planned on telling Brenda about his nosebleed, but he'd been stupid to think he could slip the bloodstains on the paper past her—a trained medical

examiner. She'd noticed them right away when she'd looked over the property histories, and had known immediately that the brown smudges were blood.

"The nosebleed was nothing," he told her, doing his best to award her a disarming smile. "I told you, it's allergies. This time of the year drives my sinuses nuts. Besides..." He slipped a particulate-filter mask in place over the lower quadrant of his face, pinching the slim metal bridge across his nose and tugging against the elastic straps drawn tautly toward his ears to secure it. "You've got us covered, remember?"

They slipped on plastic safety goggles and plodded up the creaking, aged wooden steps to the back porch. Paul imagined they must have looked very much like astronauts tromping about on the surface of an alien planet in their ridiculous gear, what with him armed with a crowbar and flashlight, and Brenda hefting about a cumbersome tackle box containing crime scene investigation supplies.

Paul broke the lock on the back door, and they checked inside the house. They found nothing of interest, just some empty liquor bottles, gang symbols spray painted on the walls, plenty of cobwebs, dust and leaves and veritable mountains of mummified mouse droppings. They fared no better on the second house, and by the time they drove over to the third, collected their gear, and made their way into the back yard, they were both feeling tired, irritable, disappointed and roasting in the bunnysuits.

And then Paul discovered that someone had beat them at breaking into the third house. The metal hinge

panels securing the padlock in place had been carefully pried loose, the screws removed from their anchorage, the plywood pulled back far enough to allow a grown man access. Paul leaned through this precarious opening carefully, shining the broad beam of his flashlight around and seeing the distinctive impression of footprints in the dust- and dirt-covered floor—numerous sets, as if someone had passed that way time and again.

“I think we’ve got something here,” he murmured to Brenda, motioning her back off the porch. He followed her, unfastening the front of his jumpsuit, reaching for his gun harness beneath. “Someone’s been in there. They might still be around,” he said, drawing out his pistol. “You wait out here, let me make sure it’s secure.”

She arched her brow. “Screw that, Paul,” she said. She knelt, opening her tackle box and—to his surprise—pulling out a large black pistol of her own. “Did I ever mention I’ve been deputized?” she asked, rising once more. She checked the clip of the pistol, an unadorned and imposing looking Sig Sauer P-226 that seemed impossibly out of place in her delicate hand.

He blinked at her. In that moment, dressed in her Tyvek bunnysuit, with her goggles on, fogged somewhat with the afternoon humidity, her cheeks flushed above the edge of her particulate mask, strands of her ivory-colored hair worked loose from her ponytail, clinging to her cheeks in sweat-dampened twists, and with her bull-dog of a pistol in hand, Brenda left him mute and breathless. *My God, I’m in love.*



"Come on," she said, tromping past him, slapping him in the belly.

They crept quietly into the house, and Paul took the lead as they stole room to room, checking each for any signs of intrusion. The footprints on the floor led them in all directions, as if whoever had left them had wandered aimlessly and repeatedly. As they followed them from the first floor to the second and then to the third—where the afternoon heat was absolutely stifling as it hung stagnantly in the dust-choked air—Paul began to have a sinking feeling that, despite their initial excitement, they were being led on a wild goose chase.

"There's no one here, Paul," Brenda said, echoing his suspicions.

"We haven't checked the cellar yet," he replied.

In all of his dreams, he'd had a sense of being *below*, somehow, like in a basement. When his nose had started bleeding in his office earlier that day, he'd had an image in his mind of descending concrete stairs—going *down* someplace, possibly a cellar.

"Come on," he said, leading her back toward the staircase.

They found the door to the cellar in what had once been the house's kitchen. Paul went down first, settling his feet slowly, carefully, each in turn upon the old, splintered risers of the steps. He held his arms ahead of him, crossed at the wrists so he could aim both his flashlight and the barrel of his pistol directly, steadily ahead of him. He listened to

the soft groan of the wooden stairs settling beneath Brenda's slight weight as she followed him.

*This isn't right*, a part of his mind whispered. *I don't remember wooden stairs. Concrete steps, that's what I saw. I remember concrete stairs going down...*

He hesitated on the stairs, the beam of his flashlight wavering slightly. *I didn't see anything!* another part of his mind cried out. *It was a dream, not a memory!*

"Paul?" Brenda whispered, as she drew still on the stairs behind him. "What is it?"

*It wasn't a memory*, Paul told himself firmly, and he glanced over his shoulder toward Brenda. "Nothing," he whispered. "It was nothing. I just—"

A sound from below, a sudden clatter, drew him abruptly silent. Brenda gasped sharply, startled, and Paul swung the beam of his flashlight in the direction of the noise. He saw a darting shadow, a scamper of movement, and heard the quick scuttling of footsteps. "Hold it!" he yelled, rushing down the remaining stairs, damn near spilling ass over elbows in his haste. "Goddamn it, don't move!"

He panned the flashlight around, straining to find any more hints of movement in the absolute blackness. The basement was immense, a hollowed out depression in the earth as broad as the foundation. The floor was damp and muddy, stinking of mildew and rat shit. "Who's down here?" he shouted, as Brenda moved behind him, shining her own light around. "This is Lieutenant Paul Frances with the Metropolitan Police Department and I'm armed. I

repeat—I'm a police officer and I'm armed! Get your ass out here now with your hands up!"

He heard the scuffle of sneaker soles on the dirt floor and swung the light toward the sound. "Please don't shoot," he heard a voice say, tremulous and timid. He pinned a figure in the beam, a broad, tall figure—a young man, little more than a kid, in glasses and blue jeans, with a T-shirt that declared *Fox Mulder for President*.

"Get out here!" Paul snapped, and then he realized the kid wasn't alone. He caught a glimpse of movement from the nearby shadows, and then three, four and finally a fifth person strode forward. Not a damn one of them was out of college, to judge by the looks of them, and they were all carrying large, cumbersome pieces of audio-visual equipment—tape recorders, video cameras, microphone booms.

"Please don't shoot," the kid in the glasses said again, his hands raised, palms out towards Paul and Brenda.

"We're not criminals, Officer, really. We're ghosthunters."

\* \* \*

"I could have shot you," Paul said, his brows narrowed, his mouth turned in a frown as he paced around the cluster of youths. They stood together in a sheepish huddle on the back lawn of the house while Paul circled them, jerking off his face mask, goggles and out of his Tyvek suit in turn.

"Yes, sir," said the kid in the glasses, who had introduced himself as Cameron Taylor, president of the Greater Metropolitan Ghosthunting Society.

"Do you kids not realize that place is full of asbestos and lead paint?" Paul asked. "Why in Christ's name do you think we're dressed up in these monkey-suits?"

"We're sorry, sir," Cameron said, his shoulders hunched, his face ablaze with shame. "We didn't know, sir."

*Terrific, Paul thought. This is goddamn fantastic. I waste an entire afternoon creeping around a bunch of broken-down houses—illegally at that—to try and find a killer, and instead, I wind up with the goddamn Scooby Doo gang.*

"What were you all doing in there anyway?" Brenda asked, "you all" coming out as "y'all" in her drawling accent. She stood with her hands on her hips, her Sig Sauer long-since stowed away again in the tackle box by her feet. "This is private property. You have no business being here."

*Never mind that technically we have no business being here, either, Paul thought. "And you busted the goddamn padlock to get inside," he added sharply. "Which is called trespassing, Mr. Taylor, so technically, you all are, in fact, criminals."*

The kids blinked at one another in mutual anxious fright, as if this notion had never occurred to them. "We didn't hurt anyone," said one of the girls, a petite, mousy waif with hot pink hair, who smelled like Patchouli and wore an ankle-length gypsy skirt with a Phish T-shirt atop. "We didn't damage anything either, except for the lock. All that spray painting on the walls inside, all the junk, it was like that when we got here."

"It doesn't matter," Brenda said, her voice mild and patient. Paul realized that, without consciously thinking

about it, they had slipped into a sort of good-cop/bad-cop routine, or in this case, a calm-parent/pissed-off parent one, with her being the latter, and him, the former. "It's still considered breaking and entering."

"We're just here to do some investigating," Cameron Taylor said, pointing to their pile of equipment. "We're recording for electronic voice phenomenon and testing for variations in electromagnetic field readings. We've got some laser-guided thermometers so we can test for temperature fluctuations and cameras so we can—"

"You're kidding me," Paul interrupted, incredulous. "You've got to be yanking my chain. All of this..." He stared at the equipment in disbelief. "For ghostbusting?"

"Not *ghostbusting*," said one of the other young men, looking decidedly insulted. "We're *hunters* looking for concrete, scientific evidence of paranormal activity."

"It's not like this was our first choice of investigation sites," said Patchouli Girl, as if this made up for any legal digressions. "All of the sites of good hauntings are either off limits, or they won't let us bring our equipment and set up there."

*Can't imagine why*, Paul thought, but bit his teeth back on the snide reply. Brenda felt sorry for the kids; he could see that in her face, and if he pushed the "bad cop" routine too far, she might wind up mad at him.

"...the old main library, Manchester Hall, the Parkway mansion..." Patchouli Girl was ticking off on her fingers the venues from which their ghosthunting expeditions had been banned.

"And Liberty Sanitarium," said Cameron, eliciting a chorus of murmured agreement, and a collective bobbing of heads from his fellows. "There's the mother lode of local hauntings. They say you can still hear the shrieks of the dying down in the catacombs they used to bring the dead out through." His expression had grown wistful, but shifted again now, nearly pouting. "But you'd need Delta Force to get in there these days. That construction company, Milton's got it under lock and key, fifteen-foot chain link fences with razor-wire all around it, gated checkpoints, security codes."

"So we have to take what we can get," Patchouli Girl said in conclusion.

Paul glanced at Brenda, and her thoughts on the matter were undeniable: *Forget about it, Paul. Let them go.*

"Well, no more breaking and entering," Paul told the kids. "You guys understand? Next time I catch you, I'm running your asses in, and I mean it." He pointed at them in stern emphasis, and they all nodded. "Go on," he said, nodding toward the street. "Get out of here."

When they were gone, their gear shouldered and trundled back toward their awaiting cars, Paul sat down heavily in the grass, heaving a weary sigh. "Christ Almighty."

Brenda chuckled, lowering herself to the ground beside him. To his surprise, she leaned over, resting her cheek against his shoulder. "You didn't ever do anything reckless and stupid like that when you were their age?"

"Oh, no, I did plenty," he said, making her laugh. "I just never got caught."

She laughed some more, sitting back from him. She was still close enough that their legs were touching, close enough so that when he lifted his hand, he didn't even have to stretch his arm to stroke her cheek, to brush a wayward strand of flaxen hair back. "I'm sorry the day was a bust," he said quietly. She was looking at him, holding his gaze, holding him captive.

"It wasn't," she whispered, and when he moved his hand, touching her face, cradling her cheek against his palm, she didn't duck away. When he leaned toward her, unable to resist, much less stop himself, she didn't shy from him.

He canted his face, and she tilted hers to meet him. The afternoon had grown fiercely hot, and even more so humid, and their skin was flushed, their faces blazing with heat. He brushed his lips against hers softly, gently, and felt her respond, a slight, gentle pucker to greet him. When he kissed her again, he let his mouth settle against hers. Her lips parted, a wordless beckon, and the tip of his tongue eased forward, slipping into her mouth, dancing against her own. She made a soft sound, a whimper, and her hands touched him, cupping his face, drawing him near.

When Susan had kissed Paul that morning, his mind had flown invariably to Vicki, filled with a maelstrom of emotions, mostly shame. He had been immobilized, too startled to react. Susan's kiss had not been unpleasant, but it had been unfamiliar, and his mind and heart had known that.

When he kissed Brenda, he felt none of those reservations. Her lips, her tongue, her breath, it all felt like

coming home to him, something soft and warm and familiar, that he had been meant to kiss, that he was supposed to spend a lifetime kissing. He didn't think of Susan, or Vicki, his job, his life, the nightmares that plagued his sleep and that had drawn him to these houses that afternoon—to that moment. He thought of nothing at all, the wonder of the moment, the simple comfort of it, overwhelming him.

"Brenda..." he whispered as they drew apart, remaining nearly nose to nose. He could feel her ragged, hesitant breath against his mouth, but when he moved to kiss her again, she shied back.

"I...I need to get back to the office," she said clumsily. She shifted her weight and moved, rising to her feet again. She dusted off the seat of her slacks.

"Brenda," he said helplessly, sorry that he had kissed her, because it had clearly unnerved her, but at the same time, not sorry at all. *Christ, I've wanted that...I don't even know for how long.*

He reached for her as he stood, but as his hand slipped against hers, she pulled away. "Paul, I'm seeing Dan," she said, her voice cut with a wavering edge, as if she struggled to sound firm. She glanced at him, and away again, stomping forward to grab her discarded Tyvek suit and tackle box. "I...I told you that. I'm seeing Dan."

"Why?" he asked, drawing her to a halt. "Why are you seeing him, Brenda? What...what in the hell do you see in that asshole?"

"He's not an asshole," she said, her voice sharp and her eyes even sharper as she turned to him. "Dan Pierson is



a good man, and maybe if you weren't always trying to push his buttons and get a rise out of him, you'd see that. My husband left me, and my son wanted to go with him to California, and I...I've been lonely..." Her voice cracked, and Paul felt a spear of pain in his heart to realize her eyes had suddenly glossed with tears. Her brows furrowed, her posture growing rigid with steely resolve, and she hoisted her chin defiantly. "Dan is good to me and I've been glad for the company. You...what you did just now...what happened, it...it shouldn't have."

"I'm sorry," he said, drawing her reluctant gaze again. *I'm sorry you're seeing Dan*, he thought. *I'm sorry I upset you. And I'm sorry I let you down today—that there was nothing here like we were hoping to find.*

He said nothing more aloud, though.

"Just take me back now, please," she said. She cut her eyes away again, looking down at her feet, and walked back toward the car.

Paul felt as though she had just driven the butt of that Sig Sauer P-226 firmly into his gut. "Alright," he said quietly, pained.

\* \* \*

He picked Emma up from school that afternoon, and then they drove together to the house Paul had once shared with Vicki and his daughters. M.K. and Bethany were waiting for him, bags packed. While Paul loaded their things into the back of his Explorer, wondering vaguely in the back of his mind why anyone would need so many goddamn

bags for two days away from home, Vicki and Emma exchanged hugs and hellos.

"I miss you, Aunt Vicki," Emma said, arms wrapped around Vicki's neck, as Vicki stooped to embrace her.

"I miss you, too, Emma," Vicki said, smiling. She didn't say much of anything to Paul, but awarded him cool looks aplenty to let him know she was still pissed off at him from their phone conversation that morning.

"I thought we could stop on the way and you girls could pick out some movies," Paul said as they drove away from the house, following subdivision streets he still knew like the back of his hand, and could have driven along while blindfolded. He looked in his rearview mirror, where Emma and Bethany rode side-by-side, belted into their seats, and then glanced sideways at M.K., who rode shotgun in the passenger seat. "Anything you'd like—even scary ones. Even Orlando What's-His-Name ones."

Bethany giggled in the backseat and M.K. rolled her eyes, smirking. "*Bloom*, Dad. Orlando Bloom."

"I thought we could get pizza for tonight, too," he said. "Danny-O's is on the way. What do you say? A couple of deep dish pies with all the trimmings? Extra pepperoni and cheese, even?"

Emma grinned at him through the rearview mirror. "Pizza! Hooray!" she cried, clapping her hands.

"Sounds good, Daddy," Bethany said, smiling at him.

"Dad, do you know how much cholesterol is in that?" M.K. asked, wrinkling her nose. "Only enough to choke a horse. Ugh."

"Since when do you worry about your cholesterol intake?" he said, raising his brow at her. *This from the kid who practically lives on Taco Bell and Burger King.*

"I don't, but you should," M.K. replied. "You're getting older, Dad..."

"Jeez, thanks," he said, feigning a scowl and making her laugh.

"I just mean you can't keep eating like you do forever, Dad. Not with smoking, too. It's going to catch up with you one of these days."

She sounded so much like her mother, both in tone of voice and choice of words, that Paul was momentarily, simultaneously amused and disconcerted.

"One pizza isn't going to make a difference, M.K.," Bethany said, frowning, punting the back of her sister's seat in a not-so-subtle admonishment.

"I'm just saying, is all," M.K. said, turning to glare over her shoulder. "Dad, she kicked me."

"I did not," Bethany said. "I kicked her *seat*, Daddy. There's a difference. And it was an accident."

"Accident, my ass..." M.K. said, her brows narrowed.

"Hey, hey," Paul said. "Cut it out, both of you. Beth, stop kicking. M.K., watch your mouth."

It was just like old times, as if the divorce had never happened. He might have been a relative stranger to them during the rest of the week, a voice they heard on the other end of a phone line every evening, exchanging polite small talk and incidental anecdotes, but in that moment, Paul was

their father again—*Dad*—and everything felt right in the universe again, if only for a little while.

He couldn't help but smile.

\* \* \*

Paul dropped the three girls off at the video store, then walked down the strip mall sidewalk to Danny-O's. As he stood in line, waiting to place his order and savoring the aromas of fresh garlic, basil and tomato sauce, an idea occurred to him.

He fished his cell phone out of his pocket and thumbed the quick-dial for Jason Stewart's cell.

"Jason, hey," he said, as his partner answered. "Where are you?"

"Paul, uh, hey," Jason replied, sounding somewhat surprised. "I...I'm still at the office, on my way out, as a matter of fact."

Paul glanced at his watch. It was quarter past seven. *On a Friday night? Jesus, does this kid have no life at all?*

"I had some things to wrap up..." Jason said clumsily, as if reading Paul's mind. "From the meeting this afternoon, with the mayor's press secretary..."

"Yeah, right," Paul said, cutting him off. "Look, thanks for handling that. I had some thing to take care of, and I appreciate it. I'm sure you did great."

"I...I..." Jason sputtered, apparently surprised anew. "Thanks, Paul. I just told them—"

"I need you to go in my office, since you're there," Paul said. "Look on my computer screen. I've got a website pulled up, the city's PVA office."

"Okay," Jason said, and Paul listened to a few moments of scrabbling and scuffling, accompanied by Jason's rather loud, heavy breathing. *No wonder the kid can't get a date*, he thought, grimacing. "Okay, I'm here. I got it."

"There's a company listed," Paul said. "Some kind of investment company that bought a bunch of other properties from that historic preservation organization. You see it there?"

"Keswick Investment Realty Group," Jason said. "Yes, I see it."

"Good," Paul said, nodding. "I need you to find out everything you can about them, and the properties they bought. They're all on that webpage."

"That's going to take awhile..." Jason began.

"I'm not at home, or I'd do it myself," Paul said. "I've got my kids this weekend, so I'm going to be kind of tied up, but I'd still like to try and get some work done on it. Can you email whatever you can find tonight and I'll get started on it then?"

The girls would be irritated if they found out what he was doing. He could hear them now: *You promised no work on our weekends, Dad*. Not to mention the tongue-lashing he could expect from Vicki if she caught wind of it: *You always put your work first, Paul. You never think about us. You never think about anybody else or their feelings, just your own. You*

Paul shook his head, clearing Vicki from his thoughts. He wasn't thinking of himself. He owed it to Brenda, to make up for the debacle of the afternoon—first, finding nothing resembling a crime scene at any of the abandoned

houses, and then when he'd kissed her. He owed it to Brenda. *And I owe it to Melanie Geary, too.*

"I...I guess I could..." Jason said.

"Great," Paul said, grinning. "Send it to my home email. Anything you can find."

"I'll probably have to—" Jason began, but Paul cut him off as the guy in front of him stepped aside, and the cashier at Danny-O's motioned him forward.

"Look, kid, I gotta let you go," he said. "I'm standing in the middle of a pizza place, and it's my turn to order. I owe you one. Thanks."

"I—" Jason said, but Paul thumbed the phone off, tucking it in his pocket as he ordered his pizzas.

\* \* \*

Later that night, after Emma was tucked in bed, Paul sat down at his home computer in the dining room of his apartment. He'd surrendered his bedroom to M.K. and Bethany without any complaint. He doubted he would need the room, much less the bed, that night. He had no intention of sleeping if he could help it. He was sick of nightmares, sick of sleepwalking, sick of feeling like he was losing his mind and control of his life. Work would be his respite, and he intended to distract himself all night long in front of the computer, working on the Geary case.

*The case that isn't mine*, he thought, as he opened Outlook and watched a list of email messages download from his server. He didn't give a shit what Pierson thought, or what he'd say if he found out what Paul was up to. *This isn't about Dan Pierson. This is for Brenda, and for me.*

*Here's what I found re: Keswick Investment Realty Group, Jason had written to him. The timestamp on the email was 8:34 p.m., and it had been sent from Jason's work email address. Paul winced somewhat. Christ, kid, I didn't mean for you to stay at work and do this. Don't you have a home computer like the rest of the free world?*

*Looks like Keswick is the leading management company for some of the city's biggest development projects, Jason had written. Montpelier Estates, the Wyndham subdivision, Rolling Acres, Cedar Creek Point, the Liberty Heights development that's in the works.*

Jason had dropped links to various websites and news articles for each of these mentions, but Paul didn't immediately explore further. He'd heard of all of the mentioned developments. *It's a roll-call of the ritziest places to live in the city, he thought.*

*They're also the company of record for the Victorian Square project, the big, proposed downtown redevelopment plan, Jason had written. You've probably read about this—they're going to tear down all the tenement apartments in the old "smokehouse ghetto" district, and put up mixed-income housing, plus a new sports arena, upscale shopping, restaurants, galleries, all there on the waterfront. The city's dumping close to three-quarters of a billion dollars into the project, and that doesn't even begin to touch the overall budget.*

*The houses that Greater Metropolitan Historical Preservation Society sold to Keswick are all in the peripheral areas of this proposed development. They sold them dirt cheap, too. According to their website, it was with the contractual agreement*

*that Keswick preserve the existing buildings and incorporate them into the new construction without significant historical alteration.*

*Those three houses you were checking out yesterday are in a neighboring area, not yet in the planned development area, but immediately outlying. My guess is, they'll be included sooner or later, because Victorian Square is still very much in the planning stages, and when they are included, Greater Metro Historical will sell them off to Keswick, too.*

Paul snorted as he took a sip of beer. "So much for their integrity," he muttered, uttering a moist little Budweiser-and-garlic flavored belch.

*Keswick's CEO is named Howard Minz, Jason had supplied. He's a self-made multi-millionaire, a real bachelor/playboy type apparently, and a pretty decent philanthropist, too.*

Howard Minz. The name was familiar, but Paul frowned, unable to place it. *I've been looking at too many names lately*, he thought, pushing himself away from his desk and rising too his feet. *Juggling too many lines of thought, and all of them leading in goddamn opposite directions. Why am I bothering with this? It's got nothing to do with Melanie Geary. Brenda was wrong about those houses today, but she's on the right track. I need to forget all of this other shit and work on that—on finding the place where Melanie Geary was murdered.*

He forked his fingers through his thinning blond hair and grabbed his beer bottle and cigarette pack off the desk. He glanced over his shoulder as he walked toward the front door, meaning to go sit on the front stoop of the apartment building to smoke. The doors to both bedrooms were closed,



the lights off beneath. M.K., Bethany and Emma were all sleeping. He stole out into the corridor, shutting the door quietly behind him and locking the deadbolt. He went down the stairs, barefooted, dressed in old sweatpants and a faded, ancient T-shirt, and stepped out onto the front porch.

He lit up a Camel Light and tilted his head back, holding in that first inhalation of smoke, savoring the scrape against the back of his throat, the immediate, satiating effect on his mind. He had quit smoking once, after a long, torrid addiction, but had started again last year. *After Jay resurrected me*, he thought.

*I didn't raise you from the dead so you could kill yourself smoking*, Jay would sometimes tell him, an affectionate, if not somewhat worried glint in his eyes.

Jay had always been the better looking of the two. Paul had always freely admitted this. He looked like their mother with his blue eyes, blond hair and pale complexion, while Jay had been the spitting image of their father, with dark eyes and nearly jet-black hair, his skin a ruddy olive-tone year-round. Even at six years Paul's junior, Jay had still been the object of affection for many of Paul's female friends growing up.

"He's too beautiful to be straight," Vicki had once remarked. "And he's got an ass you could bounce a quarter off of."

Paul had always been admittedly somewhat envious of his younger brother's looks; to say nothing of his lean, toned physique—sculpted musculature Jay seemingly had to do little if anything to maintain. Paul had always struggled

to stay in shape, particularly as he'd gotten older, and especially since he liked to engage in decidedly unhealthy life habits. It was no great secret that Paul's doctor had put him on a daily regimen of medicines to help regulate his cholesterol and blood pressure only months before Jay's touch had brought him back to life.

It was medication Paul no longer had to take, however. When Jay had restored Paul, he had somehow undone all of the damage fifteen previous years of smoking might have caused. Jay's touch undid whatever time and disease affected. Paul knew that was why he could run again the way he did, with the vigor and energy of a man half his age. He knew that's why he could eat pizza again, and all of the other garbage he shoveled down his gullet. Because, despite what M.K. had said, he *didn't* have to worry about cholesterol. Not now, and probably not ever again in his life. By the time the abuse he currently inflicted upon his body would be health-affecting, he would be an old man, damn near eighty years old. *And then it won't matter.*

He closed his eyes, listening to the hiss of burning paper as it curled back, seared from the burning tobacco as he inhaled on the cigarette. Jay had done more than save his life. He'd given him a new life. It wasn't Jay's fault it was a life Paul had come to hate.

"Hey, stranger."

He jerked, startled by the soft voice, the scrape of rubber sneaker soles against the pavement. He opened his eyes and saw Susan Vey walking toward him, a lit cigarette

in her hand, a curious smile on her face, as if she was as surprised to see him as he was her.

"Well, hey, yourself," he said.

"We need to stop meeting like this," she said, standing in front of him. She was dressed comfortably, in a T-shirt and shorts, her feet bare, like his. She wasn't wearing a bra beneath her shirt, to judge by the steely points of her nipples jutting boldly through the thin fabric. Her long, heavy hair hung loose in glossy waves, draped in twin sheaves over her shoulders. The glow of the streetlight enveloped her from behind, rendering her nearly a silhouette in the cool, misty night.

Paul grinned. "Yeah. People will talk." He patted the stoop next to him. "Pop a squat, kiddo."

She sat beside him. They glanced at each other's cigarettes, and then Susan tapped hers against him in a mock toast. "Here's to coffin nails and other unspeakable vices."

"Amen to that," Paul said.

Susan's cigarette was down nearly to the filter, and she flicked it toward the parking lot with the practiced ease of a veteran smoker. When she picked up his beer and took a long swig uninvited, he didn't mind.

He wanted to talk to her about the kiss that morning, but didn't know how to bring it up. He'd be lying if he tried to say he hadn't enjoyed the experience. But at the same time, he didn't want it to happen again. He didn't quite understand her attraction to him, and while her company pleased and aroused him, he knew he couldn't let things

progress any further. Aside from the fact that she was too damn young for him, his heart just wasn't in it. Not now. Not after he had kissed Brenda that afternoon. His body might have reacted to Susan's kiss, but his *heart* had reacted to Brenda—and in a way the likes of which he hadn't felt in more than twenty years. Not since he'd first fallen in love with Vicki.

"You look like you've got something heavy on your mind," Susan said, nudging him lightly, playfully with her elbow.

He glanced at her, uncertain what to say or how to begin. She smiled at him. "Penny for your thoughts," she said. "Or, at least, a pan of lasagna. That's what I'm fixing for tomorrow. I've got a couple bottles of sauvignon we can open, too, and we..." Her voice faded as his expression grew pained. "What?"

"I...I need to cancel tomorrow night," he said. "I've got my girls this weekend, M.K. and Bethany. I completely forgot. And then my brother's coming back early from his honeymoon, and I've been babysitting for his daughter, and..."

"That's okay," Susan said, shaking her head. There was no mistaking the look of visible disappointment that crossed her face, but she turned away from him, trying to disguise it as she lifted the beer bottle and drank again. "I understand. Family happens, right?" She uttered a short laugh. "Just like shit." She glanced at him. "It's just as well. David's staying with me for the weekend. They're fumigating his apartment or something like that. I was going

to kick him out tomorrow night, but since he still can't get around too good from where he hurt his back, I guess this works out for the best."

Paul could have let it end at that. She'd accepted his explanation. It had ruffled her feathers, yeah, but not hurt her feelings anywhere like the truth would. He could have, but then he thought of Brenda, of how kissing her had felt so honest and right to him, reflexive almost, like a part of his nature. "It...it's not just that," he said, drawing Susan's gaze. "I mean, it is, but it...there's more."

He shifted his weight, turning to look at her squarely. "Susan, you're a beautiful woman. You don't need me to tell you that," he said, and even in the dim light, he could see color stoke in her cheeks at the compliment. "But you...you're a beautiful *young* woman, Susan. A really young woman. And you don't need me to tell you that, either."

She blinked at him, understanding apparent in her face. Her eyes grew round and momentarily wounded, like he'd slapped her in the face, and he immediately felt like a shit heel.

"I'm flattered by your interest in me," he said carefully, not wanting to hurt her more. "But look, I'm fresh out of a divorce, and I was married twenty some-odd years before that. I don't have my head on straight about anything and my life is all kinds of fucked up at the moment. I don't want to drag anybody else into that mess with me, least of all you." He touched her face, brushing his thumb against her cheek. "You're a beautiful girl," he said again. "And you

deserve someone who will be there for you. Maybe it's not someone your age, but it...it's not me. I'm sorry."

She held his gaze for a long moment, her large eyes glossy, and then she blinked, ducking away from his hand and forcing a smile. "Nothing to be sorry for," she said, rising to her feet. "I understand."

"Susan..." he began, standing. He reached for her, but she drew back, shaking her head.

"It's alright," she said. "Really, Paul. I understand." She looked over her shoulder toward her building. "I need to get back. David sleeps pretty heavily with the medicine he's on, and I'm supposed to be keeping an eye on him. Or at least an ear, to make sure he doesn't quit breathing or something. I...I'll see you around. Maybe we can still go running."

"I'd like that," he said, because that wasn't a lie. He had enjoyed her company genuinely, honestly, if only because it had been that to him—company.

"Maybe you can still give me a scoop sometime," she said, managing a more genuine smile now.

Paul laughed. "That I can do," he said, and then an idea occurred to him. He arched his brow. "I can do that tonight, as a matter of fact. There's a case file that just came into homicide this week they've been keeping under wraps. They're investigating it as a hate crime."

Susan's brows went up with piqued interest. "Really?"

"Yeah, a girl was murdered, a lesbian abducted from a local nightclub, they think. That work as a scoop for you?"

There was no point in keeping the story under wraps. Paul hadn't received any official information on the case to release to the media, but he hadn't been specifically told *not* to say anything, either. Which, he figured, was almost as good as permission.

Susan smiled. "It's close enough," she said. "Can I stop by your office on Monday? You can fill me in on the details and I can shoot it off my producer."

"That sounds good," he said. *And Dan Pierson will have his ass in a knot when he finds out*, he thought, which made the deal all the more sweet.

She stepped toward him, rising onto her tiptoes and kissing the corner of his mouth softly, platonically. "Thanks, Paul," she whispered, and oh, God, at the brush of her breasts against his chest, his body railed at him for turning her away.

He watched her walk away, her hips swaying gently, tantalizingly beneath her shorts, and he had to sidestep, adjusting his suddenly-throbbing crotch before turning to go back inside himself. His mind and heart might have decided against Susan Vey, but his groin, it seemed, still had other ideas.

\* \* \*

Paul sat bolt upright on his couch in the dead of the night, his eyes flown wide as it suddenly occurred to him who Howard Minz was. He had been dozing, a light slumber drifting off toward deeper sleep, born of utter exhaustion, but all at once, his mind was sharp and alert,

like a bright, fluorescent light had just flipped on inside his skull.

"Holy shit!" he gasped, standing up and hurrying over to his desk. "Howard Minz."

He fumbled and sifted through loose papers until he found the pages Jason had printed off for him earlier that day. Among the print-outs of news articles and other information about Arthur Sinclair, chairman of the Greater Metropolitan Historical Preservation Society, he found the clipping from the newspaper's society section that included a fuzzy, black-and-white photo of Arthur Sinclair and the city's mayor, Bob Allen, laughing together at a Christmas party for the library's board of regents. A third man was in the picture, yukking it up right along with them. *Howard Minz.*

"I'll be goddamned," Paul whispered, opening the internet browser on his computer. He went to the library's website and looked up their board of directors. He scrolled down the page, skimming through the alphabetized listing until he came to the Ms.

*Howard Minz.*

"I'll be goddamn," he whispered again. His cell phone sat beside the computer keyboard; he flipped it open and hit the speed redial for Jason Stewart's line.

"Huh...hullo...?" Jason croaked, sounding decidedly more unconscious than alert.

"Jason, are you awake?" Paul asked, suddenly near to shaking with excitement. Christ, he'd forgotten the thrill of the *a-ha* moment, the point in an investigation when



everything suddenly clicks into place, and all of the pieces of the puzzle coalesce into one distinct, crystal-clear picture. The last time this had happened to him had been when he'd realized the pattern of serial rapes and murders that had identified the Watcher's history of violence. *It's been too goddamn long.*

"Paul?" Jason asked, clearly bewildered and dazed.

"Paul, is...is that you...?"

"Yeah, kid, listen—who's the federal attorney working on the Milton Enterprises tax evasion case? You did the press write-ups for it. You've got to have talked to them."

"Paul, it...it's four-thirty in the morning," Jason said.

"On a *Saturday* morning, Paul..."

"Jason, goddamn it, would I be calling you if it wasn't important?" Paul snapped. "Who's the attorney?"

"Uh..." Paul heard a rustling on the other end of the line as Jason, appropriately rebuked and shamed awake now, moved around, likely sitting up in bed. "Uh...hang on. Let me put my glasses on..."

*Jason wears glasses?* Paul thought. He'd never noticed before.

"Richard Keeling," Jason said, after Paul had listened to a few more moments of rustling and clunking. "The federal prosecutor's name is Richard Keeling. I talked to him a little bit, but he didn't—"

"Give me his phone number," Paul said, interrupting.

"Paul, all I've got is his office number," Jason said, his voice nearly whining. "It's four-thirty on a Saturday morning. He's not going to be there."

"Track me down his home number, then," Paul said, and when he heard the intake of Jason's voice, the beginnings of protest, he frowned. "Goddamn it, would you stop giving me grief and just do it, Jason? I've got to look some other stuff up from here so that I can be sure, and you'll be saving me a shitload of time."

"Sure of what?" Jason asked.

"Just get me the number and call me back," Paul said. "The minute you've got it, Jason."

He hung up the phone, snapping it closed again. He turned back to his computer, his fingers already flying across the keyboard. He Google-searched for three key phrases: *Greater Metropolitan Historical Society*, *Keswick Investment Realty Group* and *Milton Enterprises*.

He wasn't surprised to see the search results come back with more than a hundred viable hits. The first page alone was loaded with archived city records files: title transfers, deed recordings, land sales. All in the same predictable pattern—from the historical society to Keswick, and from them, to Milton Enterprises.

*The mayor sells the property cheap to Arthur Sinclair's group under the premise of historical preservation*, Paul thought, as he typed in a new search, plugging in the list of lucrative real estate ventures in town that Jason had provided to him, those subdivisions in which Keswick had been the developer

of record. *Keswick sells them cheap to Milton. Milton builds great big expensive neighborhoods on them and reaps in mega-profits.*

"Profits I'm sure they don't keep all for themselves," he murmured, as again, his search struck veritable gold. Montpelier Estates, Wyndham subdivision, Rolling Acres, Cedar Creek Point, Liberty Heights, the proposed Victorian Square...they were all there. The properties involved had all gone through a thinly disguised and systematic exchange of hands in the last five years—from the city to the historical society, then to Keswick and on to Milton.

*All during the tenure of Bob Allen's mayorship. Allen was one year into his second mayoral term. He'd won in a landslide victory of his last opponent. A couple of quick internet searches confirmed Paul's sudden suspicions. His good buddies Howard Minz, Arthur Sinclair and John Milton all pitched in with generous campaign contributions both times around.*

"Son of a bitch," Paul whispered, grabbing his phone again and dialing Jason. "They're taking their cuts off the top," he said, not even giving the younger man time to say "hello."

"I haven't found his phone number yet," Jason said. "I'm trying, Paul, but he's unlisted, and the feds are kind of funny anymore about giving stuff like that out, after the 9/11—"

"Jason, *shut up* and listen to me," Paul snapped. "Milton must have gotten sloppy. That's why the feds have grounds for the tax evasion case—and why the mayor's jumping through hoops to protect him. It's not because

they're friends. It's because Milton's books can implicate Bob Allen, too."

Jason was quiet for a long moment. "What?" he asked at length.

"Listen," Paul said. He lit up a cigarette without thinking about it. His mind was whirling, alive and alight with excitement. "You were right about those three houses. The city probably is going to incorporate that area into the Victorian Square development eventually. And when it does, Arthur Sinclair is going to drop it like a hot fucking potato—sell it cheap to Keswick Investment Realty. That's what they do. That's what they've *been* doing all along, for five years now, in little bits here and there so no one gets suspicious, so no one will know unless they sit down and actually track down all the pieces to put together."

"I...I don't..." Jason began.

"Mayor Allen is tight with Sinclair and Minz—with John Milton, too. All four of them are library regents, and sit together on about a dozen other charity boards, too. They've been friends for years. So the mayor is able to have the city foreclose on different properties for different reasons—mostly tax forfeitures. He can't sell the property for under its assessed property value unless he drops it to a non-profit organization, like the Greater Metro Historical Preservation Society, and in that case, it's a tax write-off. So the city council doesn't protest, and Arthur Sinclair gets prime chunks of real estate for a dollar apiece."

“Prime?” Jason asked, sounding bewildered. “You’re talking about those three houses sitting around crumbling that you and Dr. Wheaton—”

“They’re crumbling at the moment, Jason, and that’s why Allen can get rid of them so easily. The city council doesn’t give a shit. Why should they? They’re falling apart, practically condemned—shitholes, Jason. At least for awhile. But a year down the road, maybe more, maybe less, and the historical society sells that land off cheap to Keswick Investment Realty. Nobody notices. If they did, nobody cares. And Keswick shows up with a pitch to the city to build a new shopping district or a new subdivision—expensive shit, Jason, sure to bring in big bucks in reconfigured property taxes once the development is finished. The city can’t say no to it. So who do you get to build these great big new developments? If you’re Howard Minz at Keswick, you use your old pal John Milton’s contracting company, who else?”

Jason was silent on the other end of the phone. Paul let that sink in with him for a moment before continuing.

“Milton Industries does all the building, and Keswick splits the money down the middle, with all of them getting a cut—Milton, Sinclair, Minz and Bob Allen. Only with the Liberty Heights development, they got too greedy. They picked a historical site that wasn’t a dump—they picked one people cared about, that had too much history to be ignored.” Paul thought about Susan telling him that a protestor had spit in her hair once during a live shot at the old sanitarium grounds, and how the so-called ghosthunter,

Cameron Taylor, had told him Milton had to keep it under lock, key and razor wire to prevent curious trespassers.

"So when someone started trying to save Liberty Sanitarium, they dug a little too deeply," Paul told Jason. "They found some of Milton's iffy tax transactions and alerted the feds. Bob Allen's got to be about ready to shit his pants that he'll get sniffed out along the way, too. Not to mention what his little buddies Minz and Sinclair must be thinking." He paused for a moment, waiting for Jason's reaction. When there was only silence, he frowned. "Goddamn it, Jason, have you heard a word I said?"

He was suddenly, eerily reminded of his own conversation with Vicki that morning

*You weren't even listening, were you? You weren't paying attention to a single thing I just said."*

and nearly grimaced.

"Of course I have," Jason replied. "I just...I mean, I...Jesus, Paul, do you know what you're suggesting?"

"I sure do," Paul replied grimly.

"You're saying the mayor is involved," Jason said, his voice somewhat pleading. "You're saying Mayor Allen is a crook."

Jason sounded distraught, as if Paul had just revealed to him that Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny weren't real.

"Mayor Allen hired me..." Jason began.

"He hired me, too," Paul said. *And he's probably going to fire us both, too, when he finds out about this.*

"But I...I know him, Paul," Jason protested. "I went to college with his son. I've had dinner at his house, for crying out loud."

"Well, crooks gotta fuck and eat, too, Jason," Paul said bluntly, dryly. "Now do you want to finish looking up that federal prosecutor's number, or do I have to do it myself? I think he's going to be very interested in what I have to tell him."

"Maybe we should talk to him first," Jason said. "Call his press secretary. Something. If this has something to do with that Melanie Geary case, than at least we should—"

"It doesn't have to do with Melanie Geary," Paul said. *And that's the kicker of it, he thought. He'd had an epiphany in an investigation, alright—just not in the investigation he'd been hoping to solve. He still had no idea where Melanie Geary had been murdered. And without knowing that, I've got no proof I didn't kill her, no evidence that what's floating around in my mind are just dreams and not memories. I've got nothing but my own word I didn't do it, and hell, I can't even convince myself with that alone right now!*

"Jason, look," he said, his tone softening, growing nearly gentle. He'd just roused the kid from a dead sleep and given him the verbal equivalent of a kick in the balls, from the sounds of things. That Jason sounded so upset, nearly distraught, left Paul feeling crummy. "Just because it looks like Bob Allen is involved in this doesn't mean he is. All I've got is a paper trail. It'll be up to the feds to make it something that will stick. And even if he is involved, it doesn't mean he's a bad guy. Sometimes things just happen,

and you forget yourself, or you see an opportunity you don't think anyone will notice that you take, so you go for it."

Jason didn't say anything, making Paul feel even shittier. "I have to let the prosecutor know about this," he said. "The sooner, the better, Jason. I'm a cop. It's my job to uphold the law. If I have this information—if I know about it, Jason, and I don't say anything, then I'm not doing my job. I'm breaking the law."

He thought that might get to Jason. The poor kid wanted to be a cop. He had a badge, and he might have had a gun—Paul had never seen him with one—but for all practical purposes, Jason Stewart was a little boy playing pretend. He'd never walked a beat or worked a case in his life. He was a glorified security guard, no better than the overweight, paunch-bellied, balding assholes at the local junkyard or credit union.

"Alright," Jason said at length, sounding weary and defeated. "I...I know someone, a friend from school over in the FBI field office. I'll give him a call, see if he can log into the civil service database from his home desktop and get me the number."

"Thanks, kid," Paul said, smiling broadly. "I owe you."

"Again," Jason said pointedly, and then he surprised Paul by hanging up first.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

"Daddy!" Emma cried, rocketing across the room and crashing into her father's arms as he came through Paul's front door. Her arms locked, vice-like around Jay's neck, and the force of her impact simultaneously startled, staggered and nearly strangled him.

"Hi, lamb," he said with a breathless laugh, as her legs coiled around his middle, and he held her tightly against him. "Did you miss me?"

"Something awful!" she replied, her voice muffled against his neck. She hadn't believed that he would be okay, even after he had called Uncle Paul from the airport to let him know they had arrived safely and were on their way to pick her up. She had still been convinced that somehow, somewhere along the way something would happen, and her father would be hurt. *Just like Grandma said.*

But there he was, completely unharmed, just like Paul had promised. Daddy was alive and well, if not slightly more suntanned, and he looked just as happy and healthy as he had when he and Jo had left.

"Let me put you down, Em," Daddy said with a low groan as he stooped, letting her drop her feet to the floor again. He laughed again, less breathlessly this time, as she slipped her arms loose of their throttle-hold around his neck. "Thank you." He glanced beyond her and smiled. "Hey, M.K. Hey, Bethany."

"Hi, Uncle Jay," the two girls said, their voices overlapping.

In that moment, a disturbing thought darted through Emma's mind, her grandmother's voice whispering to her. *He'll try not to scream because he knows it will frighten them. They'll be terrified enough, so he'll try hard not to scream.*

"Hey, kid," Paul said as Jay stepped toward him, his grin widening. Emma shook her head, forcing the ominous words from her mind.

*Daddy is okay now, she argued to Grandma. He's not going to get hurt because he's home now and safe.*

She watched Paul hook his hand against the back of Jay's head and pull him near in a brief, but fierce embrace. "How are you doing?" Paul said into Jay's hair, clapping him fondly on the back.

"Tired as hell," Jay said. "Hungry and jetlagged, but otherwise, we're good. How about you, man?" Emma didn't miss the way Daddy's expression shifted, his brows lifting, his dark eyes clouding with concern. "You look like shit."

"Thanks," Paul replied with a laugh, stepping past Jay with his hands outstretched. "Here, Jo, let me take those." He thought Jay was kidding, but Emma knew that he wasn't. *He sees it, too.*

"Hi, Paul," Jo said with a smile, as Paul drew two laden plastic shopping bags from her hands. She pressed her lips against the corner of his mouth in greeting, and Emma could tell as plainly in her face as she had in Daddy's. *They see it, too, she thought. They know something's wrong. They know he's different somehow.*

Emma accepted Jo's warm hug and flurry of kisses, and let her draw her in tow toward M.K. and Bethany, who had begun fluttering and fussing over the shopping bags. Jo and Jay had brought back presents for everyone from their abbreviated trip to the Bahamas, and M.K. and Bethany were immediately arguing over an assortment of colorful halter tops, T-shirts and coral jewelry. Emma pretended to be interested, laughing and smiling as Jo dug out the pint-sized T-shirt and bright green plastic sunglasses they had brought back for her. But she watched out of the corner of her eye as her daddy and Uncle Paul stood back from the fray, lingering in the doorway between the kitchen and the dining room.

Uncle Paul had opened them each a bottle of beer, and as they stood there sipping, they spoke together quietly, soft exchanges Emma couldn't overhear. Daddy's expression hadn't softened in the least; he knew something was wrong with Uncle Paul, and he was worried about him.

Before Jay and Jo had arrived, Emma had pulled Paul aside, drawing him into the spare bedroom she had been using and closing the door so that M.K. and Bethany couldn't listen. Paul had looked both amused and befuddled by her efforts at secrecy, but when she'd instructed him to sit on the bed, he'd obliged without protest.

"Grandma wants me to tell you something," she had told him. Emma didn't know if Uncle Paul believed her or not when it came to Grandma. Grandma had given him a message through Emma that had helped him to catch the

serial killer called the Watcher, but that still didn't mean that Paul was inclined to believe.

*He's a practical sort, like his father, Grandma had explained. These kinds of things don't make sense to him, and he doesn't like that. He likes for everything to have an explanation, a reason. He doesn't just accept things on faith.*

But he had to that morning, and Emma had known it. She would be going home, and might not have another chance to tell him anytime soon. And Grandma had come to her the night before. She'd showed Emma things. She'd been adamant that Emma tell Uncle Paul about them.

"She showed me a picture in my mind of you and Scooby Doo," Emma had said.

Paul had blinked at her. "Scooby Doo, the cartoon dog," he'd said, a patient statement, not an inquiry.

Emma had nodded. "She said you'll need to follow Scooby Doo. He can help you find it."

"Find what?" Paul had asked. His voice had still been velveteen with patience, but he hadn't believed her. Emma had seen that plainly in his face.

"I don't know," she'd replied. "But you'll be looking for it. And soon. Scooby Doo and Claire Boyett will help you find it."

This time, in her dream, the skies above Grandma's house had been darkened in full, blackened with low-hanging storm clouds. The wind had snapped and snatched at Emma's hair, and large, stinging droplets of rain had pelted her face. She'd heard thunder grumbling and cringed to see splintered forks of lightning fluttering overhead.

That was why Emma had been so afraid for her father, why she hadn't believed in his safety until she'd seen him and touched him for herself. Because despite Paul's assurances the night before that Jo and Jay were safely underway from the Bahamas, the storm had still appeared in her dream—and so had Grandma's warning.

*Something bad is going to happen, and your daddy is going to be hurt.*

Emma watched Daddy and Uncle Paul talking. Paul was smiling, trying to laugh, and she knew he meant to put Jay at ease, reassure him nothing was wrong. But she could also tell by Jay's expression that he wasn't buying it. Not for one minute.

Uncle Paul hadn't been sleeping. Emma didn't know where he went at night, but she knew he wasn't sleeping. Whatever it was that kept him awake, it was like the hole inside of him she sensed because of his divorce from Aunt Vicki. It was something heavy and deep and it ate him up inside. It made him seem like somebody else.

*And Daddy sees it, too.*

\* \* \*

After Jay left with Jo and Emma, Paul took M.K. and Bethany to the mall. Jay had been reluctant to leave; he'd drawn Paul aside while the girls had squealed and tussled over souvenirs, and he'd looked at him, his dark eyes round and concerned. "You feeling okay?" he'd asked. "You look like hell, man. I don't—"

"I'm fine," Paul had replied, laughing dismissively. "I didn't sleep good last night, that's all. I've gone from being a

bachelor to having three girls in this apartment, all in about twelve hours. My head's still spinning from it."

Jay had smiled, but his eyes had still been troubled. He'd always been a lousy liar, his thoughts and concerns, his emotions readily apparent in his eyes, the unconscious set of his brows. "You sure?" he'd asked. "You sounded kind of funny there a time or two on the phone while we were gone, and I..."

For a moment, an image had flashed through Paul's mind, the dream he'd suffered in which he'd seen himself cutting off Melanie Geary's fingers. He remembered that in the dream, Melanie had looked up at him, pleading around a rubber-ball, sex-toy gag that had been strapped into her mouth, but all of a sudden, it hadn't been Melanie Geary anymore. It had been Jay, with his enormous brown eyes frightened and dazed with pain, his voice choked around the piano wire garrote.

"You'd tell me, wouldn't you?" Jay had asked him in the kitchen doorway. "If something was up, I mean."

Paul had hooked his arm around Jay's neck, drawing him momentarily near, pressing his lips and nose against the crown of his dark hair. "Yes," he whispered, forcing the memories of his dream from his mind, of Jay's whimpering pleas as he'd squeezed the blades of the steel shears closed against his finger. *Theeeesss...!* "Yes, I'd tell you, Jay."

He distracted himself further for the rest of the afternoon by letting M.K. and Bethany have some free reign with his credit card at the mall. They'd rushed about excitedly, arms laden with paper shopping bags, trying on

sandals and sundresses, buying new earrings and sunglasses, sampling perfumes and lipsticks.

They had supper at the food court. Paul had a lackluster plateful of lo mein from a fast-food Chinese vendor that couldn't by any means compete with Joe's Wok in the city—his personal favorite. M.K. and Bethany had cheeseburgers and fries, swapping fruit-flavored smoothies back and forth.

"Is that fashion?" Paul asked, nodding as a teen-aged girl walked by wearing little more than a dishcloth wrapped around her torso, or so it appeared, not to mention a pair of blue jeans so tight and cut so low, the curves of her ass threatened to spill out over the top of her waistband. He glanced between his daughters. "Tell me neither of you would walk out of the house dressed like that."

*Tell me your mother wouldn't let you,* he added mentally.

M.K. rolled her eyes, sparing the girl in question a sideways, disdainful peek. "Puh-lease, Dad," she said.

Bethany looked mortified at the notion, so Paul figured he didn't have to worry on her end of things, either. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table, prodding at his half-eaten food with a chopstick. "So tell me about this guy your mom says you're dating," he said to M.K.

She laughed. "Dad!" she exclaimed, her face blazing with sudden color.

"What?" he asked. "She told me you were out on a date with him this week."

"I was, but that hardly makes it dating," M.K. replied, still blushing.

"Well, who is he, then? This guy you're not dating?"

M.K. glanced at Bethany, and clapped her hand over her mouth, giggling. "His name is Jeremy Laslow, Daddy," Bethany supplied. "He drives a Mustang."

Paul raised his brow, and M.K. slapped her sister's arm. "He drives *safely*, Dad. Well within the speed limit. And he's got insurance. He's really nice. You'd like him."

"He's a senior," Bethany supplied helpfully, making a little part inside of Paul that had groaned at the word *Mustang* grumble again, more plaintively this time.

"I'm a junior," M.K. reminded. "He's only seven months older than me, Dad—not even a year. He's really nice."

"He'd better be," Paul said, scowling but trying to pretend like he was only pretending to scowl.

"He *is*," M.K. said again, rolling her eyes and laughing.

By the time they returned to Paul's apartment, the sun was setting, the sky draped in violet shadows. The light on his answering machine was flashing; he had two messages waiting for him.

"Paul, hi, it...it's Brenda."

Paul froze, breathless, motionless, listening to the recorded sound of her voice, feeling it grip his heart as if she stood in the room and spoke to him. From the spare bedroom, he listened to the rustling of bags and the sounds of his daughters laughing and joking together as they



unpacked their new things. They suddenly seemed a million miles away.

He'd been wanting to call her and tell her about what he'd uncovered about the mayor. He'd only discovered the truth of the real estate scams because Brenda had brought the three abandoned houses to his attention originally. Otherwise, it might have all gone unnoticed, the truth never uncovered. And while the houses hadn't ended up to be the crime scenes Brenda had been hoping for, in a sense, they remained crime scenes nonetheless, just of a far different nature.

He'd wanted to call and tell her, had debated over it, in fact, but in the end, had been too chickenshit. The memory of their kiss, and her rebuke in its wake, remained too fresh—too painful—in his mind.

"I'm sorry to call you at home," Brenda said, the gentle undulations of her Southern accent lilting in her words. "I don't have your cell phone number, so I looked in the phone book. I...I need to talk to you. Something's come up...and I think you should take a look. I'm at my office. The number is..."

He darted for his desk, grabbing a pen and notepad and scribbling madly as she recited her phone number. He reached for his cell phone, meaning to fish it out of his hip pocket to call her, when the second message played.

"Paul, it's Brenda again. It's about...oh, quarter after six, and I'm home again. Listen, they brought another body in this morning. They found it about two blocks from where Melanie Geary was dumped. Missing Persons identified her

right away—Aimee Chesshire, last reported seen a couple of nights ago at Snake Eyes nightclub, the same spot where Melanie Geary disappeared.”

The pen fell from Paul’s hand. All at once, his knees felt weak, as if the sum of his strength had sapped out through the soles of his feet and into the carpet. *Aimee Chesshire*, Brenda had said. *Aimee...*

*Don’t give up on all of us*, he’d dreamed of telling her, as he’d offered her a cigarette in a crowded nightclub.

*Don’t give up on all of us.*

“Jesus—!” Paul gasped, and then he rushed down the hallway for the bathroom, barely making it in enough time to slam the door shut behind him and slap on the light switch. His stomach heaved, and he leaned over the toilet, vomiting his supper.

*It’s not possible! his mind screamed. It was a dream! It can’t be real! It can’t be!*

His stomach twisted in agonizing knots, Paul sank to his knees beside the toilet. The acrid stink of regurgitated ginger, garlic and soy sauce stung his nose, and he flapped his hand, finding the toilet handle and flushing it. He slumped against the tub, shuddering, gasping, his eyes flooded with shocked, dismayed tears. *Oh, God*, he thought. *It can’t be real. I...I couldn’t have done that, those horrible things. Christ, please tell me I didn’t hurt that girl.*

*What else could it be?* a quiet, solemn portion of his mind whispered. *Think about it, Paul. Get a grip on yourself. Why would you see these things, remember these things, if it wasn’t real? If it wasn’t you doing them?*

Paul shoved the heels of his hands against his eyes, hoping to shove that goddamn little voice away. "I didn't do it," he hissed through gritted teeth. "God help me, I know I didn't. I didn't hurt those girls."

"Daddy?"

He jerked, startled by Bethany's soft beckon, her light rapping against the door. "Daddy, are you okay?"

"I...I'm fine," he called, his voice shaking and hoarse. He cleared his throat, struggling to force a normal tone. "I'm fine," he said again. "I just...something in that Chinese food didn't agree with me, that's all. I'll be right out."

He shifted his weight, pulling his cell phone out of his pocket. He dialed information and asked for Brenda Wheaton's home number. Brenda answered on the third ring.

"Tell me about the girl," he said after they'd exchanged perfunctory greetings. "Aimee Chesshire."

"She was just like the other, like Melanie Geary," Brenda said. "She had severe ligature wounds on her wrists and ankles. A piano wire garrote that had cut so deeply into her soft tissue, it nicked her jugular vein. Burn marks on her torso and thighs, puncture wounds from small-gauge needles. I counted one hundred and forty-seven in my preliminary examination."

*Oh, Christ*, Paul thought, closing his eyes, again pressing his hand against his brow. *Not me, not me, not me IT WAS NOT ME*

"The distal, middle and proximal phalanges on all four fingers were missing, severed at the

metacarpophalangeal joints," Brenda said. "The thumb was severed at the carpometacarpal joint. The official cause of death was strangulation."

"Christ," Paul whispered, wiping his mouth, feeling the thick, pungent flavor of bile still against his tongue.

"She was a lesbian, like Melaine Geary," Brenda said. "So of course, Dan's having a field day with it."

She sounded tired and more than a little bitter, but at her words, Paul straightened. "What?"

"She was a lesbian," Brenda said again. "Or at least, she was in a lesbian relationship. Or she had been until just prior to her disappearance. Apparently that nightclub, Snake Eyes, is a popular hang out for a mixed crowd that includes a lot of homosexuals—men and women."

Paul forked his fingers through his hair. He'd dreamed that Aimee had told him she'd just broken off a relationship. Had she ever mentioned her ex-lover's name? And if she was a lesbian, why had she gone with Paul outside to his truck?

*She didn't go with me anywhere! It was just a goddamn dream! It wasn't me! I didn't do anything!*

"Dan thinks she went to Snake Eyes to bat for the other team," Brenda said. "A couple of witnesses saw her talking with a couple of guys during the night, dancing pretty cheekily together, Dan said. He's thinking she might have been out looking for a guy for a little get-even with her ex."

That made sense, even though Paul hated to admit it, considering Dan Pierson had thought of it first. His skin

crawled at the idea several witnesses recalled seeing Aimee Chesshire in the bar on the night of her disappearance. *God, what if one of them remembers an older guy, kinda balding, buying her drinks, giving her smokes?* he thought, and then he shook his head. *It wasn't me. Christ Almighty, it couldn't be me. I didn't do*

"I don't know, Paul," Brenda said wearily. "I wanted to talk to you about it today, but then Dan came to the morgue and kept getting in my way, and I just..." She uttered an exhausted, frustrated sound. "I brought the case file home with me. What I've got of it anyway. I know we kind of ended up shitty with things yesterday, but I...I would really like it if you'd look over it with me."

"I'll be right there," Paul said, rising to his feet. "Give me twenty minutes, tops."

\* \* \*

"I don't think we should do this, M.K.," Bethany said, sitting on the end of the bed and watching as her sister brushed her hair.

"What? Don't be stupid. It's perfect," M.K. replied, leaning forward to peer in the mirror and check her freshly applied lip-gloss. She met Bethany's gaze through the glass and frowned. "And don't you dare tell me you've changed your mind. I've already called Jeremy and he's on his way. He'll be here any minute."

Bethany looked down at her hands as she anxiously twined her fingers together against the nest of her lap. She hated lying. And that's exactly what the whole evening was turning out to be—lies. She was wearing M.K.'s clothes, a

pair of tight-fitting indigo jeans and a cropped tank top of the style and fashion only earlier that evening, M.K. had denied ever wearing to their father. She wore a pair of high-heeled, strappy sandals that already pinched her feet, and M.K. had helped her paint her face up with a variety of pale, glittery cosmetics that left Bethany looking years older than her age.

"I don't like lying to Daddy," she said quietly.

M.K. left the mirror and came over to the bedside. She squatted so she could look Bethany in the eyes. "He's never going to know," she said gently, tucking her fingertips beneath Bethany's chin to draw her reluctant gaze. "It's going to be fun. You'll see."

Their father had left several hours earlier. He hadn't said much as to why he was going, only that it was work-related. He'd had a couple of messages on his answering machine when they'd returned from the mall that evening. He'd played them and then erased them; neither M.K. nor Bethany had heard what they said. Paul had gotten sick. He'd darted into the bathroom, and M.K. and Bethany had listened in alarm as he vomited. He'd told them it was nothing; his supper had disagreed with him, but he had still seemed haggard and strained as he'd left the apartment.

"You two stay up, watch some movies," he'd told them, kissing them each in turn, his breath minty with toothpaste and mouthwash.

"I might turn in early," M.K. had replied, affecting a yawn. "I'm having my period this week, and it makes me really tired."

“What if Daddy checks on us when he gets back?”  
Bethany asked her sister.

“He won’t,” M.K. said. “I gave him that line about being on my period so he wouldn’t. Men don’t like fooling with that stuff—and especially Dad. He’ll treat this room like it’s radioactive now, trust me. He won’t come in. And if he peeks through the door...” She patted her hand against two mounds of pillows they had tucked and deliberately arranged beneath the blankets, to make it look as though two people shared the bed. “...he won’t see anything but us sleeping soundly.”

M.K. dropped Bethany a wink and stood. “So come on. Finish getting ready. I think you should wear those new hoop earrings we found today.”

Bethany still didn’t move, her fingers tangled together uncertainly, and M.K. frowned again, planting her hands on her hips. “Bethany, he’s gone out for something with work. He’s going to be gone *all night*. You know how he gets once he’s working on a case.”

*But he doesn’t have cases anymore,* Bethany thought. She didn’t say anything, though. She just pressed her lips together and blinked at her hands. *He doesn’t have cases anymore because that’s not his job anymore. Now he just goes on TV.*

She rode in the backseat of Jeremy’s car on the way to the nightclub. It was a cramped fit in the low-slung sport scar, and she sat with her long legs folded, her knees nearly to her ears from the feel of it. Jeremy had a CD in, and Eminem boomed and shuddered through the subwoofers

surrounding Bethany. She couldn't hear a word Jeremy and M.K. exchanged, and watched them grin and laugh back and forth, smoking cigarettes and stealing kisses at stoplights. They also shared a bottle wrapped in a brown paper bag back and forth, and after a couple of long swigs, M.K. pivoted in her seat, offering it to Bethany.

"Here!" she shouted over the din of Slim Shady.

"What is it?" Bethany shouted back, but M.K. merely cupped her ear and shook her head, laughing to indicate she couldn't hear. Bethany sniffed the mouth of the bottle, smelling something sweet and fruity. A glance told her M.K. was watching her expectantly, and not wanting to seem like a baby, or that she was chickenshit, Bethany took a long drink. It was strong with alcohol, whatever it was, and she choked, startled as it burned her throat. M.K. quickly shoved a tissue under her chin.

"Don't go ruining my shirt!" she yelled.

By the time they reached Snake Eyes, it was well after midnight. Bethany's ears were ringing long after Jeremy had parked the Mustang in the crowded adjacent parking lot and turned off the blaring Eminem, but she could still hear the throbbing, heavy baseline of techno dance music punching through the night sky as they approached the building. Bethany limped along, the sandals aching her feet, her head somewhat dizzy from the wine. She'd had several more gulps along the ride to the club. "It'll help you relax!" M.K. had hollered at her, but all it seemed to be doing to Bethany was make her feel sleepy and clumsy.



M.K. turned to her and smiled, slowing her gait until they walked abreast of each other. She slipped her arm around Bethany's shoulders and grinned. "Nathan's already here," she said. "Stick close to me when we get inside, okay? He's got a booth for us in the back, but it's going to be packed. I don't want you getting lost in the crowd."

Bethany nodded, shying closer to her sister at the horrifying prospect. She didn't know what she would do if she got separated in the bar. She didn't know how she'd get home if she lost track of M.K. and Jeremy.

"Jesus, you're as tense as a board!" M.K. laughed, offering her a friendly shake. "Stop worrying. Nothing's going to happen. We're going to have a blast!"

Because she wanted to believe her sister almost as much as please her, Bethany managed a smile and nodded at M.K. *Nothing's going to happen*, she told herself as they approached the entrance. The stink of cigarette smoke, spilled beer and sweat was already thick and heady in the air, even from the sidewalk and she could see flashes of neon-colored lights through the doors leading inside. She reached for her purse, pulling out the fake drivers license. *Nothing's going to happen. We're going to have a blast.*

\* \* \*

"Thanks for coming," Brenda said to Paul, standing aside and holding the front door open so he could enter her home, a small, two story house facing Noble Park, no more than twenty minutes from his apartment. She was dressed in loose-fitting grey sweatpants and an oversized T-shirt. She was barefooted, and she'd long since washed any hint of

make-up from her face. Her hair hung loose in a long, pale sheaf, draped over one shoulder, and he realized it was the first time he'd ever seen her without a ponytail. *Christ, she's beautiful*, Paul thought.

"Thanks for inviting me," he said. She closed the door behind him, but he made no move to step further into the living room. All the way there, he'd been gripped with anxiety; her revelations about the discovery of another body, Aimee Chesshire's body, had left him nearly panic-stricken. Now that he had arrived, now that they were alone, he stared, transfixed by the luminous glow of her hair, bathed in soft, warm lamp light, and found himself momentarily befuddled and immobilized.

He kept thinking of their kiss, of the softness and warmth of her mouth against his, the way her breath and tongue had tasted and felt, the soft whimpering sound that had fluttered from her throat. All at once, he seemed incapable of thinking of anything else, and that memory hung between them, thick and nearly palpable in the small room.

"Would you like a beer?" she asked, walking past him, brushing her shoulder against his.

"Yeah," he said, even though his stomach was still knotted and grumbling from his early bout of vomiting, and beer was probably the last thing he needed to be dumping on it. "Please. That'd be great."

She crossed through the adjoining dining room and into her kitchen and again, Paul found himself mesmerized by the spill of her long, blond hair. He shook his head,

snapping himself from his reverie, and forced himself to look around. The living room was long and large, with a bay window filling up nearly all of the westward facing wall, awarding a floor-to-ceiling view of the park beyond. That view was obscured at the moment by heavy draperies Brenda had drawn. To Paul's immediate right, just inside the doorway, a flight of wooden steps led to the second floor. Like most older homes in the city, those built during the early days of urban-sprawl's infancy following the second world war, the woodwork in Brenda's house was dark, almost chocolate-colored. By contrast, she'd painted all of the walls a pale, eggshell white and covered the floors in light beige carpeting. Her furniture was modest and unpretentious, and the focal points of the living room's décor seemed to be the enormous barrister-style bookshelves she had lining nearly every inch of available wall space. Each was crammed to capacity with books, and an overflow of volumes rested, stacked against the tops.

"I like your house," Paul called to her. There was something charming and comforting about the space; it had a "lived-in" ambience that could never be duplicated in an apartment. It more than *looked* like someone called it home; it *felt* that way, too.

"Thanks," she replied, returning from the kitchen with two beer bottles in her hands. Beyond her, he caught a glimpse of a gas range and a white porcelain sink, with metal cabinetry with chrome fixtures lining the walls, probably original to the house. "Did you have any trouble finding it?"

"No. Your directions were spot-on."

"I hope Sam Adams is okay," she said, offering him a bottle.

"Sam Adams is fine," he said, slipping it from her hand. His fingertips brushed against hers and she drew back immediately. They stood there, blinking at one another for a long, awkward moment, and he realized she was thinking about their kiss, too.

"Come on upstairs to my office," she said, on the move again, walking briskly past him toward the stairs. "Let me show you that file."

The top of the stairs opened onto a single, long room. The walls cut in at sloping angles to match the pitch of the roof. At one end of the room, he saw Brenda's desk, as covered in papers and books as the one at her downtown office. A laptop computer also rested atop, plugged into the wall and a nearby cable internet access. On the other end of the room, he saw a queen-sized bed, neatly made, with the walls around it still adorned with various rock-band and girl-in-bikini posters. Low-lying bookshelves were lined with sports trophies and toy action figures, miniature Lego cars and model airplanes.

"This is my son's room," Brenda said, sounding somewhat sheepish. "He moved with his dad to California, but I still keep it for him, for when he comes to visit. I...I like to come up here and work. It makes me feel closer to him."

Her eyes filled with sorrow, and she looked away. "Here," she said, going to the desk and lifting a file folder in

hand. She nodded to an old, lopsided recliner behind Paul. "Make yourself comfortable, if you'd like."

Paul sat, placing his beer on the floor beside him. He opened the folder, mentally steeling himself for the brutal photographs he knew he'd find inside. Aimee Chesshire looked up at him, her face and form battered and bloodied, obliterating momentarily any dreams or memories he might have had of her from the nightclub. He felt his stomach wrench again, and he closed his eyes, drawing in long, deep breaths for a long, uncertain moment, willing himself not to vomit.

*I didn't do this*, he thought. *I couldn't have done this. Oh, Christ, I couldn't have*

"You still don't think this is a hate crime?" she asked.

He breathed again, slowly, deliberately. "No," he whispered, opening his eyes, turning quickly past the photos of Aimee's face.

Brenda leaned back against the corner of her desk, folding her arms across her chest. "Why, then?" she asked. "Why is he doing this?"

Paul flipped past more autopsy photos, these detailing the puncture wounds left by the more than one hundred needles that had been shoved deeply into Aimee's skin, at all different points on her body—her arms and legs, her breasts, her genitals, her face and ears. *I didn't do this. Please God, I didn't do this.*

"Then again, who says it's a 'he?'" Brenda mused. He glanced up in surprise and found Brenda looking at him, her

brow raised. "They were lesbians, Melanie Geary and Aimee Chesshire. Maybe another lesbian killed them."

Paul shook his head. "Doesn't fit any profile I've ever heard of," he said quietly, his voice hoarse. "No, this is a guy who's angry. Maybe at lesbians or maybe in general, and their sexual orientation has just been shitty luck of the draw. But I don't think this guy hates lesbians. I think he hates *women*."

He stood up from the recliner and began pacing, holding the case file. "These crimes aren't about sex. The victims haven't been raped. If you're going after lesbians in particular, you'd rape them—if you hated them for their sexual orientation, you'd force yours on them. You'd rape them."

He looked down at the folder in his hand. "No, our guy is angry at women. Maybe he's been hurt in the past, a lover or something."

*Maybe his wife left him, yanked his entire life out from underneath him like some goddamn rug trick.*

"Maybe he's been dumped for another woman, and that's why he targets lesbians," Brenda suggested. "There's no way to know. We've never seen anything like this guy before. I ran it through the violent crime database today to see if it got any hits from outside the city, if anyone else has anything like it, but no."

Paul nodded. "He's a newbie, our guy."

"And he's really, really bold for a newbie," Brenda said. "That's what worries me the most. Most serial killers build up to a signature *modus operandi*. It can take months,

years—decades, even. You identified the pattern for Charles Toomis, the Watcher; you traced it to before he even got brave enough to start killing—back to when he was a stalker, a rapist. But there's nothing here, nothing for our guy or his M.O. I looked up the wire garrote, the needle points, the severed fingers, all as possible signatures, but nothing."

"You didn't find a pattern because there isn't one," Paul said. "He didn't progress from rape to murder. It's not sex or power that's giving him any satisfaction here. It's the *pain*. And I think it's because he's angry. Something has happened recently to piss him off, to set him off. I think it has something to do with a woman specifically, and he's taking it out against women in general."

*But it's not me*, he thought, his throat constricted, his stomach coiled. *I'm not like that. Yeah, I've been strung out since the divorce, since Jay resurrected me, and yeah, I may not like my job, or my life, or the way anything and everything just seems to be shitting on me lately, but don't blame Vicki for that. I don't hate her for it. I don't hate women for it.*

*Christ, do I?*

"You see," Brenda said, taking a long swig of her beer. "This is why I love you, Paul. You and I—we can talk about things. We can bounce ideas, share things with one another. With Dan it's just..." She brought the blade of her fingers against her thumb, then opened and closed her hand, mimicking a mouth in motion. "Yap-yap-yap. In one ear and out the other. His ideas on things, his way, or the highway."

Paul blinked at her, snapped instantly from his thoughts. *Did she just say she loved me?*

This same realization apparently smacked Brenda, too, because her voice faltered to a halt, and her eyes widened, color stoking in her cheeks.

*She did say that. She said she loved me.*

"I...I didn't mean that the way it came out," she said. "The first part, I mean. The...the part where I said..." Her voice faded again, and she blinked down at the floor.

Paul walked toward her, moving on impulse, not stopping himself, or thinking about what he was doing, what he meant to do. *The part where she said she loved me.*

He dropped the case file and caught her face between his hands. He heard the contents of the folder scatter against the pine floor, felt photographs flutter against the cuffs of his jeans. He drew Brenda toward him, lifting her chin, and without giving her a moment to protest, he kissed her, pressing his lips against hers, opening his mouth and letting his tongue delve against hers.

She stiffened against him reflexively for less than a second, and then relaxed, the momentary tension in her draining. She seemed to melt against him, stepping into the kiss, molding her body against his, lifting her face to meet him even more fully. Paul felt her breasts press into his chest, soft and supple even through the fabric of her T-shirt; he felt the curves of her legs brush in complement against his own. He tangled his hands in her wondrous tumble of golden hair, and Christ Almighty, how often had he longed to do that? How many times—even before his divorce—had he imagined what Brenda would look like with her hair



unbound, spilled about her head against bed linens and pillows.

He led her in tow, walking back toward the bed. He turned her around so that the back of her knees met the mattress first, and when she sank back, sitting slowly and then reclining, he eased himself down along with her, lowering himself atop her. She spread her thighs, enveloping his hips, and she rocked against him, her lips still sealed to his, her hands tugging the tails of his shirt loose from his jeans.

He kissed her throat, his lips and tongue drawing against her flushed, warm flesh, nestling at a spot where her pulse raced in a staccato rhythm, and the sweet fragrance of her perfume was dizzying and acute. He reached beneath her T-shirt, pulling it up toward her shoulders and out of his way. His hand fell against her breast, cradling, kneading, his fingers toying lightly with her nipple, coaxing it to a hardened point.

Brenda whimpered when his lips settled against her other breast. He worked her nipple gently, insistently with the tip of his tongue, and she undulated beneath him, soft, breathless sounds of pleasure stealing from her throat as she clutched at him, moving her hips against him in mute implore.

He let his hand follow the soft, flat plain of her stomach, sliding beneath the waistband of her sweatpants, and she raised her hips to allow him access. When his fingers slipped beneath the elastic of her panties, delving between the warm, moist folds nestled beneath a thatch of

soft curls, she moaned his name, spreading her fingers in his hair, holding him against her. He moved his hand, his fingertips finding someplace sweetly sensitive tucked at her apex and circling there, slowly at first and then increasing in tempo, and Brenda moaned again, moving against his hand, her breath fluttering.

He brought her to the brink of climax, until her entire body was rigid and trembling with anticipation and need, and then he drew his hand away, leaving her shuddering beneath him, clutching at him desperately. He ducked his head, yanking his shirt off and tossing it aside. Her hands were busy with the button on his jean fly; she sat up and jerked them and his boxers down, away from his hips. He kicked his feet, dancing clumsily out of them, as she wriggled her way out of her sweatpants and panties.

They had one fleeting moment when they might have stopped, when they could have taken it all back. He stood before her naked, and she looked up at him, her long hair disheveled, aglow as if draped in moonlight. They met each other's gazes, both of the flushed and breathless, and they could have stopped. They could have reconsidered.

He leaned toward her, cupping his hands against her cheeks, and kissed her. He lay her back against the mattress and the moment was gone. She opened her thighs to him in invitation, and he settled his weight against her, sliding the hardened length of his arousal deeply into her. The sensation of that, her shocking warmth and wetness, forced a groan from him. It had been so long, too long, and for a moment, he couldn't move. He hovered above her, the tip of

his nose brushing hers, his breath tremulously bated as he struggled to control himself, to not shoot off immediately, like some pimply-faced adolescent getting laid for the first time.

And then she moved beneath him, drawing him in further, slowly, gently, as if she understood his dilemma, and he groaned again, her name escaping him through gritted teeth. Her hand found his, and their fingers twined together, and she moved once more, drawing him in and then releasing him, again and again, setting a rhythm for him—something long and slow and sweet and deep. Something he could match. Something he could maintain without losing himself, losing control.

It was like no other lovemaking he'd ever experienced. It was absolutely the most perfect, exquisite experience he'd ever known, both of them moving together in a steadily strengthening, quickening, pounding rhythm. She clutched at him as she neared climax, her nails digging into him, her breath hitching urgently. When her body tightened against him, beneath him, around him, as her fingers hooked into the muscles bridging his shoulders and she arched her back with pleasure, she drew him into her depths in one last, fervent plunge, and he cried out hoarsely in release.

He crumpled against her, hanging his head, pressing his forehead against her shoulder. He felt her hands light against his back, running delicately along the length of his spine, caressing him. Her lips brushed his cheek, his ear, and she whispered his name.

He lifted his head wearily, still out of breath, and looked down at her. She smiled, stroking her hand against his face. "My God, you're beautiful," he murmured, making her smile widen. In that moment, there was nothing else in the entire world—not his job, his kids, his alimony, his life, not even the dreams that had plagued him, nightmares in which he had tortured and murdered two women. There was nothing but Brenda, and in that moment, Paul felt like himself again for the first time in ages.

He felt as though he'd come home.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

"So where'd M.K. go?" Nathan Darcy asked. He and Bethany sat alone together on opposite ends of a crescent-shaped booth in the far corner of the crowded, noisy nightclub. As he shouted out over the crashing, thunderous din of music, he scooted around the curve of padded black vinyl, easing over beside her.

Bethany blushed brightly at his sudden proximity, hunching her shoulders shyly. "To the bathroom, I think," she called back, taking a sip of her drink—a tequila sunrise she'd been nursing for the better part of the last two hours. By now, it was little more than melted ice, orange juice and grenadine syrup, but she didn't mind. She hadn't enjoyed the dizzying, drowsy effects of the alcohol she'd had earlier, and was glad they'd worn off. "She and Danielle headed in that direction a little while ago!"

Nathan nodded, smiling and taking a swig from his own drink, the latest in a seemingly endless line of beers. It was hot in the bar, and his suntanned skin was kissed with a light gloss of sweat, his dark hair somewhat dampened and finger-swept back from his brow. *God, he's cute*, Bethany thought, pressing her lips together to stifle an anxious giggle. *And he smells good, too.*

She wondered if he meant to ask her to the homecoming dance now. She'd been waiting all night long for the two of them to be alone, because otherwise, Nathan

hadn't paid much attention to her. He'd been too busy with his buddies—M.K.'s boyfriend, Jeremy, and a gaggle of other older boys from their high school, laughing and smoking cigarettes, drinking beer and shooting pool.

Just the thought of him asking her out left her heart fluttering nervously and made her stomach twist in eager anticipation. Already in her mind, she could picture them together at the homecoming dance, walking in on his elbow, feeling his arms around her as he held her close to dance.

She glanced at Nathan and found him watching the dance floor, bobbing his head and tapping his fingers against his plastic cup in time with the music. After a long moment, he noticed her attention and cut his eyes her way. Bethany blushed again, jerking her gaze toward her cup, and he laughed.

"Hey," he said, nudging her with his elbow. "You wanna have some fun?"

"What?" Bethany blinked at him, smiling, but puzzled, as he reached into the pocket of his jeans and pulled out a small aluminum foil packet. He glanced around, holding the packet beneath the edge of the table and out of ready view, and then quickly opened it.

"I said, do you wanna have some fun?" he asked her again, more quietly this time, leaning forward to show her what was in the packet—a half dozen pills. "It's Extasy," he said. "Good shit." He pinched one between his forefinger and thumb, offering it to her. "Here."

"No," Bethany said, shying back, shaking her head. "No, I...no thanks, Nathan. I don't..."

"It won't fuck you up," he said. "Really. It just gives you a killer buzz, that's all." Again, she shook her head, and he shrugged, sitting back from her. "Suit yourself."

She watched him pop the pill, then fold the foil up and return it to his pocket. He scooted slightly away from her, not clear back to the other side of the booth, but far enough to let her know he thought she was lame. Her heart sank, and she felt the dim heat of tears in her eyes. Nothing she'd done that night was right. Everyone thought she was lame. She didn't like the alcohol, so while everyone else was getting drunk—M.K. included—she was the only one still sober. The sandals she'd borrowed from M.K. ached her feet, and the straps had worn blisters into her heels, and so she hadn't felt like dancing. Dozens of kids had flocked to and from and around their table all night long, laughing and smoking, and Bethany had sat there like a lump the entire time. M.K. had tried at first to coax her into dancing, drinking, loosening up a bit, but had abandoned her efforts about an hour ago to pursue her own fun. Bethany had watched M.K. bumping and grinding on the dance floor, a drink constantly in one hand, a cigarette in the other, good-looking young men always surrounding her, and she'd felt envious and unhappy.

"So, hey," Nathan said, sliding toward her again. This time, he didn't stop until he was immediately next to her, their hips touching, and when he put his arm around her, Bethany stiffened in surprise. "I was thinking..." He leaned forward, speaking in an intimate proximity to her ear, his breath tickling her, making her giggle.

*He's going to ask me now, she thought, her heart jackhammering. He doesn't think I'm lame, after all! He's going to ask me to the dance!*

"You think M.K. would go with me to Homecoming?" Nathan said against her ear, and Bethany stiffened again in new surprise.

"What?" she asked, blinking stupidly.

"I mean, she and Jeremy, they're not serious," Nathan said. "And she's been talking to me a lot lately, like she's interested in me. She was bugging me all week about that fake license for you. I gave it to her for free, and I thought maybe she might...I dunno...feel like she owes me or something."

Bethany shook her head once, her eyes wide.

"You...you gave it to her because you thought she'd go out with you?"

"Yeah," he replied, then laughed. "I had to pay fifty bucks for that. What—do you think I'd give it to her for nothing?" He sat back from her, puzzled. "What?"

"Nothing," Bethany muttered, shrugging away from his arm, sliding out from the booth.

"No, come on, what?" Nathan said, reaching out, catching her by the wrist. "Did she say something? What's wrong?"

"M.K. said plenty, Nathan," Bethany replied, flapping her arm, dislodging his hand. "And it was all a bunch of lies."

She turned around and shoved her way forcibly through the crowd, heading for the bathroom. She tried not



to cry like a stupid baby, but the tears came anyway, streaming down her cheeks, ruining her glittery eye make-up.

M.K. found her there ten minutes later, alerted to her presence by some of her friends, who had seen Bethany sniffing in line for one of the four bathroom stalls. Bethany had locked the door behind her and not come out. She sat on the hard, cold tile floor, a wad of toilet paper in her hands, her tears still seeping, her lips quivering miserably.

"Beth?" M.K. rapped her knuckles lightly on the door.

"Go away," Bethany said.

She heard M.K. grunt, and watched her sister drop to her knees beyond the bottom of the stall door. M.K. leaned over, peeking in at her. "Hey," she said, her brows lifting. She was clearly drunk. Her eyes were heavily lidded, her speech somewhat slurred, her face flushed. "Hey, honey-bunny. What's wrong? Why are you crying? Open the door and let me in."

"No," Bethany said, kicking at her, driving her back.

"Go away, M.K. You're drunk. Just leave me alone!"

Fresh new tears spilled, and she folded her arms over her knees, tucking her head down against this makeshift nook. Her shoulders trembled and she hiccupped for unhappy breath. M.K. grunted again, and Bethany heard the stall door rattle. She looked up in time to see her sister wriggling beneath the door, crawling in on her belly.

"I'm not drunk," she growled at Bethany once on the other side. She sat up, dusting off her top, swaying unsteadily from side to side. "I'm not drunk. I'm just a

little...wasted. It's not the same. You know, people puke on this floor."

"Go away," Bethany said.

"What happened?" M.K. asked. "Did somebody say something to you? Did someone mess with you?"

"Yeah," Bethany replied. "*You* did, M.K. You lied to me. You...you told me Nathan Darcy liked me. You told me he wanted to ask me out!"

M.K. blinked at her. "I told you that because that's what he said. Why? What did he tell you?"

Bethany uttered a miserable little sob. "He...he asked if I thought *you'd* go with him to the homecoming dance. He said that...that's the only reason he gave you my I.D. Not...not because he liked me, but because he...he likes *you*."

She covered her face with her hands.

"That asshole," M.K. said. She put her arm clumsily around Bethany and drew her near. Bethany could smell the pungent stink of alcohol on her. "Bethie, honey, I'm sorry. I'm really, really, really sorry. I didn't know. I thought he liked you. He's an asshole. I'll get Jeremy to kick his ass."

"No," Bethany said, shaking her head. She looked up at M.K. "Can we just go home now? Please, M.K.? I want to go home."

\* \* \*

It took them another twenty minutes to find Jeremy. To Bethany's dismay, he was even drunker than M.K.; so drunk in fact, that M.K. had to keep slapping at his hands,

laughing and sidestepping to keep him from groping her ass and boobs in front of everyone.

"I'll give you a ride, alright," he promised M.K. with a bawdy wink, as he stumbled clumsily in place, his words heavily slurred.

*Terrific*, Bethany thought. *So much for our way home.*

"We can call a cab," M.K. told her, hooking her arm around Bethany and nearly knocking her over sideways as she staggered drunkenly. "I do all the time. Jeremy's always getting wasted. He's such a fuck."

Bethany surveyed the contents of her little purse grimly. She'd only brought fifteen dollars with her. Five of it had gone toward her cover charge to get into the nightclub, and five had gone toward the tequila sunrise. Five bucks wasn't going to get them down the block, much less back to their father's apartment. "How much money do you have?" she asked M.K.

M.K. opened her purse, promptly spilling its contents all over the floor, sending lipstick, mints, spare change, crumpled receipts and her house keys scattering. "Goddamn it...!" M.K. muttered, dropping to her knees and trying to save what she could from being lost underfoot.

She found a couple of wadded up dollar bills, but nothing more by way of money. "Jeremy always buys me drinks," she said. "I never bring much. Hang on. You wait here. I'll go collect from everyone. That's what I've done before."

She then proceeded to wheel about, stumbling and floundering up to complete strangers, asking them for

money. Since she was approaching only young men, most of them took the time to wrap an arm around her and make her laugh, attempting to barter some exchange for the cab fare.

*I'm in hell*, Bethany thought, pushing and shouldering her way toward the entrance. *God, just let me get home. I swear I'll never do anything this stupid again.*

She had the bouncer stamp her hand so she could duck back inside and collect M.K. She walked down the sidewalk, shivering in the cool night air, a stark and startling contrast to the humid heat within Snake Eyes. She fished her cell phone out of her purse and flipped back the lid. *I can't call Daddy*, she thought. *God, he'll shit a brick. I can't call Mom, either, because she'll think it's all Daddy's fault, since we're with him this weekend.*

She thought of calling her best friend, Gloria's house. Gloria's mother would probably come and get them, but it was late, and she would wake Paul up to tell him where they'd been. *Then we'll just get in triple trouble—for sneaking out of the apartment, for drinking and for not calling him in the first place to come and get him.*

Bethany's thumb hovered uncertainly, hesitantly over the speed-dial button for Paul's cell phone. *No*, she thought at last, shaking her head. *M.K.'s right—if he really is out working on a case, he doesn't even know we're gone. All we have to do is just find a way to get home so he won't even notice—so he won't ever know. Someone we can get on our side. Someone who will help us.*

She skimmed through her quick-dial directory and hit the number for her uncle's house. She winced, her heart

pounding, her insides icy with anxiety as the phone rang once, twice, a third time. Finally, with the fourth ring, Jay answered, his voice hoarse and dazed.

"Yeah...hullo...?"

"Uncle Jay?" Bethany whimpered, and she didn't have to fake the sudden warble in her voice. Her eyes swam with tears, but thankfully, she had no mascara left to ruin.

"Uncle Jay, I...please, we need your help."

\* \* \*

He was there in a half an hour. Bethany and M.K. waited for him just beyond the crowded foyer, and Bethany nearly burst into tears again to see Jay shouldering his way through the crowd, looking for them.

"There he is!" she said, elbowing M.K. firmly in the ribs.

"That's your uncle?" exclaimed one of M.K.'s friends, Danielle, who was damn near as drunk as M.K. "Wow, he's pretty hot! Like Orlando Bloom...except old!"

"Hi, Jay," Bethany said, smiling sheepishly, not because he'd been near enough and Danielle had been loud enough for him to hear, but because seeing him—and the unhappy disappointment in his face, was enough to cement in her mind the gravity of the situation. She felt immediately ashamed of herself.

"Hey, Bethany," he said.

"Jay, hey!" M.K. exclaimed happily, draping her arms about his neck and awarding him a loud, schnapps-flavored smooch on the corner of his mouth. "Danielle says you look

like Orlando Bloom, did you hear? Jay just got back today from his honeymoon, everyone. He went to the Bahamas."

This elicited a chorus of slurred oo's and ah's from M.K.'s gaggle of friends.

"Jay's my most favorite uncle ever," M.K. declared, kissing him again. "You want a shot for the road?"

"No, thanks," Jay said, slipping a steadying arm around her waist.

"Can I have one, then?" she asked.

"No," he replied, steering her toward the door. "Say good-night, M.K."

"G'night, M.K.!" M.K. called cheerfully, leaning precariously back against his arm, and twisting at the waist to wave to her friends. "See you guys later! Don't let Jeremy puke in his car!"

M.K. stumbled and staggered along the sidewalk, leaning heavily against Jay, who held her closely, holding her upright. "God, I'm drunk," she said, giggling.

"Yeah, I can see that, kiddo," Jay said, making her snort loudly with laughter.

Bethany walked alongside of him, her shoulders hunched, her eyes downcast. "You're not going to tell Daddy, are you, Jay?"

"Ahhh, Bethany," he said, looking at her plaintively. "Don't do that to me, okay? Don't make me the bad guy. You know I've got to tell your dad."

"Oh, no, please," M.K. pleaded, staggering to a halt. Her knees buckled and she swayed, nearly pitching onto her face. Jay kept his arm around her and lifted her upright

again, supporting her slight weight nearly in full. "Please, Jay, don't tell," she said. "We're not making you the bad guy—honest. I don't always get this drunk. In fact, I never get this drunk." She shook her head in inebriated earnest. "He's gonna shit the bed if you tell. Please, Jay."

"He's not even home, anyway," Bethany said. "He had to go out tonight, something for work, he said. You know how he is when he's working a case—he'll be out until the morning, probably."

"That doesn't matter," Jay said. "And that doesn't make it right, what you two have done."

"Didn't you ever do something stupid when you were a kid?" Bethany asked him. She wasn't speaking of M.K. or her intoxication; she was alluding to her own foolish decision to tag along that night, and figured Jay would understand. "Something you were really sorry for, and wished you could take back? Something you promise to never do again?"

"Of course I did," Jay said. "But that doesn't make a difference." They had reached his car, a black Volvo station wagon, parked in the back of the cramped, crowded parking lot. The nearest streetlight was burned out, and the car was shadow-draped, bathed in darkness. Jay balanced M.K. on his right side and fished his key ring out of the hip pocket of his jeans with his left hand. He thumbed a button on the remote control, and the doors unlocked, the interior lights coming on with soft, amber glow.

He glanced at Bethany over his shoulder as he opened the back door and helped M.K. inside. He pressed his hand

over the cap of her head to prevent her from cracking her skull on the doorframe in her drunken clumsiness. "You know better, Bethany," he said, and again, the shame within her was overwhelming, tightening in her throat and chest, smothering the breath from her. "Both of you do. And your dad doesn't need this. It's been really hard for him since the divorce. Come on, you don't need me to tell you that."

He stepped away from the door and flicked his hand, pointing. "In, please," he said to Bethany.

"Can't we just spend the night at your house, then?" Bethany asked. "M.K.'s really messed up, Jay. What if he's not home when we get back to the apartment? We—"

"I'll think about it," Jay said, motioning to the door again.

"Please, Jay," Bethany said. "He won't be so mad if you explain it to him tomorrow morning. Then we could—"

"I said I'll think about it," Jay said.

Bethany sighed and stepped past him, ducking her head and sitting beside her sister in the backseat of the wagon. Jay bent over, leaning toward them, draping one arm over top of the opened door and keeping the other against the door frame. Bethany couldn't see anything beyond him, thanks to the golden glare from the interior dome light, still ablaze with the door ajar.

"M.K., honey, are you going to be sick?" Jay asked, because M.K. had slumped against the far window, closing her eyes, her pallor decidedly ashen.

"I might, yes," she murmured, nodding, her voice coming from fathoms away, her eyes still closed.



"Hang on," Jay said, straightening. "I've got a plastic bag in the glove compartment. I'll—"

As he spoke, Bethany thought she spied a hint of movement behind him, a shadow moving in the darkness past his shoulder. She heard a strange sound, a sort of crackling hiss, and Jay suddenly lurched in the doorway, arching his spine, his head snapping back on his neck in a violent convulsion. He uttered a sharp, choked cry and then fell forward, crashing brutally against the doorframe. She saw a spray of blood—it peppered against her face—and heard a moist crunch as he caught the brunt of the impact with his nose and mouth, and then he crumpled to the ground.

"Jay!" Bethany cried, her eyes flown wide. She scrambled forward, thinking he'd suffered a heart attack or something, and then she realized there was someone standing outside of the car, the shadowy figure of a man behind Jay, holding something out in his hand.

She heard the strange crackling again, and shied back as a quivering, crooked seam of blue light flashed in the darkness—a narrow stream of electrical current, alive and hissing; a stun gun.

"Jay...!" she whimpered, frightened, pressing herself against M.K., and then the figure leaned through the car door, stepping over Jay's twitching, groaning form. Bethany caught a glimpse of a black ski mask and nothing more—except for the stun gun as its twin prongs shoved abruptly against her belly.

\* \* \*

“Hey, stranger.”

Paul jumped in surprise when he heard Susan’s voice and halted in mid-step as he walked toward the front entrance of his apartment building. He turned and found her coming toward him, a quizzical expression on her face. She was dressed for her morning run.

It was almost quarter after six, with dawn upon the horizon, but he hadn’t thought about the possibility of bumping into her upon his return from Brenda’s house. Susan Vey had been the furthest thing from his mind, in fact, as he had been otherwise preoccupied by a maelstrom of emotions and worries. He’d been gone all night, a fact that wasn’t going to be lost upon his daughters, and he felt shitty and ashamed. He’d spent the night with Brenda, and they had made love over and over again in the upstairs bedroom—a feat of resilience and vigor that still astonished Paul. He hadn’t enjoyed lovemaking like that in forever, in twenty years at least. They had exhausted each other, dozing in between bouts, tucked in each other’s arms only to stir again after an hour or two of sleep for another round. It was as if they had felt somehow sheltered by the night, as if the reality of what they were doing hadn’t mattered without the light of the sun to lend it impact or meaning.

He’d awoke less than an hour ago to find himself alone in the bed. He’d smelled coffee, and after dressing, had followed the wondrous aroma downstairs to Brenda’s kitchen. He’d stood in the doorway, lingering uncertainly, watching her sit at a small breakfast table beneath a window, cradling a steaming mug between her hands.

"I need to think about this," she'd told him, without looking at him. She'd gazed out the window, distracted and distant. "I...I need to think about what happened last night, what it means. How I feel about it." She'd glanced in his direction, then away again. "I don't know how I feel about it. I don't know how I feel about anything right now. I...I just...I need to think about it."

He'd left, returning home, and the last person he'd been thinking about along the way was Susan. He blinked at her as she approached, and he could tell by the curious way she was looking at him that she had figured out that he wasn't just up and about very early.

"Hey," he said clumsily, because it would have been really rude to just duck and dash into the building without acknowledging her. "Hey, uh, Susan...hey. Funny running into you."

"Yeah," she replied, still visibly puzzled. "It's a small world."

*Still getting smaller every day*, he thought.

"So, you coming or going?" she asked, her eyes cutting downward, taking into account his rumpled shirt, his blue jeans.

"Oh, uh, coming," he said. "Coming back, I mean. I had...an emergency pop up last night. Something with work. I had to run into the office late."

"That case you mentioned to me? My scoop?"

"Yeah," he replied, feeling like a shit heel, even though it wasn't exactly lying. He *had* gone over to Brenda's under the original pretense of examining a case file related

to Melanie Geary's. He'd had every good intention of making the visit completely work-related. "How about you? Coming or going?"

She laughed. "Coming back, too, as a matter of fact. I got an early start this morning. I didn't get much sleep last night." She was putting on a good show, polite affectations for his benefit, but he could tell she didn't believe him. He felt as though she knew somehow where he'd been, what he had been doing, as if it was written in black magic-marker across his forehead. She smiled, but her eyes seemed sad and disappointed. "Well, I...I'll see you. I need to go check on David."

"Yeah," he said, nodding. "I should go peek in on the girls."

"See you," she said again, turning and walking away, wagging her fingers briefly in farewell.

"See you," he murmured, foregoing any more courtesy and opting for his original plan—ducking and dashing into the building.

He walked quietly into his apartment and paused outside the spare bedroom. The door was closed, and he opened it slowly, turning the knob carefully, soundlessly. He peeked into the shadow-draped room beyond the threshold and saw the silhouetted outlines of his daughters' forms, tucked beneath the blankets, sleeping side by side in the bed. Satisfied that he hadn't disturbed them, that his all-night absence had escaped their notice, he eased the door shut once more.

He went into his bedroom, stripping off his shirt and unbuttoning his jeans. He could still smell Brenda's fragrance in his clothes, the sweet hint of her perfume, the scent of her hair. He could smell her against his skin, still taste her in his mouth, filling his mind with pleasant recollection. It amazed him that in one night, he had come to feel like himself again, like all of the nightmares and worries and troublesome thoughts that had plagued his mind recently were all gone and long forgotten. He had come to feel in his mind and heart as he had felt in his body in the months since Jay had resurrected him—young again, whole once more, healed, the ghosts of past abuses behind him.

He shucked down to his boxers and started across the hall for the bathroom. The phone rang, startling him, and he hurried for the kitchen to answer it before the shrill ring woke M.K. and Bethany.

"Hello?" he asked, foregoing the cordless unit and snatching the corded handset off the wall cradle by the refrigerator.

"Hi, Paul, it's Jo."

"Well, hey," he said, blinking in surprise. "You're up early. Everything okay?"

"I don't know," Jo replied. "You tell me. Has Jay left there yet?"

Paul blinked again. "What?"

"Jay," she said again. "Has he left yet? We got a phone call last night from Bethany, and—"

"Bethany?" Paul said, frowning. "What are you talking about?"

Jo was quiet for a moment. "You...you don't know? Isn't Jay there? Didn't the girls tell you?"

"Tell me what?" Paul asked, walking out of the kitchen and across the hall to the spare room. The phone cord stretched tautly behind him as he opened the bedroom door. "The girls are right here. They're sleeping..."

His voice faltered. Outside, day was breaking, the shadows of dawn dissipating with muted sunlight. It was brighter in the room now than it had been only awhile earlier, when he'd first peered inside, and he realized how stupid he'd been. *Oh, Christ.*

"Hang on, Jo."

He set the phone on the floor and marched to the bed. He jerked aside the covers. *Jesus Christ*, he thought, staring in dismay at the two matching piles of pillows tucked beneath. *Jesus Christ on a pony, I fell for the oldest trick in the goddamn book.*

He went back to the phone, snatching it in hand. "Tell me what happened."

Jo told him, and with every word, with each new revelation, the knot that had twisted in his stomach at the sight of those pillows, that had begun seeping outward in the precious few moments since, reaching for his balls, tightened.

"What time did you say this was?" he asked.

"Jay left here around three," Jo said. "I've been trying to call him, but his phone is turned off. It keeps going straight to voice mail. Bethany called us from her cell, but every time I try, I don't get an answer there, either." Her

voice trembled slightly. "Paul, what's going on? I'm worried."

*Christ, I am, too.*

"I mean, this isn't like Jay at all, not to call and let me know what's going on," Jo continued. "I don't know where this place, Snake Eyes, is for sure, but I—"

"What?" Paul said, the knot in his gut and groin suddenly seizing his throat, choking the breath from him. He felt his face go ashen and he stumbled. *Oh, God.*

"Snake Eyes," she said again, and Paul sat down hard in the corridor. "That's the name of the nightclub Bethany said they were at. That's where Jay went to pick—"

"Jo, I'm going to go look for them," Paul said. "You stay put, okay? Call me if you hear from him—as soon as Jay calls you."

"I want to go with you." Jo had never been the sort to play the damsel-in-distress, and from the tone of her voice, she wasn't about to start now.

"No, Jo, you stay there with Emma," he said. He rose to his feet, forking his fingers through his hair. "Look, if I know Jay, he probably took the girls to one of those all-night waffle places to try and sober them up so I wouldn't wring their necks too badly. He's probably sitting there with them now, telling them all kinds of stories about how he and I used to try and pull shit like this, too, when we were kids—and how we never got away with it, either."

*God, I hope so, anyway,* he thought. *Please let that be true.*

But he knew in his heart, in that knotted pit that had become his stomach and balls, that it wasn't.

"I'll find them," he told Jo. "Trust me, if there's one thing any veteran cop knows in this city, it's where every all-night waffle joint is."

He hadn't hung up from her for a full minute before the phone rang again. He had only just turned to go back to his room, to dress again, and he snatched the corded handset off the wall again. "You heard from him?" he said instead of any greeting, assuming it was Jo calling back, and—he desperately hoped—bearing good news.

"Uh...Paul?" his partner said sounding startled and bewildered. "It's Jason. You...you okay?"

Paul sighed, shoving his fingers through his hair and gritting his teeth. "I'm fine," he said, his voice tense and clipped. "Look, Jason, right now is really not—"

"Paul, wait, before you hang up on me, there's something I really think you ought to know," Jason said in a single, harried breath. The urgency in his tone drew Paul's momentary, quiet attention. "I found something online. I was doing some research, trying to find something, any kind of link between the whole Keswick-Milton-and-the-mayor business and the Melanie Geary case..."

Paul ground his teeth together all the more. "Jason, I keep telling you," he said. "There is no Melanie Geary case. We—"

"Just *listen*," Jason snapped, his sharp tone startling Paul. "I didn't find anything there, not from that angle,



anyway, but I did find something else. Susan Vey had a restraining order out against Melanie Geary."

Paul's eyes flew wide and his breath stilled. "Susan Vey?"

"The new reported with Channel 11," Jason said. "The little brunette, the one who's been acting all friendly with you lately. I figured you—"

"I know who she is," Paul said. "What...why in the hell did she have an order out against Melanie Geary?"

"Some incident about a month ago, over at the Liberty Heights development. Susan was out there covering the protests and claims Melanie Geary attacked her, swinging and punching, spitting and cussing her on the air."

*It was cancelled, Susan had told him of her recent live shot at that very same location. Something came up. It's just as well. Last time I did a live shot there, one of the protestors decided to spit in my face on camera. They were up there picketing, trying to stop them from tearing down the sanitarium.*

"Jesus," Paul whispered.

"Yeah, well, get this," Jason said. "There's more to the story than that. Seems Melanie Geary and Susan Vey have a history together that goes back about two years, to Chesterfield College."

"That's where Melanie's father worked..." Paul said.

"Daniel Geary, Head of the English department, yeah," Jason said. "Turns out, that's where Susan Vey went to school, too. With a double major in broadcast journalism and English."

Paul blinked in surprise.

"She was sleeping with him, Paul," Jason said. "Looks like Susan Vey has a thing for older guys. She and Geary carried on a big, hot and heavy affair that damn near cost him his job when the school caught wind of it. It made all the papers up there in Chesterfield. It was quite the scandal *de jour* for awhile. Geary's wife left him over it, even though he ended the fling with Susan and tried to patch things up with her. Apparently, there was no love lost between Susan and his daughter, either."

"Holy shit," Paul said.

"Yeah, and it gets even better," Jason said. "Turns out, Melanie Geary filed a *counter* restraining order against Susan Vey. Melanie claimed that Susan had been harassing her after her father had dumped Susan, that Susan blamed her for the break-up. Melanie said Susan had followed her here from Chesterfield to continue the harassment."

"Holy shit," Paul said again, too startled to say anything else.

"Yeah," Jason agreed. "Sounds like Susan has some anger management issues. Not to mention an Elektra complex."

"Elektra?" Paul asked.

"You know, the Freudian theory," Jason said. "The one that talks about how girls are secretly in love with their fathers, or how they'll look for mates who remind them of their fathers, or something like that. It's from Greek mythology. Elektra killed people for revenge over the death of her father."

Paul shook his head. "Look, Jason," he said. "This is all well and good, and I really appreciate you digging it up. Maybe we can do something with it later. I don't know. Right now, what I *do* know is that Susan Vey didn't kill Melanie Geary. And I also know I don't have time to discuss this with you. I gotta go."

"But, wait," Jason said. "There's—"

"I gotta go," Paul said again, hanging up on the younger man. He hurried down the hall back to his bedroom and grabbed his clothes from the floor. As he was drawing his jeans up over his hip, he heard his cell phone start to ring inside the front hip pocket. *Goddamn it, Jason, just because I said I needed to go doesn't mean you can bug me on my cell phone*, he thought, as he pulled it out and flipped it open. "I appreciate your help, kid, but I—" he began.

"Daddy?" M.K. whimpered through the phone, her voice choked and tremulous with tears.

"M.K.?" Paul gasped, his heart, breath and mind all shuddering to a sudden, icy halt. "M.K., sweetheart, where—?"

"Daddy, help us!" M.K. cried hoarsely, bursting into tears. There was static on the line, poor reception, and her words kept fading in and out, breaking up. "Oh, God, he...please, Daddy, Uncle Jay is hurt! He's hurt real bad! You...you have to help us! Oh, God, please...!"

Her voice was shrill and cracked with terror, and it cleaved Paul's heart, staggering him. "Where are you?" he asked. "M.K., honey, listen to me. You're breaking up. Calm down and tell me where you are."

"I don't know!" she screamed. "I don't know! I can't get out! Uncle Jay said to run away, to find someplace where the phone would work, but there's nothing but rooms! Rooms and walls and busted windows! Daddy, please, I'm scared! I can't—"

A huge burst of static hissed in Paul's ear, and he grimaced, jerking the phone back momentarily. "M.K.?" he said, drawing it hesitantly to his head again. There was nothing but silence, a smooth, dead line, and he felt his heart twist in sudden horror. "M.K.? Oh, God—Mary Kate! Mary Kate—answer me!"

He checked the display screen on his phone. She was calling from Jay's cell. He frantically tried to redial, but kept hitting a recording that told him the cellular customer he was trying to reach was out of the service area.

"Goddamn it!" Paul cried after the fifth such attempt. He hurled the phone across the room and shoved his hands against his temples, forking his fingers through his hair. "Goddamn it!" he yelled again, and then his voice broke, an anguished choking sound escaping him. He sat down heavily against the foot of his bed and pressed his palms over his eyes.

*Think, goddamn it, think!* he told himself. *You know where they are.*

"No," he whispered, gritting his teeth, his voice seeping through in a hiss.

*Yes, you do. You've seen it before, more times than you can count*

"I didn't do this," he breathed.

*It's where you brought Melanie Geary.*

"No..."

*where you brought Aimee Chesshire*

"No, I didn't...I didn't..." Paul whispered.

*You see it every time you close your goddamn eyes*

"I didn't do this!" he cried, throwing his head back and shouting at the ceiling. "I didn't do this, I didn't—goddamn it, I would never hurt my children!"

And then he realized. He froze, his entire body stiffening, his breath bated, his eyes widening. He lowered his hands slowly from his face. "It wasn't me," he whispered. "It...it wasn't me."

*I was at Brenda's last night. I was with Brenda all night long.*

Jo had told him that Bethany had called Jay around three o'clock in the morning. Snake Eyes was in the heart of downtown; it would have taken Jay a half-hour to forty-five minutes, depending on traffic to reach them. Which meant whatever had happened to them had occurred sometime roughly after three-thirty in the morning.

*And I was with Brenda.*

Paul got up and went to the far corner of the room, where he'd thrown his phone. He picked it up and dialed Brenda's number. "Brenda, about last night—" he began.

"Paul, I'm really not ready to talk about this right now," she said. "I just...I told you, I need some time to think about things and try to sort them out in my head. I can't—"

"Was I there all last night?" he asked, cutting her off, startling her into silence.

"What?" she asked after a moment.

"The whole night through—was I there, Brenda? Was I with you?"

Again, momentary silence. And then, "Is this some kind of joke, Paul? What, are you trying to pretend it didn't happen now?"

"No," Paul said, shaking his head. "No, you don't understand. Last night was phenomenal. It...it was the most amazing night I've had in ages—Christ, my whole life through, in fact. It's just...I've been seeing these things inside my head, having nightmares about shit—Melanie Geary and Aimee Chesshire, and I..." He was trembling, and laughed suddenly, dazedly, humorlessly. "I thought I had killed them."

"What?" Brenda asked. "Paul, I don't—"

"But I couldn't have," he said. "I couldn't have, not even with the sleepwalking, because I was with you last night. I was with you."

"Paul, what are you talking about?" She sounded more than confused now; Brenda sounded frightened. He was scaring her.

*That makes two of us, sweetheart.*

He stormed out of the bedroom, hurrying toward his computer desk. "Never mind," he said. "I'll tell you later. I'll explain everything, I swear to God. I just...right now I have to go."

"Paul, I don't—"

"I love you," he said, and hung up on her. He genuflected in front of his desk, dialing Jay's house with one

hand and unlocking his bottom file drawer with the other. "Jo, hey, do me a favor," he said when his sister-in-law answered. "Is Emma up? Can you put her on the phone for a second?"

"Paul, I haven't told her what's going on," Jo said in a hushed, guarded tone. "I just said that Jay had to run out this morning."

"Mum's the word," he promised as he pulled his shoulder holster and nine-millimeter out of the drawer. He balanced the phone between his ear and shoulder as he rose to his feet and began to shrug his way into the leather straps. "Hey, kiddo!" he said, forcing a bright voice when Emma came on the line.

"Hi, Uncle Paul," Emma said brightly. "How are you?"

"I'm good, I'm good," Paul said, still with a broad, phony grin on his face, as if she could look through the telephone and see him. "Listen, kiddo, I have a question for you. Yesterday, you told me you had a message for me from Grandma. What was it again? Something about Scooby Doo?"

"She said you needed to follow him," Emma said helpfully. "She showed me a picture in my mind of you following Scooby Doo. She said he'd help you find what you were looking for. Scooby and Claire Boyett."

Paul finished strapping his sidearm over his chest and ran his fingers through his thin hair. "That's the thing, Emma," he said. "Remember when I said I didn't know what I was supposed to be looking for? Well, I do now. I

know. But I still don't know who Scooby Doo is supposed to be—or Claire Boyett." He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. *I can't believe I'm doing this. I can't believe I'm about to do this—again.* "Do you remember when I was looking for that bad man, the Watcher? You were in the hospital."

"Yes, I remember," Emma said.

"Grandma had a message for me then, too, do you remember? She tried to tell me who the bad man was, so I could find him."

"Uh-huh," Emma said.

"Can you ask her to help me again?" Paul asked, feeling monumentally foolish. He was asking his six-year-old niece to talk to his dead mother to help him find his missing brother and daughters. "I...I really need her to, if she can, kiddo, because what she's given me so far...I'm drawing a blank."

"Okay," Emma said, and then she was quiet for a long moment. Paul listened to a soft, rhythmic sound—chewing. He'd caught Emma in mid-breakfast and she was eating a bowl of cereal while she tried to commune with the dead.

After a few minutes, she uttered a frustrated little sigh. "She won't talk to me, Uncle Paul," she said. "I can see her in my head, but when she talks, all I hear is the wind."

"The wind?" He blinked, puzzled.

"There's a storm," Emma said. "She's seen it coming. She told me it was right next door. She told me Daddy was going to be hurt." Her voice grew small, tremulous. "Is my daddy okay, Uncle Paul?"



*Please, Daddy, Uncle Jay is hurt!* M.K. had pleaded. *He's hurt real bad!*

"He's fine, lamb," Paul said gently. "I promise he'll be just fine."

He hung up the phone and sat at his desk, wracking his brain. He wanted to be in motion, doing something, hunting for his daughters and Jay, but he didn't have the faintest idea where to begin. *Scooby Doo and Claire Boyett. Emma said I was supposed to follow them.*

"Terrific," he muttered, slapping his hand against his desk, sending papers scattering. "A goddamn cartoon dog and a woman I've never met before. Piece of goddamn cake."

He blinked down at one of the sheets that fluttered to rest beside his foot. It was a page from the sheaf of information Jason had printed off for him on the three abandoned houses downtown near where Melaine Geary's body had been dumped. He recognized it from the black-and-white photo; it was the last one he and Brenda had searched that day, the house in which they'd stumbled across the Greater Metropolitan Ghosthunting Society.

"Ghosthunters," Paul muttered, shaking his head. "Christ Almighty." *Maybe I need to call them,* he thought. *Maybe they know where I can find*

His thought cut abruptly short, and he gasped, startled. "Scooby Doo," he whispered, remembering what had darted through his mind on the lawn outside of the empty house, as he'd marched in angry circles around the gaggle of kids and their audio-visual equipment: *I waste an*

*entire afternoon creeping around a bunch of broken-down houses—illegally at that—to try and find a killer, and instead, I wind up with the goddamn Scooby Doo gang.*

“Holy shit,” Paul breathed, and spun in the chair toward his computer. He opened up his web browser and Google-searched for the Greater Metropolitan Ghosthunting Society. He clicked on the link for their home page off of the search results and scrolled down, looking for contact information.

*What was that kid’s name again? he wondered. Taylor, wasn’t it? Cameron Taylor.*

He froze, his breath drawing still yet again when a series of images on the webpage caught his attention. *The old Liberty Sanitarium*, the cutline declared. *Home to more than 300 documented spectral phenomena.*

There were five images in all, two of the building’s crumbling exterior, as shot on a gloomy, autumn afternoon. The remaining three were of various portions of the ruined interior. The walls were covered in spray-painted graffiti, the floors littered with broken plaster and debris.

*Horsehair plaster, I bet, and asbestos, too...probably a little lead paint tossed in for variety.*

“Holy shit,” Paul whispered. “They’ve been there. They’ve been inside goddamn Liberty Sanitarium.”

He found a telephone number listed at the bottom of the webpage, and dialed it frantically. Now everything was making sense. M.K. had cried that she couldn’t find her way out of wherever she was. *There’s nothing but rooms! Rooms and walls and busted windows!*

Hundreds of people had been housed at Liberty Sanitarium during its heyday. The building was enormous, which was part of the reason Milton Enterprises kept saying that it had to be razed, that no new construction could be built to incorporate or surround it. It was simply too enormous, and had stood empty too long.

"Hello?" The girl answering the phone sounded no older than nine or ten to his ear.

"Uh, yeah. Is this the number for the Greater Metropolitan Ghosthunting Society?" he said.

"Hang on," said the girl, and then there was a clunk as she set the phone down. "Cam!" she hollered. "Cameron! Hey, Fox Mulder, it's for you on the freak line!"

"Get bent, Adrian, you PAP smear," he heard a young man's voice say, and then, more loudly into the phone, "Greater Metropolitan Ghosthunting Society at your service. The truth is out there. How can I help you?"

*Oh, Christ, I've got to be out of my mind,* Paul thought, and he stifled an inward groan. "Cameron Taylor? Hi, it's Lieutenant Paul Frances from Metro P.D. We met the other day...yeah. Look, I got a favor to ask of you. I need your help."

## CHAPTER NINE

Bethany jerked and tugged against her bonds, feeling the ropes slip somewhat after what had to be hours of desperate, frantic effort. She had foggy, dim memories of being hefted out of the backseat of Jay's car and into the back of a truck, a big truck, like her father's. Whoever had shot her with the stun gun had then pressed a rag over her face. It had been soaked in something that smelled pungent and strong; she'd succumbed to the fumes in only moments.

She remembered lying on something like a metal stretcher, and being rolled down a long, pitch-black corridor. Whoever moved her had been carrying a lantern in their hand; the yellow glow fluttering and bouncing against the scooped out hollow of the ceiling and walls had been her only orienting hint of light. Everything had smelled mildewed, damp, musty and old, but she hadn't considered this too long before she'd fainted again.

She'd come to again to find herself tied in a chair, her wrists lashed together behind her back with rope. There was a gag in her mouth, a hard, bitter-tasting rubber ball crammed so deeply back between her lips, her teeth cut deeply into the meat of it. The ball was secured in place with straps that wrapped around her head, cinched tightly, slicing into her cheeks. She was in a large room, someplace dirty and falling apart. The ceiling was cracked and caving in; the walls crumbling, the floor covered in plaster, dirt,

dust and debris. Two lanterns illuminated the room; one by a doorway leading outward into utter darkness, and the other beside the wall opposite it, which cast a wide swath of yellow light across the floor.

M.K. sat beside her, trussed similarly. Uncle Jay sat several yards away in a different chair, one that looked like an old-time electric chair from a gangster movie or something. It had manacles built into the armrests; metal cuffs that had been locked in place over each of Jay's wrists, holding him fast, leaving his hands suspended in the open air. Someone had taken off his shirt, leaving him bare-chested in the chilly, damp room. His feet were bound together, lashed at the ankles with some kind of wire that was connected to a noose around his throat. Every time he'd move his legs, the noose would tighten, strangling him.

He might have been okay in spite of this, except the man kept deliberately hurting Jay, making him struggle, making him slowly throttle himself. At first, he'd only used the stun gun, shocking Jay with it repeatedly, over and over, making him convulse against the chair, his voice strangled and choked around the gag.

"Stop it!" Bethany had cried around the rubber ball in her mouth. "Please stop it! Leave him alone!"

Then she had watched in helpless horror as sometime later, the man—still dressed in black and wearing a ski mask—had wheeled in a little cart, the kind you see at a dentist's office. It had all kinds of instruments and implements on it, and they had clattered and rattled as the cart had bounced over the uneven surface of the floor.

Bethany hadn't understood what the man meant to do until he started shoving long stick pins into Jay's body. The man had been blocking her view at first, standing between her and Jay, and she hadn't been able to tell what he was taking from the small box on his tray. And Jay hadn't cried out at first, as if he'd been struggling not to so he wouldn't frighten Bethany or M.K. Bethany had listened to the hoarse, labored sound of his breathing as it quickened, deepened into pained gasps, and had realized whatever the man was doing, he was hurting Jay.

"Stop!" she had tried to scream around the gag, but it had been no use. She'd looked frantically toward M.K., but her sister had been as mute and helpless as she was. "Please make him stop!"

She didn't know how long it had lasted, but it had seemed an agonizing eternity. Finally, Jay had cried out around the gag, but his voice had kept cutting brutally short as he would jerk his legs and snap the wire around his neck tight. Bethany had screamed. M.K. had screamed. They had both sobbed and begged the man to leave Jay alone. When the man had stepped away from Jay, Bethany hadn't been able to see the pins, but she could see the places where he'd stabbed them—dozens of bloody places all over Jay's torso and arms, his shoulders and neck.

"Uncle Jay," she tried to say as she struggled to work her hands free of the bonds. The man was gone now. Jay looked unconscious, slumped in the seat. She couldn't move her lips enough around the ball to articulate, and all that came out was a garbled groan.

The last time the man in the ski mask had come, he'd brought a pack of cigarettes with him. He'd stood in front of Jay again, so Bethany hadn't been able to see anything, but she'd heard the *snict!* of a lighter as he lit up one of the smokes. She'd smelled the sweet, pungent stink of searing flesh and then Jay had screamed piteously, jerking against his bonds. She'd watched his hands writhe and wrench against the manacle cuffs, and she and M.K. had screamed his name together in horror.

"Stop it!" Bethany had shrieked, because after the cigarette, the man had lifted a scalpel off of the dentist's tray. It had glinted in the lantern light as he'd drawn it out of her view, moving it between his body and Jay's, and when Jay had cried out again, Bethany had sobbed for him. "God, stop it! Leave him alone!"

Now, in the dim light, with the man in the ski mask gone, she gave one last furious yank against the ropes and felt them slip loose. Her heart tangled, her breath caught, and for a moment, she was so stunned with bright, icy hope, she couldn't move. Then she recovered her wits and shook her arms mightily, jerking them loose one at a time. She reached for her gag, pawing at it until she found the belt buckles holding it in place. She wrenched it off of her and threw it aside, gasping for breath and trying to spit the nasty flavor of the hard rubber out of her mouth.

M.K. mewled at her. She'd been mewling all along as Bethany had fought her bonds, in frantic encouragement—or in shrill, frantic warning if she'd heard or seen the man in the ski mask coming. M.K. sat at a vantage where she could

see beyond the darkened doorway, and if the man came, bearing a third lantern with him, M.K. could see its light coming ahead of him.

Bethany scrambled over to M.K.'s side and fell to her knees as she struggled to unfasten the gag around her sister's mouth. Her eyes darted, panicked and anxious, around the room. She had no idea where they were. There was another door behind them, a black, shadowed threshold, but nothing else—no windows, no light fixtures, nothing.

"Gunngh!" M.K. gasped, spitting as Bethany pulled the rubber ball out of her mouth. The straps had sheared open the corners of M.K.'s mouth, and blood was crusted on her chin. When Bethany reached behind her to try and untie her, M.K. shook her head. "Jay..." she said hoarsely, drawing Bethany's gaze. M.K.'s eyes were wide and terrified. "Go...go help Jay," she whispered. "Hurry, Bethie. He...he's hurt. You gotta get him out of that thing..."

Bethany nodded and darted across the room. "Jay!" she whimpered, her hands fluttering helplessly about him. The wire noose had drawn so tightly about his throat, it had cut into his skin, drawing blood and exposing a thin, bright red strap of meat. He'd torn his wrists raw and bloody against the manacle cuffs. She could see the pins now, the sort with the squared handles, like they used in her freshman biology lab for dissections. She moaned softly, horrified; the man had pierced the needles all over Jay's form, anywhere and everywhere, at least a hundred of them in all. And the cigarette burns...and the cuts from the



scalpel... Bethany moaned again, seeing them, wicked, glittering, messy wounds on Jay's arms, his belly, the side of his neck.

"Oh, God," she whispered, cradling his face between her hands. Jay's face was flushed deeply, nearly purple with the need for air, his lips cracked around the rubber ball, crusted with dried saliva and blood. He jerked slightly at her touch, his voice escaping him in a frightened mewl, and his eyes fluttered open in alarm. Bethany began to cry. "I'm sorry!" she pleaded. "Oh, God, I'm sorry, Uncle Jay...!"

She struggled to unbuckle the straps of his gag. Jay's eyelids drooped closed, his tenuous consciousness waning as she pulled the ball out of his mouth. He couldn't breathe; God alone only knew how many hours he'd been struggling to draw breath through his shattered, swollen nose, and around the rubber ball, the crushing force of the garrote. Bethany tried to hold his head up, to ease him back in the chair to relieve the stranglehold of the noose. She stared at it in desperate horror; it had cut so deeply into him, she didn't dare try to slip her fingers underneath it and loosen it, and it was wound so deftly against the nape of his neck, she realized she'd need wire cutters to get it undone.

"I...I can't get this thing off his neck," she said to M.K., turning to her. "It's too tight, M.K.! I...I need something to cut it with...!"

Her eyes flooded with tears. The man had taken his knives and dentist tray with him. There was nothing she could use. Jay was trapped there.

"Beth..." he whispered, his voice a hoarse croak. She looked down, her tears spilling against his face, and he blinked up at her. His eyes were glassy with shock.

"I'm here, Uncle Jay," she said. "I can't get the wire off your neck! I...I'm sorry! I don't..." Her voice dissolved with tears.

"Shhh..." he said, shaking his head slightly.  
"Please...don't cry, lamb..."

She fell against him, sobbing against his shoulder.  
"Beth," he breathed against her cheek.  
"Beth...sweetheart...look. Look at me."

She blinked, trembling and hiccupping. "My phone," he whispered, his own breath hitching, straining around the noose. "The...the front pocket...my phone..."

"Oh, God," Bethany gasped, looking down at his lap. She patted her hand against his jeans and felt the outline of his cell phone tucked away, hidden in his pocket. "Oh, God, your phone!"

"Get it," Jay told her, but when she tried, she couldn't reach down his pocket. He shifted his weight, lifting his hips, but when he moved his legs, pushing with his feet against the floor, the line of the noose drew even tighter. Bethany uttered an anguished sob as he gasped weakly, desperately for air. She shoved her hand down his hip pocket, weeping as she jerked the phone loose.

"I'm sorry!" she wailed. "Jay, I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

He'd crumpled in the seat, fresh blood drawn as the wire had cut even more deeply into his throat. Jay wheezed

loudly, moistly, desperately for air. "Paul...!" he whimpered breathlessly, rolling his eyes to look at her. "Call Paul...!"

Bethany opened the cell phone, her hands shaking uncontrollably. "It's not working!" she cried when the screen remained black, when nothing happened as she frantically punched the buttons.

"Turn...it on," Jay whispered.

"Bethany—hurry!" M.K. cried.

Bethany turned the phone on. She quickly dialed her father's cell phone number, pulling the phone to her ear, but then blinked at Jay in new dismayed horror. "It says there's no service available," she mewled. "It...oh, Jay, it says we're out of service range!"

She began to cry again, but Jay shook his head.

"Beneath," he whispered. She had to lean close to listen to him now; his struggle for breath had stripped him of almost any voice. "*Beneath*," he whispered again, fervently against her ear. "We...we're *beneath* something...a building. You have...to take the phone. Untie M.K. and the two of you go...go up...find a signal."

"I'm not leaving you," Bethany wailed, shaking her head.

"You *have* to," Jay told her, pinning her with his eyes. Bethany had always hated it when adults talked to her and M.K. like they were stupid or babies, too young to face the truth, no matter how harsh. When Jay said this to her, when he stared at her, his own frantic, stark terror apparent in his face, she knew he was telling her the truth. "You have to," he gasped again. "Beth...please...!"

He was dying. She knew it. They had all been brought down there to die. The man in the ski mask was just killing Jay more quickly. The longer she stood there sniveling like a child, the closer they all came to death. This realization shocked Bethany into action like a dousing of cold water, snapping her out of her hysteria, jolting her mind into a primal, primed, eerily calm state—her most basic of survival instincts kicked in and took over. She met Jay's gaze, nodded, then turned and ran back toward her sister. She fell to her knees, setting the phone aside and jerking at M.K.'s bonds. "What are you doing?" M.K. asked.

"There's no signal down here," Bethany said, glancing up at her. "Jay's phone won't work. He says we're beneath a building somewhere. He said we have to take it up, get it up high enough to get a signal so we can call Daddy for help."

"Then what are you waiting for?" M.K. cried. "Get out of here, Bethany! Hurry! That man...he...he could be coming!"

"I know," Bethany replied, yanking against the ropes. "That's why I'm not leaving." She looked up at her sister. "He'll kill Jay. I can't get him loose. That wire around his neck is strangling him."

She yelped as the ropes came loose and M.K. tugged her hands free. The two sisters fell together, clutching at each other, both choking on tears. "This is my fault!" M.K. gasped against Bethany's ear. "All my fault, Bethie, and I'm so goddamn sorry! I—"

"It doesn't matter," Bethany said, pressing Jay's phone against her hands. "You go and call Daddy. I'm going to try to get Jay free somehow."

"But I...!" M.K. began.

"M.K., take a lantern and go," Bethany said, grabbing her roughly by the arm. "Go and get Daddy—*please*. We can't leave Jay here. We can't!"

M.K. blinked at her, stricken, and then nodded. She glanced toward Jay, and her face twisted with dismay. "I'll bring back help," she whispered, and then she darted for the door, snatching one of the lanterns in hand and disappearing out into the corridor.

\* \* \*

"I need to get inside Liberty Sanitarium," Paul told Cameron Taylor as they rode along the highway in Paul's truck. He'd picked the kid up at his house fifteen minutes earlier. To his aggravation, Cameron had rallied the troops, or at least, in this case, Patchouli Girl, she of the hot pink hair and distinctive, spicy odor. He'd been deliberately vague on the phone with Cameron, in the hopes of avoiding just such a spectacle. He'd instructed the boy to bring no cameras, tape recorders, equipment or friends with him, and that Paul would explain more along the way. Apparently, he'd needed to specify *pink-haired hippie-chicks*, too.

"Awesome!" Cameron exclaimed, pivoting in the front passenger seat to grin broadly at Patchouli Girl. A glance in the rearview mirror showed Paul she was beaming to split her face wide open, too.

"Can you get me there?" Paul asked with a stern narrowing of his brows and a sideways glare that deadened the two teens' enthusiasm. "You've been inside before. You've got pictures on your website. Can you show me around?"

"Sure," Cameron replied. "It's the *getting* inside that's the trouble." When Paul looked at him, puzzled, he said, "I told you—Milton Enterprises has that place locked up like Fort Knox. They have for more than a year now. Security gates, razor-wire fences, the whole nine yards. They say they want to keep people from getting up there and snooping around, getting hurt, with the construction underway."

"Then how'd you get in before?" Paul asked.

"It wasn't locked up before," Patchouli Girl said. "You used to just be able to go up there, right into the building, even, if you wanted. It was fantastic. The energy in there is just killer."

"Energy?" Paul raised his brow, glancing at Cameron. *What kind of shit has she been smoking?*

"Nikki is a psychic," Cameron supplied helpfully. "You told me I couldn't bring any equipment with me, wherever we were going. I figured it was going to be someplace hot, so I invited Nikki. I need to have some way of documenting any kind of phenomena we might—"

"I told you on the phone, this isn't any of your Scooby Doo shit," Paul told him, frowning. "This is police business."

"Then why not get a warrant?" Nikki asked from the backseat, her brows raised in cool challenge. "If it's police business, why do you need us to get inside?"

Paul shot her a glower and Cameron fidgeted uneasily. "Nikki, cool it," he said. "Don't blow this, alright. When the hell else are we ever going to get this kind of chance again? They're going to tear it down, for Christ's sake."

"It doesn't matter," Nikki replied, folding her arms across her bosom. "The spirit energy will still be there. Tear it down, build stuff over it, it's still going to remain."

They rode along in silence for a long moment. Paul took the exit nearest the Liberty Heights development, and began following a narrow, winding network of side roads twining up along a sloping ridgetop, approaching the base of the hill upon which the sanitarium had been constructed.

"So you're a psychic," Paul said, glancing at Nikki in his mirror again. "Tell me how to get in this place. Ask your ghost friend or spirit guide or whatever the hell it is you use."

"That's a *medium*," Nikki said, sounding somewhat insulted. "I'm not a medium. I'm a *psychometric*. I can touch things and read psychic impressions from them."

"Psychic impressions," Paul repeated. *Terrific*.

"Yes," she said. "I'm also a hypnotherapist, numerologist and crystal healer."

"Terrific," Paul muttered aloud. *What the fuck have I signed up for here?*

"There are all different kinds of psychics," Cameron said. "There are psychometrics, like Nikki, and channelers, or mediums, like you were talking about—the ones who can communicate with spirits. Then you have readers—like

palmreading, runestones and tarot cards, sort of like your old soothsayers of Greek mythology. They use *diviners*, external objects to predict future events."

"Then you have the ones with the *clair* senses," said Nikki. "The empaths, clairsentients, clairvoyants..."

Paul hadn't been paying much attention to them, having convinced himself they were both fucking nuts, and he was fucking nuts to have brought them along. He'd tuned them out, leaning forward, watching through the window as the ruined remains of Liberty Sanitarium appeared in his view, looming against the hilltop like the remnants of a long-dead monster, the exposed crest of an enormous, hulking skull left to wither, crumble and rot in the sun. All of a sudden, he slammed on the brakes, his eyes flying wide as he gripped the steering wheel tightly enough to blanch his knuckles. Cameron pitched forward, snapping back against the seat as his seatbelt drew taut. Nikki yelped in the back, rocking forward against the restraining strap of her own belt. "Ow! Goddamn it!" she cried. "A little warning, why don't you!"

"What did you say?" Paul asked, turning to look at her.

"I said give a little warning next time!" she exclaimed, rubbing her sternum and scowling.

"No, before that. Before I hit the brakes. You said a name. Claire Somebody."

*She showed me a picture in my mind of you following Scooby Doo, Emma had told him, She said he'd help you find what you were looking for. Scooby and Claire Boyett.*



Paul had found Scooby Doo, but he'd still had no earthly idea who this Claire Boyett was. He'd wracked his brain, struggling to recount each and every woman he'd ever met in his lifetime, even if only in casual acquaintance, but still the name—*Claire Boyett*—meant nothing to him.

"Claire Boyett," Paul said to Nikki. "Do you know someone by that name?"

"I...I didn't say Claire Boyett," Nikki said, the indignant aggravation in her face yielding to hesitant bewilderment. "I said *clairvoyant*. I was talking about different kinds of psychics." Her brows pinched slightly again. "You weren't even listening to me, were you?"

He ignored the eerie resemblance to his ex-wife's favorite comment. *Is that what Emma meant? Clairvoyant? She wants me to use a goddamn psychic to find Jay and the girls?*

"A clairvoyant is someone who sees things in their mind," Cameron said. "Extrasensory perception. Usually, they get impressions—visions—about things as they're happening, rather than about future or past events. If they can *feel* it as well as see it, then they're called empaths, too. Clairempaths."

Paul blinked, startled. "What...what about dreams?" he asked quietly. When Cameron looked puzzled, he said, "Dreams. Do these clair-what's-it people see things in their dreams?"

"*Clairvoyants*," said Nikki. "Sure. Most of them are more perceptive during sleep, in fact, or similar relaxed states, like meditation or hypnosis." She blinked at him, her expression softening, her mouth unfolding in a smile.

"You're sensitive," she said. "You've dreamed about this place, haven't you? That's why you're taking us here. You can feel the energy here, too."

"No," Paul replied and he frowned, rubbing at a sudden tickle in his nose. "I don't believe in that bullshit."

He moved his hand and found blood spotted against his fingertips. He blinked in surprise, and then blood slid in a thick stream from his nostril, spattering against the console between the front seats. He yelped, clapping his hand over his nose, and blinked in new surprise as Nikki offered him a tissue from her purse.

"My nose used to bleed here, too," she said. "I have to bring this with me now..." She held up a little rabbit's foot keychain charm, the fur dyed hot pink to match her hair. "It belongs to my friend, Charlie. It gives me something to focus on—him—so I don't get overloaded here."

\* \* \*

They reached the main security gate and parked the truck. Beyond the chain link perimeter, the access road wound steadily onward and upward toward the ruins of the sanitarium. Paul could see that side roads for the proposed subdivision were already well under construction, with asphalt laid and cul-de-sacs already clearly designated.

The gate was unmanned. A keypad entry was mounted on a metal post beside the gate, so those with access could go further beyond. *And those without have to stand here with their thumbs up their asses*, Paul thought in desperate dismay, hooking his fingers through the links in the gate and giving it a frustrated shake. *Goddamn it!*

“What did you see in your dreams? Nikki asked, standing behind him. His nose had stopped bleeding, but she hadn’t quit her persistent niggling at him. He did his best to ignore her, but at any moment now, he knew he was liable to handcuff the little pink-haired, rabbit-foot-toting wretch and toss her in the back of his truck. *If only to shut her the hell up.*

“It doesn’t matter,” he said, without looking over his shoulder at her. “If we can’t get inside, it doesn’t make a goddamn bit of difference.” He glanced at Cameron, his brows lifting in implore. “Any ideas, kid? You’re the experienced trespasser here.”

“We could climb it,” Cameron suggested, but when he looked up toward the tight coils of razor wire crowning the fenceline, he didn’t look wholly confident. “Throw our shirts over the top to keep from cutting ourselves. That’s how they do it in the movies, anyway.”

Paul looked dubious. He had visions in his mind of reaching the top, swinging his leg over and losing his balance, misstepping somehow. If that happened, it would be his crotch landing against the razor wire, and shirt or no shirt between his balls and the blades, he knew he’d be in for one very impromptu—not to mention painful—vasectomy.

*What fucking choice do I have?* he asked himself. *My girls are in there! Jay’s in there! I’ve got to get inside—there’s no other way!*

“Paul, if you’ve been here in your dreams, it’s because you’re sensing someone who’s been here,” Nikki said. “If you’re dreaming about being inside the building, it’s

because they've been there. And if they have, they must know the combination to this gate. Which means you do, too."

He turned to her. "What?" he asked, shaking his head. "Don't you think if I knew the goddamn combination to this thing, I'd use it?" He walked toward her, angry now—not at her, but at his circumstances in general. He was angry and frustrated and desperately, dangerously terrified. "Do you want to know what I've dreamed about? I dreamed about two girls tied up inside that building..." He shoved an emphatic forefinger toward the sanitarium. "Tortured and mutilated and finally murdered. I've dreamed that *I did it*. And now my daughters are in there..." His voice broke as tears welled in his eyes. His brows furrowed and he shoved his hand against his brow, uttering a hoarse little cry. "Goddamn it, my *kids* are in there, and so is my brother, alone with the sick fucking son of a bitch I've been dreaming about! So again, I'll ask—don't you think if I knew the goddamn combination, I would use it and get us in there?"

Nikki blinked at him, wide eyed and startled, and he turned, stomping back to the gate. He seized it in his hands and shook it mightily. "Goddamn it!" he screamed, his voice echoing, rolling along the hillside.

When she touched his sleeve to draw his gaze, he whirled, still blinking against tears, ready to yell at her to just get away from him. She smiled at him oddly, holding up a necklace she'd removed from about her neck, a length of black cord with a long, slender crystal dangling at the end.

The crystal facets winked in the sunlight, fluttering glimpses of red, green and violet.

"You ever been hypnotized before?" she asked.

\* \* \*

In his mind, Paul watched himself roll down his truck window, leaning toward the keypad beside the gate. It was dark outside, late, and he had his radio on, the volume turned down, some kind of noisy, rattling rock station he ordinarily couldn't stand. He reached for the keypad, his forefinger extended, and he typed in by instinct, the numbers long-since memorized and known to him.

*Five, eight, one, nine, zero, three.*

"Star," he murmured aloud, as in his mind, he watched himself push the asterisk key last. He blinked, startled, snapping out of his reverie, and found himself sitting in the passenger seat of his Explorer, bathed in midmorning sunshine, with Nikki, the pink-haired psychic standing beside him in the doorway, smiling.

"What?" he asked, and he frowned, scratching his head. He felt like he'd taken a cat nap, which was asinine, because who the hell could relax when M.K., Bethany and Jay were somewhere on the other side of that gate, and needed—

*The gate!*

"I remember," he whispered, his eyes flying wide. He leaped down from the truck, shoving Nikki aside as he ran for the keypad. "I remember!"

"Five, eight, one, nine, zero, three, star," he whispered, typing the keys in sequence. He heard the chain

and gears of the gate rattle as they lurched to sudden life, and then the gate began to open, sliding backward on its track.

"Told you it would work," Nikki said, beaming happily.

"Don't let it go to your head," he growled, hopping into the driver's seat. "Get in or hitch home."

When they reached the top, they all sat silently, leaning forward and peering through the windshield at the enormous, hulking ruins of Liberty Sanitarium. *Christ, the air here feels cold*, Paul thought, as a shiver slid through him. *Heavy and musty and cold...something. It feels dead.*

"You stay here," he told Nikki, glancing in his rearview mirror at her. He fished his cell phone out of his pocket and tossed it over his shoulder to her. "If Fox Mulder here and I aren't back in thirty minutes, you dial 9-1-1 and call for backup. Give them my badge number..." He shifted his weight, reaching into his back pocket and pulling out his wallet. He handed it to her, opened, so that his brass lieutenant's badge was showing. "And tell them I've been shot." When she blinked at him, her eyes widening in alarm, he winked. "That hopefully won't be true, but it should get them out here right away."

He glanced at Cameron, who looked decidedly ashen and anxious, and clapped him on the shoulder. "Come on, kid. It's show time."

## CHAPTER TEN

"Do you know who it is?" Cameron asked, as he and Paul walked slowly, carefully along the shadow-draped corridors of the abandoned sanitarium. Paul had brought along his flashlight, and moved just as he had through the empty houses with Brenda, with his hands crossed, both the beam of light and the barrel of his pistol pointing ahead of him. Cameron walked quickly behind him, shied as near to him as he could get without tripping either one of them. He spoke in a voice scarcely above a whisper, and his eyes darted about him in constant, watchful apprehension. "The killer, I mean. The guy you said you've been dreaming about."

"No," Paul whispered in reply. He paused as they reached a fairly wide intersection of corridors, and Cameron nodded once to indicate they bear left. Paul had described the staircase from his dreams to Cameron, and the young man had surmised that it could be one of the main stairwells to the building's cellar, the network of catacombs and tunnels that had once been used to store and transport the dead from the facility.

"Do you think it has something to do with the Watcher?" Cameron asked. "On account of you caught him and all? Do you think that's what this is?"

"No," Paul whispered again.

"You don't have any ideas?" Cameron asked. "I mean, I see you on TV all the time. You really know your shit. I thought you would—"

"Cameron," Paul hissed, drawing abruptly to a halt.

"Oh, Jesus, what?" Cameron gasped in sudden panic, his feet scuttling to a halt. "What is it? What?"

Paul glanced at him off his shoulder, his brows furrowed. "Shut the fuck up."

"Oh," Cameron whispered, his eyes wide, and he nodded once. "Okay. Sure."

They finally reached the broad top of the main basement stairs, crumbling risers of concrete and broken tile leading downward into absolute blackness. Paul panned the beam of his flashlight down and felt the tickling sensation in his nose again. "This is it," he whispered.

Cameron shied more closely to him. "Are you sure?"

Paul brushed his fingers against his nose and held them over his shoulder so Cameron could see the blood. "Pretty sure, yeah."

He paused long enough to take the tissue Nikki had given him out of his pocket and press it against his nose. He glanced at Cameron as he pinched the bridge, and nodded once in the direction from which they'd come. "You go back now," he said. "Go sit in the truck and wait for me. Remember what I told her—thirty minutes, and you call for help. I don't care what you have to tell them, just get them here."

Cameron nodded. Ghosthunter or not, in the goddamn apparent Mecca of haunted houses or not, the kid



seemed perfectly happy for the escape opportunity. He turned to hightail it, then turned again, looking at Paul. "Lieutenant Frances?"

"Yeah, kid," Paul replied, drawing the tissue away from his nose and taking an experimental sniff. When Cameron didn't immediately answer, he glanced at him. "What?"

"Would you...I just...I mean, I know before you said you didn't believe," Cameron said, shifting his weight nervously. "And you might still not believe, but I...I still thought that I...it might..."

Paul sighed, frowning, and Cameron finished in a rush of voice and breath. "I hope you might consider joining the Ghosthunting Society. We could really use someone like you. Someone with your powers."

*Terrific. I could sign up with the goddamn Superfriends.* "I don't have any powers," Paul told him. "I'm a cop. That's it. And most days anymore, I can hardly claim that, either. Go on." He nodded again. "Get out of here."

\* \* \*

Paul started down the stairs. He felt momentarily dizzy, as recollections in his mind from his dreams, and his own personal perceptions overlapped in a bizarre, bewildering landscape. He paused, closing his eyes, drawing in a deep breath. He thought of Nikki and her pink rabbit's foot. *It belongs to my friend, Charlie. It gives me something to focus on—him—so I don't get overloaded here.*

M.K., Paul thought, visualizing his oldest daughter in his mind, lying against the couch, laughing and talking on

the phone, her long legs propped against the cushions, her long hair spilled over the arm rest.

*Bethany*, he thought, and he pictured her in his mind, smiling at him through the bathroom mirror as she brushed her teeth. Lastly, he imagined his brother's face, his dark eyes, the broad measure of his smile. *Jay*.

When he opened his mind again, the sense of *deja vu*, the peculiar notion that his memories and reality were unfolding simultaneously before him was gone. His mind was his own again. He continued down the stairs. *At least I know I'm headed in the right direction*, he thought. *I remember this. I've seen it before. I've been here before, in my dreams.*

He strained his ears, listening for any hint of sound from above, below or around him, but there was nothing. Only the scrape of his shoe soles against the stairs, the dusting of plaster, dirt, broken paint and dead leaves beneath each step. He wanted desperately to call out to M.K. and Bethany, to scream their names into the darkness until he was hoarse from the effort, but he held his tongue, keeping silent. *Not until I know for sure who I'm up against.*

*Do you know who it is?* Cameron had asked. *The killer, I mean. The guy you said you've been dreaming about.*

*No*, he'd replied, but that wasn't entirely true. He had an idea of who it was; who'd murdered Melanie Geary and Aimee Chesshire. He had an idea of who had taken his daughters and Jay. He just couldn't believe it. He couldn't wrap his mind around it. The evidence all led him in one inevitable direction, but he still couldn't accept it.

*There's a storm, Emma had told him, part of a message from his dead mother. She's seen it coming. She told me it was right next door. She told me Daddy was going to be hurt.*

*Why the hell didn't I listen? he thought. A storm right next door—why didn't that ring any kind of bell?*

Susan Vey—his next-door neighbor—had held a hell of a grudge against Melanie Geary. Susan's brother David worked for Milton Enterprises, the company that owned Liberty Sanitarium. She'd told him David had hurt his back on an asphalt job, and he remembered seeing the freshly laid asphalt on the new roads and cul-de-sacs at the bottom of the hill. If David had been working the Liberty Heights development, he would have the access codes to the security gates. And if he had the combination codes, Susan could have easily learned them from him.

The time frame was right for Susan, too. Brenda had told him there was no history of the *modus operandi* they were seeing in their area. Like their killer, Susan was new to the city, too.

*I just started last month, she'd told him. I know, fresh-faced girl, big new city...it's very 'Mary Tyler Moore.' Everyone keeps telling me. Whatever the hell that means.*

His mind kept turning back to something Jason had told him, something about a Greek myth, and about how Susan had a penchant for falling for older men, like Melanie Geary's father. Like Paul. *An Elektra complex, he'd called it, Paul thought. He told me Elektra killed people for revenge.*

*And if she wanted revenge against Geary for dumping her, and that's why she went after Melanie, she could sure as hell want revenge against me, too. Enough to take my kids, to hurt Jay.*

Susan was small, but strong. Paul remembered admiring the musculature in her arms and legs when they'd jogged together. She was no shrinking violet, and Brenda had confirmed Paul's visions and dreams in which he'd subdued his victims using a stun gun. If Susan had caught Jay by surprise, and incapacitated him with the stun gun, Paul believed that she could have easily intimidated and overpowered the girls into submission, too. And because she was stronger than the girls, she would have hurt Jay first—put him well out of commission—to eliminate any further threat potential from him.

*But why Aimee Chesshire?* It didn't make sense. Was there something about Aimee Chesshire he didn't know? A piece of the puzzle missing? Or had Susan simply enjoyed what she'd started with Melanie Geary and wanted to continue?

He heard something from the basement below, and he immediately drew still upon the stairs. He hit the switch on his flashlight, killing the beam, slapping himself into abrupt and absolute darkness. He stood motionless, his breath still, his eyes wide, his ears straining. He heard it again—a voice from below him. Someone screaming, a garbled mess of echoing, distant, inarticulate sounds that might have been words.

*Is that Jay?* he thought wildly, his heart shuddering. *Oh, Christ, who is that? I can't tell. Oh, Jesus...*

He started down the stairs again, sidestepping until his hip brushed against the wall. He moved slowly, still in darkness, taking cautious steps, keeping himself tucked against the wall to guide himself. His instinct was to run, to turn on his flashlight and bolt down the stairs, but he knew if he did that, he could well give himself away.

*And then M.K., Bethany and Jay are as good as dead, he thought. If they're not already. Oh, Christ, just let me find them. Please God, let me find them.*

\* \* \*

Bethany found a small broken shard of metal, part of an old electrical conduit casing or something, and she tried to wedge it underneath the cuff binding Jay's wrist to the chair, to force it open. He was unconscious; his effort to raise his hips so she could reach his phone had tightened the noose too much, and he could hardly force air past it. She listened to the horrible, erratic, sodden sound of his labored gasps and struggled not to burst into tears, to yield to the itching, aching urge within her to simply fly into overwrought hysterics.

*I have to get him out of here, she thought.* She had spent a long time on her hands and knees against the floor, ducked beneath his chair, trying to work the wire free from his ankles in the hopes of lessening the noose's draw against him from that side. But the man in the ski mask had apparently used a pair of pliers to wind the wire into a tangled knot around Jay's legs. Bethany had pawed and tugged and scratched and dug, but had been unable to even loosen the end of the wire enough to unwind it.

The piece of metal slipped, popping unexpectedly up and away from the manacle cuff. It slid against Bethany's palm, slicing deeply, and she cried out, stumbling back. She clutched at her wrist, watching in horror as a heavy line of blood oozed upward out of the wound, and then began to course down her arm. She uttered frightened, breathless, birdlike sounds as she quickly shucked out of her tank top, stripping down to her bra and wrapping the material around her palm to try and stave the flow of blood.

She heard a noise from the corridor beyond the room, and whirled, her eyes flying wide. She scurried to the doorway, but didn't have to peer too far beyond to see the faint hint of glow along the walls to her right. The man in the ski mask was coming back.

"Oh, God!" she whimpered, and now her resolve crumbled, her steely determination, her fighting instincts. Now, she was just a frightened little girl again, all alone and helpless. She turned and looked wildly about. *Where can I go?* she thought, her heart hammering frantically. *I can't leave Uncle Jay! Oh, God, where can I go?*

She glanced toward the only other avenue of exit or escape from the room—the darkened doorway behind the chairs where she and M.K. had been bound. She bolted for it, breathless and panicked. She darted across the threshold, out of the circumference of lamplight and into the shadows. She fell against the ground, and scuttled on her hands and knees, finding the wall and pressing herself against it. She crawled slowly, cautiously toward the doorway, the

rectangle of dim light, and struggled to hold her hitching, hiccupping breath and listen.

She heard the clattering of metal wheels and knew he'd brought his tray of knives and tools with him again. She listened as the man in the ski mask uttered a funny little noise when he saw the two empty chairs. It was a sort of sputtering sound, not a word exactly, but a sort of stuttering, staccato expulsion of voice and air like Porky Pig stuck on a tricky pronunciation in an old Bugs Bunny cartoon. Then she heard heavy footsteps stomping toward the doorway, and she shrank back, terrified.

"Where are they?" she heard the man in the ski mask ask, in a quiet voice. It was the first time she'd heard him say anything. That had been part of the absolute horror in his torture of Uncle Jay—the man had done so with a stoic and unflinching silence, never once uttering a single sound.

"Where are they?" the man said again, and then he began to repeat this over and over, his cadence growing faster, his pitch growing shriller, his tone louder and louder until he was screaming it, hoarse and furious. "Where are they? Where are they where are they where are they *you son of a goddamn bitch, where are they?*"

She jerked, shying again at a sudden, tremendous clatter as the man either kicked or threw the chairs she and M.K. had been sitting in across the room. She felt the wall against her cheek and ear thrum suddenly, sharply, as one of the chairs slammed into it on the opposite side, and she drew back, gasping, her eyes flooding with tears. *Oh, God, Daddy, help us!* she thought. *Daddy, please, help us!*

"Where are they?" the man screamed again, and Bethany heard Jay utter a croaking, breathless cry.

*Oh, no, no, please, don't hurt him anymore!* Bethany thought, scrambling forward, her stomach and heart wrenching. *Oh, God, please don't let him hurt Jay again!*

She risked a peek around the doorway and saw the man in the ski mask with his back to her. He'd clapped his large hand against Jay's face, shoving his head back, and screamed directly at him, his nose nearly touching Jay's. "Where are they? Where are those goddamn lousy whores? You tell me where they went, boy!"

He let Jay go, and Jay slumped in the chair. He had roused somewhat, and moaned feebly, semi-conscious. The man in the ski mask started to turn, and Bethany shrank back beyond the doorway once more, crouching in the shadows.

"Oh, you're going to pay for that," the man said. "You're going to pay, boy, do you understand me? Now, we'll get down to business."

There was nothing but silence for a long, agonizing moment. Bethany moved slowly, carefully, easing away from the wall. She reached out with her hands, patting around her in the darkness, trying to find something, anything she could use as a weapon. *I can't let him hurt Uncle Jay. I can't sit here and do nothing while that man murders him...!*

"I'm going to cut off his fingers, one by one!" the man shouted out, and she froze, momentarily terrified and convinced that he'd seen her, that somehow he'd snuck up on her and discovered her hiding place. "Do you hear me,



you rotten little whores? I'm going to cut off his goddamn fingers, and when I'm finished, I'm going to cram them into every single goddamn one of your stinking, whoring holes!"

His voice dropped lower, as if he spoke now to Jay, or himself, more so than calling out to Bethany and M.K.

"That's what happens," the man said. "That's what happens when you try to fuck little girls. *Little girls*, you sick fuck. Look at you—old enough to be their goddamn father."

*He...he doesn't know who Jay is*, Bethany thought. *He thinks Jay picked us up at the bar? That we were going home with him to...to...* "Oh, God," she whispered, aghast.

"But it doesn't matter, because they're already whores," the man in the ski mask said. "Dressed like sluts, shaking their asses around—nothing but goddamn whores. I'll teach them. I will hunt them down and teach them. Just like I'll teach you."

Bethany reached forward and jumped in surprise as her hands patted against something heavy, rough-edged. It was a piece of stone, something fallen from the ceiling or cleaved from the floor at some point, no bigger than both of her hands put together, but heavy enough that if she put some heft into it... *I could hit him with it*, she thought. *I could hurt him, knock him out.*

She took the rock in her hands and crawled back to the doorway. She chanced another peek and saw the man had his back to her. He lifted something in hand from the metal tray—a terrifying pair of stainless steel shears, with short but broad, curved metal blades. Jay saw it, too, and the realization of what the man meant to do with them must

have registered in his semi-lucid, hurting mind, because he shook his head weakly. His hands twisted feebly, futilely against the cuffs.

Bethany crept out from the adjacent room. She slipped soundlessly against the floor, holding the rock between her hands, drawing it up and over her head.

"No..." Jay groaned, shaking his head more fervently as the man slipped his right index finger between the blades. "No, please...!"

Bethany rammed the broken fragment of stone down against the back of the wool ski mask with all of the might she could muster. The force knocked the man forward, sending him spilling to the ground, uttering a breathless grunt as he smacked, face-first against the concrete. The shears tumbled to the floor, the blades slipping away from Jay's hand and leaving him unscathed. Bethany had a fleeting moment, less than a breath, to meet Jay's dazed, frightened eyes, and then she yelped as the man in the ski mask grabbed her roughly by the ankle, jerking against her, knocking her down.

She slammed hard against her hip and shoulder, barking the side of her head against the dirty concrete. She could still feel his fingers closed, vice-like around her ankle, and she reacted instinctively, drawing her other foot back and kicking at him, driving the heel of her sandal into his face. "Let go of me!" she screamed.

She kicked at him again, but he sat up, wrestling with her, grabbing at her legs, her waist, her flailing hands. She shrieked, thrashing and bucking and kicking, but he

launched himself at her, pouncing heavily atop her, crushing the breath from her. “*Whore!*” he screamed at her, his ski mask twisted lopsidedly now, revealing broad portions of his face, while nearly obscuring the view from his left eye. “You nasty stinking piece of shit bitch whore!”

His hands clamped around her throat, crushing against her, abruptly snuffing the wind from her. She gagged, her eyes bulging, her mouth wide open, but there was nothing, not even the teasing hint of breath that had sustained Jay for the past several hours. She couldn’t breathe; the man was strangling her, and as she slapped futilely against his hands, she saw tiny pinpoint of light sparkle and dance in her line of sight. *Daddy...!* she thought in wild, desperate terror. *Daddy, please! Daddy help me!*

“Why?” the man in the ski mask cried, his voice choked as if he was somehow on the verge of tears. “Why couldn’t you just stay a little girl? Why couldn’t you just *be a little girl?*”

She heard a sudden, sharp thunder and the man above her jerked, his hands slackening against her neck. Bethany whooped for air, dragging in a feeble mouthful, and heard a second shuddering report of thunder, and then a third, a fourth, a fifth, a sixth. With the seventh, something hot, wet and spongy slapped against her face—blood and brain matter—and she hitched in enough breath to shriek. The man in the ski mask fell sideways, spilling off of her, crashing to the floor in a lifeless heap.

Bethany screamed. She screamed and screamed, kicking at his fallen body, covering her face with her hands.

She didn't even realize her father was there, that somehow Paul had found her, and he'd unloaded his gun, emptying his clip into the man's body, until she felt his hands against her.

She shrieked at his touch, kicking and flailing, but he pulled her against him, enfolding her in his arms, clutching her to his chest. "It's alright," he whispered in her ear, his voice hoarse and ragged, trembling with tears. "It's Daddy, Bethie. It's Daddy. I'm here. I'm here."

\* \* \*

Paul clung to his daughter, stroking his hand against her hair, his tears spilling. "I'm here, Bethie," he gasped, as she began to sob, shuddering against him, twining her small hands against his shirt.

"Daddy!" she wailed, muffled against his shoulder. "D-d-daddy, I'm sorry...!"

He spared a glance at Susan's fallen body. She was dressed all in black, her head covered in a ski mask. She lay facedown against the floor, her body surrounded in a growing pool of blood. When he'd rushed across the threshold and into the lantern-lit room to see her straddling Bethany, throttling her with her hands, his mind had snapped. Everything that was a police officer within him—someone who understood and obeyed the law—had abandoned him to sheer, primal instincts, a parent's instincts. He'd opened fire, the pistol leveled in his hands. His finger had closed against the trigger again and again, sending seven consecutive nine-millimeter, hollow-point rounds slamming into Susan's body. The last had sent her

brains scattering, but even though his clip had been expended, even though he watched Susan crumple away from Bethany and to the floor, his finger had kept squeezing against the trigger, over and over.

Susan was dead, and all at once, Paul remembered Jay, his brother with the only barely controllable ability of resurrection. "Jay...!" he gasped, pulling away from Bethany, turning to the horrifying chair he'd seen so often in his dreams.

"He's hurt, Daddy," Bethany whimpered, but he could see this plainly for himself. Susan had stripped Jay's shirt from him, and then pierced him with at least a hundred dissection needles. It looked as though she'd burned and sliced him up some, too, but all of that was nothing compared to the wire garrote.

"Oh, Christ," Paul gasped, leaving Bethany and scrambling to his brother. He cradled Jay's face in his hands and lifted his head. He moaned softly in horror; Jay's face had turned purple and the noose was so tight around his neck, he'd lapsed into oxygen-starved unconsciousness again. That was why he hadn't reacted to Susan's death; why he hadn't started struggling involuntarily against his bonds to reach her, touch her, resurrect her from the dead. *God Almighty, he's all but dead himself*, Paul realized.

"Hang on, Jay," he pleaded, snatching up the steel sheers from the floor. He moved around behind the chair and settled the taut length of wire between the blades. He closed his fingers about the handle, feeling the eerily familiar sensation against his palm, the pressure as the blades closed.

He felt resistance as the edges fell against the wire, and then he squeezed harder, snapping it in two.

He patted his hands against Susan's pant pockets until he found a set of keys. He pulled them out, wincing to notice the Channel 11 News logo on her keychain, and then searched quickly, desperately until he found the manacle key. Once Jay was free from the chair, and Paul and Bethany could ease him gently against the floor, Paul again used the shears to carefully sever the wire buried deeply in the meat of Jay's neck.

"Jay," Paul whispered, anguished, cradling his younger brother's battered face between his hands. Even though he was freed from the chair, his predicament was no less dire, and Paul knew it. Jay's breathing was irregular and infrequent, a terrible, struggling, wheezing sound, and his pulse was a fluttering, staccato mess to Paul's touch. He wouldn't rouse again, or respond to Paul's voice. Paul leaned over, his tears spilling again, spattering against Jay's face. "Jay, oh...oh, Christ, kid, stay with me, okay?" he pleaded. "Don't leave me here, 'cause I...I can't follow you. I can't follow like you did for me, and that's not fair, goddamn it. It...it's not fair."

He fell silent for a moment, choked on his tears, and he closed his eyes, trembling. "Besides, I promised Emma, Jay," he whispered, anguished. "I promised Emma you'd be okay."

At this, his voice broke and his shoulders shuddered. He clapped his hand against his face and uttered a hoarse sob. *All my fault. Christ, this is all my fault.*

He felt Bethany's hands against him, heard the soft hiccupping of her tearful breath, and turned, hugging her fiercely, burying his face momentarily against her shoulder. "Will Uncle Jay be alright?" she whimpered, clinging to him.

"I don't know," he whispered. *Please, God, let him be alright. Take what he gave to me back, if you need to—whatever strength he restored in me, give it back to him now. Please, I'm begging you.* Paul leaned back, pressing his hand against Bethany's face, looking her in the eye. "But we have to get him out of here, okay? We have to get him to a hospital. Where's M.K.? Where's your sister?"

She shook her head. "I don't know," she said. "She went to get help. She...she went to call you. Uncle Jay told us that we were beneath, that she needed to go up higher so she...she could get a signal on the phone..."

She began to cry again, and he pulled her to him, kissing her ear and whispering her name gently, repeatedly. "I'll find her," he promised. "I'll find her, Bethie, don't worry."

"Who...who is that man, Daddy?" Bethany asked, trembling against him. "Why did he do this? Why did he want to hurt us?"

Paul looked beyond her toward Susan's body. "It's not a man," he said hoarsely, his heart seized simultaneously with disgust and dismay. *It's a monster, Bethany. All of your life, I've told you there were no such things, but I was wrong. I was dead goddamn wrong.*

He closed his eyes, holding her near. "It's not a man," he whispered again.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Jay awoke with a start, his dark eyes flown wide and bright with fear. He tried to sit up, but Paul caught him. "Easy, kid," he said softly, gently, leaning over the hospital bed rail to speak nearly against Jay's ear. "Easy now. It's alright. You're safe now."

He felt the tension in Jay's body relax at the sound of his voice, and Jay crumpled against him, exhausted and fading again. It had been less than an hour since he was wheeled out of the first of what was to be several rounds of surgery to repair damage to his internal organs caused by the one-hundred and thirty-two, two-inch long, nickel-plated steel dissection T-pins that had been punched into his body. He kept rousing from the anesthesia, if only for fleeting moments, but always in a panic, never realizing or remembering where he was.

He couldn't sit up much. He couldn't speak; he'd been intubated to help him breathe. A thin, grim seam of countless, miniscule stitches wound its way around his throat, trailing behind his ears. His hair had been cut and shaved along the nape of his neck so that the deep wound from the wire garrote could be cleaned and closed. His hand pawed lightly against Paul's sleeve, his fingers clutching weakly. Intravenous lines ran through tubing connected through the backs of both hands. Jay uttered soft, whimpering sounds and trembled against his brother while



Paul stroked his hair. "It's alright," Paul whispered, tears stinging his eyes. "I'm here, Jay. I'm right here. Everything's alright now."

Jay fell asleep again within moments, relaxing in full, and when Jo returned from down the corridor, where she had been conferring with some of the Intensive Care Unit nurses, Paul left her with a gentle hug. He watched in the doorway for a brief moment as she leaned over the bedside, brushing Jay's hair back from his face and kissing his brow softly. Then he turned, his heart heavy and hurting, and left them alone.

Bethany and M.K. were in the unit waiting room with their mother and Cameron Taylor. Paul met Vicki's gaze from across the room for a long moment, and then Bethany broke away from beside her and hurried to him. She'd wound up with more than two dozen stitches across the palm of her hand to close a ragged, nasty wound, but her doctors felt confident that it hadn't been deep enough to damage any of her mobility. Paul hugged her, closing his eyes, holding her fiercely. "Hey, kiddo," he whispered against her hair.

"Is Uncle Jay okay, Daddy?" M.K. asked, and when she came over, he lifted his arm, drawing her into the embrace with her sister. Both girls had already been released from the hospital from their own perfunctory examinations. They'd showered and changed clothes. They wore no make-up, and their hair was unfixed, their clothes unassuming—T-shirts and old jeans. They looked like little girls again. *His* little girls.

"He's resting, and right now, that's all that's important," Paul said. He looked toward Cameron Taylor. He hadn't missed the fact that the young man and M.K. had been sitting side by side when he'd walked in the room; that his hand and M.K.'s had been folded together, their fingers intertwined.

Cameron had found M.K. hiding in the sanitarium as he'd tried to leave. He'd actually forgotten the way out, and had become lost and terrified in the empty, dilapidated building. Stumbling upon M.K.—who was also lost and terrified—had been nothing short of blind luck, but the girl was convinced that he had rescued her. And apparently, she now adored him for it. For his part, Cameron, being a red-blooded American young man, was stupefied and delighted by this unexpected adulation from the strikingly beautiful girl.

*Christ, here we go again, Paul thought. At least he doesn't drive a Mustang.*

Bethany looked past his shoulder toward the doorway and stiffened slightly. She drew back, and when M.K. followed her gaze, her expression grew puzzled and wary. Paul glanced behind him and saw Brenda standing in the waiting room doorway.

"I'm sorry," she said as Paul drew away from his daughters and walked toward her. "I...I don't want to intrude, but I...they called me about the body, told me what happened, and I..." She touched Paul's face, cradling his cheeks between her palms. Her eyes glistened with tears and her brows lifted. "Are you alright?"

He nodded once. "Yeah," he said, his voice suddenly hoarse and strained. She drew him against her, embracing him tightly, clutching at him, and he closed his eyes, inhaling the sweet comfort of her perfume.

"I was so worried!" she gasped against his ear. "So frightened, Paul! Goddamn it!" She leaned back from him, and slapped his arm. "I could have helped. Why didn't you call me?"

"You told me not to," he replied, and when he dropped her a wink, her fleeting, shocked expression softened and she laughed. He kissed her, pulling her fully against him once more and pressing his lips to hers. He didn't care that Vicki was sitting across the room from them and could plainly see; what his ex-wife thought no longer mattered to him.

*That part of my life is over now, he thought. I have a new life now. I've had it for awhile, but I didn't want to give it a chance...not until now.*

He pivoted, keeping his arm around Brenda, turning to face M.K. and Bethany. "Girls, I'd like you to meet Brenda Wheaton," he said with a smile. "Brenda, these are my daughters."

\* \* \*

Ten minutes later, he and Brenda stood outside the hospital together while he smoked a cigarette.

"You know, I've seen what those things can do to a person," Brenda said, as he lit up.

"Yeah, I know," he said, nodding. "You're a medical examiner. You've seen the shriveled up black lungs and what-not. I know."

"No," she said. "I've seen my father die of lung cancer at the age of fifty-seven." She raised her brow at him and he felt immediately sheepish. He dropped the cigarette onto the sidewalk and stepped on it, snuffing it out beneath his shoe.

*I have a new life now*, he thought again. *A new life, new chances, new opportunities to be different than I was. Better this time. I've got to stop pissing it all away.*

"So what does Pierson think of your perp?" he asked. Dan Pierson had been one of the responding officers on the scene at Liberty Sanitarium. Paul imagined that he'd scrambled like his ass was on fire to get there as soon as he'd heard the call come over the radio, if only not to miss another chance to ream Paul for nosing into his case. They'd missed each other, though; Paul had been too preoccupied with his daughters and Jay to give a shit, much less notice, Pierson on the scene. But now, in retrospect, he would have enjoyed seeing the man's expression—shock and dismay, his stupid goddamn hate crime theory blown all to hell—when the ski mask had been removed and Susan Vey had been identified.

"He's a little surprised," Brenda said, her tone somewhat careful.

"Yeah, I bet," Paul said with a laugh. "So much for his instincts, huh? Maybe they'll finally bust him back down to the beat for awhile and let him recut his teeth on some..."

His voice faded, and he blinked. "I'm sorry. You're seeing him. I...I shouldn't have..."

"I'm not seeing Dan anymore," Brenda said. Paul cocked his head, his brow arched and she smiled. "What?"

"Nothing," he replied. "So does this mean I can ask you out for dinner now?"

Her smile widened slightly, wryly. "It might."

He laughed, hooked his arm around her neck and pulled her near, kissing her. *I love you*, he thought, although he still wasn't brave enough to say it aloud. *Probably won't be that brave for some time yet*, he thought. *I think I've about worn out my bravery reserve for awhile today.*

"Paul, about the perp..." Brenda began, looking up at him.

"Channel 11 doesn't get an exclusive," Paul replied. "I don't care if she worked for them. It doesn't give them goddamn precedent over—"

"She?" Brenda asked, looking puzzled.

Paul blinked, feeling a sudden tightening in his gut. "Yeah," he said. "*She*. Susan Vey. You know, black shirt, black pants, ski mask. Used my baby brother for a pin cushion. She and Melanie Geary had a long-standing feud, a couple of mutual restraining orders against one another. Jason found it all on record. I still don't know Susan's connection with Aimee Chesshire exactly, but I figure if there is one, Jason will sniff it out. That kid's really—"

"Paul," Brenda said, cutting him off. "There is no connection. Aimee Chesshire was a random victim chosen

by a sadistic, psychotic predator. The body in the ski mask wasn't Susan Vey."

Her words caused that little knot in his stomach to suddenly wrench tightly. "What?" he asked, somewhat breathlessly.

"I met Susan Vey this morning, in fact," Brenda said. "Your partner, Jason, brought her by the morgue. Your perp was her brother, David. We needed her to identify the body."

Again, the knot in his gut twisted. He thought of David, the handsome kid with the TV camera that he'd known in passing, at least enough to exchange friendly greetings. "David Vey?"

"Jason said he tried to tell you, but you hung up the phone on him this morning," she said. "He was running a background check on Susan, apparently thinking the same thing you were, and he came up with some hits in the areas surrounding their hometown of Hebrides. A series of rapes, with growing sadistic tendencies demonstrated in each one. Three police departments investigated. The cases were never tied together until the state database was set up. No suspects were ever arrested, but one name kept cropping up in Jason's check. David Vey."

Paul forked his fingers through his hair. *Jesus Christ*, he thought. *Jason tried to tell me. The kid kept asking me not to hang up on him, but I didn't think...! I didn't know. How could I have known?*

"David had psychiatric issues," Brenda said. "Susan told us he'd been on risperidone, a very powerful

antipsychotic medication, for some time now. He complained of weight gain from it, and some sexual side effects. He didn't like it and apparently quit taking it without telling anyone. Apparently, the sexual side effects lingered, even without the medication, and he couldn't force himself on his victims. So he turned to his more sadistic fantasies to derive any kind of satisfaction or pleasure. He was delusional, Paul."

"Jesus," Paul whispered. *How did I miss all of that? I've stood with the guy—talked to him, for Christ's sake! How could I not have realized?*

Now it made sense, all of the things that had been scratching at the back of his mind, the finer points of his theory that Susan was responsible that hadn't made sense, but that he'd overlooked in the heat of the moment, in his frantic haste to find Jay and the girls. "I...I should have seen it. I should have known."

"You couldn't have, Paul," Brenda told him gently, stroking his arm and drawing his anguished gaze. "You couldn't have known. None of us could. We're not psychic."

\* \* \*

Two days later, Paul left his apartment to take Emma to school. With Jo spending so much time at Jay's hospital bedside, the little girl had again come to stay with Paul. They walked together, hand in hand, toward his truck. It was a quarter after seven, and for the first time in ages, Paul had slept the night before through, and nearly soundly at that. If his lousy upstairs neighbors hadn't been fucking like jackrabbits at three in the morning, the thumping of the bed

resounding through his ceiling, he might have been out fully for the count.

"Hey, stranger," he heard a familiar voice say from behind him, just as he thumbed the remote control on his key ring and unlocked the Explorer.

Paul turned and saw Susan in the parking lot, a large box between her arms. For the first time, he noticed a bright orange moving truck backed up to the front door of her building, and two men in matching clay-colored uniforms loading furniture into its trailer.

"Hey, Susan," he said. He glanced down at Emma and found her shied against him, shy and uncertain. "You go on and get in the truck, lamb," he told her, stroking his hand against her tumble of dark brown curls. "I'll be right there."

"Okay," Emma said.

As she climbed into the backseat, Paul walked over to meet Susan. He knew he had been wrong about her, that David had been the sicko next door to him, not her, but that didn't loosen the sudden, uneasy feeling he had at even this distant proximity. He didn't know what to say to her. He'd killed her brother, for Christ's sake. And for a time, he'd considered her a murderer. *How do you go back to swigging beer and making small talk after that?*

"You're moving?" he asked, with a nod toward the moving truck.

"Yeah, back to Hebrides for a month, for the funeral and stuff, and then onto Chicago," she said. "I've had a resume with a station there for about six months now, and



they finally got tired of sitting on it and offered me a job. It's a pay raise and a change of scenery. I...I guess I need that right now."

"Oh," he said, tucking his hands in his jean pockets. He rocked back and forth on his heels, feeling uncomfortable. "Well, hey. That's great."

"Yeah," she said, looking as anxious as he felt. After a moment, she turned, setting the box down on the trunk of her car. "Look, Paul, I'm sorry about what happened," she said. She tucked her hair behind her ears and blinked down at her toes, her voice small and timid. "About David...about us...your kids...everything."

"It wasn't your fault," he said.

She shrugged, still without looking at him. "I was molested when I was a kid," she said. "Our dad died when we were little, and my mom's second husband was a creep." She gave her head a slight shake. "He's long gone now. Probably dead in a ditch somewhere, who knows. And my stepdad's been practically like a father to me, so it doesn't matter anyway. But it really messed David up. I don't know. I think maybe he was molested, too, but he never told me. But I think that's why he was the way he was...why he did those...horrible things."

She shivered slightly, drawing her arms about herself. She suddenly looked very small and fragile to Paul, and he felt obliged to say something. "I'm sorry, Susan."

She glanced at him and smiled, crooked and with little humor. "You did what you had to do, Paul. I don't blame you for that."

She turned back to her car and hefted the box again. "David always used to say that's why I have a thing for older men, what happened to me when I was little," she said. "But I don't know. I think it has more to do with the men themselves."

Her words called to mind something he'd read on the internet the night before. There were too many things left open-ended in the case, and he didn't like that. It all seemed too easy, too convenient, too much like blind, bad luck that David Vey had abducted M.K., Bethany and Jay within hours of Paul telling Susan he didn't want to be with her.

*Sounds like Susan has some anger management issues, Jason had told him. Not to mention an Elektra complex...you know, the Freudian theory, the one that talks about how girls are secretly in love with their fathers, or how they'll look for mates who remind them of their fathers, or something like that. It's from Greek mythology. Elektra killed people for revenge over the death of her father.*

Paul had looked up the *Elektra complex* online, because he'd hoped to find an explanation in it, something to fill in the missing pieces of the puzzle, to give him that culminating *a-ha* moment that was critical in completing an investigation.

What he found instead had only left more questions in his mind, and an uneasy disquiet in his gut that remained with him that morning. *The daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, Elektra wanted her brother to kill their mother in revenge for their father's death.*

*Elektra wanted her brother to kill...in revenge*

Bethany had told him that David Vey had spoken to her as he'd tried to strangle her. He'd called her a whore, and asked why she couldn't just be a little girl? Paul wondered whose innocence, whose lost girlhood, had affected him the most—his victims', or his sister's?

*Elektra wanted her brother to kill...in revenge*

And if Susan, knowing this, might not have steered his psychosis to her advantage?

Susan gave him a smile. "Maybe I'll see you around sometime," she said. She rose onto her tiptoes and brushed her lips against his softly, quickly.

"Yeah," Paul said, reaching up unconsciously and brushing his fingertips against his mouth, wiping her kiss away. "Maybe."

\* \* \*

"What are you doing here?" Jason asked as Paul crossed through the Public Affairs department several hours later, heading for his office.

"Hello to you, too," Paul replied, not slowing in the least.

The younger man rose to his feet, wide-eyed and surprised. "You...you're not supposed to be here," he said, following quickly on Paul's heels. "You're supposed to be out on administrative leave."

"I know," Paul said, sitting down at his desk.

"For two weeks, they told me," Jason said.

"I know," Paul replied, looking around on the floor. He meant to grab a few things, some paperwork he could fool with while sitting at the hospital with Jo.

"Paul, you *shot* someone," Jason said. "You're not supposed to be here."

"I know," Paul said.

"You shot someone *seven times*," Jason said. "I'm not supposed to be talking to you about it. I'm not supposed to be talking to you at all. You're not supposed to *be here*."

"It'll be alright, Jason," Paul said, opening his desk drawer and gathering together some files to bring with him.

Jason uttered an unhappy, sputtering sound at this. "Wh...what are you doing?"

Paul glanced at him. "Just some homework, that's all. I've gone through all of the magazines at the hospital and Jay's there at least through the end of the week. He caught some kind of infection and they have him on all kinds of I.V. antibiotics. I need something to do."

"But that...you can't..." Jason whimpered in protest, his eyes widening as Paul gathered even more files together. "Paul, the chief is going to shit. He's already about to shit, now that he's caught wind of us contacting the federal prosecutor and ratting out the mayor. He—"

"The chief's head has been buried up Mayor Allen's ass for so long, he can't remember the goddamn color of daylight," Paul said, his brows narrowing. "And we didn't *rat* out the mayor. We did our jobs."

It had been a mistake coming there. Paul was feeling on edge with Jay still in the hospital, and now that the initial shock and trauma had worn off, Vicki was feeling particularly nasty and vindictive about what had happened over the weekend. She'd called him the night before asking

him to quit his the police force. *Paul, in the last two years, you've nearly been killed, I've nearly been killed, and now your children damn near died, all having to do with your job, she'd told him. It's too much, and I can't handle it anymore. And I'm sure as hell not going to ask our daughters to. Either you resign, or I'm suing for full custody. You love your job or you love the girls, Paul. Which is it?*

Paul stood, tucking the files under his arm. He hadn't had an answer for Vicki last night. He still didn't have an answer. And he sure as hell didn't appreciate her giving him such a piss-poorly timed ultimatum. "Look," he told Jason, leveling his dark gaze at the younger man. "I'm leaving. Happy now?"

He started to march for the door, and blinked as Jason caught him firmly by the arm, stopping him abruptly.

"No, I'm not happy now—and goddamn it, will you stop walking away or hanging up on me or otherwise completely ignoring every goddamn word I say?" Jason snapped, his voice sharp and furious. Paul had never heard him sound like that before, and he paused, turning, his brows raised in surprise.

"I'm sorry about what happened to your brother and your kids," Jason said, his brows narrowed, his blue eyes flashing hotly. "I'm sorry your wife left you, and I'm sorry you're stuck down here in Public Affairs with me, because it's obvious you hate it. You think you're the only one? Welcome to the club, Lieutenant!"

He balled his hands into fists and hoisted his chin so he could glare at Paul eye-to-eye. "You think you're the only

one who catches shit around here for being P.A.? I get laughed at, too. You think no one calls me names? I hear it all over—‘Hey, there, Scrappy Doo,’ or ‘top o’ the morning to you, Doctor Watson,’ or ‘how’s it hanging, there, Frodo?’”

“Frodo?” Paul said, and blush bloomed brightly in Jason’s cheeks.

“Yeah, Frodo,” he said. “You know, like in *The Lord of the Rings*. He’s a hobbit. He’s short. I’m short. And some people think I look like Elijah Wood, the actor who played...” He shook his head, his brows narrowing again. “That doesn’t matter! I’m a bigger joke than you, because at least, you’ve shot and killed people. Everyone thinks I either fucked someone to get here, let someone fuck me or I’m the chief’s kid! You see this?” He jerked his wallet out of his blazer pocket and shoved it squarely under Paul’s nose, flipped open to his badge. “I didn’t get this out of a goddamn cereal box! I’m a *police officer*, just like you, and just like every other fat, slouching, stinking, middle-aged, overweight son of a bitch in this building! I may not have walked a beat or busted someone’s chops, but I’m still a police officer, and I’m *your* goddamn partner! And if you’d fucking *listened* to me and let me *help* you like a partner, instead of hanging up on me on Saturday morning, you might have found David Vey a lot faster, and saved your goddamn brother a world of hurting!”

He fell silent, trembling, gasping for breath, his face flushed and glossed with a sheen of sweat. Paul had never seen him so worked up before.

“You’re right,” he said quietly.

"You walk out of here all the time and leave me to catch the shit," Jason snapped. "Do you have any idea what I've had to put up with since we..." His voice faded, his furious expression faltering. "What did you say?"

"I said you're right," Paul said. He stepped toward Jason and clapped him gently on the shoulder. "I've been unfair to you, and I was wrong. I'm sorry, kid. You did a good job."

He turned again, walking away. "Come on," he said. "I'm meeting Brenda for lunch."

"Dr. Wheaton?" Jason asked.

"Yeah," Paul replied. "We're seeing each other. But that's between you and me—as partners. So come on, join us. I'm buying."

"But I...I..." Jason sputtered, his eyes wide with disbelief. "I can't, Paul. I'm not supposed to—"

"Talk to me, I know," Paul said, nodding.

"Administrative leave, I know. Shot someone seven times, yeah, yeah." He glanced over his shoulder, his brow raised. "Kid, if we're going to work together, you're going to have to learn to bend the rules every once in awhile. They're made that way, you know."

He turned around and walked again, smiling as he heard Jason's footsteps behind him, hurrying in his wake.

\* \* \*

"Who was that lady again?" Emma asked, as Paul drove her home from school that afternoon.

"What lady?" he asked, puzzled, glancing at her.

"From this morning," she replied. "The one with the box in her hands."

"Oh," Paul said. "She's just a...a friend of mine. That's all." He'd been wondering when Emma would say something about Susan. He hadn't missed the dark, cautious look that Emma had awarded the woman, or the rather morose silence that the girl had adopted for the ride to school that morning following the encounter. He wondered if Emma shared his suspicions, the same misgivings he did about Susan. *Did Grandma tell you something about her?* he'd thought of asking, but had been unable to muster the words. "She's leaving, moving away," he said. "She wanted to tell me good-bye."

Emma nodded, patting her hands against her lap and looking out the window. "That's good."

*Christ, let's hope so.*

Emma turned to him. "Did you ever find out about Claire Boyett?"

"Yeah," Paul said quietly. "Yeah, I did."

"Who is she?"

"Just...just another friend," he replied. *Claire Boyett is clairvoyant, kiddo, and maybe that's what I am, and maybe it's not. Who knows what the hell your daddy woke up in me when he raised me from the dead. But I'm a different man in all sorts of other ways—so why not that, too?*

Emma reached for him, placing her small hand against his and lacing her fingers through his. "I missed you, Uncle Paul," she said, and it was like she knew somehow that he had been feeling like a stranger in his own skin, that



his mind had been tormented by someone else's thoughts and dreams, that his life had felt unfamiliar—and now, all of that had changed. He'd found his place in things again—a new place, but a good one still the same. *It's like she knows.*

Paul smiled as she looked at him, and he gave her hand a little squeeze. "I missed you, too, kiddo," he said. *It's good to be back.*