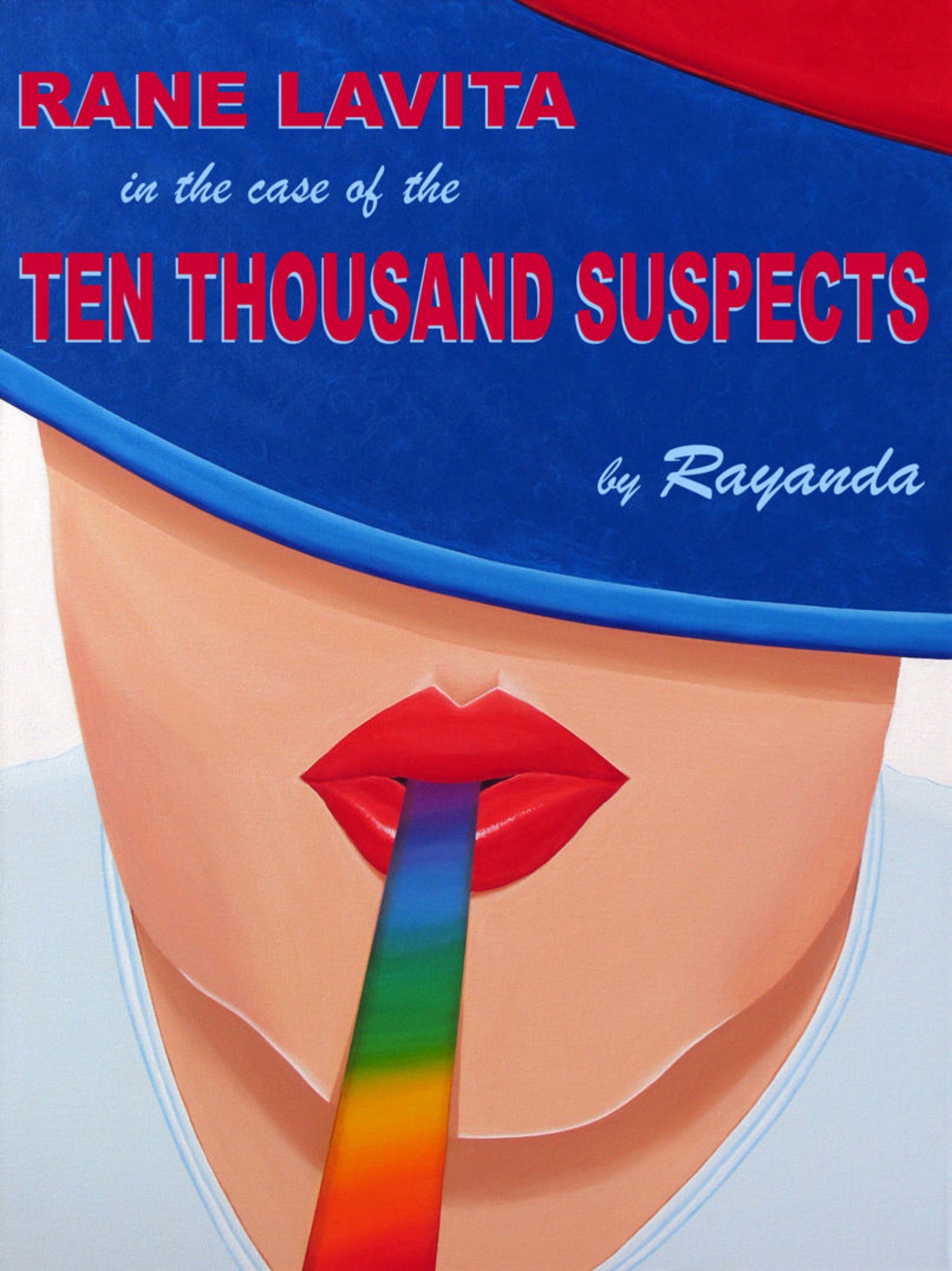


RANE LAVITA

in the case of the

TEN THOUSAND SUSPECTS

by Rayanda



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

READER ADVISORY	ii
CHAPTER 1	1
CHAPTER 2	16
CHAPTER 3	30
CHAPTER 4	40
CHAPTER 5	51
CHAPTER 6	66
CHAPTER 7	79
CHAPTER 8	92
CHAPTER 9	101
CHAPTER 10	112
CHAPTER 11	121
CENTERFOLD	133
CHAPTER 12	134
CHAPTER 13	143
CHAPTER 14	154
CHAPTER 15	164
CHAPTER 16	175
CHAPTER 17	184
CHAPTER 18	197
CHAPTER 19	205
CHAPTER 20	213
CHAPTER 21	224
CHAPTER 22	235
CHAPTER 23	247
CHAPTER 24	258
CHAPTER 25	272
CHAPTER 26	287
CHAPTER 27	295
CHAPTER 28	305
CHAPTER 29	317
CHAPTER 30	323
COMING SOON	339

CHAPTER 1

In a few masterful strokes I capture the upthrust and sigh with unadulterated pleasure. *Ahh*. But fruk, I'm ravenous. One more stroke, and I'll be ready to smack my lips on pretty well anything. The person who said that it's possible to have too much of a good thing must have been the same fool who said that you can't improve upon nature. I turn an admiring gaze from my painting of Mount Rundle's dueling peaks to the monstrous beauty itself, and a flash of light from below the summit ridge catches my eye.

Thought so. Just a pack of climbers advertising to heaven that they've arrived.

Another flash. Followed by sparks.

I grab my binoculars and zero in on three hikers malingering on a buttress ridge. One is sitting, reading a book, while the other two enjoy the view of themselves in a mirror. Too bad it's a clear day. Any old lightning bolt would give them enough of a kick to stop preening themselves long enough to write home:

Hi Bunny Buns! We were up on this mountain that's way bigger than it looks on the telly, believe you me, Love. Crikey, lightning zapped--like totally fried--our credit cards. So could you send....

We'd rather lose our virginity, integrity and sanity than our credit cards. Could be because all bad credit is honored in Hell, that celestial burb on the wrong side of Heaven.

I focus the binoculars on the--Whoa! The rock under my right foot slips out from under me, and I teeter forward on the edge of the rib I'm perched on. I glimpse down at hundreds of feet of sheer vertical ending in a murderous ledge littered with rock coffins. I jump back and keep my obscenities to myself. The mountain never gives the last word to any mortal.

A third flash, this one higher up.

I scan the peaks above the climbers. Nothing. I lower the binoculars, and a shadow plunges through my view.

What the hell?!

I jerk the binoculars down sharply to get whatever it was back into view.

Ah. A boulder bounces off the blue-gray wall of rock before disappearing behind the overhang of another ridge. Intoxicated by their nearness to the divine, those shitterbrains must have kicked

away a piece of the mountain right into the eyes of the lesser gods hovering between them and the earth.

Guess what, Bunny Buns?! We knocked off a piece of the mountain. Blimey, the world's falling apart.

I scan back to the top of the bluff. Only two of the hikers come into view. One with his back to me steps behind a rock, while the other, a hulk of a man in a Homburg and burgeoning green jacket, holds up a camera to shoot him. Guess they can't see anything else worth shooting.

Eyeing the sun-broken rock beneath my feet, I make sure it's secure then go back to my painting and soothe the sky with an ermine brush dipped in azure. A shadow clouds the sky.

I look up.

A hawk.

"Enjoying the view, Rane?" a stranger's voice says over my shoulder.

Turning around and stepping back, I see a man, standing tall and proud like the mountain he's dwarfing behind him. "Not particularly," I say, looking right at him. Although he's wearing casual clothes, his face has a starched quality that effectively masks his intent. Is the sun playing mischief with my eyes, or did someone chop off the top of his head and plunk down a florescent yellow mop?

"The signs in these parts tell you not to mess with the wildlife," I add. "That means everyone and everything that isn't a tourist."

"Including Bambi?" He gives me a secret smile, smarmy in its familiarity.

My words fly by him in the breeze without ruffling him in the least. I flip down the brim of my canvas hat to keep his glare out of my eyes. "How do you know my name?"

"If you don't want anyone to know your crimes, then don't sign your name to them. That's one mother of an ice-cream cone."

Bloody hell, there are just some things in life you can't escape. Go to the ends of the Earth, or to the Moon and turn over any rock. And sure as hell, a critic will pop out. A lot of creeps avoid paying taxes, but it's damned well impossible to avoid being taxed to hell by critics.

Mounting suspicion runs roughshod over my chagrin. He wants something from me. Something that he has no intention of asking for. At least not with mere words.

"If you don't get lost, I'm going to call the cops." I throw down my brush, grab a palette knife and point it at him.

"We're in the wilderness," he says, his eyes catching the glint of the blade.

"We're in an echo chamber crawling with sightseers. One scream, and you'll be buried under an avalanche of tourists."

He steps towards me, a cutesy smile twisting his lips like I have ice-cream smeared on my face and he's not going to let anything stop him from licking it off. The fool's baiting me to use the knife.

"Darren!" a woman's voice echoes around us.

He mouths something incomprehensible as he swings around in the direction of a towering blonde further down the slope. She waves at him, her long, thin limbs gyrating like an agitated spider's.

He signals her to wait. Then as he turns back to me, I launch my knuckles straight into his venomous smile. Before he can retaliate, my boot helps him down onto the rock face. He lets his body rag doll into my carryall bag filled with painting supplies. Laughing like a lunatic with a mind-blowing secret, he springs to his feet and charges at her instead of me.

Jerk. Dumb, dumb, fraking dumb jerk. What was all that macho crap about? Why did I have to go and sock him? I could have diffused his ego in a way that would have helped me learn what he was really after. So much for a quiet day of meditating, painting and strolling amongst the fragile yet ruthless, unforgiving beauty of an alpine meadow.

In my beater, I rattle and rumble down the sinuous road to the highway leading back to Calgary. Suddenly, the engine starts to sputter, and I swerve to a stop. I stomp my foot and have to retrieve it from the hole in the floor. "You rotten piece of garbage!" I scream, clutching the steering wheel and forcing it to vibrate along with me. I get out, check under the hood, take a flying kick at the fender then get on my cell.

"Yo, Chanlee, you witch. You said my beater would choke on me. The regulator's shot, so the alternator's going bonkers." I try with unrelenting futility to kick some life into it. "Coming with me to the unclaimed vehicle auction on Saturday?"

"Can't. I'm working Friday night. But you're going to miss your workout for the fifth day in a row. Keep this up, Rane, and you'll flunk your physical again. Buck up, kiddo, you want to take a, 'Yes sir, she's a fighting machine.' to Europe with you, don't you? Without it, you're not going to be sexy enough to nab the clients who'll pay you obscene retainers to find their stolen fakes."

"Whaddya mean I'm going to miss my workout? It's not you who has to haul her butt back up the mountain to get help."

"I'll send Bruno to give you a lift."

"So you're on with him again?" I say. His name grates like the sound of my faithless junk heaps before they die on me.

"We weren't really off."

"Whatever. You threw his stuff outside to rot in the rain and changed the locks after you tattooed his backside with your boot."

"I notice you haven't told Fitz to get lost. Heehaw, heehaw."

"That's different."

"Uh-huh."

"Why keep jerking Bruno's chain? There's no way in hell you're ever going to saddle yourself with any guy whose last name is Toothill, sings like he's wearing someone else's false teeth and always looks like he's trying to shrug off his face. What are you afraid will happen if you're honest with him for once?"

"Ha! You should talk. You haven't told Fitz you're splitting for Italy in--"

"Ah, don't sweat it with the ride," I say, steering the conversation back onto wussier ground. "I'll bus it, and be there for the workout tomorrow after I make a delivery for Mabie-Toogod. She said that when I drop off the papers I should ask the guy if he could use a hand. She didn't say with what."

"The mood you're in, either he gives you a job, or the city is going to have another homicide. Just don't take a gun on your delivery."

"When you going off graveyard?"

"Switching to days on Monday."

"Being a cop can sure take the sunshine out of your life. When you're not prowling the streets at night, you're snoring the day away, and in-between you're kicking Bruno in and out of your bed." I pace around the car. "Let's get something going for Monday night."

"With the guys?"

"Wouldn't you rather have a bad ass time?"

"Might as well, Bruno's flying off tomorrow to hawk bull DNA to some fat cats in Atlantic City."

"Great. We'll share Fitz."

I hang up, wondering if she's laughing. Because I'm not. I give the car door a ram kick and jump back out of the dust storm. I lose my footing on the shoulder and roll down the bank into a bed of Pink Pussy-toes. Hobbling back up the bank and around the car, I open the door to the sound of a car screeching down the hill. Some maniac in a blinding gold import is driving fast and wild like he's aiming to send me from here to kingdom come. The import's low-slung, so it should hug the ground in the curve.

Hell! It's tailspinning!

I dive onto the hood of my wreck just as the back end of the import scrapes the dust off the soles of my shoes. Not content with taking my door and other chunks of metal with him, the driver growls, "Get off the road!"

Catching a glimpse of him, I see it's the psycho who can't tell the difference between duelling mountain peaks and ice-cream cones. He has a small boy up front with him. So I wait until the maniac careens his phallic weapon around the next curve, leaving a trail of smoke and rubber, before I damn him with every godforsaken curse I can think of.

When I left this placid September morning for a retreat in the land of giants, it was still summer in the city. Now here I am watching aspen trembling from green to gold while I wait in Banff for the bus. To kill the boredom, I pull out my sketch pad and do one fruking sketch after another of the hikers and the psycho. His car is the only thing that doesn't come out looking deranged. The stench of mentholated upchuck drenched in urine wafts over me from behind. I glance over my shoulder and catch a disheveled street dweller peering at my sketch pad. His sneering smile is even filthier than his face.

Closing the pad, but standing my ground, I say, "Shove off!"

Cackling to himself, he scratches his ratty toque and shuffles off, taking his brand of garbage odorizer with him.

There's nothing left to do but wait. Sketch and wait. And wait some more for another chance to redeem myself by passing the physical section of the police training that trashed my hopes of getting into the service last April. Everyone thinks that all I want to do is round up enough cash to fly me back to Europe. 'Cause that's what I've been telling everyone, but what I really want to do is kick ass on the tests next month. That'll blast some of those nagging maybes out of my future. Talking about maybes, without wheels, how the hell am I going to make the delivery for Mabie-Toogod tomorrow?

Yesterday, it took me five hours to make the one hour trip back to Doré Parc, where I live. Then it took another hour to get into my apartment on the fourth floor because there was a fire scare on the fifth floor. But today I'm not losing any time getting to Mabie-Toogod's because I dusted off my mountain bike.

I skip up the stairs of her spanking new Victorian house out in the tulies and nearly trip over a wooden box in the porch. There's a note addressed to me on the box:

Here are the books and papers for Professor Faule. You can contact me at my office if you should require further information. Can you find sufficient time in your schedule to join me for tea tomorrow?

Typewritten yet. That's about as close to impromptu as she gets.

I scribble on the note,

How about Sunday?

and stick it on the lewd tongue of the gargoyle above the door. Who or what does she think she's scaring away with this thing? It's pukey, not scary.

That done, I reach down to pick up the box and end up sitting on it. The damned thing must weigh fifty pounds. And smart me took the rack off the bike so I could go faster. Great, now I'll have to park the bike and do some bus hopping.

It only takes two hours to make the fifteen minute delivery back to the inner city where Faule lives. I drop the box on the path leading to his Craftsman style bungalow and collapse onto the box. My fingers feel like they've been permanently fused into right angles.

Judging by the house with its arbored gate, green shingle cladding, hanging baskets and square columns atop fieldstone pedestals, I'd say that old Faule is a quaint old bird. I eye a swing anchoring the left end of the porch that extends the full width of the house. Even the porch floor looks more comfortable than this box. However, almost half of the porch is merely decorative because the house projects forward about three feet on the right, leaving the porch too narrow on that side to sit in comfortably unless I turned sideways.

A crow perches one-legged on a weathervane crowning the roof.

Too, too quaint.

But Faule'd better give me a tip, or so help me he won't like what I'll do with this box.

Damn. My nose is dripping, and all my Kleenex and stuff is in my bike bag. Even my comb.

While I'm rubbing my nose on my sleeve, the front door opens and a roly-poly man stuffed into a navy pinstriped suit, steps onto the porch. He tugs on the buttoned-up vest that scarcely covers his barrel then hesitates before descending the stairs. He's probably deciding whether to roll down. Pigeon-toed and knocked-kneed though he is, he flies down the stairs towards me in his fleece-lined slippers. He looks too much like an oversized cannonball to suit me. I jump out of his line of fire and into a faded yellow rose bush.

"Al Faule," he says, sweeping up the box with one hand and rescuing me from the thorny clutches of the bush with the other. His hand feels like sweaty putty. "*Rane*, isn't it?" He says my name with a lisp so it sounds like *Wayne*. I nod and he smiles, a smile that only someone made of putty could execute. His whole face

becomes one dimple then settles back to a half dozen smaller dimples, including one on the end of his nose.

"Have time for coffee?" he asks.

"As long as I don't have to run to the store to get it."

Leaving the mild-mannered exterior behind us, we enter the house and an explosion of candy colors hits us from all directions--from the walls, furniture and overabundant accessories. I look down at my avocado track suit. Poor thing, it just wilted and died of fright.

"No white blight for you, I see," I say, tempted to put my sunglasses back on. Serves me right for saying that I want a career where I can wear my sunglasses on the job. "Did you do all this yourself?"

"My no. I bought it this way. Do not know one style from another at all. Leave that sort of thing to the wife. According to the estate agent, this is called *fanciful country*, would you believe? The previous owners wanted to happy up the place by giving it scads of color and personality. A veritable doll's house, yes?" I can't bring myself to nod. Can't bring myself to do much of anything because the maddened colors have seared holes in my eyeballs. Even the floor is hopping with swirls and squiggles in a faux carpet on perfectly good hardwood. I'd feel sorry for the dolls. "Everything has been done with the same touch of whimsy, yes? So they threw in the furniture and other bits and pieces as part of the deal."

"I see that. But I smell fresh paint."

"Yes, you do indeed. I am redoing the house one room at a time, starting with my bedroom, yes? Come," he says, pointing a dimpled finger ahead of us, "the kitchen it is this way, please."

Yipes! Mother Goose's secret breeding ground! The whole kitchen is a raging rainbow of freehand swirls, florals, checks, polka dots and stripes, all arguing with each other over who gets to blind me. The only resting place for my weary eyes is a table cluttered with papers, books and what could be a laptop buried under the mess. And I thought my freckles were the ugliest things I have ever seen.

"Here, have a seat, yes?" He pulls out a chair painted with a lush garden scene.

I sit on a hard bed of gardenias and lean back against a sky twittering with larks. This whole place is in perpetual bloom with color after nauseating color yodeling in the sunshine. Happy, happy, happy.

Fruk, I feel like I'm inside a lightning bolt.

"It is not so very bad," he chuckles. "It is nice to be connected to the sun, would you not say so?"

"Icarus had the same idea."

"Yes, yes he did," he says cheerfully and opens a cupboard.

I half-expect a hoard of sugarplum fairies to come charging out at me. Noticing a screaming yellow coffee maker on the purple counter, I say, "I like my coffee black, Mr Faule."

"Al, please. Professor Mabie-Toogod she tells me that you might be available to help with my research, yes?" he says, clearing an opening in the papers on the table before me. I wish he hadn't done that, because now I have to look at the clear glass table emblazoned with gold diamonds and a shameless spectacle of other glaring colors and patterns painted by hand.

"Now that my job as her research assistant is winding up, I could use more work, but I should tell you that I'm leaving for Europe at the end of October."

"The work I have for you should not take more than six weeks, yes? And if you are as good as Aurora says you are, you could have everything in place in four." He starts to fill up the clearing with a glass mug and saucer. They match the table to a tee. "You, you have been assisting Aurora with her book on the sacred and profane use of color in art, have you not?"

"Yes. Normally, when classes are over in the spring, she travels wherever her research takes her. But this year she stayed put to wind up her book. I'm glad she did, because the work I did for her proved to be quite interesting. Until I got the job, it never occurred to me to wonder whether evil has a favorite color."

"And now you know what color is sacred to Satan?"

I shrug. "Let's just say that I know how a lot of artists answered the question."

"You studied art history in Paris and Florence, yes?"

I nod. "But my second degree is in forensics. I thought I wanted a career in forgery detection, then after working in the field a couple years, I found it too constricting. I'm too restless, or maybe I just need to push my own envelopes and create my own goal posts."

"You are planting these posts in Italy while you earn your PhD, yes?"

I didn't say anything about Italy. Mabie-Toogod must have told him.

"I'll get a doctorate when I find something I want to obsess about for two years. I'm returning to Florence because I have a job offer as a consultant in stolen art recovery."

"And your attempts to get into the police service?"

My face tightens. Is there anything she didn't tell him?

He joins me across the table and puts down his mug without clearing a place for himself. Amidst the glaring light, his deeply set eyes remain in shadow. Even when he's smiling, he has a slightly alarmed look because his thick eyebrows shoot up from the center

at a sharp angle then stop abruptly, and hang down in scraggly remnants, like they're broken.

"Uh, the physical part of the procedures training gave me trouble, so I gave up on the idea." Not exactly true, but he probably already knows that. Although you'd never guess it from the bored look on his face. I peer at him through a bouquet of glass flowers. "So what is your book about?"

"Not a book, no, no." He shakes his head and his extra chin wobbles in rhythm to his words. He has a lispy, relaxed almost lazy way of talking that is curiously clipped and formal at the same time, like he's confident enough in speaking a foreign language to be relaxed about it, but still sounds stilted because he learned textbook English in school.

"Nothing as glamorous as that," he goes on. "My no. I am writing a paper on a series of paintings that I would like to convince the world are the work of Caravaggio, but I have to dig more deeper, I'm afraid, if I am going to make my case." He picks up his mug and pulls off a sheet of paper sticking to the bottom. "My work it does not amount to anything in the grand scheme of things, but what I do means everything to me because I am all there is between the universe and nothingness."

"How can I help you?"

"Aurora says you're a crackerjack investigative researcher, yes? And, well, frankly I have run up against one dead-end after the other. I could use an additional right brain and arm to break through the impasse." He shoves aside some papers and taps his laptop. "You can start right now if you wish, yes?" He frees his laptop by sweeping the mess closer to me.

"By sorting out these papers?" I flip through the tangled web. "You sure this will only take me a month? It looks lik--" My gaze rivets on a coffee-stained tabloid headline. "BOY KIDNAPPED!" the red headline screams. I read on, "Nine-year-old lured from safety of his Banff home by net masher."

Shit, shite, shoot to hell.

The psycho in the mountains and the car. Oh, what's his name? I thump my forehead. *Darien*. Why didn't I get his license? He wasn't driving with reckless abandon, he drove straight at me with enough precision to come within a hairsbreadth of killing me. Because I saw the boy with him?! No, no, he tried to get at me on the rib. Why? I wasn't in his way or--Fruk! He thinks I saw something I shouldn't have.

Three flashes of light and something falling? The boy wasn't with the hikers, so what was I supposed to have seen?

"Shocking, how people they don't have time for their kids anymore, would you not say so?" Al says. "We are content to have

our kids sitting in front of the TV or computer hour after hour, but what we are really doing is throwing them to the wolves."

His voice snaps me back into my body. "What?"

"About the boy..."

"Easy to criticize when you don't have kids yourself," I say peevishly, staring at the smiling face of the boy. I could have stopped this if I had been paying attention yesterday. I tear the tabloid from the tangled web. Papers fly everywhere. Unfolding the paper to see his name, I let out a garbled groan. In the bottom corner is an inset photo of a man with the caption, "Hiker dies in climbing accident."

I jump to my feet and like a ball on the end of a string, Al jerks up off his chair. "I'll start tomorrow, if that's all right."

"You know the boy, yes?" He puts a comforting arm around my shoulder.

"No," I say, shrugging him off. "Mind if I use your washroom?"

"By all means, my sweet."

I grab hold of the knob on a door on the far side of the cupboards.

"Not that one, no, no. It leads to the basement," he says. "Keep going straight ahead."

As soon as I'm out of his sight, I hit myself over the head with the rolled up newspaper. A man got murdered and a boy kidnapped right under my nose, and I have to read the paper to tell me what I saw?! I give myself another whack, then freeze at the entrance of the bathroom.

Cherub-like angels with demon smiles look down from the ceiling and walls ablaze with red. The room is so narrow, the bathtub is facing end-on-end with the matching cerise toilet. Small drawers labeled, *EYEBALLS*, *TOE FUNGUS* and the like cover the side wall facing me.

As if I haven't seen enough sickening things the past two days.

I turn on my heels.

I feel like I'm still spinning when I arrive at Chanlee's modest two-story between my apartment in Marda Loop and Faule's place just a stone's throw from downtown. Fruk. The spare key she gave me doesn't open the lock. *What am I doing?* The door at the front of her house isn't the front door because the inside stairs face the door and will let out all the good energy. That's bad energy. So I run around to the front door at the back of the house. Shung chi.

Inside the house I stare at the white wall guarding the good chi from escaping through the doorway. Hot damn but that wall looks good. Marvelously plain and ordinary. Even at the speed I

gallop upstairs to Chanlee's bedroom, I'm comforted by the lack of clutter, unpainted wood, earthen tiles and concrete block walls throughout the house. I barge into her darkened room without knocking and zip up the bamboo blinds.

Chanlee and I go back farther than either of us cares to remember. We've eaten each other's mud pies, swapped bubblegum, secrets and exam answers, prom dates and keys. She's wanted to be a cop ever since her brother was stabbed to death in a crime that remains unsolved. My inspiration came from *Charlie's Angels*. She went right for it; I took the tourist route, and I still haven't arrived.

"Time to get up. I have to talk to you." I nudge her shoulder.

She pulls the covers over her head. "So you didn't get the job. You'll get another one." I grab the covers and try to yank them off her, but she holds on and comes with them. "You gone loco?"

"Maybe, but I'm not as crazy as the guy who's trying to kill me."

She stops resisting suddenly, and I fly back onto my butt.

"Sure it wasn't the fashion police who saw you running around with your pants tucked into your socks?"

"I was riding my bike. Never mind that, get a load of this." I pull the newspaper out of my pocket and throw it at her.

"So which one wants to kill you, the kid or the dead guy?"

"Do you mind, this is serious."

"It's also yesterday's news."

"My obituary isn't yesterday's news, but it will be if you don't quit farting around."

"You didn't push the guy off the mountain because he made fun of your paintings, now did you?"

"Chanlee!" She holds up her hands in surrender. "I saw him falling, and it's a sure thing he was pushed, or that psycho Darien wouldn't have tried to run me down or heave me off the mountain."

"I'm trying to picture this guy. He's a road hog, child-abducting, murdering, psycho hunk, right?" I stare at her in disbelief. "You're giving off sparks, kiddo." She tweaks my nose, then says in a slightly less obnoxious tone, "Ever seen him before?"

"No."

"Sure?"

"I'd remember," I say with enough irritation to get her smirking again. "He's a little taller than me, and trim in a wussy sort of way. He dyes his hair a florescent blond, and has this pouty lower lip--oh, and his lips are tattooed red sirens that advertise his elephant ears and honker any Roman would be proud of. But it's his eyes that really grab you. They're disturbing in their dark intent. And--"

"Uh-huh. Anything but hunky." She yawns.

"Will you wake up?" I grab her by the shoulders and gently shake her.

In a blink, the twinkle in her eyes disappears. "Just give me a chance to get a cola."

"You've sworn off the drink."

"I have. I only had thirty yesterday and none so far today."

She flies off the bed and out the room in two leaps, her long, black hair flowing in the wind.

After I've roused her out of the house and gotten her up to speed with the insanity that's been raining down on me the past couple of days, we jog towards the dappled path by the river escarpment. The mountain-cooled and sun-warmed air has a nip without much bite. A cyclist coming at us on a path that merges into ours, slows down to let us pass.

"Thanks," Chanlee and I say.

"Enjoy your run," the cyclist says with a wave.

"You know, Chanlee, we'd be living in Utopia if more people were like her."

"Uh-uh, bet it'd be against the law to have your feet on the ground when you have sex in a cyclist's paradise."

"As if you'd care as long as they didn't outlaw cola. But really, I'm being serious. The history of the world is the history of war. Would there be any wars, do you think, if we were all good to each other?"

Her reply is drowned out by the sound of a motor gaining on us from behind. A man with his backside flopping over the sides of his bike seat, whizzes by us as effortlessly as the motor attached to the back wheel.

"Ever try walking?" I yell out to him.

He turns around and mouths an obscenity at me.

"Come here and say that, if you can pry your butt off that thing," I shout.

"Leave him alone, he's not asking you to lug his fat around," Chanlee says, nearly pushing me off the path to make way for a cyclist passing on her left. The woman cyclist, looking fit and phony in her spandex shorts and brain bucket, snorts out the contents of her nose as she passes, leaving behind some of the slime on one of Chanlee's runners.

"Come back here and clean up your mess," Chanlee yells at her.

The cyclist lifts both hands off the bar and gives Chanlee a double salute.

"Stop slacking off!" Chanlee snaps at me. "There's a long light up ahead, and I'm going to--"

"Oh leave her alone, all she's doing is asking you to lug around her snot."

Jogging on the spot at an intersection later, Chanlee unzips a half-empty cola from her waist pack while we wait for the walk sign. She lives on the stuff yet her skin is silken, her bobbing ponytail is sleek and shiny and her body is strong and lithe. I'm super careful not to eat or drink anything that pollutes my body, yet my skin is forever sprouting freckles, and I've lost every argument I've ever had with my hair, so I just let my ponytail reconfigure itself into a squirrel's nest at the back of my head. As for my body, well, if they ever find a use for cellulite, I could make a fortune by selling my genetic code. Nothing less than torture and starvation keep the dimples from hell at bay.

"Rane, get real," she says, peering at me through her plastic sun visor, "you can't be sure the boy you saw in the car was the abduction victim. You said yourself that all you saw was his cap."

"His blue, peaked cap. And don't call him a victim like he's already a statistic. His name is Kenny Hironaka. Nobody seems to have seen him, except me. Find out what he was wearing."

"I suppose I could, but it would help if I knew the make of car your psycho was driving."

"I told you, it was a new, gold sedan import."

"That really narrows the field. You're supposed to be a car whiz," she says after taking a swig.

"You know I've never owned any car less than fifteen years old. If I don't fix 'em, I don't get to drive 'em. All the new ones look the same to me."

"Then how do you know it's an import?"

Two suits in a blah car slow down to admire the view. Their whistles both end in gnarled groans like someone just stole their jewels.

"Same to you," I shout.

Chanlee elbows me as I'm about to give them a raspberry. "Ignore 'em, Rane. They just recognized me. They're in vice."

"Figures. Now what were we talking about? Oh yeah, the psycho's car. I could tell it was an import by the size. New cars may all look the same, but I'd recognize him anywhere."

"If you're right about even half of this, Rane, we have to find him before he finds you."

The light changes and we start across, but a granny pulls up in a Jaguar and blocks the crosswalk. Jogging in place, I signal her to back up so we don't have to go into the intersection, but she gives me the finger. Chanlee holds up her badge to the driver's window and roars, "Move it, or this becomes a police matter!"

Drivers three cars away sit up at attention and Gran's Jag rolls back before Chanlee gets to the police part. With a glare

aimed at me, Granny shoots poisonous darts magnified threefold through her trifocals. I get both her middle fingers tapping on the steering wheel by giving her a refulgent smile. With the crosswalk cleared I can see the cars in the other two lanes. *Holy hooters!*

"Chanlee! That's him, the psycho." I point to the second car in the third lane.

"The dark blue Lexus?"

I nod.

The light changes.

Gran rolls down her window and whines, "Can I go now?"

"Nothing doing, Gran, we need your car." I reach in and open the door.

"Hooey," Gran says, in no way sweetly.

"No we don't, all we need is his license number," Chanlee says.

The cars in the through lanes gas it, with the psycho cocooned amongst them.

"I didn't get it, did you?" I ask.

Chanlee shakes her head. "Sure that's him? He's got his head turned from us. Looks like he's talking to someone. Kuan-yin! He's laughing, and he's got the kid with him. I can just see his cap." She whips out her badge again. "Outta the car, ma'am." She has to yell to be heard over the honking in the mounting lineup behind us.

Gran doesn't quibble with Chanlee's badge. She climbs out and I hop in, while Chanlee runs around to the passenger side.

"Just hold your horses, Gran, we'll be right back."

"Swing over to the far right lane," Chanlee urges.

"What do you think I'm trying to do? We're not in the movies, you know. I can't make all these cranky drivers vanish by cutting to the chase. At this time of day any one of them would run down God to gain an inch."

"Uh-huh, but at this speed we're going to lose him at the next light."

"The dashboard looks like a cockpit, well, hold on, because this baby's gonna fly."

I swerve into the middle lane. Low and mean, the Jag refuses to take no for an answer from anyone reluctant to yield. I veer and weave up to within an inch of the psycho, who's driving like he's a model citizen.

"It's definitely him. The ugly creep is better looking than I remember."

"Uh, I haven't gotten a good look at him. But I think I've seen him somewhere before. I know!" She smacks her thigh. "He models underwear."

"You wouldn't remember his face. Never mind him, look at the boy, I can't see him from here." The psycho turns our way, does a double take and--

"Brakes!" Chanlee points ahead.

The Jag stops at a touch. Mine and the car's ahead. The psycho suddenly hangs a right. I try to swing over to follow, but a road rager in a pickup has other ideas. He crowds me back into the middle lane.

Chanlee scrunches her face up against the windshield to see around the pickup. "Arggg!" She collapses back against the seat and shakes her head. "Neither of them is acting like they're in the throes of an abduction. For what it's worth, he's driving a Lexus with the vanity plate: *Nester*, in case--"

"What am I going to have to do to convince you he's a masher: deliver my corpse to the morgue?"

"Kuan-yin, I'll call this in--"

"No kidding."

--even though my guess is that if there's any killing around him, it's from the women stampeding to his door. You're acting like you've been smitten so hard you don't know which way to turn. Fitz is thataway." She points in the opposite direction of the psycho. Catching the sharp look I throw her, she downs more cola instead of pouring more fuel on the flames.

"Think Fitz'll loan me something to drive until Saturday?" I pat the dash. *Hate to part from you, sweetheart, you're such a lovely babe, but it's been nice knowing you.*

"Far as I know, you're the only one who ever says no in that relationship."

"Shows you how little you know."

CHAPTER 2

"No!" I tell Fitz as he walks into my apartment.

"What do you mean *no*?"

"How many meanings do you think *no* has?"

"All I did was open the door and step in. Couldn't you at least give me a hint?" He looks around for somewhere to put his motorcycle helmet.

"Make yourself comfortable. I'll be right back." I zip into my bedroom to change out of my tracksuit into something more impregnable. He's wearing soft black leather that I can feel with my naked eyes. And I don't have to guess what's underneath. Problem is, I don't know how to say no to myself when he's wearing it because on him leather is foreplay. I glance in the mirror. Shit. My cheeks are rosy. I need some serious backup to keep myself from climbing all over him. I've got to concentrate on staying out of the hands of the masher. The psycho, I mean.

Safely encased in a red and white romper, I saunter into the living room.

"What happened to the little table that used to be here?" he asks, with his helmet still tucked under his arm. He leans against the living room wall, turning the drab, barren wall into a work of art, and he points to an empty spot by the door.

"It's over there." I point to the tubular steel table I've converted into a weight rack.

He looks disapprovingly around the room devoid of furniture, but chock-full of exercise equipment. "I remember when this wasn't a gym."

When I returned from Europe last year, my parents gladly unloaded their unwanted furniture in my apartment. But their basement is full again.

He places his helmet on the floor then strips off his jacket, revealing a white T-shirt. So revealing that my heart skips along with my eyes from ab to ab.

I defy the world to show me a guy who looks better in black leather. Thighs to die for. He turns around and bends over to get something out of his jacket. I'm not looking. No way. Not me. *Be still my shameless heart.* If all used car salesmen were even half as sexy, the world wouldn't stand a hope in hell. We'd all be driving clunkers.

He steps towards me. "So what's this about you trying to date up some schmuck in the mountains? You're supposed to feed the tourists, not eat them."

I step aside. "I helped him get lost. Never mind, I almost got a date with death."

"You look alive enough for me."

Uh-oh, I can see my naked body in his eyes. I hop onto my treadmill, which takes me nowhere fast. "About the car, are you going to lend me one until Saturday or what?"

"Yeah, I've got something hot in mind for my cutie-patootie," he says, closing in on me. He wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me to him. My feet dangle off the ground. It's great being around a guy who doesn't make me feel like an Amazon. If only he didn't have that killer smile. Guess I'll just have to wipe it off his face.

With my lips. Amongst other things.

Ahh. The phone rings. Grrr.

He reaches around me, picks it up off my workout bench and puts the phone up to my ear. "It's Chanlee. She's calling from work," he says, his husky voice dropping another octave.

"There is no Lexus registered to anyone with a *Nester* license," she says without a trace of regret.

"You must have read it wrong. Maybe it was Hester or Pester."

"Uh-uh, it started with an N."

"How about *Nest* or *Near* or--"

"Nope. I guess that's it. "

Fitz undoes the large gold buckle on my fake belt.

Undeterred, he tries unbuttoning my fake blouse. The buttons are real, but they don't open up anything. He gives me a pleading look. All innocence, I shrug and hop onto the treadmill.

"Aw, come on, Chanlee. We didn't dream up the Lexus or the kid in it," I say.

"What do you expect me to do? I haven't been assigned to the Hironaka case."

Fitz leans into me and the phone. "Hey, Chanlee, you might want to try *N-e-v-a-r*. I've got a customer with that name." He cruises around the machine to get at my romper from behind.

"As in Stefan Nevar?! I seriously doubt it. He's a mouthpiece for moneyed offenders," Chanlee says. "You know, don't you, Rane, that none of this makes sense? You say that the owner of the Lexus killed the hiker, but you also said that he must have seen you watching with your binoculars. He couldn't have been up on the mountain and harassing you at the same time."

"So unless you pull the trigger yourself, you can't have anyone killed?"

"Okay, okay, I'll try *Nevar*."

I hang up, and Fitz turns off the treadmill. "Got a minute, Sugar?" he asks.

"Well, Speedy, if that's only how long it's going to take...." I turn on the treadmill.

"Uh, is there anything left in the bedroom resembling a bed, or is this as comfortable as it gets around here?"

"Who wants comfortable? I want challenges, excitement."

"In that case, this'll do." He jumps onto the treadmill.

Pumped up, my body jumps at the challenge.

With the night air blowing the scent of him all over me, we ride tight on his solo-seat bike born the same year as my mother. One of the bays in his six-car garage opens, and we glide inside. I hop off the bike and notice in the light that it's sparkling turquoise. I rub my hand along the fancy chrome on the rear fender.

He takes off his helmet, but I keep mine on. "Why don't you let me ride this? It's a bit of a puff for you, isn't it?"

He gives me one of his how can you be so stupid looks. "This is a Hydra-Glide."

"Geezer-Glide, you mean. Come on," I say, hopping back on the bike. "I'll take the bugs in the mouth and you cover my butt for once."

"You know the deal, you don't ride any of my bikes till you learn how to ride."

I look around at his bevy of sleeping beauties, all classic, stylish, ageless, pampered and cherished. "So which one are you going to loan me?" My gaze lingers on a baby blue T-Bird.

"This." He reaches under a workbench against the wall, and picks up a metal box. "The perfect thing for my cutie-patootie."

"Get serious. And stop calling me that."

"*Oui, ma choute*." Holding the box, he pulls out a handle and unfolds a riding platform. The silly thing is a scooter. "You're looking at the next generation of transportation. You can take it anywhere. Feel how lightweight it is." He holds it out to me. I fold my arms. "Look, Rane, you only need it to go to and from work for the next two days. I'll help you get something more your style at the auction."

"Yeah, with doors, a roof and four wheels. What good is this piece of junk going to do me if it rains?" I tap on it with my foot.

"You can leave your helmet on," he sings, snapping his fingers and gyrating his pelvis.

"Jerk." I laugh in spite of myself.

I've got rocks for brains, trying to negotiate with him when he's dressed to kill. That's what comes of a relationship that started in a graveyard. We met at a scrap metal yard filled to the sky with

cars, most of which had died violently. You'd have to go to the ends of the earth to find anybody who knows more about cars than Fitz. For me, all that trivia is so much brain dust. But he rides his passion into successful business ventures that make him so frukin' happy, he goes around 24-7 with this goofy grin. Even when he frowns, the corners of his mouth turn up. There's something totally irresistible about a man who doesn't need you to make him happy.

He steps onto the scooter and carves ever-tightening circles around me as he says, "Besides, it's not going to rain."

I jump onto his back. Since he's taking me for a ride anyway, I might as well enjoy it.

Back at my apartment, Chanlee gives me a shout.

"I've got some good news, not so good news and some shitty news," she says. "We have a match on the license. The Lexus belongs to a fifty-nine year old woman."

"And the good news?" I put the phone on conference and unfold my scooter.

"That's it. The not so good news is that Fitz was right. Because her son is the lawyer, Stefan Nevar, Q.C. You know, Queen's Council, as in don't mess with this guy. And get this, he drives a gold Prius."

"I knew it!" I cut a figure eight around my treadmill and cycle. "But if he's Stefan Nevar, then who or what is Darien?" She responds with silence. "So instead of a small fish, we have a big one to fry."

"I'd like to see anyone fry Stefan Nevar without getting burned."

"I know he's dangerous."

"Uh-huh."

"So I should just roll over and play dead?!" I zip into the kitchen and hover in front of the fridge. The scooter doesn't back up, but it turns on a dime.

"Better that than making an ass of yourself."

"I know what I saw."

"And I don't? Guys like Nevar end up as judges. You'd have to secure an ironclad case against him before I'd cross swords with anyone as sharp as him. Even then....He's a real killer in court. My reach doesn't extend to his power circle, but believe me it's going to take more than you've got to screw his reputation. No foolin', he tears witnesses apart, and he only uses words. You can imagine what he'll do if we--you try to--"

"So it's his reputation over my word."

"What word? You said yourself that you can't identify the kid because all you saw was his cap. You also said you never saw

anyone being pushed off the mountain, all you saw was something falling."

"It wasn't you Nevar was trying to cream with his Prius, Chanlee."

"Is that what he was trying to do?" She hears me scoffing and adds, "If you remember correctly, you only thought that after you read the tabloid."

"You keep this up, and you'll have yourself convinced that I tried to run *him* down." I hang up, wheel into the bedroom and crash into the closet door.

She's right, dammit. I have to get the kind of foolproof evidence against him that no sleazy lawyer can bend and twist into a joke that gets thrown out of court. Who am I trying to kid? I'm no detective, I never made the grade. But where is Kenny Hironaka? The police haven't found him. And why? Because they're looking everywhere except the turf claimed by our esteemed psycho, Stefan Nevar, Q.C. Tomorrow, I'll pay him a visit as someone else. He was hurtling down the mountain too fast to get my license, and the Jag wasn't mine, so he has no way of knowing who I am. Except my first name.

Better make sure I keep it that way.

Okay. Time for some serious exercise. Fitz was almost right about my bed being gone. All that's left of it is an air mattress that I move out of the way in the closet to pull out a stack of interlocking foam mats. I arrange them on the floor, which is empty except for an alarm clock stashed in the corner out of harm's way. Then I grab some sheets of brown paper from the top of the dresser in the closet and hang the sheets at various heights from a line I have rigged up to circle the room. They're only paper targets, but what the hell, they don't cry out when I rip them apart.

I warm up, turn out the light and start kicking. The darkness makes my wits nimble. Round kick, side kick. Contact. The knife edge of my foot rips through the paper. Am I spooking myself or is someone, something scratching on my window? I peek out behind the curtains. Nothing. Just the cars asleep in the parking lot and someone dropping his garbage in the bin by the alley. I take a deep breath and pick up on my round kicks. More scratching noises. Someone's definitely out on my balcony. Nevar must have found out where I live and has sent his goons after me. I race to the living room, fill a cookie sheet with water, place it beneath the sliding door, empty a bag of marbles in front of the cookie sheet, grab a fifteen pound dumbbell, open the door quickly and step aside.

A thump. Silence. Splash! Marbles scattering and an unearthly shriek.

With nothing to swing at.

I flick the light switch and burst out laughing. A very wet, scared black cat with a white smile and white paws that look like boots screeches around the room, looking frantically for somewhere to hide. A silver barrel swings wildly from its plaid collar.

"It's okay, little guy, you've picked the right home to invade because I have some cat crunchies left over from Sheeka's visit."

He screeches louder and flies out the door.

In the morning, I fly out of the Doré on my scooter. I overshoot the turn onto the front sidewalk and careen into my neighbor's girlfriend about to get into his black SUV. Quick as a whip, she flicks the door between us, and I bounce back on my butt. Instead of helping me up or asking if I'm okay, she checks herself over. Although her face is turned away from me, I can't see all that much for her to bitch about. Decker out in brown, she runs a hand up one of her knee-high leather stiletto boots, straightening her mesh hose as her hand reaches up under her leather miniskirt scarcely bigger than her four inch high studded belt. Then she straightens a wrinkle in her ultra snug turtleneck top, shimmering like morphing glass, and finishes off with a careful check of her short, blond copper-streaked hair brushed up at the back. A sly smile of satisfaction amuses her lips, and she steps up into the SUV.

I shake my head. She's covered from head to foot, yet there's nothing left for the imagination.

Maybe that's a good thing. Some imaginings are totally wacked. Like all the colors screaming for my attention as I fold up the scooter at Faule's. It's not going to be easy working in the whimsical side of hell. But Al's quiet demeanor gives me hope I can see this through. God knows I could use the money.

"Here's your newspaper," I say, offering it to him. "I ran off with it yesterday. Sorry."

He's wearing a loosely-knit brown sweater that makes him look like an unraveling ball of yarn. An arm pops out from behind the ball and shoves the paper back at me. "Keep it. My yes. You will save me the trouble of throwing it out."

A fly buzzes around me, and I swing at it with the paper.

Al looks at me like I'm a monster. "Let me take care of the fly, yes?" He picks up a fuchsia and orange vase in the foyer table beside us and studies the fly intently. Then he swoops down on it. Just like that, the fly's in the vase with his hand clamped over it. I open the door, and he smiles as he watches the fly soaring to freedom.

I stare at him in amazement. "The fly saw you coming, so how did you trap it?"

"The same way you tried to kill it with the paper. When you are trying to save a life, you are very careful not to make the wrong move, yes?"

"Meaning I hesitate?"

He nods. "However, when you are trying to kill something, you strike without thinking about it, yes? Clearly then, if you want to save a life, you have to do it without any hesitation at all."

"Interesting," I say, smiling at him in admiration. "My brother would love to meet you. No kidding. He's nuts about spiders and insects, and I do mean nuts. He's in Brazil identifying and cataloguing as many species as he can, because he's afraid they'll disappear along with the rainforests and be lost to the universe forever."

He nods in agreement or sympathy, I can't tell which.

Following him into the kitchen, I find that the table has been cleared of everything except a vase filled with those stinking glass flowers. I preferred the mess.

"This way, yes?" Al says, exiting the kitchen through the doorway leading to the bathroom. "I will show you where you will be working." The bathroom is straight ahead, but he hangs a right, stops at a doorway at the end of a short hall and motions me to enter the room before he does. I turn sideways to squeeze by him.

The walls and closet are covered in white primer, and a drop sheet blankets the floor of the small, narrow room.

"This side of the house is awfully narrow like--"

"The foyer closet is on the other side, yes?" He touches the inside wall facing the living room. "Then the entrance itself and then the living room." I nod and give the room a questioning look. "It will be painted and furnished for you by Monday. Oh yes."

We return to the kitchen, where he pulls out a laptop from a bottom cupboard. I should ask if I can work outside on the patio. *Now, how can I put this delicately?*

"I would like you to start in right with the library research. You can do that here." He places the laptop on the table, and my spirits sink. "On the other hand, you can take this with you and go to the central library, yes? Your choice." He retrieves it from the table and hands it to me.

"Hmm, you're going to trust me with this computer?"

"My goodness, yes. Why not? Most people have a dishonest streak, so when an honest person comes along, they stand out, would you not say so?"

I give him a blank stare. "You don't really believe that?"

"Yes, my sweet, I do. I believe you are honest."

"Thank you, but that's not what I meant. You can't really believe that most people are dishonest. It only stands to reason that

if most of us were liars and cheats our society wouldn't work. Civilization would descend into chaos."

"Society works to the extent that we acknowledge our dishonesty and build in precautions against it. Oh yes. Would you not say there are more keys than humans in existence today?"

I start to answer then think better of it. "You're trying to get me to imagine a world without keys. But keys don't necessarily mean that people are dishonest, it could just mean that we're paranoid."

"I daresay that going naked in the world without taking precautions is hardly sane either, yes? Mind, how far do you think you would get? No, no. Try imagining a world in which no one lies or cheats. How many lawyers would there be? How many banks? How many police?" There's an undercurrent to this conversation that's making me uneasy. I put down the laptop and fold my arms. He continues talking but lightens his tone. "I do not know about you, but I am not sure I would like to live in that world because I agree with the wag who said the first lie was the first creative act."

"That's awfully cynical."

"Cynical?" He says it like he's amused by the word.

"Goodness no. Far from it. Who would you say is more creative, Sherlock Holmes or Professor Moriarty?"

Sherlock instantly comes to mind, but no. Nevar paints a picture of himself as someone who never goes outside the law. The picture is so well executed, so creative in its slight of hand, that right minded people near and far admire him for it. "You want me to say that Moriarty is more creative because he draws his ideas from outside the line. But that's not really what he does. He takes advantage of the fact that there are so few people who are as dishonest as himself."

He looks at me long and hard without blinking, his putty face scrunched up. Then it explodes into an expansive smile. "There is nothing like a robust discussion to start the day, yes?" He rubs his hands together in delight, as though he's getting a kick out of being beaten at his own game. It's difficult to tell for sure, though, because his eyes are ever in shadow. "Until tomorrow then?"

"That's it? No instructions?"

"Everything you need to know is inside your laptop, yes? Toodleoo." And he says it like he means *everything*.

On my way to the library, I swing over to Nevar's office. Problem is, when I got up this morning, I didn't know who I wanted to be today, and I still don't. *Mary Muggins*? No, sounds like someone who kisses pictures of her grand kids every time she opens the fridge. *Sylvia Branco*? *Melissa Burns*? No. No.

I open the heavy wood door to his office and step into a forest of rich cherry-colored wood with the wild beauty of bubinga. A receptionist with polished brass hair and a face made of cracked cement, guards the offices beyond. I whistle under my breath and march forward, leaving behind the towering columns flanking the doorway like sentries. Guess I wasn't all that quiet, because like a cat being called via a high frequency whistle, the receptionist turns her ears and eyes in my direction but stays where she is. Before I can say anything, she motions me to retreat to a waiting area on the far side of the room, nestled discretely amongst palms and guarded by more fake bubinga columns. All very hush, hush.

The silent vigil is broken by a man and woman joining us from a doorway behind the reception desk. The woman looks like one of the columns, while he's the pedestal holding up the rear. She starts to speak, but the receptionist stops her with the imperious show of one hand.

"Excuse me, I'll be with you in a moment. I am about to help this young gentleman," the receptionist says and casts her gaze past the couple towards me.

"If you're referring to me," I say, joining them at the desk, "I didn't come here for a sex change." I look at the man dressed in an ill-fitting grey suit. "Now I ask you, would you wear my coral skort and jacket?" He gives me a crazy grin.

"I'm terribly sorry," the receptionist says adjusting her pop-bottle glasses. "But I'm legally blind in my left eye. You'll have to forgive me. How may I help you...?"

"Hansen. Linda Hansen. Is the sultan in?"

Without cracking anymore of the cement on her face, she says, "If you mean Mr Nevar, he's in court today." She picks up a manila envelope, opens it and pulls out a hand addressed blue envelope.

"In that case, I'd like to make an appointment."

She doesn't check with the computer. All she does is stare at me, her eyes popping out through her glasses. I catch a glimpse of the address before she stamps *Personal and Confidential* on the blue envelope then hides it from my sight. She keeps watching me. Guess it's still my turn to speak.

"You see, I was in a car accident."

"Mr Nevar doesn't practice personal injury law."

I look at her as if to say, *I know that*. "So I have to get around on this." I hold up my scooter. She stares at me like she can see my meaning. 20-20. So I say, "He wants to see me more than I want to see him. Just tell his majesty that I saw the fall in the mountains. And if he's interested in a guided tour he can page me at the central library."

At the library, I don't encounter any problems with the research on Caravaggio. It's pretty well standard fare that any undergraduate art history student could find casually browsing the net. Faule must be testing me, but Caravaggio is not one of my favorite artists. Too much of his work is crudely disguised narcissism. Just the same, I can't resist the chance to strut my stuff by giving Faule more than he's asking for, like the name of the guy Caravaggio murdered.

After 6:00, I call it a wrap. The only person paged was a Lydia Cranston. The name keeps echoing in my head. *Lydia Cranston, Linda Hansen, Linda Cranston, Lydia Hansen*. On the way out, I stop at the Security desk guarded by a woman with a thick neck and an upper lip sore-red from too many waxings.

"I'm Lydia Cranston," I say with more confidence than I feel. "Did anyone leave a message for me?"

The veins in her neck bulge and her eyebrows fuse together. I keep back in case she decides to bite off my head. "Oh, yes. The sultan says he would be pleased to meet with you," she says in a sweet, dainty voice. I try to look dignified while my resolve does flip-flops. He's setting me up. "Hope you haven't missed your meeting," she resumes apologetically. "We did try to page you."

"Everything's fine, thank you."

Liar. He's playing cat and mouse with me, and I don't have backup. If Chanlee knew what I was up to, she'd act to protect *him* from my "mistaken beliefs." Mind you, I'm safer from him on his turf than I am anywhere else, because he can't afford to have any suspicion cast in his direction. Just the same, I'd better tell Fitz where I am.

I jerk back my hand as I'm about to press the buzzer beside the closed door of Nevar's office, because I hear the door click open. Where is the surveillance camera? Damned if I can see anything resembling one. Then a woman's voice says, "Good evening, Ms Hansen. First door on your right, then second door on your left." No one is in the reception area, but I can feel gazing eyes upon me. The ceiling lights have been dimmed, turning the dark-grained wood a blood red that gives me the willies.

The directions take me to another forest of fake bubinga with variegated wood sculptures embedded into the spaces on the walls not occupied by postmodernist paintings. The lighting in this room proudly proclaims the beauty of the wood, leaving no shadows deep enough for me to hide in.

I'm the only one in the room, but I'm not alone.

Fruk, how long is it going to take him to look me over? Impatiently, I unfold my scooter and try practicing sudden turns and stops without breaking my neck. I scoot up to the second entrance

to see what's on the other side, but overshoot my mark as I turn. I reach out to push away from the door. It opens. I grab the edge of the door, but the scooter spins out from under me, leaving me to swing as I look into Nevar's startled eyes.

"Well, well, if it isn't Bambi," he says, recovering so quickly that his surprise turns to sneering laughter before he's finished speaking. Leaving me suspended, he strides to his desk, which doesn't have a shred of paper on it. His navy suit makes him look more like a kook surfboard hustler than someone who rides a gun.

I take my time getting back to the scooter, spinning its wheels like crazy against the front leg of his desk.

"What did you see?" he asks like he actually expects me to cough up my soul.

I sit down in a carved barrel chair impossible to get comfortable in. A beautiful torture chamber. Instead of answering him on command, I give myself some time to sense him out by looking around the room--nice and slow with a jaundiced eye--before settling my gaze on him. Strange, but now that he's in the room, I feel all alone. "You've done this place up like a confessional," I remark, "but big and over-the-top to fit the crime, I suppose?"

He leans back in his lived-in leather chair. "Big enough for you?"

I shrug. "The only ones I've been in have been empty, except for me and a multitude of demons."

"What do you have for me?" He picks up a letter opener that looks enough like a dagger to make my skin prick. He flips the opener end over end over end on the desk.

"I saw an idiot with shit for brains try to run me off the road."

He draws in his pouty lower lip then says, "I was in a hurry to get back to Calgary."

"You say *Calgary* like you're a tourist. You're an import like your car?"

"I was born east of Vulcan. But I don't have the time or inclination to chat or play guessing games with you." He talks like every word he utters is worth a \$100 a pop. Except that the sum total of everything he has to say is contained in his pauses. "What do you have--"

"Thanks for granting me the right to speak as long as I agree with everything you say. But I'm not here to play *your* games."

"What do you have, and how much do you want for it?"

My mouth drops open, not like a confused mouse, but close. "You think I'm here to extort money out of you?!"

"If I thought you were trying to do that, we wouldn't be having this discussion. The police aren't the only ones who pay for information. What do you have?" My feet tap out my exasperation.

His comes out in an exaggerated sigh. But he's just given me a window of opportunity I'd be a thimble-wit not to smash through.

"Actually, I'm here about the boy."

He starts, rising out of his chair. Then he looks at his desk like he wishes he had some paper to shuffle. Such an obvious display of guilt on his part?! It has to be put on for my benefit. He needn't bother. I already think he's a fork-tongued frukhead.

"How did y--?" He stops himself and sinks into his chair.

"Keep your money, I want information," I say quickly, before his face hardens into a mask again.

"You're talking trade?" It's hard to tell from his blanked out face and flat tone whether he's asking a question or agreeing. I cross my fingers under the desk. "So shoot."

I shake my head because this is a duel where the one who shoots first loses. That's what happens when two cats play with no mouse. "I'll bite if you come across with the goods."

"No info, no deal."

I stand up. "You know I have information you want, but what have you got?"

"You understand that I won't give you anything that will jeopardize the investigation?" I nod. "What would you like to know?"

Everything. Like what have you done to him and where are you hiding him?

"What was Kenny wearing the day he disappeared?"

"Brown hiking boots, black cargo pants, yellow fleece top with a V-neck, long sleeves and a black number five on the front. He also had his navy and grey hooded jacket with him, however, he might have stuffed it in his matching backpack."

"No cap?" I sit down.

"Not that we know of." He looks at me like I'm the one holding out on him. "I'll get confirmation." I nod. He leans back and strokes the dagger. "Even when you agree with me, you never lose that disapproving look." He stands up abruptly with his shoulders square and walks around the desk like he enjoys being tall. I shift my feet ready to strike at him. He takes hold of my right wrist and clamps the opener into my palm. "To keep you and your demons company while I'm gone. I'll only be a few minutes." And he disappears.

I eye the exits.

No one is stopping me from leaving, but I can't shake the feeling that I'm trapped. The hair on my arms stands straight up. Suddenly, the door opens again and he walks in saying, "Kenny may have been wearing a cap."

"What color?" To disguise my apprehension, I pretend to be preoccupied with something in my bag.

"His blue one is missing. But no one has reported seeing him wearing it that day." He sits down on the edge of the desk, so close to me his thigh brushes mine. I don't move, but everything in me recoils. "How did you know about the cap?"

"Let me put it in a way you can understand: You want anything from me, you have to give me something in return."

"We both know what I've given you. What have you given me?"

I recap what I saw happen on Mt. Rundle.

"Are you sure it was a camera?" he asks.

"This sure." I reach into my bag for a sketch I did of the camera and hold it up to him with the drawing facing me. He tries to take it, but I refuse to release it. "Not so fast. What do I get in return?"

"What are you after?"

"A transcript of Kenny's last email to his abductor."

He laughs derisively.

"Okay. Then who are you working for?"

"I never said I was working for anyone."

"You're deliberately being obtuse."

"And your description of the two men left on the mountain after the fall wasn't deliberately vague?"

"I told you, the taller guy in the green jacket was wearing a hat and had the camera to his face; and the guy he was shooting had his back to me."

"You'll have to come up with something better than that. And this." He snatches the drawing from my hand.

"I will."

"So you think you can do what the police and others can't." He folds his arms, tucking the sketch behind him.

"The girl who was kidnapped last year wasn't found by the police or some hotshot lawyer, she was found by a woman out walking her dog."

"Describe yourself."

I look down at my clothes, but he takes my chin in his hand and lifts my face. "No cheating and no stalling." I push his hand away instead of smacking him.

"Uh, white female, six feet, medium build, twenty-something," I pause to gulp, "brown hair and eyes."

Since I totally underwhelmed him, I say, "Now you describe the woman you accosted in the mountains."

"I never accosted anyone--" I push his face away from me. "--Your description will suffice."

"Hah, I knew you couldn't do it."

"Tan hiking sandals, blue jeans, no belt, collarless white top with large sunflowers, gold tone watch worn on the right wrist, gold loop earrings, freckles, thirty--"

"Thirty? You think I look thirty?!"

"How about twenty-nine and thirteen months?"

This is one busy beaver who deserves to be damned to hell.

My lips are so tight they feel like they'll crack if I speak, but I say with my jaw cracking, "So even when you guess you cheat."

"Who's guessing?"

"Neither of us, obviously." I gather up my bag and computer.

"Surely you want to hear my description of your painting?"

"Go to hell." I head for the door.

"Bambi?" I keep going. "You're not going to get far without your vacuum cleaner."

Collecting my scooter, I look him in the eyes and say, "Go ahead and laugh." He smiles at me with repulsive sweetness. "But if you think my *Dueling Peaks* was the best part, wait till you get a load of my *Three Men on the Mountain*. With any luck, when you see them you'll die laughing."

Downstairs in the lobby my thoughts are overtaken by the scent of him. I turn around, but he's not there. A security guard distracts me by hailing me over to his desk. "Need you to sign out, ma'am."

He shoves a clipboard at me and goes back to watching TV. "Makes you sick what you see on television these days." He shakes his head slowly, his shark blue uniform deepening the sadness in his eyes. "Children not even safe in their own homes. Poor fella."

"Are they talking about the kidnapping?" I ask, straining to see the TV on the other side of the transaction counter.

He nods then resumes shaking his head in dismay.

I race around to the other side of the desk, and he turns up the volume.

Kenny's photo flashes up on the screen. His brown eyes sparkle with playful curiosity and his smile would light up any heart. Or break it. The newscaster gives a description of what Kenny was wearing the last time he was seen. Nevar's description, word for word. *Oh hell!* He's been jerking my chain.

CHAPTER 3

Beneath that polished, diamond-hard surface is pure turd. The rat gave me zip all. Intentionally. But unintentionally, Nevar told me that the camera is important, and because he never asked for my number I know he's been violating my privacy. What did I give him without meaning to? Maybe I shouldn't have told him about the *Three Men on the Mountain*. But that's insurance, to keep him believing I'm worth more alive than dead. What am I worrying about? He'll never find the paintings. If I know him--and I'd better if I'm going to survive--he'll search everywhere except where I've hidden them.

In one way, it was a good thing my beater conked out, because doing the sketches has seared the images in my mind. I could pick out any one of those guys in a crowd. Or police lineup.

One thing's certain: Nevar is never going to give me anything that doesn't end up as a date on my tombstone. Anything I want from him I'll have to take. Like right now at his place while he's not there. The blue envelope on his receptionist's desk was addressed to him at 400 something Belisaire Place in Belavista.

Belavista is a hidden jewel of architect designed houses nestled amongst old growth trees on the east side of the escarpment. There's a noticeable lack of flash, because the people who live there don't like to attract attention to their wealth. Instead of sidewalks, they prefer chamomile growing between the cracks in the asphalt, and manicured flora as territorial markers instead of fences. Even the ubiquitous, lit security system signs are tucked discretely in flower beds. It's uphill all the way, but my little put-put chugs along undeterred. I pretty much get the whole road to myself because they keep unwanted cars and the riffraff in them from contaminating their paranoia by requiring a permit to park on the street.

When I reach the four hundred block, I tuck the scooter and computer case under an unlimbed blue spruce with the best view of the curved street. This tree and the cement box house it protects might be his, but there are no lights on, so I run from one lit house to the next doing some serious window peeping. It would help if I knew what I was looking for. The woman scolding the two kids in the Tudor house could be his wife and kids for all I know. Hell, what am I doing besides freezing my buns off out here? This morning,

clouds spanned an arch in the sky, opening the way for the dry, warm chinook winds the mountains breathe on us. That was this morning. Now the temperature is falling precipitously.

That's it.

The stakeout can wait until tomorrow. In the light of day I won't arouse much suspicion by knocking on doors, pretending to be looking for my lost cat. I retrieve my things from under the tree and step onto the curb.

Headlight beams light the horizon downhill. Then they disappear. Probably into a garage. Suddenly, a car shrouded in darkness appears around the curve. I dive back into the tree. Ouch! A thousand sharp needles stab at me. The car rolls up to within ten feet of me. I crouch back. The driver cuts the motor, gets out and walks towards me. Because there's no sidewalk, he comes close enough for me to trip him. Then again, he's close enough to strangle me. Who the hell is it? The drooping branches hiding me shield his face. He steals across the street to avoid being seen under the street lamp, but I catch a glimpse of him before he ducks behind a shrub. The nimble hulk from the mountain! I knew it! *Never, you monster, have you already killed Kenny?*

What's going on? There aren't any lights on in the house behind the shrub. I leap out from the spruce and just as quickly leap back. Ow! Someone is approaching on foot. A woman with a towering beehive pauses to let her dog tinkle his golden drops on the lamppost. At least I think it's a dog. It looks more like a woolly mammoth.

"Come on, Bobby, be a good boy and wee-wee for Mommy," the woman pleads. "Mommy's got a treat for you when you're done. Please, baby, it's going to snow."

Bobby moseys along from fallen leaf to leaf, covering about a foot a minute with his nose. He doesn't seem to know what a straight line is, so it's an even bet whether he'll pick up my scent. His floppy ears perk up like I'm his promised treat, and he starts to growl.

Uh-oh.

She peers in my direction. "Silly boy, that's just a car. Who could be visiting that fat cow Mavis at this hour, I wonder?" She follows his lead straight for me. "Humph! No permit." Suddenly, she reins him in. "Oh my hair! It's starting to snow, Bobby-poo." Big, fat lazy flakes, shimmering in the light, float down without a care in the world because there's no wind to swirl them into a frenzy. She turns back, but Bobby squats down because he's decided it's time to do his business.

Fine and dandy for him because he's got a heavy coat on. I'm the one freezing.

While I wait, I rummage through my bag for something to use as a weapon. My exercise band is the best I can come up with. No, my fingers fumble onto something hard and sharp. Nevar's letter opener?! He planted it on me. Why? No time to argue with myself, Bobby and Lady Beehive have made themselves scarce.

Before dashing across the street, I check out the car. It's a Malibu with a *Baby On Board* sign in the back window. Who's he trying to kid? With his mug that sign is as good as advertising the car is stolen.

The Hiker turned into the house with the massive stone gable. So why aren't there any lights on? I tread carefully around to the terrace at the back and come upon a French door ajar. I'd have to be a raving lunatic to go inside. Yet Kenny deserves better than my cowardice. With the letter opener tucked in at my waist, I slip inside the house. Hell, it's darker in here than outside. I let out my breath slowly, tiptoe forward and crash! I'm flat on my face. Some idiot parked his shoes by the door.

No point in pussyfooting around, they know I'm here. Taking a deep breath, I can feel my lungs filling with evil.

Time to leave.

As I'm about to lift myself up, the sounds of footsteps come from my right--soft, careful and swift. All my senses come alert to the scent of him. Nevar. No time to even think about hesitating. I grab his calf and yank hard, throwing him off balance. Then I spring up, shift my weight to my back leg and sweep my kicking leg around to plow into him, quickly following through by driving my cocked foot into his stomach. His black outline buckles as he expels the air I've knocked out of him. *Much better than paper*. I slam my heel into the back of his head, and he crashes to the floor.

My ears perk up at the sound of a grunt followed by a moan on the other side of the room. What room? Is this the kitchen? A shadow rips past me and merges with the door. Following, I see the Hiker disappearing around the side of the house. No point in chasing him, I can't outrun his Chev.

I go back inside, roll Nevar over and grab him by the shirt. Or is it a shirt? By the piping and large buttons, I'd say it's a pajama top.

"Where do you have Kenny? Huh, Nevar?" I shake him to no avail. Then I slap his face. No deal. He's out to lunch, twittering with the angels. Not bloody likely. He's cross-examining God to get a better deal for Satan. "Want more time to score some really big points with your boss? Huh, Champ?" I let go of his pj's and his ignominious head cracks against the stone floor.

The way the Hiker hightailed it out of here, I'd say that he didn't get what he came for: Kenny. I pull out my dagger. My fingers

stick to the metal. Hell, Nevar's nose must be bleeding. I can't stand the feel of any part of him on me.

I grope my way past an island and bump into a table. Aha, I'm in the kitchen. I step around the table and crash! I'm on the floor again. Only this time, I'm lying crosswise on someone's chest, and the left side of my face is grazing the sharp, wet blade of a knife. I spring up in horror before my blood completely curdles. Then I run to the fridge and force it open with my foot to shine some light on whose blood I'm sharing. *Bloody hell*. It's the short hiker. With his throat slit.

His unseeing eyes stare frantically at my feet as I look through his jacket pocket for I.D. Nevar moans and stirs. The light! He'll see me. I kick the fridge shut. He groans as he struggles to get up.

I slip by him to the door.

Outside, I shiver, not from the cold, but from the evil in such a beautiful, sparkling night filled with millions of pristine jewels descending from the heavens onto the grass and flowers. I scoop up the downy flakes and the blood from my hands sullies the sparkle then extinguishes it.

It doesn't feel good to be home. The letter opener flew out of my hand when I fell over the hiker. I should have kicked Nevar back to La-la Land then scoured the place for Kenny. My arms are sore from lugging the scooter, and I'm hurting all over from kicking myself all the way here. I'm safe, and Kenny isn't because I didn't hesitate to save my own butt. I'm about as useful as a tornado in a teacup.

I head straight for the shower, climb out after fifteen minutes then climb in again. What the hell, no amount of scrubbing can wash away the knowledge that I've been touched by his filth. Stepping out of the shower, I hear a shuffling noise coming from the balcony. I throw on a robe and dart to my bedroom window. Nothing. Like hell. Nevar's out there, I know he is. I can feel the air thickening with evil. No fruking traps for him this time. I'm going to kick the maggot off my balcony.

Ready to strike with my whole body, I slide open the door and leap out.

The only thing moving is the snow. I thrust out my arm and the flakes, curled up like boats, sail down onto my fist. Here I am, trying to punch out snowflakes. What's that moving by the garbage bin? I peer through the snow glowing amber as it falls undisturbed under the alley lamp by the bin.

Rustling sounds come from my kitchen. Creeping inside, I see a shadow move by the counter on the other side of the stove. I leap up to fell him with a low flying front kick. I land on my feet

without making contact with anything but the air. I flick on the lights, and the black cat smiles at me from the countertop.

"You again?" He gives me a plaintive meow and sticks his rump in my face. "That one doesn't work with me, pal." I turn him around, and he butts his head against me. "I'm too bummed out to argue with you. But tomorrow you're out of here. Got that?" He smiles at me, but then he's always smiling. Dumb cat. "And what did you do with that ugly collar you were wearing? How am I supposed to get you back home without it? Huh? Now I don't suppose it's a coincidence that you're parked next to the fridge?" I open it. "Hmm, nothing in here for you, little guy." I grab a jar of pickles for myself. "How about some tuna?"

I munch on a pickle then put it down so I can open the can of tuna. He whops the pickle off the counter and makes off with it. Good thing all my body parts are attached. *And guess what, Nevar? They're going to stay that way.*

"Late night, yes?" Faule asks, looking down at my feet when I arrive at work in the morning. *Damn.* I managed to put on two black socks this morning all right: one plain, the other striped. He places a comforting arm around my shoulders. "Well, my sweet, why not come back on Monday when your office is done, yes?"

"Thanks just the same, Al, but work would be a welcome distraction. Real work, not another art history 101 quiz."

The papers, TV and radio were still focusing on the kidnapping this morning, but not a word about a murder at the home of one of Calgary's finest. I'm going to have to get Chanlee in on this. But will she tell me if there's a cover-up? Who can I trust? Every question I ask takes another minute off Kenny's life. If he still has a life.

"That's the fighting spirit. My yes. I have got more real work for you than you can shake a stick at." He gently pushes me in the direction of the kitchen.

I put the laptop across from his on the table. Family photos now sit in the shade of the glass flowers.

"Your family?"

He nods. "I had them in the room that's being made over into your office, poor things."

I pick up the photo closest to me. A boy and girl, both under ten, I'd say, play with a puppy while Al and his young, slim wife watch with loving eyes. "You have a beautiful family, Al. They even have your dimples."

All the dimples on his face glow pink with pride.

"Will they be joining you from Eastern Europe?" He looks at me with a blend of curiosity and surprise. "Sorry, I don't mean to be personal. It's just that I detect a slight accent. Hungarian, perhaps?"

"I am a mongrel, wouldn't you know," he says cheerfully.

"Aren't we all?"

"I think maybe that accent you are detecting is my lisp, yes? But my family is in Montreal. They will be joining me as soon as Alma is finishing the sell of the house and tidies things up at that end." Looking pleased with the thought, he rubs his hands together.

"Mind if I make a few calls, first? A cat showed up at my door last night, and according to the apartment super it doesn't belong to anyone in Doré Parc. I want to check with the lost and found agencies."

"A feral cat, maybe, yes?"

"Not a chance. Mr McPickles is completely house trained. No one has to tell him where the fridge is."

Several calls later, I'm no further ahead. What am I supposed to do with a cat no one wants?

"Come sit here," Al says, patting the garden of posies on the seat of the chair next to him. "Right here. Beautiful. Since you have passed your quiz with colors flying, I am going to show you what my work is truly about, yes?"

I do as he says and become completely absorbed by the colorful yet foreboding painting on his computer.

"A powerful rendering of the soul ruthlessly dominating the flesh, would you not say so?"

"Nemesis being raped by Zeus?" I ask, more to myself than him.

"No, no, it's *The Rape of Leda by the Swan*," he explains.

"I was thinking of Apollodorus...."

"I do not care to know the names of the gods or which one did what. Mythology is for pie and other things in the sky. Oh yes. It is all Greek to me, really. But by golly, I know what I find beautiful. And it is beautiful the way the artist goes beyond the erotic to the mystical, would you not say so?"

It's not beautiful, it's disturbing in its baroque realism. But rather than contradict him, I say, "I've never seen this painting before."

"That is the beauty of it. My yes. No one in the art world has. So you can imagine my excitement at discovering it. And there are three more where this came from." I stare at him, eager for more. "I got onto this obscure collector--more about how later, yes? Until recently he was trapped behind the Iron Curtain with his beauties."

My face can't contain my surprise. Or envy. "Just one painting like this would be a find of a lifetime. Have you seen the originals?"

"Seeing them is what has me got worked up into such a state that I have left my family behind to be here. Oh yes."

"What could Calgary possibly have to further your research?"

"Mabie-Toogod, wouldn't you know. She has made the study of Caravaggio and other Baroque artists the work of her life."

"You haven't told her about any of this, obviously, or she'd be in a feeding frenzy."

"You are a clever one. So far I have merely hinted at my fabulous good luck because I need to do more work on the provenance. That is where you come in, my sweet. Until we can make a credible case, you are not to tell anyone about this. You have to, simply have to keep your lips sealed, yes?"

I zip my lips with one sweep of my hand. He did say we? What a coup being asked to work on a project of this magnitude. My spirits soar past flattery. This could be the making of me. But what kind of contribution can I make in only four to six weeks?

"Here is coming the second one," he says, bringing me back to earth. Another picture appears on the screen. "Equally as beautiful, would you not say so?"

A beautiful young charioteer and woman try furiously to out-race an arrow slung at them by a man in the chariot chasing them. "Hippodamia and her suitor being pursued by her father?" I ask.

"Yes, oh yes. But look, the most important person in the painting cannot be seen." I lean into the screen for ghostly shadows or images in the sky. "No. Look at the wheel of her father's chariot. See? It is coming off. The suitor is going to die, of course, but so is her father. All as planned by the mastermind behind the scene, Pelops, who wins the day and her hand. Beautifully." He smiles serenely at the work.

The skilled brush of the painter gives the scene an in-your-face urgency, but this is not the stuff tragedy is made of. The implied cruelty undercuts the impending doom of the lovers. This is the stuff pornography is made of.

Reading my face correctly, he says, "There is nothing sadistic about the man inflicting the arrow. My no. Because, as you well can see, he is not enjoying himself. Not a whit."

"Maybe not, but the artist sure is. It's not the subject that makes this painting vulgar, Al, it's the artist's lack of understanding of the myth of Hippodamia."

"You find it dangerous, yes?" Before I can answer, he adds, "All great art is dangerous because it instructs us about things we try to avoid and deny. It changes our perception of ourselves by reacquainting us with our natural state of danger."

"Danger and suffering are natural, but love and wisdom are contrivances, I suppose?"

"My no, they are coping strategies. Like most honest people, you hide the truth from yourself that we are predatory animals. You do not think twice about the elaborate precautions you have to take everyday to avoid falling prey to harm from others. At the same time, you do not think twice about wearing a uniform that makes you a predator in the service of good. There is no higher honesty anywhere than a soul who fully admits being a predator.

"All that from just one arrow." Sharp, well-aimed and deadly, but not in the least natural. I sigh and shake my head.

"Enough, I think, of playing the devil's advocate, yes?" He blanks out the screen then rubs his hands.

"What makes you think these paintings are by Caravaggio? From what I've seen, I'd say they're not because th--"

"Did I say they were by Caravaggio? No, no. Sorry for your confusion. These two are not Caravaggio's beauties. My goodness no. Anyone could see that they are not. No. We are pretty sure they are done by one of his many copiers, though. Renieri or Grammatica most likely perhaps. It is the next one that is the real doozie. If it is not by Caravaggio, I will croak. Oh yes." He rubs his hands slowly. "Let us save it for Monday. Down now to business, yes?"

After work, Al gives me a lift to Chanlee's.

"Here you are, my sweet," he says as I step out of the car into slush. He holds out money to me. I stare at it. "Your wages, this is your wages. We agreed I would pay you every Friday, yes?"

"Right. It is Friday," I say, still hesitating to take the money. "Why in cash?"

"Convenience, nothing more. No, no. But if you prefer to pay taxes on it...."

"It's not that, Al. I'd like to be able to use this job on my resume."

"No problem at all," he says with all his dimples going into high gear. "But maybe you take this now, yes? I will make out a check for you next week."

"Okay, sure."

"You are doing fine, just fine. My yes. Enjoy your weekend, Rane. Cheery-bye"

With the money clutched in my hand, I wave and go inside the empty house. Chanlee's already left for her last shift of the week. I head straight for the TV, but it's strangely silent about the murder last night. Sprawled out on the sofa, I tune into an award show that blanks me out with its endless stream of winners taking turns reciting the phone book.

I drift off into darkness.

A prick of light captures my attention. As I move towards it, the light expands into a sunshiny world of carousel colors that make

my thoughts spin. I grab at the riotous colors to anchor me, but they dance and glow without letting me touch them. How could that be? There's something inside them that's consuming me. I have to get out. Struggling entangles me. I can't--

"Rane! Rane!" the colors scream.

Then they attack full force.

Chanlee shakes me awake.

"Thanks for waking me, Chanlee. I was being devoured by predatory colors." I try to shake the fog out of my head. "Never mind that. I was involved in a murder last night, and--" I swing my legs onto the floor and sit up so she can sit on the sofa beside me.

"What murder?" She stands over me, frozen in place.

As I explain what happened at Nevar's, her expression changes from alarm to skepticism.

"There's been no homicide reported involving anyone remotely connected with Nevar," she says, sounding officious and looking it in her uniform.

"Why do you think that is?"

"You're still dreaming if you honestly believe everyone is conspiring against you to cover up his tracks."

I hold my head in my hands. "I have to be dreaming. I don't know how else I got into the world of an *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion*."

"Rane, I can't fight your demons for you."

"Who's asking you to? I'm asking you to believe me. We've known each other a long time, and I'm only finding out now that you think I'm a frukin' liar."

"Don't make this a test of our friendship."

"What friendship? How could you be my friend when you don't believe in me?"

"I believe what I know to be true. So far you haven't given me a reason to believe you."

"Oh yes I have." I get up and head towards the front door. It's about time someone let out all this good chi. It's suffocating me. "I gave you my word."

"Don't be such a hothead and come back here." She follows me. "So far the only one you've implicated with your word is yourself. You just confessed to pulling a B & E. According to your word, Nevar didn't push anyone off any mountain, and he didn't slit anybody's throat. You also said he was wearing pajamas in the dark. That doesn't give you a hint he was asleep in his house when you and the others invaded it? You keep giving me evidence that he's not implicated in anything more than being a victim of your imagination. The only evidence I have that something's amiss is that you're so strung out you're scared silly of colors."

Dammit, she's making more sense than I am. First I scream that the colors are going to get me, now I'm painting the whole world black and white. I drop my head back against the door, and she gives me the time and space to play everything back in my head to hear more than the words.

I look at her, feeling like a fool. "You're telling me you won't help me if I don't stop holding out on you."

She points at me and nods. "You've got it. You're demanding that I believe in you, but what are you prepared to give me in return? Sure as shootin' not your trust. All I've got from you so far is sanitized garbage. Make up your mind which way you want to go with this then go for it full force. I've never known you to go wrong when you do that."

I push myself off the door and hug her. Instead of asking what the world would be like without liars and cheats, Faule should ask what it would be like without friends. The world can exist with dishonesty, but could it exist for any of us without friendship?

"I got the license number of the Hiker's Malibu, *and* I did a painting of the three hikers, *and*--"

She disarms and starts undoing her shirt. "Let's save the juicy bits for when we're having eats. First, I'm having a shower."

"Food!" I smack my forehead. "I forgot about Mr McPickles."

"That's what you're calling Fitz now?"

"No. I have a cat." I smack my forehead again. "I don't have a cat. One showed up at my back door."

"You don't have a back door."

"Tell Mr McPickles that. Provided he hasn't clawed and gnawed his way into the fridge, we can eat at my place."

Chanlee follows me into my apartment, but she's the first to shriek. The place looks like a Jackson Pollack painting after a fire sale. My paints have been sprayed everywhere, even my exercise equipment is in pieces on the floor. The fiends didn't miss a thing. Just finding and sorting out all the bolts and screws is going to take me forever. And all I did to deserve this was go to the mountains to recharge my soul.

"Mr McPickles?!" No sign of him. I run into the bedroom even though my heart is cringing because I might want to throw up at what I find. Thankfully he's not amongst my shredded, sliced and diced foam mats, clothes, mattress and light fixture strewn about the floor. I dash back to the living room. Chanlee's in the galley kitchen, shaking her head and looking down at the floor.

CHAPTER 4

The total content of the fridge and cupboards is smeared everywhere in a stinking mess.

Her voice strained, Chanlee says, "They were looking for something, obviously, but--"

"My painting of the men on the mountain. But all the sick fruk got was my decoy. I knew he was going to come steal it, so I--McPickles!"

She points quizzically to two mutilated pickles impaled on a knife sticking out of strawberry jam and mayonnaise sludge.

"No!" I run to the balcony door. "Can't you hear him? He's scratching to get in." I open the door and he dashes in, stops, does a ballerina stretch then looks around and yawns. As I close the door, I catch a glimpse of a man at the garbage bin. I'll bet it's the same thug I saw last night. I step onto the balcony, but he disappears into the ally. Turning back inside, I see Mr McPickles sniffing his way to the kitchen. He takes a second to survey the scene, sees that the place has turned into one big foodfest and dives in. I grab for him. He slinks out of my grasp and slides into the sludge. "Head him off on the other side, Chanlee!"

She jumps into place ahead of him and bends down to swoop him up.

"Don't put your face so close to him!"

He growls and swipes at her, but she anticipates his fear response and jumps aside out of the reach of his claws. I grab him from behind. He protests halfheartedly, then contents himself with licking the goodies he's deposited on my blouse.

"It's not safe for him here," I say, looking with increasing irritation at the mess. Mr McPickles is the only glimmer of decency in the whole mess. They put him outside instead of leaving him in pieces on the floor. I know why I would have left him unharmed, but I have to wonder why thugs like that would have bothered.

"Or for you."

Rage washes over me. Nevar's disassembling my life with a vengeance.

"You and Mr McPickles can stay at my place. He's so cute." She pets him, and he stretches out his neck for more. Then she tickles his stomach and all hell breaks loose. I have to lock his shoulders to keep him from taking her arm off.

"On second thoughts, take him to the vet," she says, keeping a respectful distance.

"Look! He's got sutures on his stomach. He'd be better off with my parents."

"If Sheeka doesn't eat him for lunch."

"Come on, we'll clean up this mess after we drop him off."

"Don't even think about touching anything. This is a crime scene."

"I don't want the police involved in this."

"Wrong tense, kiddo."

"Don't let him keep playing the police for chumps. While you're busy sorting through this garbage, he's getting away with murder."

"Look around you, Rane. This is rage spewing out of a sick mind. It's totally misdirected, but it's aimed right at you."

"No, you look. This is a calculated mess if ever I've seen one." She shakes her head in disbelief then follows me into the living room. "This is an attempt to scatter his risk by putting us off his scent. Try seeing past the obvious. He's reduced everything to pieces without making a commotion. You have to be a pro to pull off something like this with everything in its place according to a specific intent."

"What intent?"

"He's after the same evidence as you. Only difference is he's trying to destroy it. Even in this god-awful mess I can see that there's something crucial missing: my painting of the hikers. But he only got the fake I did up for just this purpose. Well, not quite this purpose. All the same, he--"

"You keep saying *he*. What makes you so certain it's Nevar?"

"I've only told two people about the painting of the hikers: You and him. And I know *you* didn't do this. You can search every inch of this place, but you won't find the real painting."

We both sigh, but mine comes out sounding more like a growl. Mr McPickles' throat rumbles as a warning that he's going to tattoo my face with his claws if I don't put him down.

"Get a load of the phone," I say.

The answering machine and the cordless handset are hidden yet obviously intact under the rubble that was once my exercise equipment. The machine is still plugged in with the red light flashing. "Obvious, but clever. With the phone conked out, someone trying to call me would get concerned or suspicious. With the phone still connected, Nevar gets to keep tabs on me and everything seems all right. Yeah, as right as anything can be in hell."

"There's someone malingering around your Dumpster," Chanlee says from the balcony door.

"I know," I say from somewhere far away.

The display says there are seven old messages and one new one. "You're ignoring my calls at your own peril, Bambi," Nevar's voice says. "It would be in your best interest to talk with me."

"He calls you *Bambi*?!" Chanlee says, trying not to laugh.

"You're sicker than he is if it amuses you that your friend is the prey of a psycho."

"Personally, I think you're reading both him and the book wrong," she says like she can see through me. But what is she really seeing besides her own need to be right?

I glare at her but can't see past the teasing look making her eyes sparkle. "Don't you start with me again. I've got a gut instinct about him, about all this." I gesture in a sweeping motion around the apartment, and before I'm finished my hand is in a fist.

"Funny you should say that, because I do too."

"You've never even met him," I scoff.

"So? We're talking gut instinct. Want to square your instincts off against mine?"

"Why would I want to do that? I know you're wrong."

"Uh-huh." She nods and smiles sarcastically. "What you waiting for? Call him."

"The display says his name and number aren't available. But...." I pause and stare at the phone. "He said I've been ignoring his calls, but according to the machine this is the only one I got today. And there's no message from Fitz. Someone's been messing with this."

I cycle rapidly through the old messages. No Fitz or Nevar. Just regular stuff like Mom inviting me over for supper.

"So whoever left this message--" Chanlee points around the room. "--must have erased some of the other messages."

"As in Nevar phoned again after his henchmen left?"

"After the sickos left, yes. When did he call?"

"6:25."

"So they went into their sicko frenzy in the light of day when they knew nobody would be looking. Like you said, these guys are no fools."

"Did I say that? I think he's a moron. Because, Chanlee, he doesn't know who he's messing with." I massage my jaw. It's so tense, pain is shooting from the joints into my eyeballs. "Don't you get it?" I motion her to shush then grab a pen and note pad from my bag and scribble, "*They've planted bugs in this mess.*"

"*That's one of his men outside watching?*" she writes.

I nod. "*I'll prove it to you.*"

"You're not going to confront him?!"

Heading for the door, I write, *"And you're going to help me."*

"Oh no I'm not," she blurts out.

"Why or why do I let you talk me into these things?" she says as we snake our way through the basement to my locker.

"Because your gut instinct tells you I'm right." We turn a corner. Ribbons of florescent ceiling lights point the way along each corridor. But the shadows of countless unknowns inhabit the dark chain-link cages on both sides of us. "Here we are, number 46. Fruk."

"The padlock's been cut."

"I didn't expect him to forget this." I open the wire mesh door. Parts of a racing bike are scattered amongst the remnants of a sliced and diced tennis racket. "He didn't get around to trashing anything else. Someone must have scared him off." I step out of the locker and put the lock back the way I found it.

"You're taking this awfully well. I'm spitting nails."

"Well, you and Dan can share each other's spit, because all this stuff is his. We traded lockers because it's easier for him to park his bike in this corner unit." We make our way to his locker.

"Dan who?"

"The guy who lives above me."

"Kuan-yin, you have a hunk sleeping on top of you, and you haven't told me?!"

"Lay off, Chanlee." I stop in front of unit 56. Whew, it hasn't been vandalized. "Dan and I share the same fantasy." I unfold a hand truck and wheel it outside the locker.

"Uh-huh."

"Help me load this, will ya?" We load a trunk onto the dolly. "My winter clothes are in here." I pat the metal-lined trunk. "And look, the bastards didn't get my camera, easel or the painting. Or my sketch book." And hallelujah my bike is over at Mabie-Toogod's. "I've got Nevar and the others in it. I captured them perfectly. They all look like idiots. See?"

She ignores the sketch book. "What fantasy?"

"Fitz is our favorite fantasy."

"Oh." Her eyes widen. "Fitz swings both ways?!"

"No, but Dan is keeping a vigil in case Fitz ever decides to switch."

"Fat chance. Fitz is as straight as they come."

"Exactly. Which means you never can tell."

"Well, I *can* tell. Fitz isn't gay."

"Neither is Dan."

"So he's bi. I can handle that."

"How open-minded of you. But he's not exactly bi, either. I know you've wondered what it would feel like to have gay sex. Well, when Dan wonders, he fills in the blanks with Fitz, that's all. If Dan had his way, he and Fitz would star in their own buddy movie and ride off together on one of Fitz's bikes."

"Doubt they'd make it around the block without fighting over who gets to ride up front. But a buddy on a bike, hmm...." She stares up at the ceiling and snaps her fingers. I shake a warning finger at her. "What?" she says with mocking innocence. "You're already staring in your own buddy movie with Fitz."

"Oops, forgot my cell at the house." She hands me hers. "Sorry 'bout waking you, Dan, but this is a two stamper...." She knocks heads with me to hear him. I shove her away. "You've got it," I say to him before handing the phone back to her.

"You sneaky devil!" She says *devil* with such force it echoes from cage to cage. "Fitz is a twelve course meal, but you never could resist eating off other people's plates."

"Get over it, Chanlee! Dan kept showing up whenever Fitz arrived, and it didn't take me long to figure out that it wasn't a coincidence. So now whenever Fitz drops by, Dan stamps above my kitchen to warn me." Her unrelenting interest in this man she's never met is amusing in a maddening sort of way. I fold my arms and stare at her.

"Uh-huh." She folds her arms and laughs.

"Never mind that. We need to get this stuff up to his pad." I close up the locker and start pushing the dolly towards the elevator.

She keeps one step ahead of me so she can laugh in my face. "Kuan-yin, you've got this gorgeous hunk on the side."

"I never said he was gorgeous."

"Uh-huh."

"Dan!" I say to the sleepy hunk who opens the door to apartment 56. He steps aside to make room for the truck and ties the belt on his short, thin robe that awakens my imagination. "This is Chanlee."

While they swap smiles and the thoughts that go with them, I wheel in the truck.

She slides up behind me and whispers, "This is what your place should look like."

"Why are you whispering? What's the matter with you? His hasn't been trashed."

"No, I mean before that," she says, looking at him and smiling. Actually, it's the same smile that took over her face when she first saw him.

I have to admit that although this apartment is only one floor above mine, the relaxed sophistication of the decor makes it look

like we went up several levels on the social scale. That and the unforced way he's furnished the place for comfort and low maintenance gives it a decidedly masculine feel that is more open than mine even without the furniture.

"Did someone say *trashed*? What are you two dicks up to?" He yawns then combs his thick brown hair with his fingers.

"Uh...." I say, warming up for my speech.

His gaze darts back and forth between me and Chanlee then lands on the dolly.

"Someone trashed my apartment and went after my stuff in the basement," I say, trying to sound blasé to keep things calm.

Suddenly, he's wide awake. "Someone trashed my bike thinking it was yours?! No one touches my bike," he thunders and dashes to the door.

"Hold on, Dan," I say. He stops but keeps his hand on the doorknob. "You can check your bike in a minute. The guys behind this are serious. They're heavy duty--"

"And I'm not?" His knuckles go white on the knob.

"What she means is that because you've been drawn into this, neither of you is safe," Chanlee says.

Like a soothing balm on a wound, her words still his anger. Something about the way he's looking at her tells me that if I had said the same thing to him, he would have gone right through the door without opening it. But he calms down enough to hear us when we tell him that we need his help without the benefit of an adequate explanation.

"I don't know why I ever let you rope me into these things," he says, shaking his head. He catches Chanlee and I exchanging knowing glances, and adds, "Ah, Rane got you out of bed too."

She smiles sweetly until I jab an elbow into her ribs.

"Look, I'll pick up my stuff this afternoon," I say, unloading the dolly. He strides over from the door and helps me. "In the meantime, we have to get everything out of the lockers. So while you're down there checking out your bike, load up the dolly."

As soon as he leaves, Chanlee grasps my arm, "Now I know what you see in him. He looks just like you."

"Hardly. He doesn't have any freckles." Though I must admit he looks more like me than my brother does.

I open my trunk and rummage through it to keep her from seeing my reddening face. "But he's only about an inch taller than us....which gave me an idea."

"Uh-huh. You got the idea as soon as you laid eyes on him, kiddo. Don't blame you. He's a real hottie. I think that robe he's wearing blinded me, because I can't see much else now. Not worth looking at anyhow."

I dig down to the bottom and pull out a plastic bag.

"Just because he doesn't have anything under it, doesn't--"

"Surly you jest? He has the whole works under there."

"Never mind that." I hand her the bag. "This is the coral jacket I was wearing at Nevar's. Get it to forensics along with the prints from that piece of garbage watching us outside."

"I've seen him. He's too careful to touch the bin. So what prints are you talking about?"

"The ones we're going to get off him." I pull out one thing after another from my trunk. "You know that disguise I did up when I was in training?"

"The choirmaster? Surely you're not going out there to tackle him in that getup?!" She follows me into the bedroom then stops and gazes around admiringly. "This room is so him."

I glance at the phone tossed on his pillow, the plain bedding thrown back and his slippers nestled by his bed. Cool air from an open window fills the green and grey room with an energy that alerts my senses to his presence everywhere in the room. And suddenly I'm homesick for Fitz.

"Will you get your mind off him long enough to help me get into this thing?"

She shrugs and picks up a foam suit. Instantly bored with not talking about him for a second, she asks, "What is he into besides you?"

"Drugs." Watching her mouth drop open, I add, "Just kidding. If you want to know what he's into, ask him yourself."

After we entomb my body in the suit, she helps stuff me into a pair of spandex pants.

"I don't know how women with implanted boulders can stand it. I can't see my feet or anything else," I say. "And all this mascara is making my eyelids so heavy it feels like I'm breaking open sutures every time I blink."

"The idea, kiddo, is to come up with a way of eroticizing those muscle-bound eyelids into pleasure toys." She cleans and buffs my fake leather purse.

I insert cotton rolls between my gums and cheeks to change the contour of my face. "Damned to hell. This black wig makes my skin purple. And it looks like I'm wearing roadkill on my head."

"Stop griping. Any kid would love to play with you as a beach ball."

When Dan returns from the basement he looks at me and bursts out laughing. "Don't know why I'm laughing. Those punks stole my derailleur. You know how long it's going to take me to get another one? I have to order it from France."

"I'm sorry, Dan. I'll make it up to you, I promise." The worry lines forming on Chanlee's face tell me what she thinks of my promise, but now that I've made the promise it's worrying me too.

The part that worries me is that he looks anything but worried. What is he going to want in return for his derailleur?

"A bike derailleur's not something they can pawn," I continue. "They just took it to leave a signature of hate." So much for my exercise equipment. I'll bet they've taken at least one strategic piece from each machine, so even when I finally get around to piecing everything together, nothing will work. Not a damned thing. "Knowing how this guy operates, I'd say he threw your derailleur in the garbage. The collectors don't come until Monday, so...."

"You should retrieve it, Rane. After all, Dan's just an innocent bystander in all this," Chanlee says with that dreamy-schemey smile back on her face. And now he's sporting the same smile.

"Listen, Dan, we have to make it look to the guy outside like Chanlee and I have left. That way, I can go out there after you, pretending to be dropping off my garbage on the way to work."

"After me?" His forehead furrows with thought then his eyes narrow. "You're completely daft if you expect me to dress up as you." Chanlee and I both nod, while he shakes his head.

"Well, Dan," Chanlee says, "you're going to have to ask yourself whether getting the approval of strangers for the way you look is more important than helping a friend whose life is being threatened."

"There are better ways of helping," he says.

"Such as?" she challenges.

The one time it would help for her to reach out to him with a smile, and she remains stone-faced. I step behind him and stretch my lips into a smile. She catches my meaning, and he's doomed.

Dressed in my clothes, complete with my sludge-stained blouse and a wig, he's a perfectly ridiculous copy of me. Nothing fits right, and all the bulges are in the wrong place. Or right place, depending on how I look at them.

"One crack, one titter, and these clothes come off," he warns, standing akimbo.

"Promises, promises," Chanlee says like her forté is flirting with men in dresses.

"If Fitz could see you now," I say, holding back about as much as he did when he saw my disguise.

He freezes. "I'm not going anywhere like this till you promise not to tell him."

"I promise."

He thaws just enough to warn me that he doesn't trust me.

Instead of being put off by his strong reaction to the mention of Fitz, Chanlee hooks her arm in his and chirps, "As my best

buddy, how would you like to go around the block with me then come back and do some serious damage to the ogre haunting your garbage bin?"

To give them time to circle back on foot, I wait fifteen minutes. Then I carry a bag of garbage through the parking lot at the back, treading carefully on the frozen slush from today's melt. It really would help if I could see my feet. The Watcher is nowhere to be seen, but he's here. Somewhere he can get me when he wants to. Eek! Something's touching my leg! I jerk my leg forward to avoid his grasp. My feet keep going forward and up. My purse flies off my shoulder and the garbage in the bag escapes as I flip back, levitate then fall flat on my back. Thank heaven I'm wearing a mattress. I fling away soggy coffee from a used filter that landed on my face.

Purr, purr.

"Mr Pic--" I gag myself. The Watcher knows I've been letting Mr McPickles in and out of my apartment. "Go away, stupid cat," I say loudly enough to be heard by every shadow on the block.

Boing, boing. He climbs the foam mountains of my suit, slips down onto my face and rolls off.

I try hoisting myself up but my foam body resists being folded and whoosh! I'm on my back again. I roll over and push myself off the ice. Oops, my feet slide out and I'm down on the ice, rocking on my belly. Two more tries and I'm huffing, but at least I'm standing.

I look around. No Watcher. No Dan or Chanlee, either. Where are they? And where did Mr McPickles get to? Oh there he is, rooting around the rubbish that was in the bag. "What do you have there?" He zips past me with something in his mouth. "It'd better not be a bone." He jumps up on top of the garbage bin and starts munching. I move in closer to see him in the light of the alley lamp beside the bin. Shoot! He does have a bone. "Don't eat that, you stupid cat!" I reach out and try to grab it from him but he backs away, and I bounce off the side of the bin. I lift up the right side of the split lid, and look for a stick or something to get the bone from him. I might have known. The bin is almost empty. But unless the shadows are deceiving me, there's a table leg or whatever at the back. I lift myself up onto the edge of the bin and reach in. Mr McPickles climbs onto my back and resumes munching on the bone. "Get off!" I reach around to push him away, lose my balance and roll into the bin. He stares down at me from the other half of the lid.

"What are you smiling at?" I snap.

What smells so sweet? And what's that goop I have my hand in? Don't think I want to know. I grasp the spindle, but it doesn't budge. I yank hard and something flies up and bounces off my

stomach. Metal gleams in the dim light. It looks like a wrench with a daisywheel head. Dan's derailleur!

Suddenly, a shadow darkens the bin. I grab the derailleur as a head appears over me. The Watcher! I swing at him, but he jerks his head back and the derailleur strikes against the bin. He holds up something oblong and flat. A brick?! I scramble under the closed lid and twist myself around to strike at him with the spindle. Damn, I can't move in this foam hell. Three arms grope for me. No, five. What the hell?! Dan's tackling him. While they wrestle with him, I wrestle with my suit to get up.

"Let him go!" Chanlee says breathlessly. "I said to let him go!" Her voice is low and menacing.

I grab the edge of the bin and hoist myself up. Urg! Something swipes at me from behind. Turning with the intent to destroy my attacker, I stop short and sigh with relief. It's only Mr McPickles trying to kill the wig on my head. I turn back to the melee in time to see the Watcher running away.

"Why did you let him get away?" Dan asks her. He looks more scary than ridiculous, panting and snarling while his wig sits askew on his head.

"I'll explain lat--"

"You let him get away?!" I snarl at her.

"We got what we wanted," she says in her officious cop voice. Snatching up my fake leather purse by the handle, she shakes it in my face. That's what he was threatening me with?! "His fingerprints are all over it."

"And us," Dan says, dusting himself off.

"Never mind that, you could have at least ID'd him," I say, rolling out of the bin.

"When we were hiding in the alley, he walked past us, so we followed him. He got a thermos out of a SUV parked on the side street. We got the license number."

"So we didn't need to wrestle him for the fingerprints," Dan complains.

"Oh yes you did," Chanlee and I say in tandem.

"You sleeping under there?" I say and flip the wig off his head.

He holds up his hands in surrender. "Don't shoot, I'm one of the good guys, remember?"

"Five'll get you ten the registration doesn't have his name on it," Chanlee coos for Dan's benefit.

"That still doesn't explain why you let him go," I say.

"I'll explain later," she says tersely.

"A lot of good that'll do. He's the one who should be doing the explaining," I say, getting more miffed with her by the second. "By the way, Dan, I found your derailleur in the bin."

His face lights up and he leaps to the bin, dips into it then turns back to us with a sour look on his face and no derailleur. "The punks totaled the mounting clamp and the gear cable anchor bolt is gone."

We try to comfort him, but seeing Chanlee shiver, he slips an arm around her waist and urges her to go inside with him. They're awfully cozy all of a sudden.

She's been acting weird, bouncing from frivolous to downright idiotic. Why is it so important for her to make me believe that Nevar is Mr Clean? If I didn't know better, I'd swear she's not just trying to distract me with her nonsense, she's deliberately trying to throw me off track. Put together, it all adds up to one thing: She knows who the Watcher is.

CHAPTER 5

"May the snakes of hell crawl up my yin and down my yang if I know the Watcher," Chanlee insists when we're in her car on the way to my parents' place.

"But...?" She remains silent, so I add, "You had him, then just like that you backed off, which tells me you think he's a cop."

She nods. "He was wearing a standard issue shoulder harness. I don't know who he is, though. I swear."

I believe her because she's as perplexed and alarmed as I am.

We lapse into a strained silence that mellows as I relax with Mr McPickles on my lap. I left my foam torture chamber and wig at Dan's, but I didn't have time to take off the makeup.

We pull up in front of my parents' white stucco house fading into the moonlight.

"Okay, while you're getting some action on his prints and license, I'll bum a car off Mom or Dad and meet you under the spruce tree across from Nevar's." I get out of the car and have to pry Mr McPickles off the seat to get him to come with me.

"The tree isn't a good idea because it'll be daylight by time I get there."

"Right. Well then, park your car at the bottom of the hill."

"Remember to wait for me if you get there first. Don't go charging in, both fists and feet flying. They call him *The Snowman* in enforcement circles. And not just because his name is *snow* in Spanish. Someone said the *v* is pronounced like a *b*. Sound right to you?" I shrug. "What happened to your undying interest in languages?"

"He's not a language, he's an asshole." With Mr McPickles in my arms, I sink back down into the front seat with my feet on the sidewalk. "He wants me dead, and I keep walking into his traps like some dumbstick kid who doesn't know evil when it's knifing her heart."

"Cause you've lost your psychological perspective. You're going to have to pull back to see past him to the big picture."

"For heaven's sake, Chanlee, two men have been murdered and a child's been kidnapped. The picture's not too big, it's too evil. And with each passing day, he gets closer to getting away with it all." I slap my forehead. "Fruk, I know the truth is in the details. I should be paying more attention. You too. Don't forget my

bloodstained top and the Hiker's Malibu." I snap my fingers. "And make sure you put this stuff in a safe place." I point to my painting rolled up on top of the sketchbook on the backseat.

"I won't forget." She drops her head on the steering wheel.

"Kuan-yin. I remember when we used to talk about what we'd do after I become Chief of Police, and you've recovered your first stolen masterpiece worth at least a billion smackers. You know, real stuff. Not this garbage." I put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. She lifts her head and smiles. "I haven't even asked you how your new job is going. Is your boss giving you any grief?"

The idea of Al chasing me around the table is almost enough to make me laugh. "No, Al's okay. The job's the only part of my life right now that totally makes sense. No kidding, sometimes I think it's too good to be true."

"The job or the boss?"

"Both. Forget it, Chanlee. Believe me, he's not your type. He...I don't know...He's a mixed bag." Mr McPickles paws at my hair hanging loosely on my shoulder. "One minute a fuddy-duddy, the next a fired-up revolutionary. It's like he has his feet planted firmly in two millennia. He's not spacey, but he asks the weirdest questions, like: If everyone were honest, what kind of world would we have?"

She thinks about it then says, "Without question it'd improve my sex life. With the time I'd save from not having to remove those maddening little stickers from the fruit and everything else we buy, I could fuse bodies with Bruno more often. And maybe have enough time for dessert with--" She stops herself then looks at me like she's afraid I won't like what she's going to say. "Just how chummy are you with--"

I interrupt her this time. "I don't want you moving in on Dan. This may sound strange, but he's a nicer guy than Fitz."

"I knew it!" She smacks the steering wheel. "You do have a thing for Dan!"

"If I did, I'd play it straight with Fitz and tell him the truth. You're being a wimpy stinker with Bruno."

"What are you talking about? I haven't even been all the way around the block with Dan."

"Really? And what room in your mind are you having sex with him right now, huh, Chanlee?"

I expect her to feign embarrassment, but she takes my question as an invitation to open the floodgates. "I swear the guy wears magnets in his pants. You wouldn't believe what it felt like leaving the apartment and driving him around in my car. Maybe it was because he was dressed up like you, but honest to God, it felt like I've known him my whole life."

Mr McPickles kneads and chews my hair. "Look, I'd better be going while I still have some hair left."

Walking up to the door of the house, I get the same strange feeling I always do when I visit my parents. My childhood--with all its magic, broken promises and untold secrets--is buried within the walls of this house. It's an incredibly large part of who I am, yet I'm removed from it because it's not home anymore. It's Mom's. Dad lives in the garage at the back. At least that's what she accuses him of doing because he likes to retreat into his workshop to tinker around with his inventions. The house is the supreme achievement of her life. We used to live across the street, and it took her and Dad over ten years of waiting and saving to make the big move. Brittanski Drive looks like any other street, but it's the great divide between those who've made it and those who are going to die trying. Because the houses on this side are on the crest of the hill, we've got the view of the downtown skyline, Elbow valley and the mountains. All the people on the other side get to see is us looking down on them. Tragedies and farces are made of such things. I should know, I've experienced them on both sides of the street.

As quietly as I can, I retrieve the door key from its secret hiding place between the wall and the mailbox. I step into the foyer and the darkness fills with hissing. Loud and in stereo. Sheeka, the orange and white, bushy-tailed, green-eyed mistress of all she surveys, springs up at me out of nowhere. Mr McPickles lets out a howl and transforms himself into a ballistic missile, leaving trail marks on my arm.

"Sheeka!" I scream.

A lot of good that does. She doesn't listen to anyone but Mom. Now the whole house is awake and ready to seek and destroy. I turn on the lights. No Mr McPickles. No Sheeka, either. A desperate wail comes from the kitchen. Bet he's got the bushy-tailed wimp cornered. I run into the kitchen and skid into Dad. He's trying to pry Sheeka off Mr McPickles, who's backed up against the island, trying to defend himself. Blood is pouring from his tattered right ear and gouged neck. Great. He escapes being torn to pieces by a psychotic thug, only to be made into mincemeat by a psychotic cat?! I grab Mr McPickles, while Dad grabs Sheeka and pushes her through the cat door to her run outside. He locks her door, so she jumps up onto the outside window sill and screams blue murder. Half of Dad's uncombed hair was standing up, fully awake, while the rest of it was still dozing. Now it's all standing at attention.

"What are you doing to poor Sheeka?" Mom says from the doorway. She's wearing a plastic bag over her green-slimer hair, and a starched white housecoat with matching gloves that make

her look like a ghoul against the enamel white kitchen. "Come in, my pet," she coos to Sheeka and reaches around Dad to open the door.

"Leave her outside," Dad says, refusing to budge from the door.

Mom looks at me and lets out a squeal. "Who gave you those black eyes?!" She places a hand over her heart. "Fitz?! Please don't tell me he did this to you?"

She holds her breath, while Dad rolls his eyes and I hold in a thousand sighs.

"This is what I look like in makeup, Mom," I say, wondering what Nevar's going to think when he sees me. I can't picture him being frightened and blink the useless thought away.

She sighs with relief then shakes a finger at me and Mr McPickles. "So what's all this, then?"

"Sheeka got at him," I say, holding him against me.

"Oh." She steps closer for a better look. "You'd think, Rane, you'd have enough sense to keep him in a carrier to give Sheeka time to get used to him. You're never going to get those stains out of your jacket. Such a pretty color, robin's egg blue, but hardly suitable for this time of year." She tsk, tsks then shifts her gaze to Mr McPickles. "Aw, he has the most darling smile. We'll get you fixed up." She shoots me a reproofing look. "Poor thing." She pets him by making stroking movements with her hand without letting her glove touch his fur.

"No need to stay up, Lena," Dad says, moving up behind her and gently massaging her shoulders. She leans back into his body, cozy and comfortable. "Rane and I will get him to a hospital."

"Not so fast," Mom says, suddenly stiff as a board and in the attack mode again. "Rane, what are you doing here, and whose cat is this?" She pulls out a drawer, takes out a first aid box and puts it on the island in front of me.

"I'll get changed," Dad says and leaves.

"Rane, whose cat is this?" she repeats, louder and sharper this time. She hands me a gauze bandage.

"Don't know. He showed up at my back door. Didn't you, Mr McPickles?" I dab his ear and neck with the gauze, while he tries to swop at it.

"You don't have a back door. And what kind of name is that for a cat? Honestly. With your gypsy lifestyle, it's nothing short of cruel to keep a goldfish much less a cat."

"It's nice to see you're in fighting form too, Mom," I say. At least she's not dragging out my hope chest and practicing her matron of honor speech for the wedding she always sees coming around the corner. "But this isn't a mangy street cat. He's had some kind of surgery, and the people he belongs with must be worried

sick about him. Just give me a couple of days, I'll find out where he belongs."

"I'm sure you will, but why can't he stay at your apartment?" I start to answer then stop because all my thoughts lead to Nevar.

"Not again?! Don't tell me you're up to more shenanigans about joining the police force?" I stare at her, trying not to look guilty. "Oh, Rane, how could you? You're supposed to be the sensible one. It's bad enough having your brother go all strange and fall in love with bugs." She shivers and rubs herself like they're creeping and crawling out of her skin. "You are all right though, aren't you, pet?"

"Right as rain, as you see," I say with a forced laugh. I would tell her and Dad the truth about what's been happening if I could think of a way to keep them from becoming a target if the wrong person finds out how much they know.

"I thought so. You've got yourself mixed up somehow in the kidnapping of that boy. Everybody's talking about it. But you never could settle for just talk. If there's a reckless, dangerous way to get somewhere, you'll find it. Don't bother denying it. This nose knows." she says, tapping the side of her nose. "You won't listen to sense, so there's no point in telling you to stop all this nonsense and marry Fitz."

"Uh-uh, way too dangerous." Urg, she's going into mother-overdrive. "Got to go, Mom." I lean over to kiss her. She leans back to avoid being touched by Mr McPickles, and I have to settle for kissing the air several inches from her cheek.

In the garage, I load Mr McPickles into the back of Dad's van. Trying to find a way out, he pokes his paws through the wire grate door of Sheeka's carrier then tries biting the wire.

"You haven't gotten yourself into any kind of trouble you can't get out of, now have you Rane?" Dad asks as he climbs into the van.

"There's a fighting chance I haven't. But I need a car until Monday. My beater died, you see, and--"

He holds up a hand. "You working on an investigation with Chanlee?"

I nod. "I'm meeting up with her. Uh, I don't like to ask, but could you--"

"Take Mr McPickles to the hospital and look after him until Monday?" I nod and he does too. His long, creased face eases into a smile that gives him a youthful ruggedness. You'd never guess that he has spent most of his life in the artificial light of desk lamps, accounting for other people's money. He slips off his hooded, black jacket and empties out the contents of the pockets. "Here." He

hands the jacket to me. "Yours is bloodstained. And take the Audi." He throws me the remote.

"Uh, I'd rather not. I don't want the responsibility of insuring I'll bring it back in the condition it's in now." I hold out the remote.

"It has the best insurance." He closes my fingers around the remote. "Let me worry about the car. You didn't come here at this godforsaken hour to have me stop you from doing what you know is right."

What could be more right than exposing Nevar for the monster he really is? What could be more right than depriving him of his freedom? Or more right than kicking his butt from here to Spy Hill?

None of my questions intrude upon the silence or disturb the breeze as I surveil his house from my vantage point under the spruce tree. Light from the street lamps falls softly on the snow that survived the day's melt, bejeweling the night. The glistening carpet stretches from yard to yard untrampled. Not a place where children frolic or make snowmen on the lawn. No dogs, no beehives, no fat cows, no cars, no hikers. Peace reigns. A dark, uneasy peace that won't lift with the dawn. It doesn't feel right knowing that Nevar is safe and sound inside his house.

Burr, the rising damp on the bottom of my jeans is freezing against my legs, and the cold is biting through my hiking boots. I hear a rustling sound behind me and turn sharply. Nothing moving except the branch I jostled above my head. Snow trickles down the inside of my jacket.

Suddenly, light shines from an upstairs window of Nevar's house, beckoning me. I'd better call Chanlee and tell her to get her butt over here. Fruk! I don't have my cell. Another window lights up. This time at the back of the house. He's in the kitchen. No. A shadow's creeping down the driveway. Towards the house, not away from it. With a hefty wrench from the Audi tucked in my jacket, I leap out from the tree. At the corner of my eye I see footprints cutting across the snow-covered lawn. As I turn, a hand clasps over my mouth and an arm chokes my neck. The scent of him. It's Nevar. Panic strikes, but I resist the urge to struggle. Instead, I push back hard against him and yank down with all my might on his arm and shoulder while I try to knock his right foot out from under him. No go. He twists me back onto my heels. I slash my hand back to knife his groin, but he crushes me into him to cushion himself.

"No you don't," he says through his teeth and drags me back towards the tree.

There's no way that tree is going to become my coffin.

I sweep my foot back and smash it against his leg just above and to the side of his knee. The kick doesn't blow out his knee cap because he enjoins his leg movement with mine to block me. While all this is happening, his grip on my hand loosens and I take a deep breath through his fingers before biting down on them. The sharp pain throws him off balance.

We fall together.

I thrust an elbow up into his chest, and he groans. Looking up, I see a shadow darting out from the driveway of his house. The Hiker! He's coming right for me. Nevar's backup. I try to scramble to my feet, but Nevar has different ideas. He pushes me with such force I fall forward. Something whirs by my right ear as he pounces on me.

Blinded by the snow I'm eating and breathing, I try lifting my head. I manage to catch a glimpse of the Hiker running down the hill, before Nevar pushes my face back into the snow.

"For God's sake, stay down," he hisses, his face up tight against the back of my neck.

His body isn't pressing down on mine, because he's taking his weight on his elbows. Just enough room to twist out of his grip. Thrusting out with my arms, I knock his elbows out from under him. Instead of losing his balance so I can roll him over, he snatches the wrench and springs up, pulling me with him.

Breathing hard, mostly from rage, and my right ear ringing like no one's home, I punch at his neck. He blocks the strike with his arm. Footsteps crunching the snow behind me make me turn. More backup coming to his rescue. Not the Hiker this time, though. I've never seen this goon before. Without turning my face back to Nevar, I wheel my left leg around in a fake kick that he wards off with a block. And while he's gloating, I smash his face with a back-fisted punch. His head snaps back and jerks forward, blood draining from his nose. I turn to run, but his goon grabs my arms from behind and pulls them back until my shoulders are locked in pain.

"Calm down, or I'll break your arms," the goon says, breathing down my throat.

I feign acquiescence, to concentrate my energy away from the pain and into my legs.

Nevar scoops up a handful of snow and holds it to his nose. He bends down and squeezes snow into his other hand. Then he walks towards me and swings up his fist. I kick out at him, but he sidesteps while the goon applies more pressure to my arms. Yeow, if he bends them back any further, I'm going to end up being quartered. Without lifting my hand, Nevar puts snow inside it and closes his fist around mine then lets go. What is the psycho creep up to now? What does he think I'm going to do with the snow

except throw it at him? Whatever he wants or expects from me, I'm not going to play his game. I open my hand and a wisp of brown hair falls on the snow.

My hair?!

The ringing in my ear is suddenly sounding like a bullet shot from a silencer. A bullet that came so close it gave me a haircut as I fell. But why would the Hiker shoot at me with Nevar close enough to take the hit? Confused, I look up at him.

"Enough fun and games for the night," he says with a fleeting blood-smeared smile. "You keep punching me, I'm going to start hitting back."

"Go ahead, hot shot, you've got my hands tied behind my back." He pulls his head back and turns his face away like he expects me to spit at him. I can't say the thought hasn't crossed my mind, but I wouldn't give him the satisfaction. It's too much like admitting defeat.

Nevar walks past me. "We'll finish this inside."

The only way he's going to finish anything with me is over my dead body. What am I saying? That's at the top of his wish list. But Chanlee is only a wish away.

I hope.

The goon pushes me into the kitchen of Nevar's house and releases me. The liberated pain in my arms, shoulders and chest shoots through my whole body, weakening me. I trip forward, right myself then wobble backwards into Nevar. He catches me like I'm a tossed ball then puts me aside like I'm in his way.

"Now behave yourself," the goon growls and pats the right side of his jacket. "My little friend is quick with the trigger."

I look at him in surprise. Not because of his threat. Hell no, the surprise comes in just looking at him. He has cop written all over him, not just cop, but vice cop. An indefinable quality. Not cockiness exactly, more like an inured confidence that comes from years of learning where to place the goal posts in the dark. It would take a universe of forces working against this man to get him to cross a certain line. So what is he doing with Nevar besides strong-arming?

Nevar walks past me to the heart of the maple and granite kitchen. Then he turns around, all fire and ice, and I burst out laughing. The punch he took tonight on top of the bruising I gave him yesterday has left his nose and eyes a swollen red, yellow, green, blue and violet beacon.

"Not hard to tell who has the class around here," the goon says, giving me the once over with disdain in his eyes. "You notice he has the decency not to laugh at you."

"Excuse me," I say. "I didn't realize you abducted me for a fashion show."

"Decency is a concept some people never grasp," the goon says, unfazed. He walks by me to hand Nevar a towel.

"And you'd know, being a cop working for this thug." I jerk my head in Nevar's direction. He wipes his face like I'm boring him. He and his goon are putting on such a good show, if I didn't know better, I'd swear they didn't hear me say the word *cop*.

I stay in the breakfast nook because it's closer to the door. But a shiver shoots through me because I'm also closer to the spot where a man gasped his last breath in a pool of his own blood. The scariest part is that everything's been washed away, including the truth.

"I'm getting a taste of the kind of decency you're trying to force me to grasp," I say, pulling out a chair and sitting down at the sunset maple table. I sit sideways so I can see the door. "The cowardly kind powered by hypocrisy, that's dangerous for anyone to come into contact with because it's quick to punish, and so frukin' warped it can't be satisfied with anything less than torture and death."

Nevar drops the towel from his face and stares at me like he's Mr Clean. That's him all right, pure as snow that's been scraped off the roads. "You've missed your calling, Bambi. You should have a bully pulpit in the town square."

"While you're knocking 'em dead from your pulpit in court? How decent of you," I say, rolling my eyes in the direction of the door. The pallid light of dawn is peering in through the door and double-decked windows. This is such a grand house. Too good for him. But then it's not realistic to expect Satan to live in a hovel. This place is beautiful on the surface, yet utterly creepy like him. Kenny's tortured calls for help are being held prisoner by these opulent walls.

The goon tries to suppress a smile. Nevar doesn't bother. He smiles and continues to stare at me boldfacedly with undisguised mockery. "Would you like a coffee?" he asks me.

"No thanks, Snow White. I prefer my coffee without strychnine."

If he takes offense, he doesn't show it. In fact, the more I talk, the more he stares at me and the bigger his smile gets.

"Looking at you, anyone would have to wonder what's making you so paranoid. *Fiat lux*, Bambi."

Now it's my turn to stare. This guy is totally wacked.

"Gee, Snow White, I can't imagine why I would be paranoid, considering you're holding me against my will."

You frukhead.

"You're free to go, but--"

"Free?! Yeah sure. Your idea of freedom is to deny others of theirs."

At least the goon has the sense to stay clear of the verbal volleys by remaining silent and busying himself with making coffee. The enticing aroma makes my stomach growl. I wish talk wasn't so cheap, because I'd kill for a cup of coffee right now.

"Leave if you like," Nevar dares me.

"Right. I leave and you take my life. No thanks, I don't like the tradeoff."

"Tradeoffs," he says slowly, walking towards me. "Let's talk tradeoffs."

I tense up, ready to knock his block off if I have to. He sits down facing me, so close our knees touch. At this range, it's too easy to lose sight of what a slimefest he is. But any way I look at him he's a killer. I push back my chair and rest my arm on the table to brace myself for any sudden movement.

"Through no fault of your own, you're caught up in an important investigation. That explains Maldoon's presence here."

Maldoon tips his proverbial hat to me.

"As your behavior indicates," Nevar goes on, "you already know that the investigation involves the men you saw on Mt. Rundle. One of them tried to kill you tonight because he knows you have evidence that will help the case we're building against him and his associates. The man who fell was a tourist from Australia. It seems no one but you saw him fall, and you have a painting that locates him and the other two men on the mountain at the exact--"

"Really?" I lean back in my chair and fold my arms. "What do you want, Nevar?"

"The same thing you want from me: the truth. But I'll settle for your painting. The one you did of the three men on the mountain, not the ice-cream cones."

"The truth?! Your humor is awfully black, Snow White."

"And the joke is...?"

"No joke. You want the facts to use as a weapon against the truth."

He cups his chin in his hand and looks at me thoughtfully. It's hard to read his face because his eyes are a bloody mess, but I'd say from the way his eyebrows have plowed together and he's frowning that the sultan is not pleased.

He bursts out laughing.

"You think I killed Joseph Stampe?" he blurts out between guffaws. Seeing that I'm not connecting with the name, he adds, "The man you saw falling." He looks at me askance. "Bambi, what you're thinking is preposterous." I look at him like he's crazy. "If I'm the monster you think I am, why aren't you afraid of me?"

I keep looking at him like he's crazy. "I'd have to be a retarded lunatic not to be creeped out by a psycho like you."

Fruk. The first rule of survival when dealing with a predator is not to show your fear. My fear is the source of his power. I should know better than to give him carte blanche. It's just that he gets me so....He reminds me of the fly at Al's place. Except that after I capture him and put him outside, then I'll swat him. Without hesitation.

"Bambi...." he says and reaches out to touch my face.

I guard my face with my arm. He grabs my wrist to keep me from following through with a blow to his face. The sureness of his grip tells me he's ready for a fight.

"The puncture marks on your neck and these scratches on your arm need tending," he says reproachfully, like I'm a naughty child. He yanks me to my feet.

I vibrate with the urge to bolt out the door. But Kenny's where Nevar is. He's probably too smart to keep Kenny here, but there may be something he's overlooked. Something as small, commonplace and critical as a linchpin.

"I'll keep the coffee hot," Maldoon says and bites into a croissant. Then he adds as we leave the kitchen, "And no funny business, Bambi."

I dismiss him with a shrug and follow Nevar into an atrium with opposing walls of stone and glass, and trees disappearing into the sky. I pause to contemplate the vibrant, soaring beauty oblivious to all evil. He leans over the balustrade of a bridge above me and says, "So where's your cat?"

"I don't have a cat."

I cross the bridge and follow him into a self-indulgent bedroom with linen walls, regal-sized bed and barely-there colors that soothe the nerves and flatter the skin.

"Either he scaled the wall to get to your balcony or someone put him there." He disappears into the adjoining bathroom.

"You see an awful lot from these windows." Like the color of my bedroom, the style of my toothbrush, the scent of my sheets and the feel of my underwear.

"I've never been to your apartment."

"What a wonderful eye for detail you have, considering you've never seen my place." Staying by his bed so he doesn't notice a difference in the distance of my voice, I check under his bed and pillows, and search his night table. *Aha, a little leather book.* I pocket it.

"I said that I've never been there. I didn't say I've never seen it."

Silence. Uh-oh, he's coming out.

"What you need is in here," he says from the doorway while I sit cross-legged like an angel on his bed.

I join him in the L-shaped room where he resumes setting up his shaving things on one side of a freestanding octagonal double vanity. I take my time walking over to the other side of a two-faced mirror suspended from the ceiling, separating the two sinks. And us. This room was made for intimate privacy. But where's the woman who shares the intimacy?

Eek! I exclaim to my image in the mirror. My overdone, smeared makeup distorts my features and the raw paranoia on my face is making me look like I'm bent for hell. Or dying. "I'd be the surefire winner at a fright night contest," I say, too surprised to be embarrassed.

He peeks around the mirror, his face half covered with shaving cream.

"Only if I'm not a contestant."

His soft laughter grates on me. I don't like the feel of any of this. Here we are, two people, worlds apart, bantering quietly on opposite sides of a mirror--and everything else. Like Kenny doesn't exist and would be irrelevant even if he did.

He comes around to my side. "I'm having a shower. Care to join me?" The damp towel he's using to wipe the shaving foam off his face leaves his smirk intact. I ice him. "Go ahead and use whatever you need."

"Nevar, I need to know what you want from me."

"We've already been through that, Bambi," he says from around the corner hiding the rest of the beaded-board room. "I'm waiting for you to deliver."

"What's so important about the painting?" I say, playing dumb to get him to talk while I scurry around searching through everything I can get my hands on.

"The subject matter, not the way it's painted," he says over the sound of running water. His voice is serious rather than teasing. And for this I endure his presence?!

"So your idea of a tradeoff is to get me to give you a painting you've already stolen from me, and in return you insult my talent?"

While I'm on the floor peering under the vanity, he suddenly appears before me, gloriously wet and naked except for a towel he's clutching at his waist. "You don't have the painting?"

I shake my head and get up slowly because at this angle the towel is merely decorative. He's definitely a natural blond and infinitely better built than I would have cared to guess.

"And you think I do?" he asks like he's the one who can't believe what he's seeing. "Bambi, surely you'll admit that the logic isn't on your side? Why would I go through the trouble to try to get it from you if I already have it?"

"To make me believe you don't have it."

"When did you discover it was missing?"

"The same time I discovered you trashed my place."

"You're wrong, Bambi. I didn't trash your place. And you know why? Because I know where the real action is." He's almost believable, standing there looking fierce yet surprisingly wounded.

"Who else have you told about the painting?"

"One other person."

"Chanlee?"

He knows who she is?

I nod, and he shakes his head. "You've told someone else." I shake my head, and he nods. "Some way, some how, you told someone."

"No I didn't," I insist.

"I prefer to think you did." He gives me a loaded look and walks back towards the running shower.

I avert my eyes. For at least a second. Then I gawk with my eyes and mouth wide open. This whole stinking mess is just too crazy. Or is it me who isn't making sense? Don't know how else to account for the wild thoughts invading my head. I close my eyes to break the spell cast by smooth, taut skin accenting sinuous curves.

I smother the fire.

What did he just say? Why would he prefer to think I've been shooting my mouth off about the painting? I open my eyes, and with the dawn comes the light. He's not in sight, but the truth is. He's accusing me of having sold out to the Hiker.

I march around the corner. Dark green tiles in the oversized shower cast his steamy body into relief as he washes himself. This guy doesn't need to use words or anything else to grandstand.

"Where is the body of the man who was murdered here? Who was he, anyway? And what are you really after, Nevar?"

"Decided to join me in the shower after all?" He opens the door, and I back away. Not all that far. My eyes are acting like they're found what they've been looking for their whole lives. Whew, it's hot in here.

"You're not going to get clean with your clothes on," he says, his voice as warm and soft as the water.

"You're dreaming, Snow White. Dreaming. What did you do with the body? And how have you managed to involve the police in the cover-up? And--"

"You really want to know?" he says. The water on his skin is teasing. Holding onto the door he leans forward and whispers, "Then give me the goods, baby."

I wince at his lousy gangster impersonation.

He fixes his eyes on mine. "You have something that men are willing to die for."

"What'll you give me in return for the painting?"

He laughs. "Bambi, do you honestly think anyone would kill for one of your paintings?"

"Listen you--"

"Sorry for the interruption, Stefan," Maldoon's voice calls out unapologetically from around the corner, "but Tildy needs to talk to you."

"Well, Bambi," he says, sounding disappointed but looking expectant. "It looks like you'll have to get undressed yourself. But I'll be back in time to scrub your back."

"In your dreams, Snow White."

As soon as he's out of sight, I clench my hands and scream inwardly. The primitive, irrational part of me is refusing to believe I'm right about him. Because he turns my nerve endings into horny devils that stoke the fires of hell in me. I throw myself face down on his bed and sink into the down. And keep sinking until I hear him call my name.

"Bambi?"

I roll over and open my eyes. "That's not my name," I say to his colorful face peering down at me.

"What would you like to eat?"

"Everything." I stretch and glance at the clock on the night table. "Twelve-thirty?!" The car auction started at twelve o'clock. I jump up and look wildly around the room.

He gives me a wide berth like there's a maniac loose in the room and points to the bathroom. "Calm down, you didn't turn into a pumpkin at twelve."

"I know. I turned into something far worse: one of your accomplices."

I avoid looking in the mirror. I know I look like an alien who forgot to pack a brush and comb before taking off on a thousand year flight.

After I wash up, he follows me as I dash outside without the leather book I found. The jerk stole it from me while I was sleeping.

"Now what?" I say impatiently, turning to face him.

His shoulders are hunched from the cold, and he's warming his hands in his pockets. Not exactly the image of a man about to attack. I relax enough to stop growling.

"Out here, it's just the two of us."

"So what's your point?" The chill in my voice blends with the air.

"Inside the house you talk and act like you're performing for a hidden camera. The house isn't wired, but you are. I thought that out here we could talk without anyone or anything running interference between us."

"You're such a thieving liar, Nevar. You've never been straight with me yet. All I've been getting from you is bullshit as you do the high fandango around the truth."

"And you've been straight with me? Where's your paint--"

"You can't answer a simple, straightforward question without crapping on the truth."

"Yes I can."

"Oh yeah? Where are you from, Nevar?"

"Rocky Mountain."

"You mean Rocky Mountain House?"

"No, east of that."

"We're east of that, but so is Europe and the rest of the world. And that's your idea of a straight answer? Screw you, Nevar."

I leave him standing there, half-smiling, half-shrugging, totally annoying.

"Bambi, you might want this on your travels." He holds out the Audi wrench.

I turn back instead of turning onto the driveway. "Don't think this changes anything, Nevar. Because it--"

"Put the weapon down, then put your hands behind your head," a voice commands through an amplifier.

We freeze and fire accusing glances at each other.

"You're not going to get away with this, Nevar." I lunge for the wrench, but he throws it behind me. "So help m--"

"Step away from him," the voice booms.

"For God's sake, do as he says," Nevar warns as he puts his hands behind his head. "This is no time to prove to the police you can pass their physical."

Hell, does the whole world know I didn't make the grade? I lock my hands behind my neck and turn slowly. A bevy of Tactical Unit weapons point at us.

CHAPTER 6

Someone steps out from behind a cruiser cutting off the driveway.

"Chanlee?!" I blink in surprise.

"What are you doing?!" she exclaims.

"What the hell do you think I'm doing? I'm trying not to get my head blown off."

"You look...you look like you've been holding up pretty well."

The alarm contorting her face softens into a worried, puzzled expression. She must have waited for me at the bottom of the hill and stared at the empty Audi until her impatience grew into raging paranoia.

"Cancel the war. Nevar hasn't been holding me against my will," I say and fling my arms down with an exasperated sigh. But relief eludes me because I'd like to wring her neck.

She looks past me at him. "Put your arms down, Mr Nevar," she says apologetically, saving her resentful smile for me. "Why are you wearing that jacket?" she yells more as an accusation than a question.

"Why do you think? It's cold out here," I yell back, upping her accusatory tone.

I glance over my shoulder at Nevar. Tac guys swarm around him like they're seeking autographs. He gives me a secret smile that makes me feel strange, mostly because I know what it means.

I turn back to Chanlee, and we walk past the firing line onto the street.

"What will the neighbors think?"

"Who gives a shit? They're not your neighbors."

"That's not what I mean, Chanlee. How am I going to stake out his place with the neighbors spying behind every bush?"

"Surely you jest? Look around you, kiddo."

I look around. No one congregating around the scene. No one peering out windows. Everything basking in the sun as though nothing counts for anything. We walk on moodily.

"With that getup and your hair done up like that, you don't fit the description I gave them. At first we thought you were one of his accomplices."

Little does she know.

"I was going to call you," I finally say, "but you've got my cell."

"I do not. You left it at my place." Her voice is assured, hard-edged. "What difference does that make? If he wasn't forcing you to stay in his house, you could have used *his* phone. You were supposed to wait for me. Remember? What were you doing in there all that time, anyway?"

"Uh, sleeping. Mostly."

"Uh-huh."

I stop and glower at her. She holds up her palms. The teasing curiosity on her face is poorly veiled, but I let it pass and we resume our walk to the steel blue Audi.

"Bringing in the cavalry was a bit much. Why the heavy artillery?"

"When you didn't show up, I came up here and the only sign of you was the blood by the blue spruce and the prints in the snow indicating a struggle had taken place. One look at him and I knew that he's the one who took the hit, but how was I supposed to know that when you never bothered to call?"

"That doesn't explain the artillery. You must have found out something about Nevar that confirms my suspicions about him."

She nods like she has to force herself to do it. "The Malibu the Hiker was driving came up a dud. It was hot. And so far there's no match for the blood on your blouse. What's got me gnawing my knuckles is that the Watcher's prints belong to a cop, Jake Hulladin. But you ready for this? He's supposed to be on vacation. Nevar's definitely up to his yin-yang in something."

"Hulladin's in vice, right?"

She stops suddenly. "What makes you say that?" She snaps her fingers in anticipation.

"Nevar's strong-arm is in vice. Have you heard of a *Maldoon*?"

Troubled thoughts cloud her eyes. "Not good news. He's on suspension, pending an investigation involving a young boy."

We stare at each other, our eyes lit up by the same idea: Maldoon is the connecting link between Nevar and Kenny. But something's not jibing. Nevar's been too careless in exposing Maldoon. *Too careless* with a guy like Nevar adds up to *deliberate*. What is it about Maldoon that he wants me to know?

Lost in thought, we walk the rest of the way in silence, our shoulders hunched and our heads down as though we're butting our heads against the wind.

Getting into the Audi I say, "I have to meet Fitz at the car auction. I'll catch you later."

"I can live with that. I could use 40 thousand winks." She pulls out her black cell from her jacket. "Here. Use mine." She digs deeper into her pocket. "You'd better have this headset too. Just in

case." She peers through the window into the backseat. "You don't happen to have a cola in there, do ya?"

The dealers are out in full force at the vehicle impound lot. I spot Fitz amongst them and snake my way through to the front of the huddle around Srunk, the auctioneer.

"Anything good left?" I ask Fitz after I tug on his sleeve to get his attention.

"I've got an inexhaustible supply," he says in a lecherous voice that matches the expression on his face until he notices what I'm wearing. "Where were you last night?"

"Never mind that. I didn't have time to check the list on the net. What number are they on?"

He taps number sixty-one on the list he's holding. Before I can read the description, Srunk moves onto the next vehicle and the huddle shifts along with him.

"This is yours, sugar," Fitz whispers.

Srunk is Jack's bean stalk. He's so tall, he can command a view of the huddle with one glance down his long nose. Nothing, no one escapes his beanie eyes. But he's also too thin to get in anyone's view of the cars. I eye the flaming yellow custom job behind him.

"Forget it, Fitz. I'm not driving around in a squashed spaceship."

"This is the one you want," he insists with a maddening smile. "Trust me."

"Yeah, sure. The last time I trusted you, I ended up carrying the vehicle home."

"Before or after you mastered the tailwhip sexchange?"

"Don't you try to sweet talk your way out of this. You said it wasn't going to rain."

"It didn't rain. It snowed." Suddenly, a shadow crosses his face. My lips tighten with guilt. "Chanlee phoned me this morning looking for you. Who were you with?" His voice becomes more sharp-edged with each word. And suspicion.

"The starting bid is \$3000...", Srunk says at a fast clip.

"I picked up this mysterious guy in a slick, black coat. Just couldn't say no to that knock 'em dead charm of his, so--"

"I've seen that jacket before on..." his right eyebrow lowers slowly "...on your father." His smile is back in the saddle. "So cut the bull, cutie-patootie, and give me a hug."

He wraps his arms around me before I'm finished speaking and plants a big, wet kiss on my lips as I breathe out a full-bodied hug.

"That's better," I say, trying to pull away.

"\$2400 anyone? \$2300...", Srunk sings on.

Fitz holds on and kisses me again. And again. Such is love with a man who's been hoarding his inexhaustible supply.

"\$900...\$800. No?" Srunk jabbers on. "Come now, don't any of you know a good buy when you see one? \$700..."

With each kiss my lips keep getting warmer and his get juicier.

"Sold to number 278 for \$400. A steal."

The huddle shuffles along. Good, because I needed to come down from Planet 9 for air. "What moron bought that piece of junk?" I ask no one in particular and scan the huddle for a smiling fool.

The only one smiling is Fitz. But his number is 26. His sassy, gotcha expression makes me look at my card. Damn. I'm 278.

"You held my card up?!" I smack him with the card.

Making a big pretense at being hurt he says, "You heard Srunk. It's a steal."

He tunnels a route through the huddle.

"Yeah sure," I say, staying tight behind him before the huddle closes in on me. "That's why no one else but this fool bid on it."

He shakes his head, while his smile stretches into a laugh and he pats the squashed flying saucer. "I spread word that it's not roadworthy."

"Oh, and that would be a hard sell. Even the guy who made it wrote it off. He modified so many of the parts that even the scrappers don't think it's worth towing to their yards."

"The way it is now it can't go anywhere on its own steam. But I've got the guys in the shop fabricating the parts it needs. Once they're in, this baby's gonna fly. And so will you, Rane, because before you leave next month, you can unload it for at least thirty thou."

"Really? I've got a better idea. You're going to pay the \$400 then tow this piece of garbage to the dump." I kick the fender and the driver's door handle pops off.

"You won't believe the mileage you're going to get, and propane is such a good--"

"This sucker guzzles propane?"

"Sips propane, my cutie-patootie, sips.

"How do you want to die?"

An arm slips around my waist from behind. I turn and see Schnell, the only other dealer who has the means and hutzpa to give Fitz a run for his money. "Great seeing ya again, Raney," he says, squeezing my waist. "Gimme a call when ya wanna unload the yellow babe."

I give him a long, hard look to see if he's had a lobotomy since the last time I saw him. He runs a hand across the top of his head, smoothing down the long wisp of brown hair that he has

fanned and pasted across his bald dome. And his x-ray eyes are checking out what they're seeing under my jack and beyond. I'd say everything's in order with him.

He gets out his wallet and hands Fitz five twenties. "Always wondered why the miserable old coot never done herself in," he says with regret. "That ass of yours ain't doing anyone no favors." He looks at me like he's snacking on someone else's treats. "Present company excepted." He winks and forces his way back into the huddle.

Ah, I get it. The good stuff is under the hood or Fitz wouldn't be going through so much trouble over it. He doesn't have any duds in his harem. And Schnell figures he stands a better chance of getting a deal from me, because if he had entered the bidding he'd have to go over the top to get the yellow job from Fitz. Both of them are using the right strategy if I were really that much of a pushover.

"How does it feel to know that he makes love to you every time he bonks his wife?" Fitz asks.

"Charming. That's crude, even for you. But never mind that. If you colluded with him to fix the bid, why is he paying you?"

"I won a bet with him. We saw Srunk's wife smile."

"No kidding?!" I chuckle. The last time anyone caught Srunk's wife smiling is when she had an unrestricted view of Fitz's butt. Even then her smile could have passed for a perfunctory grimace.

"If I'm going to round up the next car I have to get back into the hustle," Fitz says. "Where do you want to go for eats after, sugar?"

"Going to have to pass. Way too much to do. For starters, I want to chase down this guy with the killer charm." My forced levity goes over with a thud. "See you tonight."

Leaving, I blow him a kiss as suspicion creeps into the disappointment on his face.

On the way to pick up my things from Dan's apartment, I drive by the motorcycle park and see a bike sailing into the sun before splashing down. Who in their right mind would navigate a hill with the trails saturated with today's melt? Some thrill-seeking fanatic too obsessed with getting a rush to care about the difference between nerve and recklessness. Just my kind of guy. What he couldn't teach me about riding bikes!

I veer off in the direction of the hill and wait for him to come down off his high, hopefully without too much singeing. Bike and rider appear in silhouette at the top of the hill then plunge straight down. Swoosh! They disappear into a puddle at the bottom. Then like a Phoenix they fly out of the blaze of mud. He has to be tied to the damned machine.

I wave him over, but he turns around and ascends the hill. Not once but several times, with me waving like a hot-to-trot groupie each time. Finally, he rises out of the blaze and waves back at me. Coming at me, he stops the bike so close my toes curl up protectively.

"I want to learn how to ride. Would you be willing to teach me?" Silence emanates from this forbidding looking creature from the deep and on high. "I'll pay you."

With his goggles covered in mud, it's a mystery how he's taking my offer. He lifts his goggles onto his helmet. One glance at me and he explodes into laughter. High-pitched and unrestrained. He pulls off his helmet and shiny red hair tumbles down onto his filthy jacket. Correction: *her* filthy jacket.

"Fitz's babe!" she says and gasps for air.

I've been called worse things, but never with such relish. "I'm not his *babe*."

"No offense, Rane," she says, pulling off her right glove and offering me her hand. "Lulie Fine." Her hazel cat's eyes still dancing with laughter, she studies my face. "It's too hilarious. You've been with Fitz how long now? And you haven't got the hang of riding?!"

"Hey, Big Lulu! You through for the day?" a fellow biker calls out after hitting bottom.

"You've got it, Mick," she hollers.

We shield our eyes and watch him traverse the hill.

"The front wheel's canting. He's going to high side it," I say. His bike crashes sideways. He flies to the right, rolls then picks himself up.

She pats me on the back. "Well, hon, at least you know a squid when you see one." She stands back and looks me over like she's sizing me up for a coffin. "Not bad."

"For a spectator," we finish together.

"I'm no biker, but I'm not exactly a tanglefoot, either. I rode a scooter when I was going to school in Italy, and I have my license, but I don't know how to ride, you know, really ride. Fitz likes me to ride wrapped around him. But no matter what bike he takes on the road, he never gets the finger from anyone on a hog. Now that's riding."

"No fooling." Then she sobers up abruptly. "I don't ride bitch with anyone. No butt-kissing sissy bars for me. Want to hop into the saddle right now?"

"Uh, I'm not going up there in this outfit," I say.

"With that attitude, any self-respecting bike will have you nipple surfing in no time flat." She strips off her body armor, and as she shrinks down to human size she grows bigger in my eyes.

"I was thinking I could crawl around on a road bike before I start jumping off mountains."

"Here, you'll need a skid lid." She shoves her helmet at me. "I have leathers you can wear, and we can use the slalom here."

"With this baby you're going to do more than crawl," Lulie says as she rolls a Ducati from the back of her truck. "She's no wrestler. She doesn't hesitate to deliver the power when you need it." She invites me to take the reins by patting the saddle. "While you get the feel of her, I'll set up the cones."

On her machine and in her husband's leathers, I feel removed from myself, like I'm buried under someone else's skin. She drills, drills and drills me on the dirt slalom. After the first few hundred runs in lock-to-lock turns through the plastic cones, I can't tell whether I'm turning or the world is. And Lulie is doing more roaring and whining than the Ducati.

"You're strangling her," she shouts as I try to execute a 360 degree turn with continuous full lock. "You're transferring your weight too soon. Ease up. Don't overdrive her. She'll have more respect for you if you don't give into her leaning attitude." While I struggle to keep the front from slewing sideways, she yells, "Okay, Rane, roll 'er off."

I cruise up to her as Mick does the same from the other direction. Looking like he's a mobile puddle, he says from inside his helmet, "This isn't happening. No way, man, you're letting someone ride the Duke?!"

"Fitz won't let her ride his. That's good enough reason for me," Lulie says picking up the cones. She directs me to meet her over at the truck.

While I'm lining up the bike at the back of her pickup, my rearview mirror fills with a grey SUV. The idiot driver must think I look good as a hood ornament. Shit, shoot, shite! He's not going to pull over, because it's the Hiker. I turn in time to keep him from crushing me against her truck. Dialing lots of throttle, I carve a wide arc to keep him from backing up onto me. The hill looms before me, but this Ducati will die trying to get over it. She was born to command the road. I rev her up for the exit. A flash glance back and I catch Lulie jumping up and down and punching the air with her fists. Staying true to her nature the Ducati gets all fired up without acting temperamental. With a booming roar we downshift into the corner, taking me onto the pavement with the Hiker in pursuit. But I cut it too tight and skid into a pile of slush. My racing heart tells me to brake hard, but my brain overrides that suicidal missive. I let off the brake and hold tight, steer into the slide, smart kick us upright and get the wheels rolling true.

The Hiker doesn't throw me into the big highway in the sky because a car comes between us. In a matter of seconds I become

everything I loathe in a driver: a raging tailgater, stop sign-runner and lane-changer without consideration for anyone but myself.

Just like the fiend trying to kill me with his SUV.

Riding the Dead Man's Alley between lanes, I head due west to get on the other side of MacLeod Trail because then I'll be on *my* turf. I don't know the nooks and crannies of the industrial parks on the east side. The light turns red at the intersection ahead, and the Hiker is only one car behind. He crowds the driver into swerving into the far lane and hanging a right. A sedan, which is the only thing between me and the intersection, is a deathtrap because the SUV is going to ram me into it. With only enough time for a lifesaver glance behind, I swoop to the right between the sedan and the curb.

The light turns green, and I roar out without anything between me and the cross-traffic on my right except a hope and a prayer that the Hiker doesn't know that on the other side of MacLeod the curb dips then rises sharply to slow down drivers like him intent on killing someone. I push my body up from the saddle and hug the tank with my knees. There's no room for error. A driver jumps the gun and turns onto my tail as I hit the speed bump dead on. The SUV takes the bump in stride and swerves in front of me. I veer to the right and the van goes ahead of me. Then I cut through a gas station back onto MacLeod and take a long, slow breath. I exhale with the SUV breathing down my neck.

I swoop west off MacLeod.

All right you cutthroat, hell-bound bastard, you're on my turf now.

Assuming nothing but his determination to annihilate me, I lead him through the residential streets of my youth. The roads are covered with icy patches that I avoid like they're dynamite. I turn onto a street canopied by elms that shed most of their leaves with Thursday's snowfall. Damn. They're dry on top but wet as hell underneath, making them about as safe as riding on an ice rink. Swearing a blue streak, I ease up on the throttle to keep the bike from squirting out from under me. The SUV gains on me, getting close enough to whack me like a hockey puck to the other end of the street that ends in a ten foot high cement sound barrier. I kill that nightmare by steering clear of the traction busters and veer up onto the sidewalk. Foreshortening and a six-foot high hedge conspire to hide a narrow street running the length of the barrier. With any luck the Hiker hasn't seen it. I swoop to the right and without stopping my engine, I come to a dead stop. I hold my breath without dabbing my foot on the pavement. The SUV shoots ahead of me and crashes into the cement while trying to negotiate the tight blind right onto the narrow street. While he's bouncing off the wall and sucking up his airbag, I cross my toes on the footpegs

and lean and dip into the corner tightly enough to save myself from becoming wall graffiti or another windshield wiper on an oncoming vehicle.

Luckily, no one's on the street. The deadended road that's going to take me and the Ducati over a cliff if I don't keep my speed perfectly in sync with the ground. Before me a footpath blocks fools like myself crazy enough to take the plunge down the escarpment. On the left a massive interchange blocks me. But I slip through a gap between the bumper guard and the corner of a fence lining the escarpment. I used to take this route when I was a kid. No sweat. But I was riding a measly mountain bike then. I stay up on the top until the edge softens into a more forgiving grassy slope. I take a deep breath, lean the bike out and my body into the slope and descend crosswise. The slope holds and so does the Ducati.

At the bottom, I head for the interchange to get me onto the freeway. But I glance up and see the SUV turning around at the end of the road. The Hiker's going to circle back and greet me because he knows where the on-ramp leads. Damn. I gear down until he disappears down the road. Then I turn around sharply and head in the opposite direction to the bridge. It's only open to pedestrians and bicycles, but I'm going to have to chance it. Turning onto the cement bridge, I blast my horn to warn a pair of lovers walking hand in hand that I'm coming through. They give me the royal finger as I jockey for space to charge past them. I can't dawdle or the Hiker will spot me. Taking its cue from me, the Ducati accelerates aggressively as I gear up and drop my shoulder into a crosswind lashing out at me. In my rearview I see the male half of the couple talking into a cell. Lulie's going to explode into a spitfire when she gets cited for my misdeeds.

As I'm about to applaud myself for making it over the bridge, a woman riding a bike pulling a baby in a cart suddenly appears around the corner. Fruk! I thumb the kill button and brace myself.

"You're not allowed on the bridge, you Neanderthal yo-yo," she screams as she passes me.

No shit.

With the Hiker off my back, the rest of the way should be a cakewalk, but I find myself riding into a black cloud that bursts over my head. The rain-slicked roads bring the oil to the surface, giving me the thrill of riding on a treacherous minefield with the rain pelting me while it nearly blinds me.

I detour to my parents' place.

By time I turn onto Brittanski Drive, the vengeful cloud that dumped a load on me has floated merrily on its way, leaving the pavement dabbled with sunshine. And in one of those pockets of light across from my parent's house, I see a parked gold Prius. Nevar. What the hell is he doing here? Staring at him leaning back

against the car with his arms folded, I almost miss the turn into the driveway and out of the sunshine. I have to straighten up as I go into the curve and apply the brakes hard before I can lean into it again. But I bring the Ducati and myself to a stop. Upright.

"Well, well, if it isn't Bambi," Nevar says behind me.

I swing my leg over the saddle and turn to face him. The soles of my boots are too wet to grip the slate, and I kiss the driveway with my butt.

I spring to my feet before he can reach out with a helping hand. His smirk clips me though, making me sore.

"What do you want?" I snap.

"Everything. But we can start with your painting if you like."

"I'd like you to leave." He shakes his head. "Don't you ever sleep?"

"Yes, but not when I'm awake."

"Very funny. Buzz off, Nevar." I take off my helmet and scowl at him.

In the light of day his wounds look awful, but I can see past all the colors, the trench coat and his insolent expression to what lies beneath. I refocus on the bike, verify neutral and get the Duke rumbling and rolling towards the garage.

Mom charges out the front doorway. "Rane?! I was wondering who on earth was making such a horrible racket."

She must have been preparing plants for overwintering, because she's dressed in old jeans and one of Dad's stained T-shirts.

"Shut that thing off!" she hollers. I do as she says, and she turns her fire on Nevar. "Is there any reason you're on my property?" she asks him, frosting her fire with ice. He doesn't know it, but he's getting the royal badass treatment. She's so ticked off at him for not being Fitz that she can't even be bothered to tidy up the bun unraveling at the back of her neck.

"I'm here to conduct some business with Rane," he replies sweetly. Preoccupied with the damage on his face, she avoids getting tangled up in the undercurrent raging between him and me. "We were just about to leave."

"We?!" I say akimbo. "For a guy who doesn't sleep, you sure are a dreamer. There's no way in hell I'm going anywhere--"

"Rane! How do you know he doesn't sleep?" Mom interrupts. Her eyes narrow. "What are you up to?"

"Um, it's just business," I say, wagging a finger between him and me.

"Does this business involve the neighbors?" she asks.

Nevar and I exchange glances to see who's going to tackle this one.

"No," we say together.

"Well then," she says, "why are you out here seeking counsel with them?"

"Let's continue this meeting inside, by all means," he says, walking past her towards the door.

She watches him disappear into the house. After the initial shock, her face reddens and her bifocals steam up along with the rest of her.

I slip the helmet back on to hide my amusement. A red flag should be unfurling in my mind, but something, call it gut instinct or stupidity, is making me think Nevar doesn't mean my family any harm. Maybe it's a misplaced hope that his malice is limited to a predilection for young boys. That he kidnaps? Suddenly, I see red.

"Aye, aye, aye!" Mom says and slaps her cheeks. "When you said you were in trouble, you didn't let on you were in *this* kind of trouble." She looks at me like she's watching me shoot Fitz down in flames. Then she rubs noses with my helmet and peers through the visor. "Anyone home in there?" she says, knocking on the helmet. "Please tell me you're not going all strange on me like your brother."

I lean back so far I knock into the bike. I grab the bars in time. "Who I go with is my affair." I mount the Duke.

"Tori Rane! How could you be so selfish?!" she says, recoiling in horror. "They're *my* grandchildren." She taps her heart with a fist.

"I have to put this in the garage."

"Tell your father supper is ready," she says to my back.

"Then come inside and tell your friend he's not invited."

The garage door rolls up as I approach it.

Dad looks admiringly at the Ducati, while I park it in the corner of the crowded garage. Contraptions, spare parts and gizmos jostle for room amongst the tools, shelves and benches lining the walls. I take off my helmet and plunk it down on a bench beneath a backlit sign he made up that sings, "Home sweet home," on the hour.

With his hands shoved in his perennial green taupe cardigan, he walks around the bike. "She's a beaut. Bet she's a bitch, though."

Taking off my gloves, I shake my head. "She's so good she makes love to you in any gear."

"You don't say." He chuckles then shuts it off abruptly and eyes me suspiciously. "You didn't trade the Audi for her, now did you?"

"Just borrowing it. By the way, supper's ready." Then in the same breath, I slide in, "And I have company."

"He's the trouble you're in?"

I shake my head. "Uh, yes. But not in the way you're thinking."

"So what's the problem?"

"Mom wants him to leave. Would you be a doll and tell him?"

"He's your friend, you be rude to him."

"He won't listen to me."

He scratches his head. "All right. Just give me a couple minutes." He returns to his favorite bench and begins tinkering with a wooden box.

"What you working on?"

"Don't know yet."

I unzip Lulie's jacket and pull out Chanlee's cell. "How's Mr McPickles doing?"

"Just fine," he says, pointing to a bag of nails on the other side of the box.

I step closer and see Mr McPickles curled up, sleeping on Dad's slippers.

"He likes 'em, almost as much as my inventions."

"Hello, big guy," I say, chucking his ears. He opens one eye and unceremoniously drifts back into dreamland. "If no one claims him, I'll get him shots and have him fixed. Then I'll find a good home for him."

Dad shakes his head and breathes out, "No, no, no," without using his vocal chords. "You're going to have to wait on the neutering. The vet says Mr McPickles is only four months old."

"No way, Dad! You can see for yourself that he's fully grown."

"This one's going to be a real strapper. Look at the size of his head. Give him a few more months and Sheeka is going to be mending her ways or licking her wounds." He smiles with a glint in his eyes.

I have to smile too, because I think Mr McPickles has found a home for himself. Right in Dad's heart.

Dad turns back to his box and hums to himself like he never heard me tell him supper's ready. For as long as I can remember, it's been a standing rule that when Mom says supper's ready, we have fifteen minutes lead time to get into the kitchen. After that, she turns into a wrathful deity and descends on us.

Just enough time to give Lulie a shout.

"We saw the brute trying to bend you into the shape of his bumper," she says. "Skip the chatter 'bout the Duke. I know you're a cop, or at least you will be once you pass the physical." Geez, is there anyone Fitz hasn't told? "I take it you managed to ditch the bastard?"

"Temporarily," I say, concealing my annoyance with Fitz and his big mouth. "I thought you were going to ride roughshod over my hide for stealing your Duke."

"The only thing ticking me off right now is how you're stripping me down to a stereotype. Don't get me wrong, I don't like anyone messing with my bikes, but I ride 'em, I don't build shrines to 'em. Just don't steal my man, no how, no way."

"Want me to deliver the Duke now or tomorrow when I come for my lesson?"

"Hold onto your hat till tomorrow."

"Come on, Mr McPickles," Dad says quietly in the background, "it's time to go inside." The kitten's ears perk up, he uncurls and bounces to life.

As I hang up, Mr McPickles rubs up against me and purrs his approval.

"We should get inside the house and rescue your friend," Dad says, picking up Mr McPickles. "Your mother's probably lynched him by now."

Nice thought while it lasted.

Entering the spacious country kitchen, we exchange bewildered looks. Mom has changed out of her jeans and ratty T-shirt into a gown that would look just right at the opera. Preferably on-stage. She's rubbing shoulders with Nevar at the table-style island in the center of the room. They chat away, thick as thieves, while she washes lettuce, and he sharpens a knife with the tip conveniently arcing in her direction.

CHAPTER 7

What?! I leave Nevar alone with my mother for fifteen minutes, and he's already got her at knife point. He gives me a creepy smile, puts down the knife sharpener and slices through a red pepper in one fell swoop, like he's doing an infomercial for cutthroats.

"I was about to go outside and get you," she says to Dad and I with mild reproach. She pats the spiffy, reborn bun at the nape of her neck and turns her attention back to Nevar. "I think we're ready to top it up with the lettuce," she says to him with a look I know only too well. It's a look of satisfaction tinged with pride, and anticipation tinged with impatience. And it comes over her whenever she sees a sign, however imaginary, that I've moved closer to matrimony. It means that when she looks at him she can see the faces of her grandchildren. She's always said that it doesn't matter what color they are. Now when she looks at him, she has a bouquet of colors to choose from.

Wallowing in the undeserved attention, Nevar tears lettuce leaves into a bowl.

"Marvelous. A man with the sense to tear lettuce instead of cutting it," Mom says, looking up at him in wonderment. Then, giving me a jaundiced look, she says, "And Rane, when you're washing up, please change out of that motorcycle moll costume. You won't be riding anything around inside here."

Nevar doesn't speak. His eyes say everything for him. With his gaze peeled on me, I undo the zippers and shed my leather skin.

Dad whispers in my ear, "Now what, Sherlock?"

"We feed him, then we take him out with the trash," I say out of the side of my mouth.

"If he's going to be sitting at my supper table, mind telling me his name?"

Nevar puts the knife down, too full of himself to bother concealing that he was eavesdropping. He walks around the island and holds out his right hand to Dad. "I'm Stefan," he says, while I mutter, "This is Mr Nevar."

"The trial lawyer?" Dad says, shaking Nevar's hand. "I wouldn't have known it with those shiners you've--"

"Your very own daughter gave him those," Mom pipes up.

The three of them eye me, all with different expressions that add up to the same thing.

"She mistook me for someone else," Nevar says, obviously loving how the bruises make me look hideous and him look like an angel.

"Rane, honestly," Mom says with an exasperated look that melts as she shifts her gaze to him.

"I see," Dad says, smiling at Nevar.

"Not as well as I did when I gave him those," I say, my voice hoarse from restraint. The easy charm with which Nevar is insinuating himself into my life is twisting my stomach into knots.

"Aye, aye, aye," Mom says, looking singed by the sparks flying. "When you dismantled that fortress you built in the backyard for your friends from the Sombrero galaxy, I thought that was the end of your far out trips. But Rane, honestly, the way you act anyone'd think you haven't found your way back home."

While she mollycoddles Nevar's amusement, I say, moving towards him, "Nevar, how would you like to--"

Dad steps between us. "Mr McPickles needs his antibiotics," he says quietly. The kitten climbs around his shoulders and starts munching on Dad's hair.

"As long as you don't give him anymore canned tuna," Mom says, stepping back to the cupboard containing the tuna and guarding it. "It's much too rich for a kitten. I don't want him throwing up on my sofa again."

Wearing Mr McPickles like a hungry coonskin hat, Dad reaches around her and takes a can of tuna out of the cupboard.

"Is Mr McPickles the cat that scales your apartment building and makes death-defying leaps onto your balcony?" Nevar asks as we walk to his Prius after supper.

"Why do you want to know?"

"I don't," he says, holding the passenger door open for me. "Just making conversation."

"You said you would drop me off at the motorcycle park to pick up the Audi, without any detours, delays, subterfuge or whining. And I never said I was going to talk to you along the way, so shut up."

Smiling like the fiend he is, he waves at my parents as they stand at the front door, each holding a cat in one arm and waving back with the other.

"You can cut the act, you've already seduced them."

"Why shouldn't I smile? Your mother told you to bring me along for Sunday dinner."

"Yes, well, I wasn't the child who did as she was told. My brother filled that role." I wave and get into the car.

"Is that why he's in Brazil, and you're still here?" he asks, getting into the driver's seat.

"Shut up, Nevar."

Surprisingly, he does just that, but once he turns off Britanski and we're alone together, the mood changes. I'm sitting in the same place Kenny was. Equally as willing. But one of us is old enough to know better.

"What's your connection with vice?" I ask with a casualness so forced it betrays me.

"How do you propose I answer your question without talking?"

"Fruk, why do I bother? You're not capable of saying more than two words without drowning them in subterfuge."

"Try me."

"You're dreaming. I'll try almost anything before I'll try you. Why are you having me watched?"

"I'm not." His voice is relaxed, unbothered.

"Okay then, why are you having my place watched by a vice cop?"

"I'm not."

"Why did you trash my place?"

"I didn't."

"Why is the camera the Hikers had up on the mountain so important?"

"It's not."

"Why are you pretending you don't have the painting you stole from me?"

"I'm not," we say together from the opposite sides of reality. He punctuates his words with an up note, while I punctuate mine with a gagging sound.

Neither of us says anything for the longest time, until the silence builds to a nerve-wracking intensity that fills the car, the night, the world.

With him.

"What have you done with Kenny?" I blurt out after censoring my reasons for caution.

He throws me a startled look and veers onto the side of the road. Instead of correcting for his error, however, he compounds it by cutting the lights then rolling to a stop. We're about a block away from the entrance to the motorcycle park. In the dark, away from traffic and people.

Uh-oh.

"You start anything, Snow White, I'll finish it." I ready my body to slash him with a knifehand. Right across his nose.

"You think I stopped here to neck with you? Forasmuch as I'd like to oblige...Ask me again later."

I relax my hands, but my chest tightens. "Must you reduce everything to sex?"

"Only trying to keep up with you." His half-laughing voice gives way to dismay as he adds, "I saw a light up there through the trees. The rock hopper trying to kill you may be waiting for you."

So the spider says to the fly. That's what I get for trusting someone who isn't a used car salesman.

"I'll check it out," Nevar says, getting out of the car. "You stay here."

You're dreaming, Snow White.

I'm out of the car in a shot.

The chilling night air is still, expectant. With the help of a streetlight further down the road, I see the shadow of his black trench coat stretch into the park. I veer off the road and scale a chain-link fence about twenty feet from the Audi.

It's still there where I parked it, alone and undisturbed.

As I steal to the car, a cold sweat creeps up my spine, making my hair stand on end. It's just too damned quiet. Where's Nevar? I start the car with the remote and reach for the door handle. Suddenly, a motorbike roars at me from the rear, its headlight blinding me. I jump onto the car hood and roll onto the other side.

The bike howls into a turn for a repeat performance. Obscured in black, both the rider and bike are difficult to see. But I've caught the one detail that matters: It's the Hiker. He has a deadly sureness to his actions that is unmistakable. Does the Grim Reaper ever miss a cue?

He points something at me.

Holy shit, it's a gun!

I kill the Audi's ignition because I don't have time to get into the car. And if I don't get away from it, the Hiker's going to make it look like a Picasso painting. I drop to the ground and belly walk under the car to the other side. I scramble to my feet in time to give the Hiker a psycho's dream shot at mowing me down. I dart to the side and ready myself to kick him over, but Nevar appears out of nowhere and does it for me. The bike bucks, throwing the rider. Nevar's coat catches onto the bar and yanks him violently. But he doesn't get thrown into the crash because his coat splits down the back, leaving him intact but with only half a coat.

I charge at the Hiker. Unmoving and face down on the ground, he looks about as innocent as a bomb about to go off. "Get up, you bag of shit!" He responds by pretending not to be responding. I kick him over onto his back. "Listen, you--"

Nevar bear hugs me from behind. "We've got company," he breathes into my ear.

Fruk, another bike is heading for us. No lights and a purr instead of a roar. Suddenly, the lights flash on and the bike rages at us. We bolt for the hill. The biker traverses the hill and gains on us as we climb straight up, but at least Nevar is between me and the bike. At the top I crouch down. Breathless. "Nevar, get down!" I grab his coat, and he falls into place beside me.

"As soon as he circles around to face us, start running down right here," I say and point to the vertical trail that leads to the swamp below.

"Now I get you," he says. "Pax." He kisses the top of my head then jumps up.

If all psychos were this maddening, they wouldn't live long enough to kill anyone.

I spring up as the bike rears at the crest before plunging down at me. I jump aside and the bike careens past me. Then I kick its rear down into the murky abyss.

"Nevar! Flying garbage!"

Splash!

Nevar catches me as I fly down off the hill.

I don't linger in his arms. "Who is the creep?" I ask.

"Surely you've figured out that much by now?"

We're equidistant between the swamp creature and the car. I go for the creep making weird sounds in the mud.

"Krudmin's on the other side of the car," Nevar says, grasping my arm. "You have to get it to safety before he--"

"You're right." Not really. I just said that to shut him up long enough to allow me to get a crowbar or some other weapon from the trunk.

His grip weakens in proportion to the satisfaction he gets from having his way with me. *Men*. What a world this would be if their brains were even half as big as their egos.

"That's better," he says in a mushy voice.

Yeah sure.

I head for the car with Snow White treading softly by my side. Why isn't the Hiker greeting us with his usual lust for blood? The tension in my muscles grips my whole body. Nevar stops abruptly, as if he's so much in tune with my mind and body that he's riding my thoughts to their destination. We spin around. And as we bolt for the swamp, a blast pops our ears and jolts us off our feet. We dive into the mud, with hot white light licking our backs. The explosive light seers sharp, painful images of my parents into my head.

I land on the biker.

"Get off me, you stupid bitch!" the biker yells in my ear. "I think my leg's busted."

"Where?" I ask, getting up.

"Here," he sits up and points to his shin.

"Well, let's see what we can do about that." I kick the side of his knee, blowing out his kneecap. "You don't know how to count, dumbass. It's broken in two places."

Howling in pain, he grabs for my ankle.

I stomp on his wrist.

With a sudden and sure push on the back of my knee and the merest touch of his hand on my shoulder, Nevar pushes me into the mud. "Hasn't anyone ever told you that you don't kick a man when he's down?" he says while I gasp and struggle to get up.

Finally upright, I wheel around, choking on mud and feeling like the flames that burst into life and took the Audi with them when they died. Nevar faces me without shirking my wrath then heads for the exit.

I glance at the biker, with the idea of tearing off his helmet to see who or what's under there, but he's slumped into the mud. Totally out of it. The police'll find me here before I'll find out anything from this guy. I hoof it to catch Nevar before he drives away without me. He comes into view beside the Prius. I walk around to the passenger side while he shakes mud out of his hair. Then he looks over the roof at me and says, "Take your clothes off."

"Open this door, it's freezing out here!"

"You're not getting into my car like that. Unless you want to clean up the mess afterwards."

I stare at him, unsure whether he's serious or just plain seriously mad.

"So the mud on my clothes is going to soil your car, but yours isn't? Like your shit doesn't st--" His mud-drenched pants splat against my face. I pull them off, and one of his socks lands on my face. I duck, unzip my jacket, creep around the back of the car and catch him peering over the roof, shirt in hand ready to strike. He's down to his oh-so brief underwear. If ever there was an inducement to smear his perfect body. I chuck my filthy jacket.

His mouth drops open, first in surprise, then in disgust.

"I knew you couldn't take your own medicine," I taunt, dropping my jeans.

"That's medicine," he says, pointing at my legs. "This isn't." He picks up my jacket and throws it back at me.

He walks around me, opens the car and hands me a plastic shopping bag. "To wrap up your hair." Then he throws me a blanket about the right size to cover my butt.

Grumbling and mumbling, I get into the car with my back to him.

"You needn't be prudish on my account," he says, getting into the car.

"As if you need eyes to see any part of me. Dream on, Snow White." The blanket is so small, it's intent upon making his dreams come true.

"Where to first?" he asks after he's through chuckling over my plastic-wrapped hair.

"What do you mean *first*?" He smugly ignores my question "Listen, Nevar, you drop me off at my parents', and that's that." What am I saying?! The psycho Hiker just blew up their wheels. "Uh, then you can drop me off at my friend's."

"Fine. Then we'll get the painting," he says with nauseating cheerfulness.

The wild, wicked and outrageously satisfying things I could do with my hands about now! But no, I have to hold the blanket to keep it from riding up.

"Someone's still up," he remarks at the lights shining from the windows at my parents' home.

Damn. Mom always thinks I'm up to something dirty, but this is one time she's not going to be all that pleased about being right. I step past him to get his eyes off the parts not covered by the blanket, but my cheeks are sticking out enough at the back to give him an eyeful.

Screw that.

I change back into my jeans and blouse. Without the underwear. My skin prickles, crawls, shrinks then freezes. Unwrapping the plastic bag, I find the mud has set my hair in place. Not exactly a beauty treatment. More like opening a can of frozen worms. I walk to the front door, feeling like Medusa in an ice pack.

I point at Nevar, who's donned his shirt and pants. He's too amused to take his eyes off me. "Not a word, Nevar. Not one damned word." I stop just before the door. "Listen, the kitchen light at the back is off. Stay here. I'll sneak upstairs to--"

The front door opens, throwing an unwelcome spotlight on us.

"What on earth?!" Mom says, her gaze swinging wildly between Nevar and me until it rivets on him. "You poor man. She's turning you into one of her creatures from Sombrero."

This from a woman who's wearing Gruffie the Wonder Bear slippers, a purple and orange fuzzy kaftan and enough PVC piping in her hair to service an entire bathroom.

She looks back over her shoulder. "Terence, *your* daughter is back without *your* car." I step into the house, and she tilts back her head and peers at me through her bifocals like she's holding up a magnifying glass to me. "At least I *think* it's your daughter."

Nevar bumps into me from behind because I stop short in the foyer. I'm in enough of a mess already without having her

declare war on me for sullyng her domain. Well, it's not completely hers. Dad gets to enjoy the plaid, plain and striped parts of the room, while she gets to savor the floral and chintz parts all by herself. If you don't count Sheeka, who's crouched on the yellow rose sofa, ready to pounce. The uppity feline sneers at Dad as he slouches contentedly in his navy plaid chair, with his legs stretched out on the ottoman, and Mr McPickles nesting in his hair. Both of them peer at me over the top of the book Dad's holding. The kitten smiles, but alarm weighs down the whole of Dad's face. He sits up. "Were you in an accident?"

"Not quite. I'm okay, as you see." His hair tells the tale of his disbelief. It's standing at wit's end. "I'm okay. Really. But your car is toast," I say with enough discomfort to cause my voice to quaver. "This is all that's left, I'm afraid." I throw him the remote and glance back at Nevar to cue him we're leaving. His mud-caked bruises give me the willies, but fruk if they don't do him justice. I stifle a laugh.

Catching my snicker, Mom says in a huff, "So you think this is some kind of joke. My Rudy Valee compilation was in that car. I'll have you know it's not replaceable."

"Neither is your daughter," Dad says.

She shakes a finger at him. "I blame you for this, Terence. You and your big ideas about having her experience the world before settling down. Look at your handiwork. Hope you're proud of yourself."

"I am," Dad says, and it doesn't sound like he's just saying it to spite her. "We don't have another car to spare, but we'd like to help in any way we can to get Kenny Hironaka back safely."

"Am I wearing a sign or something?" I ask.

"No," Dad says. "I know you wouldn't go through this much trouble for anything less. It must be particularly difficult for you, Stefan." He shakes his head in sympathy.

Nevar laps it up then blanks out his face as I glare at him.

"Personally, Rane, I think you're doing all this to get the attention of a certain young man," Mom says. "Not very clever of you, my dear. You've already got his attention."

We all stare at Nevar, but the only one in the room who can think of something to smile about is Mr McPickles. Yet I get the feeling that Nevar is smiling inside. He's giving me that secret look it seems only I can see.

"Well, we're off," I say, nudging Nevar backwards to the door. His body moves with my hands instead of resisting. I sure don't trust how obliging he's being.

"At least clean yourselves up first," Mom commands.

"I have an old coat you could wear," Dad says, getting up.

"Never mind," Mom says, motioning him to sit back down. He walks over to us with Mr McPickles holding up the rear. "I'll get

her something with a hood. Honestly, Terence, the way you act you'd think you're the only one allowed to be proud of our daughter." Turning to go upstairs, she grumbles, "My only daughter. When will she ever grow up and learn that life isn't about having fun?" Shaking her head, she goes up the stairs. "I was never even remotely that pigheaded or foolish when I was that age."

Dad clears his throat without saying anything, and suddenly the air is clear.

Cleaned up a little, but not refreshed at all, I get out of the Prius outside Chanlee's and smile unabashedly as I tell Nevar to clear off.

He looks back at me with a smile devoid of anything worth receiving. "You're stuck with me until I get what I came for," he says.

With him dogging my steps, I head for the shung chi entrance at the back of the house. "You're wasting your time, Nevar. My friend isn't going to fall for your puke-nice routine the way my parents did. You'll be lucky if she doesn't pull out her gun and shoot you." If I don't barge in while she's making out with Bruno. Then it'll be me she shoots.

I step inside with him so close behind that it's difficult to tell where I end and he begins. Then I turn around, push him back outside and shut the door on him.

"Who's out there?" Chanlee asks.

"No one." I walk past her to the kitchen.

She opens the door, closes it and returns. Without him.

Trying to make myself comfortable in a straight-backed chair, I say wearily, "I'd like to call it a day, but I promised Dan I'd clear out my things." I rest my head in my hands. One of my shock locks plops down on my face. I just let it hang there.

She sits down across from me, her back as straight and stiff as the chair. "I know you're going through a lot right now. Why the hell do you think I gave you my cell?"

"You're right," I sigh and rub my eyes. "It's just that every time I thought of calling you, I...." I lift my head and wave away the thought. "Screw that. I'd like to see you dwell on niceties when you're being chased through hell by a psycho who can't think of anything better to do with his life than take yours."

Her brittle expression shatters, revealing the Chanlee I know and love. "I thought you were out dirt biking with Fitz." She gets up and rests her arm on my back.

"I wish. I've been with Nevar. Fruk, I can't believe how much it takes to get him to accept that he's not wanted."

"Ah, that explains this terry robe you're wearing." She rubs the downy fabric, and I feel like the genie in the bottle, wishing I

could just break free. "And why you look like you've been thrown for a loop. At least a hundred times."

"Being with Nevar doesn't explain a thing."

"Uh-huh." She squeezes my shoulder and walks into the living room.

"I don't know whether it's him or me, but the closer I get to him, the harder he is to read. Like, I know he's mixed up in Kenny's kidnapping, but I'll be damned if I can make any real connection between him and the kid. Except Kenny was in his car. Laughing." Uh-oh, she's going to the front door. I spring up off the chair and my body thanks me. "You're not going to open that door?!" She grasps the knob. "You open that door, and shar chi will steal into this house and poison all your thoughts, dreams and desires."

"You know I don't believe in that stuff unless it works for me." She opens the door.

Nevar leans against the jamb like he doesn't think that Chanlee knows how to use a gun. And she sighs like he's the purveyor of tian chi, the energy of heaven.

"Come on in, Mr Nevar," she says with a grand sweep of her hand.

He steps inside, and I charge at him. "Not so fast, Nevar." Rubbing noses with him, I push him back outside.

"Well, well, if it isn't Bambi," he says like he's getting a kick out of rubbing me the wrong way. He's being so accommodating, that he's resting his hands on my waist to help me push into him.

There's no way I'm going to be able to shake this guy until I show him that someone trashed my apartment and stole the painting. Not the real one, for sure, but he doesn't know that.

Or does he?

"Chanlee, if I'm not back in an hour, call the police." I walk backwards with him breathing down my neck.

"She is the police," he says, his breath warming my neck.

"Give the man a prize, and give me a couple of minutes. I'm going with you," she says. "I'll take care of the Watcher."

I shake my head. "Don't sweat it, Chanlee. Just grab me my cell and stay--"

"We'll wait for you in the car, Chanlee," he says.

"That pouty mouth of yours is way too big for the size of your brain. But it's going to get even fatter if you don't shut up and stop interfering in my life," I say.

"Are you always this territorial?"

We get into the car in silence. Then he spoils it by adding, "Your tongue catches fire every time someone close to you gives me attention. I was just trying to be kind to your friend. You should try it sometime."

"Spare me the bullshit, Nevar. You weren't *trying* to do anything, you were undercutting me by negating my decision to leave without her. This is about power, about how you don't feel secure unless you're in total control, so you stoop to stealing my power. Big man that you are."

"This *is* about power. Absolutely. With you, everything has to be your show or no show. She just wants to help."

"You're not in court now, Nevar. So stop trying to pass off your guesses as some kind of higher reality. She wants to come along to help, all right. Help herself to my neighbor while she betrays her commitment to her fiancé."

"A neighbor who's your show?"

"So what if he is?"

"Because so far all I've heard you talking about is what *you* want. You're trying to make your feelings drive her decisions."

Ouch, ouch, ouch! He keeps hitting raw nerves, the ones that combust on touch. He's turned with his back against the door, his luminous eyes alert and calculating, like he's eager for a fight. Bully for him, because that's not what he's going to get. That is, unless the lid I've clamped down on my feelings explodes off.

"Enough of your bullshit, Nevar. Why are we in this car together?"

He shifts his weight, starts to speak then hides his thoughts in silence, all the while looking like someone just lit a fire under him.

"I'm after the truth," I go on. "What are you after? Money? Sex? Kicks? Or is everything about power with you?"

"In truth, all of the above," he says shamelessly. He never has to worry about putting his conscience to rest. He's never awakened it.

His answer should just about cover all the bases. Like what else is left? Yet, put all together, they don't explain why he's in the same car with me. The only overlap in our lives is the Hiker. Nevar thinks I saw something on Mt. Rundle that threatens him. Somehow. Enough to kill Kenny?

"Listen, Nevar. There's something about me you should know. The truth comes to me the way money comes to some people, or fame does to others. There are lucky devils in this world who never have to pray for a date or wonder if they'll ever be loved. Because the people they dream about come to them. That's how it is with me and the truth. Whether I like it or not, it comes to me, sometimes packing a fruking wallop."

"That's because you don't turn your back on it. And it never leaves you because you're not too scared to do something about it."

"That's not the point. You and I are opposing forces that cancel each other out. Because while I'm trying to get at the truth, you're trying to create the truth with lies."

He leans forward conspiratorially. "How do you know that's what I'm doing?"

"Because I'm in this car with you. If you acted on your true thoughts and feelings, I wouldn't be here now. I'd be dead."

He laughs, which surprises me because I expected him to lie. "Not necessarily. The truth I'm creating might need you to be alive and well." He leans in for an extreme close-up. I jerk my head back, and it bounces off the door window. Shit, I could use one of Chanlee's rigid chairs. This seat is too soft, giving and curvaceous. No matter which way I squirm I can't get comfortable.

"In view of the fact that--" He straightens up abruptly. "Chanlee's here."

She opens the door before I have time to shift my weight forward. I fall back and have to grab onto the dashboard to keep from cracking my head on the sidewalk. Nevar clenches the front of my robe and tries to pull me back up. But I twist out of his grip and scramble to my feet on the sidewalk beside Chanlee, who's doing a lousy job of trying to suppress her laughter.

"Did up my face. Just in case," she whispers and hands me my cell.

"So I take it you and Bruno are off again?"

"About as much as you and Fitz are." She slides her gaze in Nevar's direction, then adds, "But one man never has been enough for you."

There's a lot I could say to that, but nothing I want Nevar to hear, so I get into the back of the car in silence.

He smiles at her and pats the seat I vacated. "Rane hasn't figured out how to be a backseat driver from up here."

While they snicker and talk without saying anything, I get on my cell to Fitz.

"It's about time," Fitz says without giving the phone a chance to complete the first ring. "Where are you, sugar? I'll come and get you."

Hearing his voice amplifies my guilt. Not only for neglecting his feelings, but for neglecting my own. I've been so busy, I haven't had time for love. Only hate. I'm so consumed with what I'm pursuing that my life is emptying out fast, like the bottom has fallen out of it, and I'm suspended in that eternal moment between ascending and falling. Or maybe this is what it feels like to be sucked into the center of a vortex. Anyway I look at it, my life is making about as much sense as any life without love.

"Uh, I'm with Chanlee. We're on our way to the Doré to pick up my things." In the rearview mirror, I catch Nevar staring at me

like he's watching a liar, a real pro, in action. I slouch down and turn my face into the corner away from him.

"What things?" Fitz asks. "Did you--"

"You still there? My phone's cutting out," I say. There's nothing wrong with the phone, but that lie doesn't count because it's not really me who's creating it. Nevar is. If he weren't in the car, I'd be able to speak freely to the man I love.

"I'll meet you at your pad," Fitz says.

I sit up. Straight as an arrow. "No! My place was trashed, and--"

"Your voice keeps fading out. Did you say your place was trashed?"

"A tornado would have done a less thorough job."

"You're talking like...Is the guy who did it in the car with you now?"

"Hope not," I say, slinking back down.

"Who is h--"

Pretending not to hear him, I barge in, "If I could float through the air on my dreams, I'd be landing on your lap. Or parts thereabouts. How many lifetimes ago was it that we fell asleep in each other's arms? Hell, Fitz, I feel like I'm stuck in a storm on the far side of hell, searching for something so elusive I'm not sure I'll be able to recognize it when I see it."

"What did you say?"

"Never mind. I'll give you a call first thing tomorrow."

"Promise?"

I kiss the phone.

"Keep your helmet on, baby," he says in such a sexy voice that I feel Cupid pricking me all over.

Closing down the cell, I'm struck by the silence around me. Not a titter or a peep out of anyone. They're too busy being a rapt audience, and I'm too busy missing someone. Along with the rest of my life.

CHAPTER 8

Chanlee and I get out of Nevar's car short of the Doré Parc to pay the Watcher a surprise visit. If all goes well, we'll pin him down while he's distracted by Nevar driving into my parking stall. It's time Hulladin explained why an off-duty cop is spending his vacation worshipping the Doré's garbage bin. Chanlee approaches him from one end of the alley, while I close in on him from the other end. We stay connected through our cells. Anticipation builds as I move with stealth from shadow to shadow. A chinook arch is pushing away the veil of clouds, leaving a trail of warm air in its wake. In this star-kissed night any shadow could be lethal. Sliding into the shadow of a fir tree, I get a good view of the garbage bin basking in the lamplight.

Except there is no Watcher.

No Chanlee or Nevar, either. He's probably having coffee with the Watcher.

"I can't see him," I whisper into the phone. Silence.

"Chanlee?" Silence. Her cell's still on, but she's not responding. What the hell?

A crunching sound coming from behind the bin breaks the silence. My heart skips a couple of beats then races to beat hell. I drop to the ground to peer under the bin. A pair of shoes point in the direction of my apartment. I glance up at my balcony. A white light no more than a pinprick flashes through the wrought-iron railing. So that's where Nevar is?!

I glance back under the bin. The shoes are gone. My eyes swing from shadow to shadow. I can't see anything amiss, so I know my eyes are lying. I lift myself up into a crouching position and try to sense which way the wind is going to blow.

Without warning, a hand grabs my hair from behind and the cold tip of a knife jabs the side of my neck. Nevar?! Suddenly, high beam headlights blind us. The knife jerks away from my neck. I glance over my shoulder. It's the Hiker. Fruk, who appointed him the Grim Reaper? I grab his hand and yank it down. He resists forcefully, and I let go quickly then kick sideways at his groin. He crashes backward, doubles up and writhes, still clenching the knife. I grab his wrist and lock down on his shoulder, fitting the back of his neck snugly around the instep of my boot.

He releases the knife.

Swooping it up, I say, "You wish I was dead, now here's a wish for you." I part the hair on the back of his head with the knife. My hands tremble with anticipation of shipping him to hell, but he's no damned good to me there. The headlights edge closer and closer, like the driver's getting his kicks by threatening to run me over in slow motion. Where the hell is Chanlee? She's too swift to let the Watcher catch her. Is that him in the car? Or is it Snow White?

Something touches my shoulder. The Grim Reaper's horse? No, this attacker has a hand. I drive my free elbow back into his solar plexus. No contact. I turn around and stare in surprise at Chanlee. Suddenly a limb of the fir tree beside my head snaps and falls at our feet. And just as suddenly we're in the dark again.

"Get down!" Nevar yells from behind me.

Fruk! He just took a shot at us.

Chanlee and I drop to the ground, while the Hiker springs up and bolts. I'm facing away from Nevar, so I curl up into a fetal position to rotate myself 180°. He's crouched down beside his Prius. At least I think he's crouched. He's no more than a shadow.

Chanlee's wasting her time looking everywhere but at me. I nudge her, point at the knife then at Nevar.

"If you could get your mind off him for a measly second, you'd know that the shot came from over there," she says, jabbing the air repeatedly in the direction of my apartment.

"Go around to the front," Nevar says.

"I'll go," she says and crawls backward to a power pole.

"And for God's sake, stay on your cell this time," I chide, bypassing my cell. I stab the knife into the ground under the tree. Nevar managed to get the letter opener from me, but he's not going to disarm me this time.

"I thought I saw Hulladin skulking around the Dumpster. I couldn't very well announce my presence," Chanlee's voice says over the cell.

"Oh, so now that you have nothing to say, you've found your voice," I say. Damn, the knife won't go in all the way. The soil's too compact.

Nevar leaps from the car to the tree, lays down beside me and presses the side of his head into my earpiece. His dirty, bruised face is revolting this close, but it suits the mood and the scant light.

"Do you mind?" I say, pushing him away and shifting myself forward a little so he won't see the knife behind my head. He springs back into place tight against me.

"What are you griping about now?" Chanlee says like she's gritting her teeth.

"Only me," he says.

His warm breath touches my lips on the other side of the mike.

"Sure took your time getting here," I tell him.

"You said to give you fifteen minutes, not ten or eleven or--"

I slap a hand over his mouth. He doesn't bother to take my hand away, so I have to do it myself.

"Cut out the bickering, kids," Chanlee says. "The gun pointing at you doesn't care who's right."

"There may be more than one of them, Chanlee," he says.

"Watch your back."

"Thanks, I will," she says and lapses into a silence followed by a soft thud. "There. I'm over the fence. I can see the entrance of the Doré...Someone's coming out. A woman. Forget it, she's just puttering along to her car. If she's a flight risk, I'll eat that unbelievably ugly hat she's wearing. Wonder if she'll mind if I bum a swig of her cola. Just kidding...No one else in sight. Freeeeeaakkk! I shouldn't have let her see me. She flashed a light in my eyes. Rats! She's vanished."

"We'll head her off," I say, jumping to my feet. Nevar comes with me. Or is he lifting me? Pretending to trip, I step down hard and press the knife handle into the ground with my heel.

"Which way, Chanlee?" he asks as we run to the car like our bodies don't know they're separate.

"East. She's wearing a red overcoat," she huffs.

He backs the car up while I'm still getting in.

"This is a lousy idea," I say.

"I have to turn it around."

"Not that. In your hands, this isn't a car, it's a penile weapon."

"Not to worry, it's not you I'm chasing." He flashes me that secret look. "Not at this precise moment."

The car fish spins as he pulls out of the turn. My neck is craned back and my brake foot is trying to go through the floor. With the back wheels spinning in the air, we fly out of the alley. Omigod, Chanlee's standing in the middle of the road. Her back is to us, and she's too close to dodge out of the way.

"Chanleeeeeeeee!" I scream into the phone as he swerves by her and brings the Prius to a sudden death halt.

She spins around and gapes at us. "I've lost her," she says, looking pissed off rather than shaken. She runs over to Nevar's side of the car like she knew all along he wouldn't waste her. "Did you see her?"

"No," he says. "No one running amok with a cola. How old would you say she is?"

"About 300, give or take a day, but I didn't get to see much of her face because of the hat," she says, leaning down close enough to suck face with him.

"Then what is it about her that leads you to believe she's old?" he asks like he's getting a rush out of breathing the words down her throat.

"The way she moved," she says all breathy. "She rocked her hips unevenly, like she was arthritic."

"And the hat?" he asks.

"Wide brimmed with the sides flopped down like dog ears, and the front tacked up with a...something that looked an awful lot like a prairie oyster. It was--"

"Never mind her, Someone flashed a light in my apartment," I say, miffed at their chatter.

"I thought I saw something too," she says, "but know what? I think it was just a reflection from one of the alley lights."

"Like hell," I say. "I left the curtains closed to hide the mess. The morons forgot to close them this time after they were through with their psycho games."

"Or they left them open deliberately," Nevar suggests.

"How are the jerks getting into my apartment so willy-nilly? Like how are they getting past everyone, including the super and Dan? That's what I'd like to know."

"Speaking of the devil, guess who just pulled up?" she says. The eagerness spilling out of her voice advertises that lust has arrived. All she wants to do is scratch an itch. But Dan's a good guy. The kind of guy I'd marry and have kids with if I--screw that. He's old enough to vote. So is Bruno.

I shake my head and catch Nevar staring at me like we're running with the same fugitive thought. Not bloody likely, though, because at the sight of Dan, his face and black eyes lit up with more than curiosity.

Getting out of the car I say, "Home kind of early for a Saturday night, aren't you Dan?"

"At the crack of dawn I'm driving to the hot springs with Myrtle's folks," he says, taking a gym bag out of the back of his SUV. "You look like you lost another round with the Watcher."

Nevar makes straight tracks for the Doré, while Chanlee and I wait for Dan. She's breathing so hard and fast I'd swear she was in the throes of a panic attack if I wasn't getting scorched by the fire.

"Need my help?" Dan offers as we catch up with Nevar at the entrance.

Chanlee gives him a shameless yes; Nevar gives him an emphatic *no* and I say, "Depends on how many rounds we have to contend with tonight." I can barely see him, because Nevar has

conveniently planted his carcass between us. Spare me the know-it-all idiots of the world. Mind you, maybe it's better if Dan doesn't see me. I look like Medusa after she died and went to hell. I don't know why, but it seems that Dan always gets to see me at my worst. One of us, at least, deserves better.

"Annnnddd," I groan as I try shoving Nevar out of the way.

"It'd be great if I could get my things from your place."

"My pleasure," he replies.

"You're a real gem, Dan," I say. "Okay, you and I get my things, while Chanlee and him get cracking on my apartment."

Chanlee folds her arms. "I'll get your things," she says and gives me a look that says she's not prepared to negotiate.

Nevar shakes his head. "No, I'll get your things," he insists. "And you and Chanlee tackle the apartment." Standing on my toes, I butt heads with him. "Listen, Nevar. You're not--"

"Stefan, have you met Dan?" Chanlee asks with a strained sweetness that nevertheless manages to cut through the tension.

"I don't believe we have," Dan says, holding out his hand.

Nevar charges ahead to the elevator, turns to face us then stands with his arms at his sides like he's waiting for the precise moment to draw his guns.

Being the good-natured guy that he is, Dan takes the rebuff in his stride and winks at me. Chanlee eyes me like she's praying I'll get lost. This four-way tug of war is more nerve-wracking than being in the grips of the Grim Reaper. At least with the Reaper the message is unambiguous. But damned if I know what bug just got up Nevar's backside.

"Mind if I make a suggestion?" Dan says rather timidly.

The three of us stare at him, ready to jump down his throat.

"Why don't we all get your things from my place," he continues, "then come back here and take on your apartment?"

Chanlee and I smile in agreement, while Nevar looks so edgy and brittle, sure as hell something dire would happen to him if he tried to smile. He throws me a look, like I should be ashamed of myself for making him fail in his attempts to reason with a naughty child.

"You've helped enough, Dan," I say as the four of us huddle in the elevator taking us up to my apartment after we've hauled my trunk and things to Chanlee's. "We'll battle our way through the rubble in my apartment without you."

"Crackajack," he says, "but come up to my flat for a drink first. You look like you could use a break." He looks at Chanlee. "I've got cola."

"We'll pass," Nevar says, his tone highhanded and dismissive.

The elevator door opens on the fourth. Nevar shoves me out and snatches Chanlee, who can't tear her gaze off Dan even though she's in another man's arms.

"Let me know if you need anymore help," Dan says, his eyes alive with amusement at Nevar's antics.

I forgo wrangling with Nevar about his Tarzan act, because I'm anxious to see what's in store for me in my apartment. I unlock the door, and the three of us peek around the doorway. No barrage of bullets. There's nothing but a disquieting silence in the darkness. I reach around the jamb and flick on the lights. Chanlee and I gasp, while Nevar studies our faces to figure out why we're acting like remembering our own names would be a seriously challenging task. He looks hopelessly defeated by a lack of clues. After all, the apartment is perfectly fine. Tidy, clean. Everything in order. My exercise equipment is assembled and ready to go, just as though yesterday never happened.

Propelled by the same idea, Chanlee and I shoot forward. The doorway isn't wide enough for the both of us, so we crash to a halt then scramble to get past each other, neither of us giving an inch. Finally, we turn sideways and charge forth, racing from one thing, one room to the next.

"Fruk!" I exclaim.

"Everything's exactly the way it was!" she says, finishing my thought.

I plunk down on my racing bike, trying to believe my eyes. "That's just it. The bastards have it too damned right. I'll bet you anything that tucked away somewhere in this city there's at least one hard drive filled with images of my apartment and everything in it. Including me. I'll also bet that if we look hard enough we'll find something that looks picture perfect yet isn't quite ri...." My voice deadens to a quiver. "I felt invaded when I saw all my things had been trashed. Now I feel violated." My shoulders sag with my spirits.

Nevar, who had been holding back in the entrance hall, strides over to the bike and says, his voice low and throaty, "Ride with it, Rane. Don't let them touch you in that way." The scent of him is so...so him. It creeps up on me. "You have to keep them from getting at what you truly value in yourself, your life."

I tilt my head back and meet his gaze. Is that fear shadowing his dark eyes? And why is his smile halfhearted? Or am I just seeing myself reflected in his eyes?

"Here's something they didn't get right," Chanlee says, pointing at my answering machine. We join her by the phone. "It attracted my attention because the red light's not flashing. See? The display says you have no messages."

I press *Repeat Messages*, and sure enough, all the messages are gone.

"Something they didn't want you to hear, obviously," she says thoughtfully.

Nevar shakes his head. "Not *something*. Most likely *someone*."

Chanlee and I eyeball him.

He holds up his palms to stave off our unvoiced accusations. "Neither the logic nor the evidence supports your conclusion, which is strictly inferential," he adds. "Simply because you heard at least one of the messages I left for you on Friday, I did all this?! Believe me, if I didn't want my voice on your machine, I wouldn't have left any messages. The people doing this know they made a mistake by not erasing your old messages. Erasing them this time was their second mistake, because it draws attention to their first mistake."

"Not necessarily," Chanlee says. "The culprits may have trashed them because there's nothing on the machine worth keeping. Most of the messages were from Lena. No offense, Rane, but she never said anything worth remembering. Unless you need to be reminded that she wants to talk to you."

"Then why not leave them be?" Nevar asks.

"I agree with him," I say. "I'd buy your argument, Chanlee, if her messages were the only ones in the machine. No, the psychos overlooked one of the messages in the first round. They're not tinkering around here. I mean, they went through the trouble to selectively erase Fit--" I stop myself from saying Fitz's name. I won't let him be victimized by my problems. "But there was nothing out of the ordinary in *any* of the messages. Was there, Chanlee?" I say, tossing the attention in her direction.

She holds a finger to her lips and points at the phone.

"You don't really think that'll stop them from finding out anything they damned well please," I say. "These creeps know what I'm doing before I do. Ask this one here, if you don't believe me."

"His name is Stefan," she says and laps up his smile.

I throw my hands up in the air.

Her frown lines iron out as her face lights up. "Wasn't there one from Professor Mabie-Toogod?" She snaps her fingers. "Yes. Something about tea on Sunday."

"Good thing you reminded me," I say.

Nevar smiles at her like she just gave him a gift. "Chanlee," he says, drawing out her name like he can't stand the thought of releasing it from his lips. "It was brilliant of you to think of what was missing instead of focusing on what looks right." He gives her a half-hug. "If you keep looking, Rane, you'll find something missing. No matter how small or insignificant it may seem, it'll be important."

Is he referring to my painting?

He goes on, "They--"

"They, they, they!" I say explosively. How long is he going to keep his arm around her shoulder, anyway? "Who are *they*? Who gives a damn why they erased the fruking messages? The people who are doing all this are killers. They're crazy. Totally zonked. So it doesn't make a helluva lot of sense to stand around here talking about them like they have sane motives for doing anything. What have I done to them? Nothing. But you both know as well as I do that *they* don't intend to stop until they've killed me. And they're sure as hell not going to do it with any deleted messages."

"Oh but they are," Nevar says with sinister certitude. "They have every intention of using the erased messages to get away with murder. Who else besides your mother and the professor called?"

"Leave her alone," Chanlee says, too mildly to even qualify as a suggestion.

"Don't, Chanlee!" I say, holding up my hand. "Nevar, why are you in my apartment?"

"I want to see your painting."

"It's not here," Chanlee blurts out stupidly. She catches my sharp look and adds, "I haven't seen it. Think it might be in your closet, Rane?"

I don't bother answering because she wasn't the only one to catch my sharp look. Shit, shoot, shite. Now he knows it wasn't stolen.

I pull at my hair and my hands fill with dirt. "That's it. Enough of this. I'm having a shower."

"Okay," Chanlee says and starts walking arm in arm with Nevar to the door. She must be blind, deaf and numb because she's too much under the spell of his easy charm to hear the hiss behind his words or to feel his sting.

He holds the door open for me.

I shake my head. "I'm staying."

"It's not safe here," he says, walking towards me.

"Tough. I'm staying."

Uh-oh, he's going to fight me on this one. And I do mean fight. I bolt into the bathroom, lock the door and turn on the shower to drown him out.

The long, steamy shower washes away the dirt, but the filth *they* are trying to smear on my soul remains. Every drop of water falling on my skin echoes inside me as an unanswered question. Who are *they*, and what's their connection with the police? What was on my answering machine worth killing for? Why bother to put everything back into place? If there's something important missing,

as Nevar says, what could it be? What does any of this have to do with Kenny Hironaka? Is he still alive?

On and on, the water falls, taking the answers with it.

I grab one of my replaced towels and start drying myself. Who'd ever guess this isn't the same towel that was hanging on the rack three days ago? It looks the same and feels the same. The exactness is disturbing somehow. I toss it onto the vanity and the label catches my eye. I always cut off the labels because they scratch when they rub against my skin. So here's something the psychos got wrong. Hardly important, though. But if *they* got this meaningless detail wrong, what else have *they* overlooked? Nevar said--Where is he, anyway? It's awfully quiet on the other side of the door. I throw on my new old robe and look around the apartment.

No Nevar. Or Chanlee.

CHAPTER 9

They've left me alone in my perfect little apartment, snug as a bug. A bug trying not to get squashed by incomprehensible forces. When I was outside, who was in here lighting a path through my things in the dark? To see what? Do what? I hesitate before opening the closet door in my bedroom. Nothing hidden, nothing to fear. Anger springs up in place of my apprehension. I know where Chanlee is. She's wheedled her way back to Dan's.

Not for long.

I knock on his door. Once, twice, three times. Finally it opens.

"Mind giving me time to get changed?" Dan says sleepily, shielding his eyes from the hall light. His apartment is immersed in darkness, and he's wearing nothing but his silk robe. Mentholated lavender with a hint of chamomile wafts through the bedridden air. He leans dreamily against the jamb, and the loosely secured robe slides open.

I tug on the belt of my robe. "Uh, sorry for waking you up. I thought Chanlee had taken up your offer of a cola."

"Then you don't need any help with the Watcher?" he says and yawns. "I saw him out there when I turned the lights out."

"Oh." So that's where Chanlee and Nevar are. "Mind if I have a look?"

Not that I haven't been looking. And looking. Maybe I'm seeing more than there really is, but I think he's telling me he's available. He straightens up--Damn!--and guides me through the darkness to the window. No Watcher. But Chanlee and Nevar are tight and cozy beside his Prius. Some help she is. I give them a moment's grace of perfect understanding, then I put a lid on it. She's not the only one who knows how to help. Dan's dining table always has a food bowl on it. Like thunder after lightning, I'm out on the balcony hurling a red pepper at them in a flash. It lands on the roof of his car. The sound is sweet music to my ears.

They duck behind the car, and I laugh. Being helpful sure feels great. But I don't think I'm being helpful enough. I zip inside for more ammunition and run into Dan.

"Steady," he says, taking hold of my shoulders. I gear up to push past him, but he adds, "One target at a time, Rane. Your friends have no intentions of harming you. But the Watcher? What are his intentions?"

I release my intentions in a drawn-out sigh. But before I take another breath, they're replaced by even more unsavory ones. Ever since he opened the door, my body has been carrying on a shamelessly intimate repartee with his. After all, he's already warmed up the bed. No. No. Fitz is all I need. Tell that to my duplicitous hormones raging against convention and anything else that stands in the way of their satiation. Besides, what's the point of locking myself in a corner when I'm splitting for Europe? Hell, I'm already halfway there. But is that what I really want? I close my eyes and feel Fitz's breath on my lips as he whispers, "Yes."

"That's better," Dan says and tweaks my nose. "I didn't know you had an impetuous streak."

"Impetuous? I've been wanting to do something like that since I met the jerk."

"I daresay what they're doing together is about you," he says slowly. "There's no need for you to feel threatened by Chanlee. She's--"

"I don't feel threatened by her."

"Whatever feelings propelled that piece of fruit--"

"Red pepper."

"--were wasted because he's here for you. He knows he'll never find Kenny Hironaka in your apartment."

"How do you know he's looking for Kenny?"

"Who isn't? Haven't you been following the story in the media?" The biggest stress in his life right now is how to entertain Myrtle's parents for a whole day. Yet he probably knows more about what's going on with Kenny than I do.

In the darkness I can feel him, sense him like he's in the air I breathe. The smell of the mentholated lavender and chamomile soothes while it tantalizes. His shadowy form is no match for the vivid images of him snaking through my mind.

"We know so much about each other, you and I," I say, my voice husky from trying to hold back the rising tide. "Things we don't share with anyone else. Sure I've seen Myrtle a few times, but I've never met her or anyone else important in your life."

"That's because they're not as important as you."

He brushes back a lock of my damp hair. His soft skin is cool and unnerving against my hot face.

"Uh, Dan...." The unfinished words burn my throat.

"The lift has stopped on this floor. He's coming to claim you."

Even forewarned, the pounding on the door jolts me.

"Ask him what he was talking about with Chanlee," Dan says in my ear as he places his hands on my shoulders and turns me towards the door. "If he denies he was talking about you, he's a liar and a coward. I'll stake my word on that." He pushes me forward gently.

Well, *push* is an exaggeration. I don't need any encouragement to go, even though I feel like Nevar is on the other side of the door jerking my chain. It's time I had it out with him once and for all. And Chanlee better not get any bright ideas about helping.

Either of us.

I throw the door open then have to hold myself back from slamming it in his face. I mean, who is this filthy, beaten up guttersnake with his encrusted hair flecked with blood? And why is he scowling at me?

He tries to run his fingers through his hair, but they get stuck. "The latest addition to my general good taste in grooming is red pepper that some hothead threw at me. Can't think why, can you?" His smirk subsides as he condemns my attire with a naked stare. Then he narrows his eyes and peers into the darkness behind me.

Dan stays back as a silken shadow.

Looking over my shoulder, I say, "Thanks for everything, Dan. Have a great time tomorrow. Maybe when you get back, you and Myrtle can come over for coffee."

"You won't catch me saying no, but we'll have to see what she says." His voice is subdued and strangely remote.

I close the door softly then yell at Nevar. "Where's Chanlee? What have you done with her?"

"She's driving home," he replies quietly.

"Like hell she is." I grab the front of his jacket with both hands. "She doesn't have her car here."

Instead of fighting back, he pulls out his cell and cups it around my hands. "She's driving *my* car."

I grab the cell and punch in her number. "You'd better be telling the truth, Nevar."

"He's telling the truth," Chanlee says from the other end.

"And you would know," I say. I dash to the stairwell to get some privacy, but he dogs my steps. "That was quite a tête-à-tête you two were having out in the parking lot. What was so compelling that you had to fall over each other to say it?"

"So what's your question?"

"You heading home?"

"Uh-huh."

"Without me?"

"You said you were staying."

"Yeah, but I never said anything about staying with him."

"His name is Stefan. He'll stay outside if you make him, but he's not going to leave you there alone."

"Come back here, Chanlee! I don't see why I'm the one who has to be foisted with him."

"After he explains--if you let him explain a few things, you'll see why it's better if he stays and watches over you."

"I'll get back to you in a bit," I say and hang up.

He reaches out in front of me and opens the door on the fourth, but I push past him and keep going down. I want to check out my locker to see if the psychos have left me anymore messages. Nevar's footsteps echo after mine on the cement stairs.

I turn suddenly and say in his face, "What were you and Chanlee talking about at your car?"

"You," he says, unfazed. "We were talking about you."

It felt like a compliment when Dan said it.

"I was telling her that you lack a sense of humor," he adds so smoothly it grates. He looks into my eyes with a steady, uncompromising gaze that makes my skin crawl.

"Maybe it's the company I keep. Or maybe I don't have any freaking time to laugh because I'm using it all up trying to stay ahead of the psychos out to kill me."

"Or maybe you're too busy chasing down what you want out of life to make the time."

"You should talk, Nevar. You've been making a royal ass of yourself around Dan with all your posturing, strutting and huffing to get Chanlee away from Dan." I continue my downward spiral, this time with him by my side.

"I was wrong. She shouldn't have come with us."

"What's that supposed to be? An apology?" He nods. "Like hell it is. You haven't said I'm right."

"You need it in blood?"

"No. All you have to do is say I'm right."

"I already have."

"Like hell. You said you were wrong. Tell me I'm right. Come on, say it."

He fidgets with the paint peeling off the tube railing. If I'm reading him right, he's going to detour into subterfuge.

"I didn't see a computer in your apartment," he says, his eyes averted. "Did *they* get it?"

I'll be damned. I've found his Achilles heel. Some part of him, whether it's the best or the worst, can't handle feeling small around me. Now that I've caught him in a moment of weakness, I just have to ask, "About my painting of Mt. Rundle's dueling peaks. Do you really think they look like ice-cream cones?"

"No. I think they look like tits covered in chocolate syrup."

Jerk. Doesn't have the decency to lie.

I turn my back on him.

"No need to be offended. I admire your efforts. It takes real courage to paint with your talent."

"Does your mother know you're so rude?"

"No, but my wife does."

I hesitate as we pass the main floor, dying to turn and face him, but I stop myself because I don't want him to see my surprise. Wife? What wife? The over-processed blond that dwarfs the mountains? Just the right showpiece for a man who prefers boys.

In the storage room I check both lockers. The only thing amiss is that Dan's is still full of his things, including his bike parts. My shadow stays behind me, a quiet presence totally in tune with this dark, cement encased tomb.

All of a sudden, he presses his face against the wire mesh door, peers inside and grunts something about being careless.

"What do you think you're going to find in there, Nevar?"

"I've already found it." He rattles the door and shakes loose my misgivings about being alone with him amidst these cages and the gods only know what else. "Open it!" he commands.

"No." I don't believe he's found anything, but if he has, I'm not going to let him have it.

The cold, hard look on his face chills me. The dark forces behind that look won't take no for an answer. I shove my hand into the patch pocket in the front of my robe containing my keys and make a fist with the keys wedged between my fingers. He's standing between me and the exit, waiting for me to try to break past him. But I step back. He lunges at me. He misses the pocket but grabs onto the robe as I try to pull away. The more I pull, the more of my robe he claims. Something's got to give, and it sure as hell isn't going to be me. Half nude and totally prepared to match my skills against his strength, I cross step into him with my keyed fist between us.

Suddenly, he releases my robe and laughs. "You thought I was serious?!" He tries in his drunken laughter to help me do up my robe, but I warn him to back off. "I rest my case," he says. "You have no sense of humor."

I don't release my keys from my fist until we arrive back at my apartment.

"It's the end of the line for you, Nevar," I say, blocking the doorway.

"Fine," he says with a smile that looks so sincere I know it's phony. "You wouldn't let me get cleaned up at your folks' place. Just let me wash up, then I'll shove off."

What's the quickest way to get rid of him?

I let him in, and he walks quietly into the bathroom without any fuss. He closes the door and turns on the shower.

"Nevar, don't you dare use my shower!" I pound on the door.

"I'll be out in five," he says and drowns out my pounding with *Otschi Tschornije*. In key, yet. Definitely a man of many talents, he can do subterfuge in any key.

I haul the foam mats from the closet. But instead of springing into action with a kickass workout, I throw my air mattress on top of the mats and sink into the air. I'm too wiped to fight paper tigers. My body is yearning to conk out, but I have to keep my bag and keys safe from Nevar. I rig up the dresser in the closet, with a 25 pound weight on the shelf above. If he opens the drawer stashing the bag, the weight will fall on him.

That done, I change into my blue pjs that only a few days ago had snowflakes on them instead of white daisies. Another meaningless difference. The shower stops running, but I can't hear a peep out of him. Ah, there's a rustling sound. I race up and press my ear to the door. No, not a rustling, more like a clamping or--The door opens and I fall into him. The only thing in his hands is me. And I seriously doubt he has anything tucked under the towel he's wearing. Nothing that would make those kinds of sounds.

"Well, well, if it isn't Bambi."

"What have you been up to, Nevar?"

I push past him and look around the cramped room covered with postage stamp beige tiles, all warm and steamy. Without replying, he leans back against the wall and watches me like he's enjoying my frustration. No point in trying to get an answer from him. He'll just lie anyway. Bet he hid something in the toilet tank.

I pick up his clothes draped over the toilet seat. "*Buenas noches*, Nevar."

He takes the clothes but says, "I'm not putting these back on."

"Then I guess you'll just have to go out like that, because you're not staying here."

"What do you think I'll do to you?"

"Nothing."

"And that worries you?"

I point to the exit.

"If I were going to slit your throat while you're sleeping, do you really think I would do it with Chanlee's and Dan's knowledge?" I remain silent because he's got me cornered with a double-edged sword. "That would be incredibly careless of me, in view of the fact that I am the alleged master criminal who always manages to deflect suspicion away from himself."

"Oh, go ahead and sleep on the floor in the living room, but I don't want to see your face in the morning. You got it, Nevar?" I'm in no mood to argue with the smirk on his face. I slide past him into my bedroom and bolt the door.

He gives me about two seconds of peace.

"Rane, you don't need all those foam mats." Using the non-lethal of the two sliding doors to the closet, I haul out six of the

2 x 2 feet mats, open the bedroom door, throw them at him and bolt the door again.

I lay down and try to relax to the sounds of him moving the exercise equipment around to make room for the mats.

This time he gives me about five minutes of peace.

"Have a spare blanket and pillow?" he says from the other side of the door.

"No!"

I hear him walking away from the door. Finally. Now I can get some sleep. The hall closet door slides open.

"Stay out of my things, Nevar!" I jump up, grab a pillow and blanket from the closet, open the door and charge at him. I shove them into his stomach, but he's too many steps ahead of me to be thrown off guard.

"Find what you were looking for?" I ask.

"Yes and no." He gives me a puffed up smile and starts fluffing up the pillow.

I check the closet. My jacket pockets are about the only things that could possibly be of interest to him. I go through them one by one. All empty except for a canceled transit ticket. Hell, this whole place is full of meaningless details. I walk back into the living room. The towel he was wearing is hanging from my bike handle. He's stretched out on his back under the blanket, with his hands tucked behind his head on the pillow but within quick reach of his cell, wallet and keys nestled on top of his pants folded beside him. He's about as comfortable and self-satisfied as any wolf can be inside the lamb's den.

"My, what big ears you have," I say, slapping my cheeks in feigned wide-eyed innocence.

"My teeth are even bigger. Come here, Bambi, and I'll show you."

"Get real. How close do you think I need to get to see I'm staring down the barrel of a gun? Dream on, Nevar."

"We're only as real as our dreams, Rane. Sure you don't want me to pick any of those little white daisies with my teeth?"

It feels like at least one of us is lighting firecrackers under my skin.

I fold my arms across my chest. "Stop looking at me like that."

"I can't help it. I've found the girl who followed the yellow brick road."

"So you don't approve of me. I must be doing something right."

"Disapprove of you?" His amusement makes his eyes sparkle. "I envy that girl. Her path came paved. A coaster's dream."

But she charges ahead, grabbing power for herself by knocking down all the direction and warning signs."

"That is such a crock." I find myself chuckling anyway.

"Reality doesn't come preassembled. Neither does life. Like everyone else, I have to create and edit my own manual."

"I meant that you live like your life really depends on it. And you must admit you get a charge out of power."

"How does anyone exist without it? Do I like to use it? Sure. Try paving any path without it. But what do the signs on your road say, huh, Snow White? *Danger ahead, soul under construction?*"

"Not my soul, my dreams."

"Too bad mine came prefab, huh? Because if I had any spare bricks on hand, I'd help pave your way out of here."

He shakes his head. "You'd add them to the wall you're building around yourself."

I shrug halfheartedly and dodge his pointed remark, because I feel like I've been taking all the right turns to the wrong place. "Is there anything else you'd like to complain, whine, gripe or fuss about before I go into my bedroom and try to get some sleep?"

"Where's your TV?"

"Don't have one."

"Do you have a book I could read?"

"No."

"How about a radio?"

"I've got a clock radio in my room, but you're not getting it even if I have to keep it on all night to drown out your whining." I shut off the ceiling light, but he turns on the table lamp he rigged up beside his makeshift bed.

"Now what?" I snap.

"Where's your computer?"

"What business is it of yours?"

"Did they get it?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"I'll loan you one if--"

"I'll tell you if you tell me what you and Chanlee were really talking about in the parking lot."

"We were talking about your painting."

"I don't doubt for a second that you could wax eternal about a painting you've never seen, but I know Chanlee wouldn't. She'd have to run out for a cola."

"We were talking about how to convince you to let me see it." Now that I believe. "About the computer," he prompts.

"If you must know, I sold the one I had to pay for my return airfare from Italy."

The way he's looking at me is making me all jumpy and scratchy inside. Like I'm missing the point. What juicy tidbits of info

does he think I have for him in this ghost of a computer he's lusting after? "Are you asking if I scanned the painting into the computer?"

"No."

"That's awfully vague."

"No is vague?"

"It is when you say it."

He rolls over onto his side and cradles his head and pillow in his arm. Then, keeping his eyes on me he says, "You've done this place up like a pit stop."

"You don't like it? You're welcome to buzz off home."

"No can do. I'm still dreaming. Home is where my dreams are and my dreams aren't there anymore."

"Where are you from, Nevar?"

"Just west of Upper Musquodoboit."

"Where's that?"

"North of Middle Musquodoboit."

"Which is...?"

"North of Musquodoboit."

I snatch the pillow and hit him with it. "Tell me. What have you got to hide?"

"Nothing. Musquodoboit is east of Brussels."

"That leaves most of Europe and all of Asia. Would it kill you to cut the legal babble and give a simple, straightforward, honest answer to a question? Hell, you'd think all you learned from law school was how to bury the truth."

"The Brussels I'm talking about is west of Europe," he says, licking his lips like he's already enjoying the taste of the daisies.

I pull down my top to keep him from denuding the whole bouquet. "I never asked you where Brussels is, I asked you where you're from."

"Would you believe St.-Louis-du-Ha! Ha!?"

"No." I eye the pillow, but he's hugging it tightly to his chest.

"Well then, how about Rocky Mountain?"

"You're hopeless. I get more intellectual stimulation when I'm comatose." I lift myself up, but he takes hold of my waist and pulls me back down. "Forget it, Snow White. You're never going to get any closer to me than St.-Louis-du-Ha! Har!"

"Close enough for--"

"Not for me. I don't know what you're seeing and feeling. But I've fallen into the widening abyss of lies and suspicion between us."

"Maybe if you unchained your heart, you might--"

My back snaps to attention. "Unchain my heart?! Hell, I've been giving you more credit than you deserve if you really believe you can seduce me with a litany of clichés. You can't really believe you're going to get anywhere by accusing me of being--Ooh! It's too

horrid to mention!--FRIGID. Fruk, I bet that dead old horse is right up there at the top of your seduction routines. 'I've got what it takes to thaw your cold heart,' he pants in the ear of his prey. 'And your frigid vagina.' Spare me, Nevar."

"I was going to say that if you unchained your heart you might be able to see past Fitz."

"Oh." My body--horny, unconscionable traitor that it is--welcomes his words and relaxes.

"For you, love is an anchor not a harbor. But, Bambi, it's all about where your heart is, not where it's been."

I clamp a hand over his mouth. "No more subterfuge, Nevar. The chasm between us is rancid with all the things you know but refuse to share with me. You torpedo my questions and sabotage my feelings. To what end, huh? We're both sinking."

He pulls my hand off his lips but keeps holding my hand. I yank it away.

"What do you want to know?" he asks sounding pleased with himself. My hand is free, but what does he care? He thinks he's captured all of me.

"I never told you about Fitz. Did Chanlee tell you?"

"No."

"You're being vague again. See? I ask a simple question and you ward me off. Where is Kenny Hironaka?"

"I don't know."

I study his face, which is the picture of sincerity. What *skilled deceiver* doesn't look sincere?

"*Il volto sciolto ed i pensieri stretti*," I say, more to myself than to him. His eyes smile. From understanding or a lack of it? They're so dark the mystery in them is seductive. Now what was I going to say? Uh...oh yes--

"Better than showing your hidden agenda in your face," he says, and my face warms.

"You really don't know where Kenny is?" He shakes his head. "But you have a pretty good idea, don't you?"

"I have an idea, but I'm not sure how good it is."

"Push, push. Away I go." I tug on the pillow he's holding.

"It's safer for you if you don't know certain things."

"Are you trying to win the dumbass award or something? You can't possibly believe that you can protect me by keeping me in the dark where I can't see where the hell I'm going or who's coming at me?" He gives me a blank stare. "And you think patronizing me is smart?!"

"Yes. Someone has to stop you from taking on Kenny's abductors as a one woman army."

"So you do know who's got him." I bend down quickly and stop short of rubbing noses with him. "And what's your part in all this, huh, Nevar?"

He gets up and lifts me up with him. The blanket slides down between us. Buzzzzzz. He's zeroing in for the sting.

"You're right. This isn't a good idea. I'll catch a cab home and drop you off at Chanlee's on the way."

"I'm not leaving, but I'm sure your wife is waiting with bated breath for you. What have you done with her, anyway? Where have you buried her?"

"Do you care?"

The look I give him has *no* written all over it.

"Good. Because neither do I."

And he smiles. I blink a couple of times while I look into his eyes. Hell, that's not a smile on his lips. It's an invitation to a kiss. I'm not going there. No way. Then why are my lips zeroing in on his like a heat-seeking missile? Ah, to hell with talk. The one thing his lips don't need is more chatter.

CHAPTER 10

Before I'm fully awake in the morning, the scent of him overtakes me. *Let me be dreaming.* I open my eyes. Damn. I'm in a dream all right. His.

Nevar stares at me a breath away on the air mattress in my bedroom. Lying on his side with his head propped up by his elbow, he's lit up with a smile that radiates all the way to my hand resting on his backside under the blanket. My face warms to the thought of the touch. How to move my hand without drawing attention to myself?

"Any guesses why only one of us is smiling?" I say, faking a yawn to free my hand. Then I ease into a stretch as an excuse to slide away from him.

"Couldn't be because you have all the pillow and most of the blanket."

No, it has more to do with the fact that I'm an idiot. *If you're going to allow yourself to be seduced, Rane, for heaven's sake make sure it isn't by the devil.*

"I can't help smiling," he adds, cozying up to me. "I went to bed with Bambi and woke up with Gilda."

Oh, so now he's going to drag out all his old girlfriends and parade them through my bedroom to show me how I stack up.

Seeing that he's hit a sour note, he says, "Oh dear, that deer was too dear, my dear." He smiles like an idiot, and I groan.

"Now that you've got out your measuring stick, want to know how you size up to Fitz?" He starts to reply, but I add quickly, "He's much more--"

My cell buzzes. I glance at the clock in the corner. *Twelve-forty?! Shit, shoot, shite, it's Fitz!* I was supposed to call him hours ago. Nevar reaches behind him and picks up a cell. A silver one. My blue and white one is safe and sound in the closet. Or is it?

"Thanks, Tildy....I understand....Get back to me," he says into the phone then hangs up.

Whew! A close call. I'd better get mobile before Fitz does call.

"Now where were we?" Nevar asks, his voice soft and easy but uncomfortable to my ears.

Uh-oh, he's looking at me like he hasn't had enough daisies. I wish I had more than a sheet and blanket covering me.

"You were leaving." I try to get up with the blanket wrapped around me, but he won't let go of his corner of it.

"Come here." He reaches for me.

I drop down on top of him and roll onto the other side of the mattress, wrapping myself in the blanket as I go. Good plan, except now I have all the blanket, and he has all of me. To hell with the blanket! I scramble to my feet, triumphant. He's no match for my lightning speed. Yeah right. I trip on the blanket and sail into his waiting arms. His eyes sparkle with delight. I don't see any danger in them, yet I know he's dangerous. This is a man who knows how to commune with my demons. I wish he didn't feel the way he does, or smell the way--

Thump, thump, thump. Pause. Thump, thump, thump.

My body freezes while my heart and mind race ahead of the next set of thumps. Definitely three. Dan's warning me that Fitz is coming! Holy hell! I jump up without Nevar impeding me and race around in circles. "Where's my robe? What have you done with my robe?"

"I don't have it." He stands up in his naked glory. "Relax. It's just someone stamping on the floor in one of the apartments above us."

Wearing the blanket like a tent, he races after me as I tear into the living room, grab his clothes and things, zip out the front door and hurl the bundle into the elevator.

"Rane," he says between quick breaths. His pleading, confused voice rankles. "What is this about?"

I dodge around him and his question and lock myself in the apartment. But his voice calling my name sneaks in through the door. It's creepy hearing my name like it's coming from far away yet from deep inside me. I race back into my bedroom and peek out from behind the curtains. Fitz! Rain drizzles on his black leathers as the tail end of his chrome-laden bike disappears behind the garbage bin. I sigh and sigh again with relief. He saw that my curtains were closed, so he's leaving without waking me.

Fitz, you deserve better than me.

Last night was an unmitigated disaster. How could have I been so...so willing? All I had to do was go to my room by myself. But Nevar's the question on the exam that you can't forget because it's the big one you got wrong. He's the provocative, potentially harmful, relevant but highly objectionable statement stricken from the court record. He's the tree of knowledge I'm not supposed to partake of, while he satisfies his lust for daisies growing in the garden. I'm not supposed to enjoy exploring the forbidden and beyond. I'm supposed to say no to satisfy *others*, those anonymous, intrusive, know-it-all, know-nothing *others* who rip your conscience to shreds if you don't allow them to dictate what you do.

They keep score, to what purpose, no one really knows. All we know is that we're *supposed* to care about the score even though we're not allowed to see what it is. Oh yes, Nevar's a dangerous man. My exhausted body is still aching for more.

It's shaping up to be another never-ending day.

I stare out at the naked green ash tree on the edge of the parking lot. Beads of rainwater cling precariously to the underside of the bare branches. A sparrow alights on a branch, and the light trapped within the beads sparkles as they fall. My hopes for finding Kenny fall with the light. In the spring when I found out I flunked the physical part of my police training, I stood in this very spot and watched snow lashing tender buds bursting with life that I was sure would be stillborn. But it took the snows of autumn to kill the leaves that had sprung forth.

Guess I should scour the apartment for the psychos' fingerprints. No, I'd better get over to Fitz's place before his suspicions turn into a breach. Damn. Mabie-Toogod's tea is this afternoon. I run my finger tips along my parched lips then do a drum roll on them. I've also got a riding lesson with Lulie. And I've invited Dan and his sweetie over for coffee after they get back from--Hold on. How could Dan have signaled me? He's in Radium Hot Springs. Or did he say they were going to Fairmount? No, I think he just said they were going to the hot springs. What the fruk does it matter? Obviously the trip's off because of the rain. Better give him a call. And Fitz.

I slide open the closet door to retrieve my cell and stop abruptly, cocking my head at the faint but unmistakable sound of a key turning in the entrance door. Fitz?! I dive between the sheets. Wrong, wrong. He knows I don't like sleeping in the buff alone. I hightail it into the bathroom, jump into the shower and start yodeling loud enough to wake up the dead.

The bathroom door opens slowly, and through Michelangelo's David undulating in the plastic showercurtain, I stare at Chanlee.

"Oh! It's you," I say, sounding disappointed but not meaning to.

"How was your golden boy?" she asks, smiling like the thought of him is turning her on.

"Don't start with me." I resume washing myself then do a double take at her. She's still wearing yesterday's clothes. I fling back the curtain. "Don't you smile at me! You've been with Dan."

Her smile disappears under her T-shirt as she pulls it over her head.

"What are you doing?" I ask like I really don't know.

"I'm not getting in there with my clothes on." Her jeans slump on top of her bag on the floor, and she steps onto the edge of the tub.

"Wait until I'm finished."

"I've got an important date in an hour." She steps around me and begins washing herself.

"With Dan you're just going from the frying pan into the fire."

"You should talk. He offered me a cola. What's your excuse?"

"Sooner or later you're going to have to realize that Bruno--"

"Bruno who?"

"More like Chanlee who? Are you out of your tree?"

"Chill out, Rane, you're steaming up the mirror." She picks up a sea sponge. "Here. Do my back." She throws the sponge at me.

I catch it and throw it back at her. "It's my shower, you scrub mine."

"Why should I? You've already done yours." She turns her back to me and throws the sponge over her shoulder.

Red lines streak diagonally from her shoulders down to the ribs on each side.

"You're not getting into the rough stuff, now are you, Chanlee?"

"They're love marks."

"They look more like--"

"He's athletic and imaginative like you wouldn't believe. Now stop fussing and start scrubbing."

I rub cautiously over the lines on her lean, taut back. She's got muscles to die for. Not many brains, though, if she really believes these marks on her back are made of love.

"When Bruno sees these he's going to--"

"I'll leave Fitz out of this if you stop throwing Bruno at me."

"It's different with me and Nevar. I never planned it. Hell, until my lips landed on his, I didn't know I was available."

"Uh-huh. So I'm not supposed to have sex with someone because *I* want to. I'm supposed to be like you and have sex with someone because *he* wants to."

"I never said I didn't want to." I get out of the shower and check out the toilet tank. Nothing untoward inside. I gaze around the room. What was Nevar doing in here that would make a clanking noise?

"What are you looking for?"

"Not sure."

She starts scanning the room through the body of Michelangelo's lust. Might as well. She knows what I'm looking for about as well as I do.

"You know, Chanlee, sooner or later you're going to have to realize that he's not a pop-up toy that springs in and out of existence at your whim."

"Who are we talking about now, Bruno or Fitz?"

"Never mind. Why Dan?"

"I know love makes us blind, but you saw Dan way before you laid eyes on Stefan."

"Dan's taken, Chanlee."

"Who isn't?"

I turn my back on her trashy smile and head into the bedroom.

"What's she like?" she asks from the bathroom.

"A tall blond." I put on a long sleeve T-shirt and a pair of jeans. Everything fits, but not exactly because nothing's been broken in by this curve and that hollow of my body.

"Who isn't these days?" She appears at the doorway, in a towel sarong and her bag slung over her shoulder. She pulls out a comb from her bag. "What does Dan do?"

"Besides ply my friends with cola? You were with him all night, and it never occurred to you to ask him that?"

"I was busy touring his body. Didn't even get close to exploring all the avenues, I can tell you."

The feel of Nevar creeps over my body. "Dan sells insurance."

"You're kidding?! Does anyone really sell insurance outside of the movies? I thought all the insurance salesmen were made of celluloid. What's his name?" I stare at her. "His last name."

"Istenly."

Her nose wrinkles in disdain.

"Is he still around?" She shakes her head while she combs her hair. "Oh. So it was you who warned me about Fitz?"

She stares at me quizzically. "You mean the stamping thing?" She shakes her head. "I rocked, danced, and rolled but I never stamped. What you heard must have been me putting my gymnastic training to good use."

"No, someone signaled me. It had to have been Dan."

She shakes her head. "He was with me every second, every touch, every look, every move of the way. Hmm, so Fitz showed up. The faithful guard dog on the prowl. That explains Stefan's absence, and why it isn't just your hair that's frazzled."

"Did you tell Nevar or anyone else about the signal?"

"No."

"Then Dan must have."

"He's no singer."

"One roll in the hay doesn't make you an authority on him."

"One?!" she snickers.

She pulls her black cell out of her bag. "Here. Call him."

I start dialing then stop. I'm always calling on him to do favors for me. "I've locked my keys in the car, Dan." "Will you dress in drag for me, Dan?" "Will you stop screwing around with my friends, Dan?" Once, just once, I'd like to phone him and say I did something for him. "And you never had to ask, Dan. I just did it because you're my friend," I'd say. Better yet, I'd love to be able to do something for him without drawing attention to myself. But I don't have anything to give him. Not that he'd want for more than a few minutes.

"Go ahead. Call him," Chanlee urges gently. "Don't worry about intruding on his outing. He's at the dinosaur museum."

"The one in Medicine Hat, I mean, Drumheller?"

"Uh-huh. He's up to his neck in dinosaur doo-doo, walking on eggshells with a lampshade on his head to impress Myrtle's parents. If his voice sounds strange, that'll be him sending you one kiss after another from the Mesozoic era, to thank you for the chance to fast forward 150 million years."

"He should be entertaining my parents. Hell, all he'd have to do to get on my mother's good side is fit the wedding suit--"

"And the life."

"--she's picked out for him. Dad's a different story, though. He's hard to read sometimes because he prefers to communicate to the world through his machines. He seems to like Fitz well enough, but does he really like him?"

Chanlee scours my clothes in the closet, looking for something to wear.

"Dammit. Dan's not answering," I say, then try Fitz to no avail. She slides open the other side of the closet and reaches for the dresser. "Don't touch th--" I tackle her. We crash against the wall as the weight falls.

"Who you trying to kill with that besides me?!" she says, staring at the dent in the parquet.

"Sorry, I forgot to disarm it." I hand her the cell, take out my bag and root around for mine. "I knew it. He took it. What? Here are my keys. Why didn't he take them?"

"Let me have a look." She grabs the bag. "Before I forget, yesterday your mother called your cell."

"Oh?"

"She had the dream of dreams Thursday night, and guess who was getting married in it?" She moves methodically from compartment to compartment in a fruitless search for the cell.

"Will her subconscious never give up?"

"She said you were getting married on a boat." She looks up at me. "There's no cell in here."

I sit down on the mattress to put on my socks. "Her dreams have taken a real sadistic turn. She knows I don't like boats."

"That's what's got her so excited. She says it means you're conquering your fear of--" She cuts herself off and stares at me. "You're sitting on your phone!" She reaches under the pillow I'm half sitting on, and she pulls out the silver cell.

"It's his." I jump up and snatch it from her.

"I don't like that intoxicated look in your eye. What are you going to do with it?"

"Use it to get out of this mess he's gotten me into."

"How is stealing his call list going to get you out of trouble?"

"Damned if I know. But this is the first real break I've had. I wouldn't dare piss off the gods by ignoring one of their gifts." I glance at the clock. "Got a rendezvous with the Duke."

"Did you say *Dan*?"

"No, a bike. It's--" I stop myself because I remember Dan's bike. "Meet me outside by the garbage bin," I say, grabbing an exercise bar from the closet. "We're going to retrieve Dan's derailleur so I can order him a new one."

"I'm not going near that Dumpster unless I'm in the car. She strolls into the bathroom.

"Fine, just don't take all day tearing yourself away from the mirror. I need a lift to Brittanski Drive."

As soon as I'm out in the hall, I press Redial on Nevar's phone. I want to get some action from this thing before he tips everyone off that I've got it.

"Stefan! Terrific news!" a woman's voice says in a thick Scandinavian accent. "Darien's got it! Can you meet him at the...at the--" Damn, she hung up. Or were we cut off? I press Redial. No answer. Okay, so they're onto me. But I still have their numbers. She's the blond job chasing him up the mountain, but who's Darien? Is he the Hiker?

I detour to the basement to check out Dan's locker.

Too late. Nevar beat me to it.

The lock's intact on a door that's been cut open with wire cutters. Whatever Nevar saw last night is gone with him. Or is he gone? I have the feeling I'm being watched. I take the exercise bar in both hands and turn into the row containing my unit.

Nothing.

A beam of light flickers across the floor in front of the end unit then disappears. But it came from unit 53 directly across from mine--well, from my things in Dan's locker. The door is shut, but I can see the outline of someone inside. My gut is telling me it's the Hiker. Or the Watcher. But it's probably Nevar. I tiptoe up to the unit, stopping short of the door to see inside without being seen.

Suddenly, the door flies opens.

No one steps out.

I hold the bar vertically, ready to jump into the unit and lock his neck with it. A drawn-out swish and grunt ripple through the air. I jump. Wham! A middleaged woman carrying a box of mangy old dolls slams into me. She screams, I catch my breath in surprise and the box flies out of her hands. I drop the bar to catch the box. She trips over the bar, and I fall on top of her with the box.

"You can't have my babies!" she screeches as she tries to buck me off.

"Whoa!" I say, landing on the floor. "I'm sorry, but I thought someone was rifling through--"

"Gimme my babies!" She grabs the box, backs away and squints at me. I stare at her too. She's thick but bandy like her dolls, and her long, curly brown hair looks like it grew out of remnants from old dolls. She focuses most of her attention on my fluorescent yellow gloves. "I know you. You're the pervert who lives in 56. I'm reporting you." *She thinks I'm Myrtle?!* She hugs the box to her chest and stomps off, muttering sweet nothings to her babies.

Outside, the air smells of rain, but the clouds are unloading their cargo in the northeast of the city. The Watcher seems to have disappeared with the rain. I poke around with the bar in the full bin. And I poke. I lift out one disgusting piece of trash after another until I catch a glimpse of the derailleur with the wide end sticking in a potted plant that died of starvation, and with the pulley end wedged in a toaster slot along with a black, slime-infested slice of toast.

I lift myself up and dangle over the edge of the bin to hook the derailleur with the end of the bar. It's coming. Just a little more to the left. Aha! I've got--

I'm jolted by someone slapping my backside. The derailleur slips further down into the bin.

"Having fun yet?" Chanlee says and laughs.

"You jerk! I almost had it."

She's dressed to the nines in my black tube dress and sling-back stilettos. In my sunglasses, drop earrings and with her hair tucked up into my trilby, she could be me.

"What's this big date Bruno's taking you on? A stripper's funeral?"

"Who said anything about a date with Bruno? Can't you do this later? I'm late."

"Bully for you. I would have it now if you hadn't stopped me, so you get it."

She hesitates then grabs the bar. "Sometimes you're a real pain, you know that?" She lifts more rubbish out of the bin then pokes around. "I think I've got it. Yes. Here it is. Crap. It dropped."

She throws me the bar and rubs her hands together dismissively. I throw the bar back at her.

"Why don't I just shoot the useless thing?" she says.

I point to the bin.

She lifts herself up and dips into it. "Okay, this time I've got the sucker in my iron grip for sure. Don't just stand there, grab it. I'm not touching the filthy thing."

I walk around to the side and grasp the derailleur. Then I jerk down hard on the bar, and she falls face down into an open bag of garbage.

"That should answer your question: You bet I'm having fun." I look at the derailleur with triumph and disgust. It doesn't look damaged, but what do I know?

She rubs the garbage off her face. "Mayonnaise. Gross."

"What are you complaining about? It's good for your skin."

"Well then, you're going to want some for sure." She scrapes some off her face and comes at me with it.

I hoof it to the Doré with her in pursuit. "You're dreaming, Chanlee. I can run faster than you."

"Not over long distances."

I run around a station wagon. "Go make love to the mirror again, and I'll get the car started." I scan the lot without finding a Prius; while she tries to decide whether to mess up my face or beautify hers.

Beauty wins. She heads for the Doré.

"I'll see you around the front," I say, walking behind her but safely out of reach.

She opens the door, turns around, throws me her keys and points east. Seeing the keys fall short, she smiles. "It's on the next block." The door closes.

What the hell? I've already got a set of her car keys. I pick them up and groan. I'm holding Nevar's keys. Is that why she's getting dolled up? Because she's going to his place to deliver the car and guess what else?

He's her big date?!

Like hell he is.

CHAPTER 11

Without a hitch I find the Prius and drive to Brittanski Drive. Without Chanlee. She thinks Nevar's about as dangerous as a dildo, and that Dan really is one. She wants to be with Nevar today? She can walk.

At my parents' place, I see Lulie geared up in her leathers, waiting on the Duke.

"Sorry I'm late, Lulie," I say, walking up the driveway.

"Are you late?" she says from somewhere in the garage.

At the same time, Dad says from behind the visor on the bike, "Afternoon, Rane."

"Don't tell me you were riding the Duke?" I ask him.

He dismounts and takes off the helmet. "Maybe I'll replace the Audi with one of these," he says, stroking his chin and looking wistfully at the Duke. "Nothing this grand, mind. Not at first."

"What were you making in the garage?" I ask Lulie.

"Nothing. I just like to slug a hammer now 'n again."

Either I woke up on Tuesday in a parallel universe, or the whole world has gone strange. Well, it's always been strange.

Mom appears around the back of the house and chucks a plastic bag filled with soiled paper towels at Dad. "This is the last straw, Terence. After he threw up in his bowl, that animal of yours threw up on my Egyptian duvet. He's ruined it. My beautiful, Egyptian duvet." Then she says as an aside, "Hello, Rane. If you have anymore strays, please take care of them yourself."

"I'll take Mr McPickles back to the vet first thing in the morning," Dad says, picking up the bagged throw-up.

"You clean up all the vomit from now on. And keep him from chewing on Sheeka's tail, or there won't be anything left of it--her poor beautiful tail," she says. "Come and help put down the drop sheets."

"Yes, yes," Dad says, handing me the throw-up and pointing to the garbage can by the curb. "Don't do anything on the Duke that I would do," he says, touching my shoulder.

His hand slides off my shoulder onto the bike handle.

I shake my head in disbelief. He's like a kid falling in love for the first time and agonizing over it like it's going to be the last.

"It's just a bike, Dad, not a love machine," I say.

"Hold your tongue," Lulie says, joining us. "There's something dangerously wrong with anyone who doesn't fall in love

with the Duke." We look at each other from opposite sides of the universe. "You're different," she adds quickly. "You've got Fitz."

"Does she?" Dad says, loading the two words with more meaning than I care to weigh through at the moment.

"I have to round up a couple things from the house," I say to no one in particular, and drop the throw-up their way.

Rushing back outside, I find myself alone. Lulie's not in the garage. But her bike is still standing guard in the driveway. Then I hear a familiar choo-choo and whistle coming from the neighbor's yard. Peering through the living fence on the other side of the driveway, I see her riding in the locomotive cab of the train set Mr Cribblekree built when I was a kid--to my endless delight. It rings his house and my heart. Lulie disappears into the garage cum station, and when she reappears around this side of the house, I call out to her. But she waves me off, saying, "I gotta throw 'er into reverse, hon, 'cause the cow catcher is stopping the draw bridge from doing its thing over the pond."

Eventually, she gets around to joining me. "The Duke's been telling me I should ride bitch seeing's how you're Fitz's girl. By the by, how's it feel to be *his* girl?"

"These lessons are for me, not him." I say coldly.

"Sure they are, hon." The expression on her face is ambiguous, but her wink isn't. Neither is the content of the plastic bag I throw at her.

Geared up and rolling, I ask, "Mind if we stop at a bike shop?"

"You must be joking. Try getting me out of hog heaven."

"Sorry, I meant *cycle* shop."

She makes a cross with her forefingers. "As long as you don't expect me to foul my boots crossing the threshold."

Two hours and umpteen bumps and grinds later, trying to keep us upright on the quick-spill surfaces left by the rain, I pull up at the Spoke'n Wheels Cycle Stop in the deep south. Before I can locate the sales counter through the jungle of bikes coming at me from the ceiling, walls and floor, a short bald guy with a doughboy body and head long enough to look like it was formed in a vise, corners me.

"Good afternoon, good afternoon! Have you picked the perfect day--PERFECT DAY!--to go for a ride on your new mountain bike!" he says in a rapid fire staccato. Those aren't words coming out of his mouth, they're bullets. He shakes a finger at me. "I caught that eyebrow shooting up." *At least I know that eyebrows are supposed to come in pairs, you numbskull.* "You're wondering how I know you're here to buy a mountain bike. Years of training, years of training. Years." He shakes his head in disbelief, but he

doesn't seem to notice I'm doing the same thing. "You're a mountain bike kinda gal. Am I right, little lady, or am I right?" I let him talk because sooner or later he has to pause long enough to breathe. But did this runt say I'm *little*? "You're just in time for our closing special." He rubs his hands together like he's sharpening his fork and knife in anticipation of the big kill. "You're not going to believe--totally won't believe the deal we have for you. Strictly pro-quality titanium frame, sensored hub with...."

"Whoa," I say. But instead of slowing down, he whips himself up into hurricane speed. This is one windbag who doesn't have an off switch. There must be some language he understands besides blatherskiteta. I turn my back to him and face the exit. Suddenly, silence reigns. I turn back to him and hold up the derailleur to his face. "I want to order one of these, please."

"Why didn't you say so?" Without taking the derailleur or giving it a close look, he says, "This is a stock item, but we're out of them at this location. I'll have one sent over from our other store, and you can pick it up tomorrow. We close at 9:00. Now about that--"

"Isn't this a special order import?"

He looks at me like I'm trying to ride a bike without wheels. "If Saudi Arabia can import sand, we can import bicycle parts from Belgium. Now about our special...."

Seeing me come out with my face tied in knots, Lulie asks, "No luck, hon?"

"Depends what kind of luck you mean. At times like this, certain people are damn lucky that I'm not carrying a gun."

From our vantage point at the crest of a hill, bright and shiny under a patch of open sky, I look down the asphalt river. My gaze follows the glittering headlights streaming to the city center shrouded in the mist. In the sunshine, we ride with the wind blowing the rain our way, each drop a pellet warning that the road is treacherous up ahead.

"Swing by the central library," she says.

"Dukes and books," I say as she comes out of the library. "They go together like--"

"Can the wisecracks. I work here."

"Security?"

She gives me a sharp look. "Librarian."

"So where did your interest in bikes come from? Your husband?"

"He owns a body shop."

"A mechanic. It figures."

"I never pictured you sleeping with stereotypes, especially stale, old impotent ones." She looks at the Duke, standing there

resolutely silent, and she squares her shoulders like she's ready to kill me if I say the wrong thing. I take my cue from the Duke and opt for silence, then I get us mobile.

"Kary's a doctor," she continues. "He owns the Karing Aesthetic Chateau for Men. The fool thing is, he started out doing hair plugs, but a lot of the guys told him about how all their hair is growing in the wrong places. So he branched out to hair removal. Now the Chateau gives the full treatment, facials, peels, the works." She jabs my ribs as they shake from laughter. "Go ahead and laugh, hon, but Kar always gets the last laugh. All the way to the flippin' bank. Hang a left."

"There's no turn here, Lulie."

"What'cha call this?" she says, leaning into the entrance to the Rainbow Mountain Ice Cream Emporium.

We swerve the Duke up to the black and white facade of the Emporium and park under a foolhardy poplar still clinging onto its handsome foliage. After a quick trip inside, I sit down on the Duke and nibble on an ice-cream sandwich that looks and tastes like a postage stamp, while my eyes feast on Lulie's triple-rippled, double-dipped chocolate ice-cream cone.

"You really going to eat all that?" I ask, feeling like a pig just looking at her.

"I came bucking out of the politically incorrect chute on a farm in Saskatchewan. Yessirree. 'Cause I was born to take what I want from life, no ands, ifs or buts. Don't believe in denying myself anything that fate will deny me given half a chance. Not me." She licks the cone, and half of the second scoop disappears. "I haven't got time for those dad-gummed sludges who trudge back and forth to jobs they can't stand, with their shitty little dreams of winning one of those house lotteries. They never win a darned thing, but they get all orgasmic at the thought of paying to lust after a crummy house that's the wrong color, style and size for them. That makes about as much sense as climbing a mountain to seize the wrong end of the darned stick just to hit yourself over the head with it."

"Hold that thought, I'm going to get another one of these," I say, downing the last of the sandwich.

I come out with two of them.

"And every time without fail the real winner of the lottery is...." She pauses to lick her lips as the last of the cone disappears. "The dude who donated the house. He gets a tax write-off and free advertising. Suckers just never seem to give themselves an even break."

"All that from an ice-cream cone. Guess I'll have to wait to see you eat a seven course meal before I'll find out what you really think."

She laughs, while I try to whitewash images of Nevar eating a double-dipped cone. But the whitewash only makes the images glow.

"Think I'll try to get hold of Fitz again," I say, talking over the lewd sounds Nevar is making in my head. Or is that my heart? Lulie stares at me like I'm holding a tripple-dipped cone up to my ear. "He's not answering." I drop the cell into my jacket pocket. "Why isn't he responding to my messages? That's what I'd like to know." Something's up with him. Something I think I'd rather not know about. "Listen, Lulie, I have a tea I'm late for. Mind giving me a ride up to the boondocks past the university?" She hesitates. "I have my bike parked there, so I--"

"You have a bike?"

"Bicycle." *Oh that again*, her face says. "Go ahead and sneer, but that sucker can get me from there to Fitz's place in 14 minutes flat. In the rain yet."

"Nuts to the bicycle. The Duke'll get you there in 10, or my name's not Big Lulu."

"So when I want you to do me a favor, all I have to say is, 'Open sesame,' and pronounce it F-I-T-Z?" She pats the saddle, and I hop onto the driver's seat. "What's this thing you have about him, anyway?"

"Well, hon, you're contorting yourself into an overcooked pretzel to get a new derailleur for some dude whose name isn't pronounced F-I-T-Z."

Easing out of the parking lot, I do a shoulder check and glimpse a black SUV turning the corner behind us. Dan?! Can't be. Fruk! And that looks like Maldoon tailing him. I lose sight of both of them in the traffic maze.

"Shit, shoot, sh--"

"What's giving you a hairy?" Lulie asks.

"I thought I recognized the guy in the black SUV and--"

"That cager was a woman. A blond."

Myrtle?

We arrive at Mabie-Toogod's in time to watch her pour the cold tea down the drain. She's not exactly the picture of domesticity, standing at the sink in her full-length red gown; spiked, fluorescent-red hair; needle-pointed, clear plastic stiletto shoes and her inch-long black nails with silver flecks.

"I'll make a fresh pot," she says to Lulie and I standing sheepishly by the kitchen doorway.

"Did she say something, or did she cough?" Lulie whispers. I elbow her to shush.

The professor's voice takes some getting used to, because it always sounds scratchy like she's trying to relieve an itch in her

throat. She stares at us through her purple plastic, diamond-studded glasses and holds up the china teapot.

"Uh, we'll have to pass," I say.

"Make yourself comfortable in the living room. I'll be right there," Mabie-Toogod says, washing the pot. It's beyond me how she manages to use her hands at all with those black claws. Like how does she get her clothes on and off without mauling herself? Or scratch her nose without impaling herself?

"She has to be joshing about getting comfortable in this place," Lulie whispers as I sit down in the living room on a sofa with a claustrophobic heaven tapistried on the back. Her eyes try to take in the meticulous clutter of the Victorian decor. She looks aghast at the row upon row of ornately framed art hiding the floral wallpaper above knee-high chair rails. I motion her to sit down, and she points to the red leather chair beside her. Propped up against the back is a hunting painting of dogs relishing their kill. And a porcelain doll with big, bright, expressive dead eyes, is using the landscape as a backdrop.

Lulie looks at me like she doesn't have room to breathe. Then she wanders across the room and peers through the beveled glass in a black lacquered cabinet that looks like it's sprouting china and other knickknacks from seeds planted in the Victorian era.

"And what's this?" she says. Her voice is strange, like she doesn't want to believe what she's seeing. She tries opening one of the doors. "Locked."

"Yeah, because she found out the hard way that no one can go for more than a couple of minutes without finding something so interesting they just have to touch it. But if you want to get out of here before next week, don't say a word about any of her collection," I suggest.

"A week?! In a pig's eye! Betcha there are people still wandering around in the other rooms from the tours they started last year." She twirls a finger around her ear then up in the air. "Geeeezz! She's got the ceiling covered too."

"Laugh all you want, but she's got a collection of old books in her den. And as soon as you catch sight of them, you'll break through the glass with your bare hands to grab them."

"Funny you should say that, 'cause I was just going to ask you if the old duffer would notice if I forced open this cabi--"

"Before I forget," Mabie-Toogod says, joining us. "Chanlee's been phoning with alarming frequency, attempting to contact you."

Good. I hope my stilettos are killing her. Think I'll let her track a few more miles in them before I give her a shout.

"How's the research progressing with AI?" Mabie-Toogod asks and motions Lulie to sit on an armless chair about a foot high.

I try not to laugh as Lulie sits down with her knees grazing her chin. She doesn't seem to mind, though, because she's staring at Mabie-Toogod as though the professor's one of the curiosities in the room she just has to touch.

"Difficult to say," I reply, "because I'm not sure he knows where he's going with his project. Where'd he get his credentials, do you know?"

"Everywhere that counts for anything these days," Mabie-Toogod says. She begins dusting her Japanese china collection with a chamois.

Lulie leans forward like she's having trouble separating the scratching from the coughs.

"Can you be more specific?" I say. "I'm curious because he thinks Apollodorus is a god."

"You think that if his scholarship in classical mythology is faulty, then his expertise on Caravaggio is tainted? Or fraudulent, perhaps?" Mabie-Toogod says, staring lovingly at the obsessively ornate grey pot she's dusting. I don't say anything because I can tell from her pedantic tone that she expects me to shut up and listen. "True scholarship entails--albeit with unrivaled acumen--intense scrutiny and articulation that effectuates a certain narrowness of focus."

"Like with yourself? That's just it. You've devoted most of your life to studying Baroque paintings, and yet you know who Diodorus Siculus is."

"I wouldn't be so assiduous in retaining such hoary details if I didn't deem it efficacious to instruct in order to facilitate my research."

"Sure you would, because you need to know as much as you can for your research."

She smiles like she's about to share a secret and tugs on an earlobe, stretched, I suppose, from years of dangling what looks like car parts from her ears. "You're fairly well versed in Renaissance art, Rane. How's your knowledge of Apsaras?"

"Hindu goddess of paradise, who--" I say.

"Indara?" she asks.

"Another Hindu goddess?" Lulie volunteers.

"Another name for the Ch'an painter Yin-t'o-lo," I say. "How about Bultaco Sherpa?"

Mabie-Toogod looks stumped, but Lulie says, "Now we're talking real gods." Mabie-Toogod stares at her. "Stellar resident in the pantheon of trial bikes."

Looking more mystified than ever, Mabie-Toogod says, "Which underscores my point that if one is a Caravaggio scholar, it doesn't necessarily follow that he or she, as the case may be, is an expert on anything else."

"I take it he's only a visiting lecturer this semester?" I ask.
"He's not associated with the university," Mabie-Toogod says.

"But I thought... Then he's here in town to pick your brain?"

"That's a question predicated on a dubious assumption."

"No, it's based on the fact that you recommended me for the job as his research assistant."

"That I did, but only because I'm cognizant of your work. I observed an ad on the employment board outside the department office, and I contacted him to ascertain whether I was correct in surmising he was seeking a researcher with your abilities."

"Oh." Now that's interesting. About as interesting as all the rest of the useless details cluttering my life lately.

Lulie stands up. "Sorry, but I won't be able to give you a lift if we stay much longer."

"Another time, then," Mabie-Toogod says, walking around us and at least a hundred other things to the front door. "Tomorrow evening's good for me."

I nod. "Mind if I leave my bike--my bicycle--here a couple more days? Fitz is expecting me," I say. "Before I go, how's Frank? In Stade?"

"Get a move on," Lulie says in my ear as she pushes me out the doorway, "before Frankenstein arrives."

"He's at Fermi, splitting infinitives in lieu of atoms," Mabie-Toogod says, waving us off with her chamois.

"You can have your sweetheart back," I say to Lulie as I dismount from the Duke in front of Fitz's house.

She hops off the bike and follows me up the stairs leading to the Philip Johnson style house. "I didn't go into the bride of Frankenstein's love nest and the rest of it just to kiss the Duke. How long have you known the creepy old bird, anyhow?"

"Creepy?"

"A refreshing change from the dead men you're used to conversing with, I'm sure, but--"

"Never mind. I've known her since May when she hired me as a research assistant. Why?"

"Just curious," she says with a shrug.

I peer past a swaying willow obscuring the glass walls. Frank Lloyd Wright would totally understand why Fitz likes to leave his helmet on.

Not a hat in sight.

"Damn. He's not here. Guess I'll have to leave him a message," I say, eyeing a good-sized rock in the frostbitten flower bed. *Where the hell are you, Fitz?* "Got anything I can write on?" As she unzips her jacket, I hear the faint roar of a bike. "Forget it, he's

here." It sounds like he's coming around the front. Strange, because the garage is at the back. But sure enough his bike cruises up to the curb behind a straggly Saskatoon bush. "Come on, Lulie, you're not going to get that kiss by standing here gawking!" I grab hold of her arm, and we skip down the stairs.

All the way to hell.

I fume at the sight of Fitz lost in the bliss of holding the waist of a woman who takes off her helmet and shakes her long hair in his face. I run back up the stairs, grab the rock in the flower bed and charge at Fitz. Correctly reading the smoke signals coming from me, the woman veers out of the way. Fitz sees me just as I clank him on the helmet with the rock.

He jumps up off the spanking new Kawasaki. "What the hell was that for?" Noticing Lulie, he says with a tainted smile, "Well, I'll be, if it isn't the Mighty Fine. What brings you to these parts?" He takes off his helmet, grimaces at it and says, "Rane! You--!"

"Shut up!" I yell. "What was this bimbo doing on your precious bike? Huh, Fitz, you lying, two-faced, two-timing--" Words don't cut it. I kick the bike, and the crashing noise finishes my statement with the right kind of punch. "Come on, Lulie." I gesture her to follow as I stomp off to the Duke. She kills the wind in my sails by staying put.

"Want to explain what's got her nose out of joint?" Fitz says with rather convincing desperation, considering he's faking. "This is a long way from the dirt tracks, Lulie. I take it the craziness going on here has something to do with you."

"Well, Fitz, er...", Lulie says, looking torn about which way to go. Her gaze settles on his motorcycle partner, who stares at the fallen bike with an air of amusement.

"Crazy?! Who you calling crazy?" I say, storming up to him. "It would never occur to you to look to yourself for the source of your problems."

"Then what's Big Lulu doing here?"

"Big Lulu?!" the bimbo giggles and tosses around her long, very blond hair that hasn't quite fused into doll plastic. The leather she's wearing must really like her because it's melted onto her skin. Her tittering gives a semblance of character to a fashionably vacuous face trying to get undeserved attention by being made up to look like everyone else's.

"Good question, Fitz, what is *she* doing here?" I point to his riding partner who smothers her giggles with a retarded Cheshire cat grin.

He seems content to avoid answering my question, so I add loudly and sharply, "You said you don't ride the fender for anyone, absolutely no one, but you'd make an exception for me if I learned how to ride. So how come she gets to ride you, huh, Fitz?"

"Oh, that!" he says, sounding relieved. But the tension knotting his brow deepens.

Turning to Lulie, I yell, "Want to know what it feels like to be Fitz's girl? Ask *her*." She watches her nails grow, while Lulie and I eye her. I lower my voice a tad. "What's she doing in our relationship, huh, Fitz?"

"I waited for you all morning. You could have at least called, or--"

I stick my hand inside his jacket, pull out his cell and shove it in his face. "I've been trying to get hold of you all day, but you've been too busy bimbo-baiting."

"There aren't any messages from you," he says. Then he looks into my eyes and says quietly, "Where were you last night, Rane?"

"At my apartment. I saw you spying on me this morning."

"I never spied on you. All I did was phone you, over and over. Fool me."

"Like hell you did, uh, didn't--Have you been calling my cell?"

"No, because I found out yesterday that Chanlee has it. I've been leaving messages on your machine."

"Like hell you have."

Nevar's cell buzzes. I grab it, see Nevar's name on the display and yell into the receiver, "Screw off, Snow White!"

Fitz stares at the phone and keeps staring at the pocket I drop it in. "Who were you with last night, Rane?" His voice drops to a fading whisper as he speaks.

"See? You've been spying on me."

He blinks then jerks his head back like I slapped his face, while a door slams in my mind. Fruk, I just shot myself in the foot. Hell, the way my body feels, I'd say that's the only part I missed. Staring down at the ground, I think of the maggots infesting my answering machine. "I believe you about the messages," I say trying to be conciliatory. But my words come out sounding hard-edged and resentful.

"And I believe you about him." I look up, and the hurt in his eyes stings mine. "Ah well, you're cutting loose for Italy."

His sadness envelops me. "Who told you about Italy?" He looks away. "My mother, obviously." Still looking away, he shakes his head. "Don't tell me Chanlee told you?" He continues to shake his head. "So you've known how long now, and you haven't said anything?"

"I never said anything because until now I never believed you'd go."

"Really?" I hike a thumb over my shoulder at his riding partner. "She was straddling your equipment when you still had yourself believing I was here for good. So tell me, Fitz, what does

fidelity mean to you? That it doesn't count when you screw around, only when I do? Well, screw you."

I let out a long sigh that leaves me feeling empty, and I hold out his cell. He takes it like it's anything but an empty gesture.

"Thanks, but I've already got the message," he says. His voice is strained with emotion, yet he makes the words sound cold and hard.

Obviously, he thinks I've let him down. Hell, the cosmos lets me down everyday by refusing to accede to my demands, and I still haven't got the message. What makes him so certain?

Besides arrogance.

I could say that I haven't been thinking straight since the psychos hemmed in my thoughts with bullets. I could say a thousand other things. But they'd all be lies because although I still don't know what last night was all about, I know I was kissing my relationship with Fitz good-bye. Without meaning to. What do unintentional good-byes mean, anyway?

We avoid each other with our eyes and watch Lulie lifting his bike. The silence is so icy, my bones start shaking. "Guess there isn't anything more we can say without repeating ourselves," I say without changing the temperature.

"Your car is road ready. I've made some changes."

"Yeah, and I haven't liked a single damned one of them."

He glances over my shoulder where his *girl* was standing, but she's gone.

"Lose something?" I say to him.

"She was a buyer."

"Don't worry, she'll be back. You're still very much in business."

He shrugs. "And you're still leaving for Italy."

He turns away, his walk deliberately slow enough for me to overtake him. But something more than anger holds me back.

"I can drive myself home, Lulie," I say, suddenly feeling exhausted.

"Sure thing," she says. "When you want another lesson--"

She stops, looks at Fitz ascending the stairs to his house, then says, "Remember what I said about taking what you want. But it does B-all for your taste for life when all you really like is plain vanilla. If you know what I mean, hon."

Who's she calling vanilla? Me or Dan?

"Don't think I do, Lulie, but the only ice cream I can't say *no* to is Spumoni."

"I see," she says and stares at me like she's reading the future in my eyes. Instead of telling me what she sees, though, she gives me a cryptic smile. All this interest, and I didn't have to say the word *Fitz*. Not out loud, anyway.

He's right. This situation is crazy. Like this whole day has been. No Watcher, no Hiker. Something's wrong, or I'd be tasting bullets right now.



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CHAPTER 12

Following Fitz's footsteps to the garage, all I find is the ugly yellow propane. He's nowhere in sight. Fine. I don't need him or his permission. Not for anything. Not to be myself, not to live my life. But what about our life? Ah, I don't feel like wrestling the demons between us just so he can unload more guilt on me. For what? Because I want to follow my heart to Italy?! And I do mean *heart*, because my work is at the heart of who I am.

Suppose I should drive over to Chanlee's. Then again, there's no percentage in getting close enough to let her bite my head off. Hell, the mood I'm in, it'd be a toss up who'd win at being low, mean and dirty. Think I'll just let her sleep it off. From a distance.

I head for my perfect little hellhole at the Doré.

This propane brute has to be the ugliest car I've ever seen, but it rides sure and easy like it's trying to pamper me into believing I can make my dreams come true. If I ever get enough time to dream again. My ugly friend slides like a dream into my stall. Dan's stall is empty. Good ol' Dan. He knows I'd rather scrub my floors than entertain Myrtle. If he weren't thinking with his small head, he'd rather scrub my floors than entertain her. Yeah, I've seen them together, but I just don't see them together. Strange, but when I'm away from him, his image is super sharp in my mind but my feelings are faint. So faint, I'd have to rack my head and heart to find a pulse.

Where's the Watcher? I can't see any shadows that look like they'd spring to life and kill me if I approached them. I take a few steps forward then stop. There are only about twenty steps between me and the Doré. Doesn't Fitz know how many steps there are between here and Italy? How many realities there are to explore between him and me? He's willing to turn his back on both of us because he's certain I don't love him. But *that* certain? Love makes us so frukin' dumb. I know him. Right now he's feeling like I slammed him with that rock without his helmet on. Lulie said that she gets through life by taking what she wants. If I don't go back and take Fitz into my arms, our relationship will die.

For certain.

In death, what's left to take?

I walk back to the car then stop. Can't very well go to work tomorrow in these clothes. I turn back then stop again. My bedroom

window is lit up! No dastardly prick of a light for the psychos anymore. They're getting so comfortable and cocky in my apartment that they just walk in and turn on the lights. I race inside and climb up the stairs because I don't want the intruders to hear the elevator. Damn! I should have taken my cue from Mr McPickles and scaled the wall to the balcony. On the fourth I find my apartment door slightly ajar.

I hesitate before opening it. Whoever's in there has shut off the lights.

If it's the Hiker, he won't think twice about shooting me at point blank range. I grip onto Nevar's cell. Hope I don't have to use it on anyone's head, I haven't had time to copy out the call list. With as much stealth as I can, I push open the door, and in the darkness, the scent of him hits me.

Nevar?!

I bolt inside but the only trace of him is in my bedroom. The window is closed tightly, but it's unlocked. I peer outside. He's gone. Damn. I knew I should have tried coming up through the balcony. Yes, just as I've known all along that he's the purveyor of the evil overtaking my life. Without slowing down to grab a change of clothes for tomorrow, I tear after him. It's scary thinking about what a sicko he is, but it's even scarier thinking about what he'll do to me and kids like Kenny if I don't put him out of action. And something too scary to think about is that he's so crazy he thinks he's normal, yet I had sex with him. Which means that I'm even crazier than he is. I'd better stop him dead in his tracks before I become totally deranged.

Outside, I watch my step and look out for him. A cold, smoky wind carrying the remnants of a fire, ruffles my hair. Other than that, everything appears to be as it should be. Yeah, nice and normal like Nevar. He's disappeared, but he can't hide from me. Sooner or later he'll turn up at his world class, luxury hellhole in Belavista.

As soon as I turn the car out of the alley onto the street, a dark sedan swings into line behind me. A couple blocks down the road, the sedan is still riding my tail.

Praying that I'm giving myself enough lead-time, I swerve into the oncoming lane. The driver at the wheel of the sedan is definitely Nevar. Without wasting time to breathe, I brake and swerve back into the right lane behind him. Whew, good thing Fitz installed a rocket launcher in this ugly brute, or I'd be chirping in heaven. While the driver of the oncoming car gives me the finger, Nevar smiles at me in his rearview and tops off his insolence with a friendly wave. I give the smiling devil an equally friendly push with my bumper. Not as hard as I'd like to, though, because I don't have a plate or any papers for Brutus.

A few blocks from his Belavista home, he speeds ahead with his eyes looking backwards. Without warning him with a signal, I hang a right. Burning rubber, I circle around and shift into park in front of his driveway. Without killing the engine, I get out, lean back against the door and wait. There's no way I'm going to be alone with him without the world watching. The smiling fool cruises by, flips a U-ee and stops headlight to headlight with my yellow brute. As his shadow steps into the car lights, I press the bottom of my boot against the door, ready to kick any part of him reckless enough to come within striking distance. He stops short, but his smile is nothing short of an invitation to another black eye.

"Well, well, if it isn't Bambi. If you back up, I'll go first," he says, pointing to the driveway. I shake my head. "What point are you trying to make by getting towed away? You need a permit to park on this street."

"Nevar, I'm not here to listen to you spewing more of your damned subterfuge. What were you doing in my apartment?"

"I was looking for my cell."

"Sure you were. That's why you phoned me. What were you doing in my apartment?"

"After I discovered it wasn't in your apartment--"

"What were you doing breaking into my home?"

"--I tried phoning the cell. I didn't break in, the door was unlocked."

"You think you can beat the truth by lying? You're dreaming, Snow White." I push myself off from the door and lock eyes with him. "One of your thugs tipped you off I called Tildy."

"She's not clairvoyant."

"Why did you break--" He's right. I never tipped her off who was calling. "Okay, so you tipped her off." He shakes his head, actually looking believable. The trouble with lies is that the only thing separating them from the real thing is the truth. And belief doesn't need the truth. "Never mind the cell. It's not the real reason you broke into my home."

"I was looking for you--"

"Nothing but the truth, Nevar."

"I'd like to say there's no harm in being with me, but in truth, I can't." He stops like there's nothing left to say. I motion with my fingers for him to keep talking, and he gives me a *well, that's it* look with the sorriest excuse for a smile I've ever seen. I glare at him and my protracted sigh feels like anger sizzling.

"I went inside," he resumes, "to retrieve something I found there yesterday."

"So hand it over." I hold out my hand. He shakes his head. I glance at the car.

"It's not in my car."

"You passed it onto the Watcher."

"If you mean Jake Hulladin, yes."

"I see, you have the police in your pocket. So for all intents and purposes what you stole from me never existed."

"What I took didn't belong to you."

"Oh." I pause to give my surprise time to revert back to suspicion. "You're always dancing around the truth. What did you take?"

"It's safer for you if you don't know that at this point."

"Screw you, Nevar!" I fold my arms, unfold them then poke his chest repeatedly with my apartment keys fisted in my hand.

"You said that like you actually expect me to be grateful that you're trying to keep me ignorant so *you* know what I'm doing, but *I* don't. And that's going to keep me safe?!" I grab the front of his jacket.

"Don't do that, Rane. What you're feeling this close to me is making me crazy." His gaze is unclouded with anything resembling sanity, yet he knows I'm fighting like crazy to keep myself from getting tangled up in another emotional chute-the-chute with him. Or is he guessing?

"Want to know how I really feel about you? Everything I'd like to do to you is illegal. Get it?"

He takes a deep breath, drops his head back and laughs like he actually means it. I let go of his jacket, and he teeters back. All it would take is a sissy shove, and he'd be cracking his head open on the asphalt.

He rights himself.

"This is no place for crazy talk like that," he says with a sarcastic smile. "Let's go inside, and you can show me what you mean, and I'll show you if I *get it*."

"Will your wife be joining in the fun and games?"

"You've got my cell. Ask her--if you're into decorated skeletons. But don't get too excited by the prospect, she hasn't noticed yet that there's anyone else in the universe besides herself."

"This is how you talk about the woman you love?! Charming. Why are you smiling? Being a dickhead is something worth smiling about?"

"I wouldn't know. But I like the way you keep bringing love into the conversation."

"Nevar, shut up!" I stomp on his foot, but his self-satisfied expression only intensifies because he's wearing steel-toed shoes. He came prepared to rumble. All this for little ol' me? "Where is she, anyway?"

"In your pocket."

I take the cell out of my jacket and hold it out to him. He reaches for it, but I yank it away. "You're dreaming if you think you're getting this without returning mine."

"I don't have yours."

"What's it going to take to get the truth out of you, huh, Snow White?"

"Depends what kind of truth you're after."

"Even though you like to believe that the truth is something we make up as we go, it isn't negotiable, Nevar. Not in this reality."

He points to the house and takes hold of my elbow.

I twist out of his grip and shove my face into his. "Since I met you, I've been in the dark, walking a tightrope that's going around in an ever tightening circle. So far, I haven't figured out a whole helluva lot, but your sick game is going to be over as soon as I figure out how it benefits you to keep me walking that rope."

He grips my elbow again, this time too tightly for me to get free without engaging him in combat. "The real games await inside," he says in my ear and locks his arms around my waist. "My chessboard is already set up."

"You don't say? Well, you don't want to play with me." I almost chuckle at my mistake, but I'm choking on the desire to blast out of his grip. "I'm a lousy loser and an even worse winner."

"Kenny Hironaka," he coos in my ear. I snap my head back to see his face. He pushes me with one hand and I fall back, but he grabs me by the front of my jacket. "Two can play your game," he says like his jaw is locked but something came undone inside him. "What's happening to Kenny and you isn't a game."

I freeze in his grip then go limp without taking my gaze off him. "Kenny and *me*?"

He lets go of my jacket but secures me by the waist.

"Someone has kidnapped Kenny, and you have people shooting at you."

"That's not what you meant. And you used the present tense, so you know that Kenny's still alive. I'll bet no one else on this planet knows as much about what's happening to me and Kenny as you. How is it you know so much, huh, Nevar?"

"We think we know who's got him, but we don't know where he is. Come inside, and I'll explain."

"Says the cat to the mouse. And you say this isn't a game," I scoff. If he's paying attention at all, he's hearing my saber rattling. He follows me as I walk around the car. "However much you dick around with the truth, I'm never going to be your mouse or anyone else's. I'll kill you first, Nevar. Believe it." I open the door.

He kicks it shut before I can escape inside. "I believe it. Why do you think I haven't kept you abreast of what's going on? I know what you'll do to him when--"

"Him?!" I snort. "You'd be surprised how much I can see from behind the eightball. From the moment I laid eyes on you, I knew you were too taken with yourself to love anyone or anything but the devil. The only reason you're still alive is that I can't make a dead rat sing." He places a consoling hand on my shoulder. One of us is missing the point. "Get your hand off me." My glacial stare freezes my whole body. His gaze drops along with his hand. I shudder at the thought of being touched by a nihilist who mocks me and everything else in the universe with his disbelief. "Now get out of my way."

He stands his ground. "Bambi, I'll tell you what you want to know if you come inside."

"What did you call me?" I say with enough contained rage to fuel an all-out war.

He steps aside.

Brutus screeches into the parking lot at the Doré. Nevar's cell buzzes against my heart. I shut it off.

Dan's SUV is still gone. Damn. I could use his help to corner the Watcher. Where is the damned fiend, anyway? I know he's here. In his sneering, superior way, Nevar told me that much. I search fruitlessly in the garbage bin and everything else big enough to hold a viper, then head for my apartment. The only thing that Nevar said that wasn't unmitigated bull was his boast that he stole something from right under my nose. Something I should have found and safeguarded before he got to it. At least now I know why he toyed with me last night and wouldn't leave.

In the bathroom, I turn off the valves under the sink and unscrew the trap to see if Nevar left any hints of what he was hiding inside it. Nothing. I climb onto the vanity and unscrew the fan cover. Nothing but a dusty fan. I move onto the bedroom.

Oh hell.

The mattress and sheets are on the floor right where I left them, but the blanket he was wearing is folded neatly by the pillow. I rip apart the whole shebang and stuff it into the laundry hamper in the bathroom. The scent of him fills me with horror. I dump the hamper on the tile floor and something makes a clunking noise as it lands. So he missed something. I never thought I'd live to see the day when a clunk would be the high point of my day. I rummage through the heap. What?! Nothing but dirty laundry. I search each item. It wasn't this tube dress Chanlee threw in here. She'd better hope these stains come out, because if they don't, she's going to have to fork out a bundle for a new dress. I bought this boob tube in Italy. I'm especially partial to it because I like the way Fitz looks at me when I wear it. But he's never felt this one caress his skin. How did the creeps manage to find one so much like mine? Even the

hem has been mended in the same place. Hold on, hold it just a cotton pickin' minute. I sealed a lock of Fitz's hair inside. I grab a pair of manicure scissors and rip the hem open.

Hot damn! This is my dress.

I stare at the golden strands in my hand. Another meaningless detail?

No.

Nothing about Fitz is meaningless. And he belongs. This dress doesn't. It doesn't belong because it's the only damned thing that's really mine.

Feeling as low and sullied as the laundry, I resume my search for the clunker, and voilà there's something in the pocket of my housecoat. My cell. Dead as a door nail and even more useless. I've got messages, but the damned thing won't give them to me until I feed it. But why would Nevar plant it in my dirty laundry? I run my fingers over the keypad. Because he didn't. I threw my robe in the hamper after my shower. So he was telling the truth. And I wasn't. Which reminds me, I should check my answering machine.

The display says I have three messages. Fitz's, no doubt.

"Name the place," Nevar's voice says before I send it to oblivion. *Anything to please you, Snow White.*

The next two are from my mom. First she leaves a gentle reminder that she expects Nevar and I for dinner at 6:00. Then she calls back and demands to know if I'm all right before she tears a strip off me for standing her up. No messages from Fitz. Someone's been tampering with my machine again.

Nevar, you're going to tamper your way into the hell of MY choice.

Now for some tampering of my own. There must be someone on his cell besides his wife. The first number on his call list is an Erns Bilkovitch & Associates. The next is a number without a name. Ditto for the rest. The phone book says Bilkovitch is a lawyer. It figures. I'll pay him a visit tomorrow. But to really get the lowdown on the others, I need Chanlee's help.

Why hasn't she called me, anyway? I miss the bum.

A make up call wouldn't hurt. I key in her number, but she doesn't pick up. I think she just saved me from getting my head zapped off. I'll catch her so early tomorrow, she'll think I'm a bird singing.

I stare and stare at my answering machine. The truth is buried in there somewhere. Whose message was erased the first time? And what was so dangerous about the message? If only I could think of the right questions, I'd find out why Fitz's messages are being singled out for obliteration. Nevar....He doesn't ask many questions. No, that's not quite right. He stopped asking them

after...after Chanlee tipped him off about the painting. No. The last time he expressed an interest in picking our brains was when we were chasing the woman in the red hat. But he didn't ask anything he'd need to know if he really wanted to find her. What was he really asking? In his inimitable psychotic way, he's too subtle to feign curiosity to throw us off her scent. He had to have noticed as I did, that Chanlee said this woman walked like she was arthritic, but she outran us all. I'll have to ask Chanlee more about her.

Hell, Monday isn't even here yet, and it's already used up, gone. If I ever make it that far. Nevar has other ideas for me, I'm sure. Like adorning me with an extra bellybutton made of lead.

Chanlee and Nevar. Fruk. I think I know why she's not answering her phone.

The gods just laugh at us when we're right. I'd rather be wrong.

By the spruce on Belisaire, my footsteps disturb the pervasive quiet ordered by the gods to ensure that none of the big noises around here has a fitful sleep. Even the wind blows more softly here. Amazing what money can buy. Through a shrub partially blocking my view, I see his car parked in the driveway.

Shit, shoot, shite!

It's not his car, it's Chanlee's. I rub my eyes then let my hands slide down over my mouth. She didn't?! She just can't be that much of a two-faced, back-stabbing heap of dung.

I march around to the back of the house. If she really is in there with him, the only way I'll ever talk to her again is the way my answering machine talks to me.

Now it's her turn to get a nasty surprise.

While I'm assessing his house to find the quietest way to break in, my rage runs out of steam. She didn't seek him out. She's another mouse for him to play with. He's doing a number on both of us. If there's anyone in this world who deserves to be disturbed in this ever so respectable quietude, it's Snow White.

"Nevar!" I holler and kick the door.

Suddenly, something hard strikes the side of my thigh. I turn sharply in the direction of the driveway. If I believe my eyes, a ghost pelted me. I tear around the corner, down the driveway and onto the street. Which way to go? I'm the only one on the street.

A shadow flits in and out of sight around the side of my car.

I race to the car, and the Hiker springs out from behind it and runs like hell down the hill. I stop just past the car instead of busting a gut tearing after him. He'll mow me down in his waiting car if I try to catch him. Besides, he's not running away from me, he's running away from my car. He threw a pebble or whatever at me to get my attention so I would find him skulking around my car. I walk slowly

around it, feeling cautiously under the fenders and bumpers. Nothing amiss. Then I check the doors. They're locked. I take a deep breath, but the tightness in my chest increases. Somewhere in this car there's a message for me. A small detail rigged to reduce me to nothing in a split second. I step away and look hard at Brutus.

Fitz knows you intimately. Inside and out.

Walking back to the house, I pull out Nevar's cell and key in Fitz's number. The phone doesn't ring at his end, though, because something inside me shuts down and the cell with it. Nothing Fitz and I can say to each other over the phone can equal one shared glance.

I ring Nevar's front doorbell enough times to sound the death knell to his fun and games. No one answers. They're lying low. Lower than I'd ever go. But in the ensuing silence there is an understanding. Neither of them can hide from my knowing.

Guess this means I can take your car, huh, Chanlee?

Inside her car, I gaze at the house, so content in its silence. But with each second that passes, my unease multiplies. A man's life was brutally taken from him inside that silence. And the footprints of his murderers linger there. Ever silent.

Screw that.

I'll be damned if I'm going to let his death remain another meaningless detail.

Chanlee, you idiot! I have to get you out of there.

But first I have to rouse Fitz from his misbegotten slumber. "Let there be a light," I say aloud as I approach his house. When he leaves the light on in the foyer, it means he's expecting me.

CHAPTER 13

A light glints through his neighbor's tree, and I smile, not simply in relief but in gratitude. Walking up the path to his house, I have to quiet my heart that's trying to leap forward to bridge the distance between my hopes and doubts. Fitz said that Nevar is one of his customers, and I need to know how much he actually knows about this customer from hell. But what kind of idiot barges in on her lover while he's asleep, to ask him about the guy she slept with last night? I come to a standstill in the light reaching out to me from the foyer, and rain begins to fall. A gentle reminder that there's no need to cry, because the heavens are doing it for me.

The front door opens and Fitz steps out wearing his leathers. Shadow though he is, the black leather lights up everything in and around me. Before he has time to pick up where he left off or to negotiate, I take hold of him.

"I'd love your help," I say, my lips pressed against his cheek and my voice rough but laced with the sounds of my heart pounding.

He pulls back his head to look at me, and his face, everything he is in my eyes says, "I know." And his lips say it again and again.

"You don't have your helmet on," we say together, catching the spark in each other's words.

Then without the slightest prompting from me, he makes tracks for Chanlee's car and slides into the passenger seat. He knows that time and everything else that makes life possible is of the essence. Hot damn it feels good to be home.

"We're not going to get far without gas," he says, tapping the gauge.

Taking a few shortcuts, I get both him and the car up to speed. And while I'm detouring at a gas station, he arranges to have some of his guys meet us at Nevar's to check out my car.

"Chanlee's in hell right now, but she's having too much fun to know it. Or care," I say after he puts his phone away.

"Fun? Nah. She phoned my office twice trying to reach you. She was breathing so hard I only caught part of what she said, but it sounded like she was trying to tell me someone was pursuing *you*, and *she* needed some backup. When I tried calling her back, I couldn't get through to her."

Welcome to my world, Chanlee, and may you live long enough to enjoy it.

"She was wearing my clothes."

Ah, his face says. "Does that have anything to do with her second call about a hat fitting into the painting in the locker?"

"What kind of message is that? We already know the hat fits into the painting in the locker."

We exchange stupefied glances.

"You must have missed something, Fitz. What were her exact words?"

"Here," he says, pulling out his cell and holding it up to my ear. "Check the message yourself."

"I believe you." I push the phone away. "Later, when we're in bed, and I have time to think."

"Time to what?" He chuckles and runs a hand from the tip of my nose down to my lap. My hands tighten around the steering wheel to keep my thoughts from veering off the road.

"She wasn't the only one trying to get hold of you." He drops his voice, making it resonate deeper inside me. "I left one message after another on your machine and checked out every place I could think of. But nothing doing. Then I figured I should stay put to let you find me."

"My heart knows the way home. Well, that and I have a built-in homing device that zeros in on blue-eyed devils in leather."

His smile stretches all the way to mine.

We lapse into silence with both of us waiting for me to get around to the unspoken name niggling at us. I negotiate and renegotiate with my internal censor about how much I'm going to tell him about last night.

"Well, it looks like your guys beat us here," I say, commenting as nonchalantly as I can on the trucks lining the street at the bottom of Belisaire Place.

Fitz gives me a sneaky smile like he was inside my head listening to every damned thing I was thinking. "Don't get too close."

Catching the point of his double-edged sword, I peer through the windshield and say, "The rain has stopped." And I stop well behind my car parked at the crest of the hill.

Amongst the crew packing up one instrument after another is a thin man with striped pajamas sticking out from the bottom of his coveralls. He stops petting a steely-eyed German shepherd that looks like it's waiting for the opportune moment to tear his hand off. He secures the dog's leash and approaches us. "No detonator. No bomb," he says as Fitz gets out of the car.

"Sure it's clean, Jed?" Fitz asks.

"Clean as a whistle," Jed says and stands up so straight he gains a few inches on Fitz. "But we found this." He hands Fitz a small plastic box.

"It looks like a spare key box," I say, taking it from Fitz.

Jed shakes his head. "No key. Some kind of computer chip."

"It's a key, all right," I say. "But beats me what it's supposed to open." This is one of those times when getting the message isn't enough. I have to know what to do with it, or at least where the hell I'm supposed to deliver it. I turn the chip over in my hand then glance up at Nevar's house, stately and proud in the darkness. None of the houses around here are willing to shed any light on him or anything else, but his house seems to be shadier than the rest. Or is it simply that I know it steadfastly protects his evil delights from the light of day? "Sure there's nothing trying to hitch a ride in my car?" I say to Jed with a sharpness that causes Fitz to raise an eyebrow.

"Not a darned thing," Jed says, making the words sound ironclad. But not so ironclad that my nagging doubts can't blast gaping holes in them. "We turned her on and she purred real sweet, eh, though you might wanna fill 'er up before too long."

"It needs refueling?" Fitz asks suspiciously. Jed nods, and Fitz turns to me. "I filled the tank myself. You've already logged that many clicks?"

I shake my head and give him a questioning look, while he looks at me with unwavering skepticism. "Then who--" he starts to say then concludes the thought in silence as he glowers past me at Nevar's place.

Jed's gaze follows Fitz's.

"You didn't by chance see any lights come on in that house, did you Jed?" I ask, desperation creeping into my voice. Jed shakes his head. "No one coming or going?"

"Nothing gets by Timber," Jed says, looking with pride at the shepherd eyeing me suspiciously.

"Well then, thank you." I offer him my hand.

All this trouble over my car, and the only surprise is that Jed's hands are uncalledoused and silky soft, like he pampers them obsessively with lotion.

He bows his head then Timber leads him in the direction of the trucks.

"Nothing means nothing," Fitz says with a shrug that ends abruptly as I slip an arm around his waist.

Heavy panting sounds rivet our attention on Timber. Jed tries to restrain the dog going berserk over Chanlee's car.

Fitz and I glance at each other and say in tandem as we back away, "The bomb?!"

"Find it!" Fitz shouts to everyone within hearing range.

The two of us run up Nevar's driveway to the back of his house. I grimace at the patio door we're going to have to smash open to get inside. I feel like a sleazy dick crashing in to get seedy photos of people having no-holds-barred illicit sex. The last thing I want is a picture slinking around in my head of Chanlee practicing her gymnastics with Nevar. But I understand her desire to be with him. If only forbidden fruit didn't taste so...so much better than it is.

"The guys can get around the alarm, no problem," Fitz says.

"Screw that. It's time the world woke up to what a phony bastard Nevar is." I step between him and the door. "Is there anything about him I should know?"

"Such as?"

"Just how deranged is he? Enough to do Chanlee any--"

"Do who?"

"You knew him before I ever laid eyes on the jerk. You must know something about him."

"Yeah, like what kind of car he bought and whether he used debit or a credit card. Sugar, you could pay me a million bucks to tell you the color of his eyes, but I couldn't do it because I don't give a shit."

"Oh, never mind. Whatever we see inside, whatever happens, promise me you'll let me deal with him."

"No," he says and sidekicks the door.

His answer shatters the quiet with flying glass. But his kick isn't answered by an alarm blaring.

"Don't go in there," I say. "He's setting us up for--" I save my breath because I'm talking to his shadow committing a crime as it disappears into the house. I tiptoe behind him, feeling my way through the dark.

Suddenly, the lights come on. "Pussy footing's for pussies like Nevar," he says, charging towards the atrium.

"Ah, don't step there!" He freezes. "That's a man's grave."

I leap past him and over the space then dash through the atrium to the stairs. On the way up, my stomach sinks because with each step a sickening feeling swells up in me that Fitz and I are alone in the house. For a flash of a second, I actually rejoice that Chanlee's not here with Nevar, but sanity blasts that thought to hell. She's still very much with him. So is Kenny, but not here.

"She's not here," I say, coming to a standstill on the stairs. "He's taken her somewhere else."

He bounds past me as I turn around to go back down. On the way out, I shut off the lights. With them on, we're the prey in a game farm. I open the door and someone lunges in at me from the deep shadow on my left. *Over my dead body, you psycho piece of shit!* I thrust my elbow back and up into his neck and follow through with hard and fast blows to his chest, then I swing back out of the

way as he clutches his throat and doubles over with an animal grunt that tapers off into heavy gasping. What's with this creep?! He's acting like I caught *him* by surprise. He crumples to the ground. Even the paper dummies I use for practice hold up better. "Ready to talk now, or do you need more encouragement?" I say grabbing him by the hair and yanking his head up. As I'm about to tell him what I really think of him by kneeing him in the teeth, the kitchen lights suddenly come on. I let go abruptly because instead of seeing one of Nevar's thugs, I see Jed wincing at me. What he wouldn't say to me if he could talk.

From inside the house Fitz says, "He's definitely not here. Doesn't look to me like anyone lives here. I feel like I'm farting around on some slick, la-di-dah magazine cover."

I try to take hold of Jed's arm to help him up, but he fends me off. "I'm sorry, Jed," I say, my tone too edgy to be apologetic. "But what the hell were you doing coming in at me like that?"

His answer is indecipherable through his labored breathing. But a cigarette butt glowing red by my feet provides a more comprehensible answer. He must have been having a smoke while he waited for us to come out.

Fitz joins us. "Rane! You know what I've told you, 'No more practicing on my men.'" Jed replies for both of us by grunting. "What did you find, Jed?" He takes hold of Jed from the other side and helps me hoist him up.

Jed shakes his head.

"Timber doesn't fake his orgasms," Fitz resumes. "Get both cars to the shop and find out what's cranking him up. Rane and I will take one of the trucks."

Jed nods, and I look through the darkness at Chanlee's face. Wherever she is, I know she's having a grand time making a fool of me. And tomorrow she'll call me from work to boast about how good it was with him. *With you as a friend, Chanlee, it sucks to be me. So where are you, my friend? Your place?* Not bloody likely, it's way too obvious. Never mind that noise, her sex toys are there. Everyone of them except Bruno.

Coming back to earth, I notice Fitz staring at me like he actually knows where I've been. He's wrong. But if I try to correct him, it'll only serve as fodder for his scurrilous thoughts that are about as logical as love and infinitely less endearing.

"You thinking we should try Chanlee's?" he asks.

Know-it-all.

"I knew she wouldn't be here," I say after we've searched her house. With Fitz behind me, I walk into her bedroom and stare at the undisturbed silk throw covering the bed. "This place reeks of bad chi. Totally reeks. And not just because she's missing with him.

Something's been added." I look around the sparse, grid-like room. "Something we'd run like hell from if we had any sense at all. For the life of me I don't get why the gods haven't rained bullets down on him."

Fitz rests his hands on my shoulders and says not all that softly in my ear, "Is that what this is all about? You want to kill him because he's two-timing you with Chanlee?"

I turn in fury and glare at him. "Why can't you just come out and say what you really mean?" He starts to speak but I cut him off. "That you want to kill him because I'm two-timing you with him." I try to keep my voice down but it rises sharply with each word. "What's with you anyway, huh, Fitz? Remember, you're the guy who asked me once whether I'd rather have an American who tells you off and means it, or a Brit who smiles politely and doesn't mean it. You're acting like you've forgotten my answer."

"I haven't forgotten a damn thing. I still remember who I love. Do you?"

The calm, cold way he says it disgusts me. I push past him to leave, but he grabs my arm and swings me around.

"Do you?" he says, his voice hoarse.

"Now just hold on a cotton pickin' minute here." I stay in his grip, but my feet dance restlessly on the oak floor. "You never granted me permission to love you. That's something I brought to our relationship. And no matter how much of my love I share with you, Fitz, you don't have dibs on it. Or me for that matter. What sappy fool drummed it into your head that love ever respects boundaries?"

He points at me. "Yes, you. My love knows the difference between you and any other." He keeps the accusing finger aimed at my heart. "And there's a boundary you're going to have to respect if you want our relationship to continue: I draw the line at you dragging Nevar into bed with us. If you--"

"If I what? This is supposed to be about Chanlee," I say, cutting the air with both hands. "She's the one with him. Remember?"

"If you went after him with the unthinking ferocity you went after my men, he'd--" He stops himself and takes a deep breath.

There's that fruking hesitation thing again.

"He'd what?" I say with my heels lifting off the floor. "Screw that. If I hesitated with him last night, would we be having this useless jealousy and guilt driven conversation?"

He looks up at the ceiling like he's praying for help. "Sometimes, Rane, you can be an insensitive jerk." He takes his time coming back to earth then gives me a look so penetrating I'd swear that the gods he summoned are peering out at me from behind his eyes. "Evidently, we're in this empty house because you

don't think he kidnapped her. But what about Kenny Hironaka? What about him?"

"I don't think--I'm pretty sure--" My sputtering collides with his defiant stare. "He didn't kidnap Kenny," I say with so much conviction that it surprises me into wondering if I'm losing it. *I need some shuteye.* I pull my jacket more tightly around me and look down to keep his prying eyes away from my thoughts.

"If you don't think he's guilty of anything, then--"

I look up abruptly. "Oh, he's guilty of something all right. He has to be the brains behind the trigger-happy thugs, or he wouldn't still be alive."

"*Something. Anything. Nothing* but words. All the lights are on in the house, but we're standing here in the dark without the answers, Rane."

Here I am, trying not to get defensive and failing miserably because I'm feeling guilty as hell; while Nevar gets his jollies with my truest friend because he's not capable of feeling even a twinge of guilt.

I drop down onto the foot of the bed. "Believe me, I'd like him to be guilty of something, anything, I don't care which." *Just as long as he gets a taste of guilt.* "He knows too much to be clean. But every damn time I try to fit the pieces together with him at the center, the picture doesn't make sense. He wasn't up on the mountain with the hikers, but he was there. He didn't slash the throat of one of the hikers, but he was there. And I'll bet he didn't snatch Kenny, but he was there, somehow, someway, somewhere." Fitz watches me intently, his angry expression giving way to interest. "Chanlee's car was parked in his driveway, but he wouldn't rig it up to explode in front of his house. He--"

"He would rig it to detonate at his convenience."

"Details, details, nothing but freaking details that add up to how many lies?" I say, holding my head.

He sits down beside me, slips an arm around my shoulders and strokes my arm, while I stare off into space and stroke the cool silk throw.

"If all the roads lead back to him, why do I keep coming up with dead ends?"

"Maybe they're not dead."

I give him a dirty look. "You think I'm blocking myself?! I'd have to be braindead to want to protect him."

He squeezes my arm. "I meant that maybe he's rigging the paths to look like dead ends."

"Meaning he's feeding me red herrings?"

We both nod, although his is a lot more enthusiastic than mine because he doesn't feel like he's letting himself down.

"You're discouraged at this point because you're forgetting something essential: He's not smarter than you, he just knows more." He takes hold of my chin and turns my face to him. "Why do you think that is?"

"Will you stop it?!" He refuses to unlock his gaze from mine. "I don't tell you how to do your job."

"That's one of the reasons I love you even without your helmet on." He hugs my shoulders and kisses my neck. The relentlessly hideous feeling of being broadsided by a lying, snow white devil almost vanishes in this ephemeral cocoon of love. "But if the power he holds over you is his knowledge, then you have to find the source of his knowledge."

"What do you think I've been trying to do?" I stare blankly into his keen blue eyes while I rev my brain up a couple notches. "Maybe I've been going at this all wrong. So far, I've been trying to make sense of this mess by concentrating on who's working for him and why. Maybe I should be trying to figure out who he's working for--"

"Or with."

--and what he has to gain by it. I know this sounds abysmally stupid, but I'm stuck in the outfield praying for a fly ball because I can't for the life of me figure out his motive."

I smile at him and kiss his eyes.

"A motive," I resume, shaking my head. "A simple, ordinary garden-variety motive. Well, I've gone around in so many circles today, centrifugal force has flattened out my brain. I need some sleep. Might as well hit the hay here, she won't be back tonight." I close my eyes, lift my hands above my head, yawn and stretch back onto the bed.

Without warning me with a nuzzle, coo, peck, cuddle or kiss, he lifts me up off the bed into his arms. "Let's split for my digs. I've got something there guaranteed to please any cutie-patootie."

"I see." I shut my eyes and zoom in for a close-up in my mind, turning the burgeoning image every which way. I open my eyes abruptly and jump to my feet. "My painting!" I dash to the spare bedroom where Chanlee and I unloaded my things from the Doré. Fitz comes up so fast behind me, he almost mows me down. "If it isn't here, she's given it to him."

Please let it be here.

It isn't.

Chanlee, you moron. Whatever he gives you, however much pleasure you receive in return for it isn't worth anyone's life.

I wander back into her bedroom and plunk myself down on the bed. Fitz parks himself at the doorway, leans cross-legged against the jamb and looks at me like he's dying to cough up the canary he just swallowed.

"Remind me to take my laptop for work tomorrow," I say. He smiles in agreement, and I pat the bed beside me.

His smile remains as he says without moving, "Nothing doing."

"Well then, go ahead: Shoot!"

"If we took jealousy out of the picture, what would we be looking at?"

"Jealousy?!" I snort. "Whose?"

"Let's start with yours."

"We'd still see the same fruking mess with my hands dripping in the blood of a dead man, who, according to the press and everyone else, never existed."

"Would you still be looking here for Chanlee?" Before I can give him my definitive yes, he charges on, "Why haven't you checked with Bruno?"

"Because he--because she--" An image flashes in my head of Chanlee's face turning into a brazen beacon as she purred, sighed and teased herself into a froth by going on about her circus performance last night. I jump up. "Fruk! I'll bet she's with Dan."

Fitz and I knock on Dan's door longer than any fool would. But his SUV is parked outside.

"Sorry for waking you, guy," Fitz says into his phone. "But haul your ass out of bed and answer your door."

The door opens before the phone lands back in Fitz's jacket. The smell of mentholated lavender and chamomile welcomes us.

Dan stays behind the door and sticks his head out at us. "I was dreaming someone was knocking my door down," he says, his voice fading in and out like he's still not sure he's awake. Mind you, his eyes don't seem to be missing a thing as they soak up Fitz's leather.

"Is Chanlee with you?" I blurt out.

"No," Dan says, his surprise giving strength to his voice.

"See for yourself." Staying behind the door, he steps back and waves us to come in. I stay where I am. But if Fitz weren't up snug behind me I'd give into my temptation to see what's behind the door. "She had an appointment with someone this afternoon." He scratches the back of his head. "Or do I mean yesterday afternoon?"

"Either way, how was your trip to Drumheller?" He looks at me like he's going to fall asleep if I don't stop talking Swahili.

"Chanlee said--"

"I told her I was taking the fossils to the museum." It's my turn to give him a blank stare. "Fossils à la Myrt's parents."

"So you took them to the museum in town?" I say. He nods and Fitz yawns. "Right. I saw you."

Suddenly, he's wide awake. "You saw me?"

"In your black job," I reply. "You were cruising by the Ice Cream Emporium on--"

"You saw Myrt," Dan says rather flatly considering how awake he is. "We ordered Hungarian from our favorite restaurant, and she was picking it up."

Myrt. The name is starting to grow on me because it rhymes so well with the right words.

Fitz tells me what he thinks of the conversation by taking my hand and tugging me in the direction of the elevator. "Your exercise bike back up and running?" he says more as an enticement than a question.

"Well, sorry for bothering you, Dan," I say, giving in to Fitz's boredom with Dan and my excitement about a wild bike ride. But half a step away I turn back to Dan. "She didn't by any chance try to contact you?"

Dan shakes his head. "Sorry, I feel like a right sod, being this unhelpful."

"Did you see me here Sunday morning?" Fitz asks, his weariness suddenly gone.

"No. Why?" Dan says then shakes his head like he expects to hear loose screws. "If I saw you, Rane'd know by my signal." I try without a glimmer of success to get his gaze off Fitz long enough to signal him to shut up. "As Chanlee will tell you, my dancing's only passable, but it hardly qualifies as stamping."

I stifle a groan. He just gave Fitz enough ammunition to razz me till doomsday. I look blindly up and down the hall, being extra careful to avoid seeing anyone or anything in my peripheral vision. Not that it does me any good, I can feel both of them staring right through me. Might as well face the fruking music. I turn just as Fitz steps past me.

"Got anymore tidbits for me hidden behind there?" Fitz says, grabbing hold of the door and looking behind it. One scant look and he adds, "Nothing I need concern myself about." The door shakes from the tension of being pulled both ways at once. "Right, big guy?" He slaps Dan on the back so hard Dan's nose makes a thud against the door.

Fitz steps back into the hall, and Dan looks at me like doomsday just hit.

"What was that display of macho bull about, huh?" I ask Fitz in the stairwell on the way to my apartment. "What'd Dan ever do to you?"

"Nothing. It's what he's been doing with you." His voice is tense, challenging.

I won't go there.

I go quietly into my apartment instead. Everything's eerily the way I left it. Even the answering machine. There were no messages from Chanlee or Fitz then, and there still aren't.

"Come here, little girl," Fitz beckons from the bike. "I have a message for you."

"My machine's not working," I say with barely enough energy to be heard as I shuffle to my bedroom.

The silence of the room is haunted by birds outside my window, reciting poems, calling lovers across town, complaining about the weather and praising the rising sun. I slump onto the bare mattress and savor the feel of my head sinking into the bare pillow. No sooner do I close my eyes than the phone rings.

And rings.

CHAPTER 14

The ringing stops and Fitz says in a wickedly sexy voice, "Come here, little girl, I have a message for you."

"Is it Chanlee?"

"You'll have to come closer. I can't hear you from way over there."

"Who the hell is it, Fitz?" I shout with a drum roll in my head saying it'd better not be Nevar.

Irritation shreds my curiosity, and I shoot off the mattress then stop dead in my tracks in the living room. Fitz is nowhere to be seen, but everything else is because it's no longer nighttime and the balcony is already in shade.

The green light on the phone flickers as I'm staring at it. I grab for it, but the line's dead.

Fitz, you don't want to see me today unless you want to die. Like I've got time to be frivolous. I've already missed half a day's work.

"Not if I play it smart," I say aloud, smiling inwardly.

Al said I could call the shots re my hours. As long as I get the job done. With that in mind, I reward myself with a long, drawn-out stretch that ends with a jolt. Fruk. Fitz's guys are mauling the most intimate parts of my ugly propane guzzler, and my put-put is at Chanlee's. Along with my laptop.

I put Nevar's cell to good use and call Faule.

"Rane?!" Al says. "You are all right, yes?" Before I can answer, he says with urgency, "I was beginning to wonder if you were ill. My yes. I tried both numbers you gave me and could not get through at all. Do not worry yourself about coming by today--"

"Al, I'm fine."

"--I think I can manage without my right brain for a day or two."

"I'm fine, Al. Really."

"Okey-dokey." His keyboard taps in the background to the rhythm of his voice.

Suddenly, the tapping becomes upbeat along with his voice.

"Then you feel up to working this evening, yes?"

"I can be there in about an hour, so--"

"Wonderful. Marvelous. Toodleoo."

He hangs up. He'll just have to wait until I get there to hear me say I can't work tonight. I have to sort things out with Chanlee.

And Nevar. And Mr McPickles, and, and, and....

But Chanlee comes first and last. Walking into the bathroom, I short-circuit the police switchboard by phoning Levi, her erstwhile partner in crime.

"Holy smokes, Rane," his voice booms. "I was about to put an APB out for you."

"Me?! I didn't say this was Chanlee, I said I was looking for her. Have they stuck her out in one of the district offices?"

"Seems she's taking the next couple days off for another one of her hiking trips. Thing is, she wanted me to get on the blower to ya. I'd about given up tryin'."

"When did you talk to her?" I stop in front of the vanity mirror, but all I can see is Chanlee's face.

"She phoned while I was chowing down last night."

"This isn't like Chanlee. How did she sound to you?"

"Like she's getting off on the mountain air."

"That's it?!"

"Chanlee's banked a shit-load of hours helping to keep the streets safe for the likes of you and yours. Grant her that much, Rane. Far as I'm concerned, she's earned more than a few days of doing sweet all anywhere she doggone pleases."

"Yeah," I say, relaxing, "you're right." Tell that to the hair standing up at the back of my head. When he said *sweet all*, a picture flashed in my head of her kneeling perfectly still with her hands tied behind her back, while Nevar playfully, teasingly curls the hair at the back of her head with the barrel of a gun. And the image remains plastered up everywhere in my brain.

"Say, I almost forgot," Levi says, "She said she doesn't want you playing cowboys and Indians with the wheels she's dropping off for you."

"If she said that then she must have called from the hospital after the successful removal of her brain. Did she say where she was calling from?"

"No, as I recall she was dialing 'n driving, so I figured she was skedaddling to the--"

"She couldn't have been on the way to the mountains, Levi. Because she didn't drop her car off until later."

"She didn't say...I just assumed...."

The remaining words get buried in a thoughtful silence broken by the phone on my machine ringing.

"That's probably her." I race back to the living room.

"If not, gimme a shout."

"Thanks, Levi, I won't hesitate." I hang up in mid-sentence. Her cell number is decorating the display.

"Chanlee?! Where are you?" I yell into the phone.

"Hi, kiddo," she says with mindless cheerfulness. "You don't happen to have a cola, now do ya?"

"Well, well, if it isn't Bambi," Nevar's voice says in the background. "Chanlee's here. With me."

"You're with him?" I ask incredulously. Why the truth doesn't want to register, I don't know. It's not like the thought of them together hasn't been rubbing me the wrong way long enough to make me sore.

"Uh-huh. I'm in his car."

"I've been worried sick about you, Chanlee."

"How was I supposed to know that when you never bothered to call?" She sounds like she's the one being put upon. "Chill out, Rane, I'm on vacation."

"You're not acting like you're on vacation, you're acting like you're on drugs. What are you doing with that bastard?"

"Speaking of the devil, guess who wants to talk to you? If you let him explain a few things, you'll see why it's better if he's with me."

"When you coming back?" I ask.

"What's the rush?" she says with a sly flippancy that avoids the question.

In a voice diabolically complacent, Nevar says, "We were talking about how to convince you--"

"Nevar, you lay a finger on her and I'll--"

"Leave him alone," Chanlee says like she's not sure which side of the fence she's sitting on. Then like an afterthought, she says barely above a whisper, "We should continue this conversation elsewhere."

"Watch him and your back," I say.

"Thanks, I will," she says politely. "Bye."

"Hold it!" I yell. "Where you headed?"

A dead line answers my question.

Parts of the conversation reverberate in my head like misguided missiles. She's really flipped. Head over heels into his clutches. She sounded like her brains are scattered everywhere except in her head. He must have drugged her. Without her knowledge? Ah, they're both old enough to pretend they know what they're doing. Still....

I glance at my watch and yelp.

"Lookee, lookee, if it isn't the lucky lady herself," Stanley, the super, sings to me as I step off the elevator into the lobby. Normally, he has the mug and demeanor of a pissed off pit bull, but I'm in no mood to listen to a pit bull sing. "Come," he beckons with a grin that gobbles up his pie face, "it's your lucky day."

"I spent longer on that damned elevator than I did in the shower, so I don't need you to tell me what kind of day I'm having." I step around him, but he steps back in front of me. I'm not in the mood to tango with a pit bull, either.

Undaunted by my warning glare, he shoves his idiotic grin in my face like he expects me to kiss it off. I'll kiss it off, all right.

"I have a message for you," he says.

He said it like Fitz, except Fitz doesn't sound like a pit bull trying to purr.

"Where is he?" I growl.

He leads me out the back to the parking lot.

"Yes, and...and...?" I say, rattling my keys in my hand.

A starkly human shadow extends out from the front of the garbage bin. The Watcher! I race over to the bin and come to a halt in the ally.

Nothing.

I turn back, and the scent of him hits me. Everywhere at once in all my senses. Nevar's here.

He is?!

The autumn sun shines on the last leaf of the poplar branch above me, as it rides on the wind blowing away the scent of him. Over the hum of cars on the trail three blocks away, a dog barks.

Nevar's not here, he's with Chanlee. If only he could ride on my imagination like the wind, he'd be anywhere except with her.

"Your honey's over here," the super says, waving me over.

Fitz!? His face, lit with a knowing expression, pops into my head and suddenly all my thoughts are clouded with guilt.

"She's right here," Stanley says, opening the metal door to the shed attached to the back of the Doré.

"Did you say *she*?" I ask as he rolls out the Duke.

Fitz, oh Fitz, it seems I can't doubt you without doubting myself. And this is what I get for my doubt: you closer to me than ever, with Italy one day closer.

"Will you let me take her for a spin sometime?" His voice sounds like the pangs of love have punctured his throat.

"Sounds like a plan."

He lets go of the Duke reluctantly then says eagerly like he'll get his ride all that much sooner if he rushes, "I have your computer bag in my office."

The chrome on the Duke glints at me as I dismount from the bike in front of Al's. I take off my helmet, gather up my computer bag and look at the house. Such a retro little thing with foolhardy geraniums clinging for dear life in hanging baskets swaying in the porch, the crimson and hot pink hinting at the explosion of color

awaiting inside. Who'd ever guess that Mother Goose decorated the interior?

Al opens the door as I'm about to ring the buzzer. His crisp dark suit, tightly cinched tie, slicked back hair and the neatly folded newspaper he's holding are in sharp contrast to my grub jeans, boots and helmet.

Although he has summoned a smile to his lips, he looks at me like I'm blocking his view. Ah, he's falling in love.

With the Duke.

"I see the Duke's made another conquest without gliding out of neutral," I say and chuckle. He gives me a questioning look. "The bike?"

"The bike?" he says with the comprehension of a parrot. He shoves the newspaper up under his arm. "You are ready to start working, yes? Come, your room is ready." What's with him? He's acting like someone left him in the freezer overnight.

I follow him into the house, stopping to put my helmet and things in the foyer closet.

"No, no," he says like he's admonishing a naughty child. "Alas, the catch on the door is jammed. You may put your things in the office."

We tread in silence through the wild hue zoo, with the whole freaking menagerie jumping out at me, and a gaseous bouquet of acrylic and latex paints hijacking my sense of smell. The lights are on in the kitchen because the venetians on the windows are closed.

Seeing me stare at the blinds, Al says, "The sunlight it makes it difficult to see the computer screen, yes?"

I pull out the chair with the larks still searching for an escape route, and I sit down on wooden gardenias that have faded, blistered and peeled in the sun. For a respite, I plunk down my helmet in front of the photos of his garishly beautiful family.

"I think the cuckoos who owned this place imprinted big time with Mother Goose," I say, trying to inject a bright note into the lugubrious mood amidst the gourmand's delight of color.

Sitting down at his notebook across from me, he pats the chair beside him, "You will see more better from here." *The point is, Al, I'd rather see less.* I slide over onto the chair and get rewarded with shadows of myself and Al in a blanked out screen. Come on, come on, what Caravaggesque unatoned pleasures or autobiographical horrors await beyond the darkness?

"Well now, do any of us really ever leave fairy tales behind?" he asks.

"Nursery rhymes aren't fairy tales."

"Sure not. Mind, they both revel in the dark side of life and the pleasures of the flesh, especially flesh dancing to the whip. Tsk,

tsk, poor John O'Gudgeon." With a smile reconfiguring his bulbous face, he sighs.

This close, I see the reason he always looks like he just shaved. Except for his eyebrows, lashes and occasional strands flopping down onto his forehead, his face is hairless.

"Yes, well, nursery rhymes are merely the warm-up for fairy tales," he prattles on. "I really hate to think what civilization would be without fairy tales." He said *hate*, but he looks positively besotted by the idea. "They, they are erotica for children. My yes, heavenly erotica devoured in every culture throughout time without restraint."

"They're what?! Chicken Little isn't exactly my idea of a sex symbol."

"The Frog Prince, Sleeping Beauty?" *And Snow White.*

"What do you think they are about? Now take Hansel and Gretel." He presses Enter and another of the would-be Caravaggio works lightens and darkens the screen. Only this one isn't a painting, it's a pen and ink sketch.

"Al, this can't be a Caravaggio," I say, giving questioning looks to both him and the sketch. "It's provocative, but way too subtle."

"To be sure this is a departure from his other sketches."

"There are no extant sketches by Caravaggio. And any documentation of such works by him has amounted to nothing."

"The failures of the past they are not mine. The unlucky sods never got to see this," he says like now that he has spoken, there's nothing left to say on the matter. Then he adds, "Sketching exercises are for titillating, arousing creativity. Art it is what happens when the Muse is seduced."

"That doesn't make this a Caravaggio." My feet won't stay on the floor, and I kick him accidentally in the leg. "Sorry." I shift in my chair and kick him again because he never bothered to move his leg. Instead of apologizing, I slide my chair away from him and my feet resume racing.

"Look, my sweet! This could very well be you and I or any of the people we know playing the parts of Hansel and Gretel, would you not say so?"

With him watching me with a sort of perverse parental interest, I squirm inside and gaze in fascinated revulsion at the sketch. A young woman with a body not unlike mine embraces a boy in a roughly hewn metal cage. They're both nude and faceless. His face is squeezed and deeply shadowed between the bars, while hers blends into the cage. Behind them, in front of a shack with boards missing, is a chopping stump with an axe in it. A rooster perches on the handle while chickens mill around it.

"No I wouldn't, Al," I say, shifting my gaze to him. For a moment, I see him in the sketch. Not in it, exactly. More as though the sketch were superimposed upon him. As the image dissipates, his expression becomes tense, expectant, like he's still waiting for my response. A deep, straight vertical crease forms in the center of his forehead and butts up against a sharp line cutting horizontally across the bridge of his nose. The last time I sat here with him, those furrows looked like dimples, now they're deep cuts jarring my comfort level. Looking back at the sketch, I add, "I'd say it's a competent rendering of a slave with her child, but even the Caravaggisti wouldn't take on a subject like this for fear the inquisitive Church would--"

"Look again, this time for the less obvious, perhaps. Like most people, you picture the witch's house in the forest from the front. But Caravaggio with his iconoclastic turn of mind he shows it from the back." He places a hand on my shoulder. His gentle laughter shakes up the tension in me. "Well now, do not be so dismayed, my sweet. He tries in his art to show the world through the eyes of the Almighty. Oh yes, the Almighty One."

"I don't see God anywhere in this work. I see a self-obsessed adult child."

"Pooh, being grown-up is grossly overrated, as Caravaggio well knows. The trouble with being grown-up is that by time we grow up who remembers who we are?"

"When you whitewash Caravaggio's work--supposing this is his work--it may bring his message into sharper focus for you, but it does absolutely nothing for me."

"Nothing?! Oh my, my, his radical naturalism it is not for everyone, to be sure, but--"

"It's not his naturalism that I take issue with, it's his self-indulgent anatomization of his ego and taste for boys and blood. He never painted so well as when he ardently believed he was being persecuted."

"In my mind's eye, that is a misreading of his art. *Certainement*. Do you not see?"

I'd rather see what's inside the newspaper lying on the table by your elbow. He's being casual about it, but he's still acting like there's something in the paper he can't let go of. It's not the whole paper, either. Only the first section, and all I can see is part of a word in the banner headline: --/ON.

"He does not revel in the persecution, but in the suffering, yes?" he goes on. "He uses light symbolically to evoke the light of heaven as opposed to the darkness of hell, to give us the Maker's point of view, the Almighty's vision."

"More like the viewpoint of someone with a warped sense of self from looking at himself in the mirror too much. The pope

pardoned him, but God separated him from his fame, fortune and art on the shores of Porto Ercole."

He starts to say something, purses his lips, then says, "With or without God, his vision always goes beyond the horizon. You, you should try it sometime, yes?"

I try not to let him see that I resent his assumption that I haven't tried it, but I say coolly, "His horizon was clouded with his fear of sin. He was continually seeking the redemption through his art that he was too cowardly to give himself."

"My, my, I must say I am a tad surprised by your hostility towards one of the world's greatest artists."

"Hostile?!" I mean to say as a snicker, but it comes out more like a snort. "In order to be hostile, I'd have to invest a helluva lot more time, attention and emotion than I could ever muster for him as a painter or murdering carouser. He doesn't even show up on my Richter scale." *But you're beginning to, Al, my sweet.*

"It, it is difficult at times to separate the man from his art. Nevertheless--"

"Please don't drag out that tiresome bugaboo from your Art History 101 lecture notes about keeping the artist separate from his art. Caravaggio's no longer a man, Al. He's a historical figure."

"True, true," he says with his head drooping, "But more of a mythic figure, would you not say so? You women are such surprising, surprising creatures. It amazes me no end that you exist at all. Absolutely floors me how much you understand without having to learn it. I simply cannot stop envying you. My no. The way you decorate up the lives of us men and never leave your childhood behind like we do."

From the satisfied look on his face, I'd say he's expecting me to be grateful for being relegated to window dressing--in a nursery at that.

"That's condescending, castrating bull, Al."

"Goodness me, I did not mean for you to take *that* personally. I meant simply that it is marvelous how you women teach children how to wash themselves and appreciate fairy tales. Caravaggio himself would understand your hostility. I daresay that perhaps he would secretly admire it. But you must understand, my sweet, that for him hate is not the opposite of love, no, no. Freedom is."

I look more closely at the caged boy being embraced.

"If love is bondage, then what is hate?"

"Whatever you want it to be. God is immutable, yes? But Satan he is not. Therein lies his power. And all true art." Seeing my shocked protest, he smiles serenely and adds, "We are the only creatures on this earth that relish the pain and suffering of others as entertainment, that make war into art and worship death as an art

form. For good, good reason. Happiness, joy, ecstasy, they are all fleeting, but war and death they are always with us and nothing lasts as long as death. As we speak, how many people beyond your macho doll world are fantasizing about hitting, maiming, killing, or vaporizing other people?"

Macho doll?! He can add me to the list of people doing the fantasizing.

"You cannot avoid the truth by avoiding the answer, my sweet. But do not mistake my meaning. Hate it is not a commodity that can be traded or bartered. My no. And you cannot buy it like you can purchase hope with a lottery ticket or plastic surgery. Think. Who or what keeps God in business?"

"I don't want to argue with you again about the extent to which dishonesty runs the world."

"Good." He slaps his hands down on his thighs and they quake like jelly. "We have made some progress on that score, then have we not?" I look in the direction of the sketch but roll my eyes. His quest for riches and immortality through someone else's art is beginning to sound like a terminal illness.

He sails along, like I'm caught in his wake, and I hunker down for a long-winded trip. "Pop psychologists go on and on about shame as though we have too much of it. What drive! We are enculturated in this society to be completely shameless in the pursuit of our vices, yes? We reward the boundless avarice of our most successful acquirers, with our envy and adulation. So now there are no more poor people. No. They have become greedy rich people without money. You are not convinced, yes?"

"I wouldn't have chosen this field of work if money were my prime motivation."

"Perhaps so. But your youth it is not a vice, yes? No, no, not in itself. But the way we pursue and worship youth that is exactly what it is. If people kept their word and were as honest as the day is long, who would own the land we are sitting on and claim as ours?" His rebellious hair is becoming unfurled, and a strand flops down on his forehead.

"Uh, to get back to the sketch at hand...."

"But my sweet, that is precisely what we are discussing, yes? Notice the joyfulness in the embrace."

"The rough metal bars between them portray the ecstasy of the willing slave, would you say?" Although my sarcasm is crude, it's so obvious, he nods in agreement.

"When the body is negated, what else can the spirit do but be free?"

"By that logic, quadriplegics are the freest of us all."

"It is perhaps a question of will, yes? Do quadriplegics willingly surrender their bodies? Not a whit. The ultimate freedom is

in the willful surrender of oneself to another's will. Ask any of the people who greedily brand themselves with corporate logos. Do you not see? The boy he is the freest because he is surrendering."

"Surrendering to the will of God can be a trap in itself."

"Heavens, child, he is not surrendering his will to God, but to her. Only to her. He is inside the cage she has made to deliver him from the torture of having to think. Look at the way he is melting into her breast. He is on his way to negating his rapacious taste for suffering by becoming nothing but the thought of her. Pure, unadulterated spirit."

Pretending to look wistfully at the sketch, I say, "Ah, for the good ol' days when slavers weren't hindered by modern inconveniences such as a conscience."

"Now you mock the truth, yes?"

"Better that than using it to defend lies, yes?"

"You, your arguments are leading you astray from Caravaggio's work, no?"

"No. A caged, mindless, sadomasochistic spirit happy in its slavery?! I seriously doubt it, Al. Any happiness the boy derives from being a willing slave comes from surrendering to his delusions, to making himself believe that his thoughts and feelings are emanating from somewhere outside himself. But he's not just behind the 8-ball, he's behind the decision to give in to the abuse. And that decision is every bit as willful as the decision not to give in to it."

"Given how cruel and unfair life can be, art that extols the virtues of sadomasochism is redundant, would you not say so?"

"You agree with me then?"

"No, my sweet, Caravaggio is no sadomasochist."

"Yeah right. Just a willing slave to his free spirit. And who have you surrendered your will to, huh, Al? Who's doing your thinking, feeling and deciding for you? Hitler's dead."

Surely that's not indecision crossing his face?

CHAPTER 15

"Hitler never surrendered to anyone," Al says shamelessly, his putty face taking on a hardened look. "You should know that it adds nothing at all to our discussion of Caravaggio to bring a failed artist into it. No, no, I surrender myself willingly, ecstatically to only one thing."

He pauses to give me time to guess. Even if I used the right words, they wouldn't mean the same to him. *Freedom, love, hate, hope, will, joy*. All commonplace words that go back so far in my mind I don't ever remember learning them. Yet the way he says them, it's like I'm hearing them for the first time. There's a malevolent cadence, a primitive subtext beyond Neanderthal, beyond biological, like he's suspended in a spiritual void, merrily preaching away to all his surrendered spirits and would-be captives. But to get us to believe what, to do what exactly?

"If art it is to mean anything to you, then you have to surrender yourself completely to it, yes? I daresay that is what art does to simple souls such as myself," he says, taking the words out of my mouth, but without my meaning.

I point at the sketch. "But is this really art? I think it's derivative and not of Caravaggio."

"Who else dares to dream so dangerously?" Nevar springs to mind, but what he does is the antithesis of art. "It took genius to catapult him into thinking the unthinkable. What will it take you, my sweet?"

"It doesn't take much thinking to go beyond this year's or last year's fashionable brand of morality."

"Such a timid answer." He shakes his head and refrains from tsking, but his putty face takes on the expression of a professor handing back a failed paper. "It is too, too bad that we censor the dreams of our children and shape them into chicken-hearted dreamers. It is a dirty shame, yes? Can you not see? When it comes down right to it, all we are left with at the end is our dreams, because even our memories they fade and fail us." He pushes his chair back and heaves himself out of it, pocketing the newspaper in the process. "Feel like coffee?" I shake my head but stand up because my chair feels like it's growing tendrils. "What would you say is the focal point of this work?"

"The cage."

"Not the spider?"

"What spider?" I lean into the screen and see a web stretched across an opening in the shack where a board has broken away. "There's no spider, Al, only a web. But even if the spider were out in the open, climbing on her skin or the cage, it still wouldn't be the focal point because it's not capable of wielding the axe."

After retrieving a plain white mug from the cupboard, he pours himself strong smelling brew from the yellow plastic maker, so shiny and glaring it looks like it's a megawatt lamp. His left eyebrow shoots up as he takes a sip, with three fingers of each hand flaring out at the rim of the mug. A red horseshoe decorates the bottom of the mug.

"Someone once said that we're all gossamer threads that God spins into a web then abandons. Could be why we fear and loathe spiders, would you not say so?"

"My brother loves them."

"Yes? Fancy that."

"If I'm understanding you, you're saying that unseen, God is watching us. That in the light of day the two figures have forgotten that the stars are still up there looking down on them."

"Perhaps, perhaps," he says, his eyes lackluster as he shakes his head. "The spider is not absent, it is within, yes? Caravaggio he is saying that God is in the knowing."

"That's not quite how I'd say it."

"No?" The broken ends of his eyebrows turn down sharply.

"No. I'd say this is a fake. If the Muse was involved, she faked her orgasm. Like Febo di Poggio, Merisi could paint so well he created smut for angels. This is just plain smut."

"Perhaps, maybe if it was the work of Potggio di Merisi. There is a crucial difference, yes? Viz., this it is Caravaggio's art," he says and takes a sip of coffee. Over the rim of his mug he gives me a knowing look. This from a man who doesn't know one divinized Michelangelo from another. As the mug descends, a smile spreads over his face, not of knowing, but of victory. A victory worth savoring. I see this all through a darkening cloud of suspicion, while I fight the urge to scratch my back because it feels like something's crawling up my spine. And taking its time doing it.

Al's just trying to be fatherly, I suppose, but the more he talks, the less I can picture him as a father. Oh, I can picture him well enough, but going around with his balls in his hands, feeling decapitated and tortured by his excessive kindness to his wife and children.

"This work isn't self-conscious enough to be his," I say, my voice as brittle as the flowers in the glass bouquet on the table. I pick an iris, all shiny and bright, capable of being destroyed but not killed. Lifeless art.

"The sense of self is the sixth sense. You understand, yes? It is the last one to develop and the first to go kaput," he says. He takes a sip of coffee and sticks his tongue out like he's searching for the flavor. He's on the scent for something. What? Not the siliciferous particles of worn-out rock tossed into the fires of hell to make the flower I drop into the vase. "Have not you noticed the extent to which people will go to rid themselves of their individuality? For the hardest of souls, the only time they feel safe and secure, wanted and alive is when you give them a taste of death. Were it not true, were it not true." He pauses, with a ghoulish glint in his eyes, like he's lamenting the absence of death. Shaking his head, he resumes, "Yes, yes, when you make them suffer by beating and forcefully ravaging them and tearing, searing, consuming their flesh with pain because, my sweet, total pain is total possession." He says it like he's warming up his lips, brains and other instruments of torture for someone specific. "That is why pain is a seductive virtue, is it not? My yes."

His use of elaborate rationalizations to disguise petty, stunted, lame feelings is anything but seductive.

"Not everyone is tortured by the burden of having a soul," I say, feeling my soul recoiling. Not at anything identifiable. No, at something missing.

He gives me a lavish grin, then says, "Your sense of sin is showing, my sweet."

"And yours is conspicuous by its absence."

"You want that I should change my views to suit you? My, my, but I am disappointed in you, Rane--my yes I am--for succumbing to your gender. I thought you would circumvent the defects of your sex. You women you understand yourselves fully enough to see the need to change yourselves. No quibble with that, not a whit. Alas, no woman is willing to settle for that. She has this hellish, insatiable, vampiric desire to change the men she loves." Shaking his head, he tsk, tsks. "You women are--"

"The spoilers of man's perfection?" He deigns to give me a smile that he swiped from those bloody angels in the bathroom.

"Eve couldn't leave well enough alone. No, she had to redecorate. Starting with him, yes? Interior decorating *him*."

"Tell me, Al, how do you mutilate and destroy someone's body and devour her soul as a forfeit, without changing that person?"

"Poo!" he says with a flick of a hand. "The idea is not to destroy the person, but to strip away the superfluous to get at *Eve*. Man he does not try to change her, my no. He forgives. To understand completely is to forgive completely, yes? You would say that women understand men so well they can't forgive. You would, oh yes you would. But--"

"Are we talking about you and Alma?"

"--unlike a woman, a man he does not need to change the world to love it."

"No. Man changes the world to dominate, control and make it over into his own image. But what's this crock about understanding and forgiveness? You're saying that men *ought* to loathe women because all males are tainted with *her* original deed. So what have you forgiven, huh, Al? And your Spider, for that matter. Does he understand well enough to forgive? If every male born is still tainted, then who's doing the tainting? Who tainted the Spider, huh, Al?"

He wiggles a finger at me. "I can see the twinkle in your eyes. Twinkle, twinkle little heart. You are wishing to change my mind, yes? Alas, you women, you cannot escape yourselves."

"Why should we?" I snap.

"Now you are agitated with me, yes? Because I have ruffled your temper by subjecting you to an argument you cannot, dare not refute."

"What argument, Al? You've been all over the map. You said that God is in the knowing, but that Eve is to blame for the woes of man, because she chose knowledge of self over the bliss of endless ignorance." He looks at me with amusement that buries my goodwill in his condescension, so I add with cold vigor, "My take on this? Man knows himself too well to forgive himself. But I don't see the point in contradicting you when you do such a thorough job of doing that yourself." My eyes lock on his. "At Delphi, the gods warned each and everyone of us to 'Know thyself.' Other gods reserve that knowledge for themselves and with diabolical fervor punish any of us mortals for presuming to be worthy of such knowledge. If you want me to refute your argument, Al, then choose your god."

With his gaze still riveted on me, he swings down his mug. Black brew erupts out of the mug, darkening the purple counter. "Now that our chitchat is over, down to work, yes? I have an appointment that will be taking me away shortly. That alarms you, yes?"

"No. Actually, I was trying to disguise my delight."

Gleaning the serious overtones of my jest, he says, "Yes, yes, while the cat's away, the mice shall play." Ha, ha. He rubs his hands together and adds, "Beautiful. For I have left instructions for you on this...." He reaches into his jacket, pulls out a disk and holds it out to me. He doesn't make any effort to move close enough for me to reach the disk, so I stretch across the peninsula between us to take it. Then with a smile I once thought was adorable and inviting in its dimply sweetness, he walks around the peninsula and past me to his computer. He knows I've figured out that he's not a

Caravaggesque scholar. Yet his embarrassment about it is only as deep and lasting as his smile.

"What's the point of giving me this?" I toss the disk on the table. "I've already given you my professional opinion that the sketch is a fake."

Keeping his eyes on the notebook he says, "An opinion, whatever its source, is not a statement of fact, yes? It is your job to prove it is a fake." He picks up the disk, throws it back at me and resumes typing.

I stop myself from tossing it back at him, because I can't afford the luxury of throwing away my ticket to Italy. "Just how do you propose I do that without seeing the original?"

"You will stay to see the original tonight, yes?"

"What about the other two works?"

"Three, my sweet. Those also." His dimpled fingers smoke the keyboard in wild abandon without so much as grazing Backspace or Delete. The universal monkey at work. But why bother with the charade? The game's up. "I cannot wait to see your surprise," he resumes, "when you discover how authentic it really is. Oh yes."

"It's going to take more than a mere look to determine the authenticity of an unsigned sketch."

"It is signed on the back."

"I'll bite, by whom?"

"Enough shilly-shallying. The answers are on the disk," he says impatiently. He glances up, meets my gaze then quickly looks down again and says cheerfully, "It is time for me to scadoodle. I will leave a key in the second flower pot in the porch in case you should decide to fetch yourself something for dinner. I will be back around sevenish, yes?"

I nod.

What the hell, the art world is full of crackpots and deluded idiots with crazed dreams of glory that they've lucked upon a masterpiece that'll bring them untold wealth and fame. Taking money from him for doing bogus work is like taking candy from a baby. But I didn't sacrifice most of my youth learning this business so I could prostitute my knowledge, talent or ambitions. The idea was to put a kibosh on scam artists intent upon victimizing gullible dilettantes like him. And there's no doubt about it, someone's scamming him big time. Bet he gave up his job teaching some bullshit philosophy course, left his family in the lurch and took all the money out of their home to finance all this. If I stay on, I'll be taking his money, but it'll give me a chance to track down these unconscionable con artists and stop them from absconding with his family's life savings.

"See you around 7:00, then, Al," I say, gathering up my bag.

"Righto."

As I pass the basement door I hear a click like the door's locking. I glance back at him, but he's busy packing away his notebook.

I stop abruptly at the office doorway to let my eyes adjust from the overload of aggressive hues. Except for small black stars peppering the ceiling, the decorative motifs have been replaced by ghostly white. The closet in the wall across from the windows is gone, replaced by a built-in bookcase already filled up with coffee table art books. Another filled bookcase runs down the full length of the adjacent wall, while a smaller one is built into the wall shared by the foyer. I pull out a couple of books and stare lustfully at the glossy color plates. Someday I'll have a library like this. If I ever stay in one place long enough to collect anything.

I plunk the computer bag down on a pale laminate desk facing away from the window, and sit down on an upholstered chair so new the factory chemicals are almost disguised by the smell of packing materials.

Why the hell did I turn down that cup of coffee? I need something to keep me awak-KE! Someone's shadow is joining mine on the desk. I spin around and see good ol' Al laughing at my surprise and giving me a thumbs-up. Weird, but I never heard him go out the front door. As I watch him leave, his image morphs into Nevar's. Nevar lies about big things and tells the truth about little things that don't add up to B-all; whereas Al tells the truth about the big things and lies about the little things that would be meaningless details if they didn't add up to something.

Nevar and Chanlee.... I shake my head.

What did he use to entice her to the mountains? His rotten personality and burnt-out surfer bum looks wouldn't be enough to lure her away from Dan. Or would it? After spending the night hyper-extending her libido with Dan, all it took was a quick shower to wash him away, and voilà she was dressing hot-to-trot in my clothes for a tryst with Nevar. So while I walk on eggshells in Mother Goose's house of horrors, that maggot-infested dingleberry's stomping on my life, trying to bury my relationship with Chanlee. And my family. And Fitz.

I open the cupboard beside the coffee maker in the kitchen and grab the only plain mug in sight. Turning it around to take hold of the handle, I see that it has a large screw painted on the inside at the bottom. Then I turn it upsidedown and see that what I had thought was a horseshoe is in fact a U. Al's mug. At least the sneaky jokester washed and put it away instead of leaving me to clean up his mess. I fill the cup, lift it up in the direction of the photos on the table and toast him, "Same to you, Al."

The caffeine-drenched liquid soothes my throat and kicks my feelings about the decor past revulsion to an unquenchable curiosity. The renovation in 'my' office can't have been done for little ol' me. The makeover is too dramatic and costly to be a useless quick fix. Yet, this whole place has a transient feel to it, like if I looked under his bed I'd find his luggage packed.

Where is his bedroom, anyway?

I find it on the other side of the kitchen. The venetian blind is down in this room too, so I flick the light switch, and wish I hadn't. Like frozen soldiers decorated in their funereal finery, gilded Chinese scroll pots line all four of the smoky aluminum-foiled walls. Besides being repositories of stale air, the pots brim over with sinuous, denuded branches fanning out against the walls and forming a canopy over the metallic purple bed in the center of the room. I keep my head bowed to avoid getting tangled up in the forest of death, and I peer under the bed.

No suitcases.

No suitcases anywhere. No more bedrooms, either.

How could that be? Al has two kids. The other bedrooms must be in the basement. Surprisingly, the door to the basement is unlocked.

Definitely no bedrooms down here. It's cold, dank, undeveloped and empty except for a pile of pine lumber and cans of white primer and beige paint stacked neatly on the cement floor along with drop sheets, roller trays and other painting paraphernalia.

I thought so, I say aloud, nodding my head. He's renting this place because the scammers have him convinced that Mabie-Toogod will help him vanquish all the naysayers. There's no point in staying here. I can't do anything until I see the real McCoys. I'll have a boo at the disk he gave me then come back around 6:30. First, though, I need to get up to speed with Kenny vis-à-vis the media. What the hell? There aren't any newspapers down here. Maybe he left the one he had in the kitchen.

No such luck.

How about a TV then? There might be some news about Kenny on one of the local channels.

No TV, either.

Al, you lead an interesting life.

I detour on my way back to the office to relieve myself of the double-filtered coffee in the murderous red bathroom, and take a few minutes to see what's inside some of the small but obtrusive drawers lining the wall. With overfed angels giving me the evil eye, I snoop inside the *EYEBALLS*, *SCABS*, *EARS* and *TONGUE* drawers and find they're filled with a boring assortment of grooming aides such as eyedrops, cotton balls and swabs.

A phone rings. I dash into the office and reach for Nevar's phone in my jacket. The ringing stops. Damned nuisance. Then a double ringing starts up from the computer bag on the desk. I grab my cell from the bag. It's Fitz.

"How's it going?" he asks.

"Not much happening, but things are still in a snafu."

"That why you haven't called? Or is this phone erasing your messages too?"

"How would I know?" I snap. "I didn't know I had it. I thought it was still conked out at my apartment. You could have told me."

"I thought you'd look in the case."

"A lot of good your wrong thinking does me." I expect him to snap back at me, but he remains silent, and I distill a moment of peace from the silence. "Uh, let me check out this phone, then I'll get right back to you."

Looking through the bag, all I find of interest are my sunglasses. This room's not too bad, but being in this house feels like I'm in an exploding rainbow. I slip on the shades. *Ah, that's better.*

Then retrieving the most recent of six messages on the phone, I listen to Fitz informing me that both my car and Chanlee's are clean. *"But Timber's nose says that the same person--not you or Chanlee--was in both vehicles,"* Fitz's voice says. *"On the passenger's side in hers, and the driver's side in yours. This new friend of yours is dirtying his lily whites with hell dust. When I find Nevar, I'm going to strip a piece off him and feed it to Timber."*

Not if I get to him first.

The next message is from Chanlee calling from her home phone Sunday at 5:35. I press Playback, but all I hear is her saying, *"Baaa"*, which she interrupts with a sneeze then hangs up. The next one is from her too, but six minutes earlier and from my cell: *"Watch yourself, Rane. The hat fits into the painting in the locker! Get back to me ASAP, will ya?"*

The third message is from her at 5:02: *"Rane! Geez, hurry up and answer the freakin' phone! Now! Now! Kuan-yin!"*

The fourth message is also from her. This one at 4:30: *"Nice friends you've got there, kiddo. They've been chasing me from yin to yang and back again because they're after your butt. Finally shaken them, but for how long? We have to get the police involved, Rane. I know, I know, they're already involved, but it's my butt on the line now too, and I know who we can bring on side. Anyhow, I'm heading home to get out of these clothes. I swear every second felon in town thinks this dress is a red flag. Then I'm off to my big date with you-know-who. Before you get any ideas, kiddo, you're not invited."*

And the last message from her is clocked at 3:47: *"I could use some backup, kiddo,"* her voice says, *sounding winded. "I'm up*

to my eyeballs with the Watcher. I know it sounds crazy, but I swear he's coming at me from all directions. Scare up Fitz and we'll--sssshitttt--"

How could she go with Nevar? What can she possibly see in him? Why am I even thinking about him? I throw the phone on the desk then just as quickly snatch it up again. There was something about the way she said *they*. Like I know who they are. Where the hell was I, and what was I doing when she made each of those calls?

The phone rings as I'm about to press Replay.

"Has Chanlee tried to contact you today?" I ask Fitz.

"Not Chanlee, no," my father says. "Thankfully, Fitz has.

He--"

"Hi, Dad."

"--just explained why you haven't been returning my calls. I've been trying to get hold of you because McPickles had surgery this morning to remove a blockage in his intestines."

"Oh no, not Mr McPickles?! How bad is--"

"He won't die on us. Not McPickles, he's too much of a fighter. His chances of surviving were far worse before the operation. You see, he--" His voice drops to a whisper. "--Is it safe to talk?"

"Except for some demonic angels stuck in red paint, I'm alone. Why?" Although he sounds calm and quiet, there's an alarming tone running through his voice that I've never heard before. A tone that scares the hell out of me because I recognize it as an element that's been added to my own voice over the past few days. "Never mind that, I'll be right over. You're at home or the vet's?" I grab my jacket and sling the computer bag over my shoulder.

"I'm at work, but I can meet you at the house in an hour."

I close down and dial up Fitz as I make my way through the house.

"Fitz, can you spare some time from your wheeling 'n dealing to run a few errands for me?" Don't know why I feel guilty asking him. He's going to get one of his employees to do them. I reach up and feel around for the key in the second hanging basket in the porch.

"I'm not doing anything I can't get out of for my best friend and cutie-patootie. I'll fly to the moon for you. Italy too if you want. Just name it."

That kind of talk goes straight to my heart like an arrow, almost as fast as he went from here to Italy.

"First of all, play back that last phone call in your head and take out all my snapping and miserable whining. If there's anything left, that's what I really wanted to say to you. Okay?"

"Don't make excuses for being ticked off. You won't see this through if you don't stay madder than hell."

"How can I stay mad when you talk to me like that?" It feels good to hear myself laugh. "Now that you've got me buttered up, suppose you could pick up a bicycle derailleur from the Spoke'n Wheels bike shop? The one in the southwest." I lock the front door.

"Consider it done."

"And it'd be great if you'd do a land title search on this place."

"Where you're working?"

"Yes." I drop the key in one of the box planters flanking the doorway. Funny, but I don't remember them being stuffed with flowers. All late bloomers to boot. Then again, I don't remember the planters being here the first time I saw this place.

"If my paranoia level gets any higher I'm going to be certifiable," I go on. "But I'm pretty sure my boss is being rooked by persons unknown who have found an easy way to separate a willing fool from his money. A good place to start tracking down these dirty dealers is to find out who owns this freaky place."

"Sure you want to take this on, what with one set of wiseguys already aiming to give you a one-way ticket to ride?"

"It's what I do for a living, Fitz."

"Duh-yup. And, look, you don't have to gallop around Italy to do it."

What's with him, always trying to drag me to Italy with him?

"Who knows where it'll take me?"

"My bed tonight?"

"You never could separate work from pleasure."

"You say that like it's a crime. Tell ya what, sugar, why don't you come over tonight and arrest me? And bring your handcuffs."

"I'll leave my helmet on if you rev up the whirlpool."

I blow softly into the phone, and he catches his breath.

"What's the address there?" he says in a voice so low and deep yet vibrant I swear those are the sexiest words in the universe.

"Uh...." The address? First let me get back to Earth. "2597 Kirkewood Place."

"And the number?"

"It's--" I stop myself from giving him the phone number Al gave me. "You know what, Fitz? I don't think this place has one."

"Then keep this phone on."

"Absolutely. One more favor. Think you can round up today's papers and all the local ones you can get your hands on from the past week?"

"Can do. How's your new baby?"

"That devil can charm a snake out of a tree. He--" Shit, shoot, shite! I think he means the Duke. "The bike is a real godsend, Fitz. Thanks. But I'm worried about Chanlee. What the hell is she doing with him?"

"The same thing as you?"

"Men. Can't you think beyond sex?"

"No, because there's nothing beyond sex."

"In the message you left me this morning, you said that Nevar's into the snow white crap. I don't buy it. Chanlee's never had a yen for illicit kicks. No courage pills for her. Not a chance. Her honesty and courage blow all that away in the dust. If he offered her nose-candy, his nose would be out of joint in the slammer." So why did she sound like she had dynamite for brains?

"Just because he hasn't given any to her, doesn't mean he's not a user and doesn't have the stuff on him."

"Right, but why are you so sure he was the one in our cars?"

"You need proof? I'll get it for you."

"Now you're talking. But don't stay angry, or you won't see it through. He's not much good to me dead."

"You're telling me," he says with a sinister twist. "Chanlee's my bud, if he harms her, he'd better kiss his butt good-bye."

In case he decides to add more to his punch line, I quickly say, "Have you heard of an Erns Bilkovitch?"

"No. The only friend of Nevar's I know is you."

"He's not my friend."

"Sure he is, or you'd make mincemeat of him instead of the truth about him."

I don't throw more fuel on the fire by contradicting him. What the hell, he can have the last word. It's not the truth, anyway.

CHAPTER 16

The Duke stops on a dime outside Erns Bilkovitch's storefront law office off Shaganappi. Because I know he has dealings with Nevar, I expected the place to be seedy, but the white stucco building with its huge black and white neon sign blatantly advertises his respectability in a tidy, barren, unimaginative way.

Rock music blares inside the stark white two-story reception area surrounded by fake plants cascading down from ersatz balconies. Behind the reception desk, a woman with immaculately-groomed greasy garbage-bag orange hair and dandruff on her glasses, bobs up and down and slides back and forth along the full length of the desk. Leaning across the transaction counter, I see that her butt is overloading an exercise ball.

"Rane Lavita to see Mr Bilkovitch," I say. "I phoned earlier."

Taking her good sweet time, she says, "What was it you wanted to see him about again?"

"Work, actually. I was wondering if he could use someone to water the plants."

She eyes me, her nostrils flared and eyelids at half-mast, giving her a fiercely moronic look. "Have a seat." She jerks her head in the direction of a row of oversized ice-cream buckets.

I sit down in the one with a mirror behind it. She stares into the mirror like she's begging it to lie to her and looks through me like I'm a smudge she'd like to wipe away. Eventually, she returns from her visit to her shrine and steps out from behind the desk, crosses in front of me and jerks her head in the direction of a doorway on her right.

"This way," she says, slinking along. A slit running up the back of her long tight skirt gives me the dubious pleasure of watching her thighs and cheeks bob and roll. Thankfully, she tugs down on the skirt, but then one of the spare tires she's smuggling under her spandex top pops out.

As I follow her, keeping back a little in case she falls off her eight inch platforms, the fading rock music isn't overtaken by the sounds of anyone working. So where are his elusive associates? If they're ghosts, then who are his clients? Wish I'd had more time to check him out first. For all I know, he could be the Hiker.

Humming to the absent rock music like she's wearing earphones inside her head, she abandons me in front of an

unmarked, fake wood door. Avoiding a cord bundle duct-taped to the vinyl tiles in the hall, I open the door and trip into the room on one of the rolls in the Shar-Pei carpet.

A short, twitchy man rises from behind his laminate desk, and holds out his hand to me while I pick myself up off the floor.

"What can I do for you, Miss Lavita?" He tilts his head back and a little to the right and talks out of the right side of his mouth, baring rodent's teeth. He sits down again as I reach my hand across the desk. His forced smile ices me, while the gold rings on his fingers sear into my hand.

"Mind if I sit down?"

He smiles, and his long thin nose hooks down almost touching a growth lingering on his upper lip like a drop of sweat. His face is damp like the armpits of his tight green suit.

There's no chair on my side of the desk, so I take one of two plastic jobs stranded by a wall of sagging low-grade particle board bookcases painted with dust and filled with law books that would probably turn to powder if anyone bothered to open them. None of the walls in the room--or anywhere else in the place, come to think of it--are decorated with so much as a discount store print. He saves all the decoration for himself. Not hard to tell that with this guy, all his hardware is decoration.

After touching a small pendant dangling on a heavy gold chain around his neck, he sits back on his high-backed leather chair and taps the armrests. Each hand is out of sync with the other and with his eyes making quick, jerking movements in my direction without his gaze touching base with mine. Tap, TAP, tap, tap, my left foot syncopates with his fingers. His insistent urging builds momentum, while I take my time getting seated.

Just at the point where his hands rise from the armrests and curl in readiness to wring my neck, I clear my throat and lean forward. Choosing my words carefully, I say, "I got your name from Stefan Nevar."

At the mention of Nevar's name, my throat tightens and Bilkovitch's twitching gears down a notch. "Stefan Nevar, of course, of course. Good barrister, that one. You can't go wrong with Stevie Boy." He stops there, but his accusing look is saying, "So what do you think you can get from me that you couldn't from him, you conniving bitch?"

I'd like to jump across the desk and tattoo the answer on his eyeballs, but I talk slowly, keeping my tone even if not light. "It's not what you can do for me, Mr Bilkovitch. I have a message for you from him." He reaches out with his tongue to the growth on his lip. "He'd like you to know that the hat goes with the painting in the locker."

He jerks forward, his snake eyes widen and the blue veins on his temples bulge and pulsate. I start at the violence of his reaction, and recoil the words about Kenny I was going to whip out at him.

Drawing courage from my surprise, he laughs nervously. "Always the kidder, Steve." He shakes his head and beads of sweat grace the air. "Always the joker. Ha, ha, the hat belongs with the painting in the locker." He picks up the dead phone on the desk, and says to the ghost in the machine, "Hold, please?" Then he clamps his hand over the phone and says to me, "As you can see...."

Back outside, I brush myself off because it feels like I've been swimming against the current in a gutter. I used Chanlee's message to test him, but I'm the one who flunked the test. Everyone involved in this mess knows that the hat goes with the painting in the locker, but now everyone knows that I know. He's on the phone for real this time, shooting off his mouth to Nevar. But what is it about the hat, painting and locker together or apart that nearly made Bilkovitch croak on the spot when I mentioned them? I'm missing some cruddy detail that makes all the difference in the world. Yeah, like the difference between here and Italy. Chanlee said it like I should know who the woman in the red hat is. But I'm not the one who knows, Nevar is. She has to be the blond job who can't say more than one sentence without mentioning *Darien*.

"Who the hell is Darien?" I ask Fitz over the phone as I hop on the Duke.

"I've heard that name somewhere. Only the other day," he says thoughtfully.

"In connection with Nevar?"

"No, with the kidnapping--"

"Same thing."

"--Can't remember whether I heard it on the street or on the news. Let it ride, and it'll come back to me."

"Which reminds me, I've got just the thing to jump-start your memory: the call list from Nevar's cell. Five'll get you ten Darien's on that list."

After taking down the numbers, he says, "The second to last number rings a bell, but I don't recognize the tune. Any luck with Bilkovitch?"

"Only if it's lucky to put your foot in your mouth. How's it going at your end?"

"The house on Kirkewood is registered to a Forbes Daddlewood who bought it thirty-two years ago."

"Thought so. Al's been telling me one lie after another to protect his sources. Find Daddlewood, and you'll find the cesspool that's generating the lies."

"Connie's going through the *Daddlewoods* in the phone book. So far no one's admitting to knowing him."

"Think you can round him up before 6:30?"

"Unless you're going backward, *can* always comes before *can't*. I'll have your cesspool dredged before 6:30. And in case you need your car, I had it refilled and dropped off at the Doré. Also parked Chanlee's on the street in front of her house. As for the rest of the stuff, I'm still rounding up the papers and the derailleur's not in yet at the Spoke'n Wheels' south location. They'll call you when it comes in. Want me to try the north?"

"Don't bother. I'm--"

"What do you want it for?"

"To crank up--" I stop myself from saying *Dan*. "--someone who's going to help me get Nevar."

"Sugar, I'm already cranked up."

I roll-off the throttle in Dad's driveway.

The garage is closed, but I see light shining through the starburst windows on the doors. One of the doors lifts as I approach.

"Come on in," Dad says, ducking under the door after it comes to a halt part way up.

I step inside, and the door closes. The only other time I've known him to be in here with the doors closed completely is when there was a tornado warning. "No bad news about Mr McPickles, I hope," I say in a hushed tone in spite of myself.

"No, no, don't worry about him. He's in good hands." He looks and sounds strange, like he's trying to be conspiratorial but can't quite muster up enough paranoia. "Come, I want to show you something." He directs me to the wooden box he's been fiddling with lately. "Try opening it." He hands it to me. "Go ahead, McPickles can do it."

Although the oblong box is the size of a breadbox--a little bigger, maybe--it's not all that heavy, so I'd say it's hollow. There aren't any signs of hinges, nails, staples or other joinery, but the two end pieces sit inside the four long pieces. I try pushing in on the ends, but they don't budge.

"You've got the right idea," Dad says. "Here, let me show you." I hand him the box, and he holds it up to my ear. "Hear anything?" I shake my head. "McPickles can." He places the box down on the bench beside us.

"Well, that's hardly fair, Dad. You can't expect me to hear above or below a certain frequency."

"True enough, but I do expect you to think beyond the obvious."

Obviously, at least one of the ends is a door. Scattering my energy by putting pressure on the whole door doesn't work. So the catch to open it has to be localized. I push on the center of the end piece nearest to me. Nothing. Then I try around the edges. Nothing. Turning the box around, I repeat the process and voilà! a feather pops out from the bottom. I watch the feather sliding back and forth about two inches, then tug on it while it's in motion, and the door opens inward and up. Peering inside, I see a flat piece of metal lying on the bottom against the other end of the box. I go to reach inside then pull my hand back.

"Go on." Dad urges, "Nothing's going to strike out at you."

I reach in, and as I grab the metal piece, the far end of the box springs outward.

Turning the object in my hand, I see that it's a memory card for a camera. I look quizzically at it then at Dad.

"You wouldn't think an innocuous thing like that would be a killer, now would you?" he says, shaking his head in dismay. "That's what the vet found inside McPickles."

The thought of it in my hand makes my skin crawl, and I nearly drop it. But my revulsion gets deluged by a rising tide of anger. It doesn't surprise me that a man--a monster--who's never felt a twinge of guilt would so callously use and abuse life, but it pisses me off that he's using me to do it.

"Clearly, you know who did this," Dad says with detectable resignation that mystifies and riles me.

"What's in this cursed thing?" I yell, shaking it at him.

"Your immediate future, I expect," he says like he's uttering a curse. "I don't have the right equipment here. I could take it to work if--" Seeing me shake my head, he stops then resumes, "The card was shrink-wrapped when they took it from McPickles' bowels, so the data should be retrievable--if the heat or whatever didn't interfere with it. Fitz keeps up to date with these things, check with him."

"What is it about him that makes you say his name like it's a dirty shame?"

"Oh, I like Fitz well enough. But if you'll excuse an old man for butting in where he doesn't belong, it seems to me that he's found the right woman, but you haven't found the right man."

"So it was you who told him I'm leaving for Italy?" My realization is riddled with annoyance.

Picking up on it, he says, "I thought he knew, because I didn't think my daughter would ever feel helpless enough in her relationship with any man to play him for a fool to get what she wants."

"I wanted more time." He gives me a doubtful look. "To think, what else?"

"Not about your career, surely? You made up your mind about that before you met him."

"You couldn't be more--" I stop myself from saying he's wrong, not because I think he's right, but because I'm not altogether sure what he's accusing me of. He knows I met Fitz before I made up my mind about my career. He has to be referring to Nevar, the unspeakable presence polluting the air I breathe. "You can't--you don't really--how could you believe that I could even entertain such feelings for *him*?" I say the words like I'm trying to punch Nevar out of the air.

"I've seen you with him, and if I could feel the difference...."

Fiery and chilling, flimsy and powerful, dazzling and murky, repulsive and desirable, a rush of conflicting feelings attack my vulnerable side. I lean back against the bench and let them vent through a myriad of shoddy but easy rationalizations.

"He's a psychopath, Dad."

"Psychopaths are cunning devils like us normal folk, except their conscience is--"

"Elastic enough to stretch from here to hell."

"--unbound and free to--"

"Run amok."

"--use the difference between right and wrong to satisfy any desire or obsession. No questions asked. Whenever we catch one of them with the remains of their victims buried in their gardens, pickled in the pantry or stored in the freezer, you know who gets caught off guard, don't you? The neighbors, that's who. 'He was so quiet and well-behaved, minding his own business and all,' they say, dumbfounded how they ever missed his raving lunacy. Psychopaths are like this here box I've made into a toy for McPickles."

"I catch your drift. The key is inside the box." I run a hand along the top of the box.

"Not quite. The box *is* the key."

The thought takes over my field of vision and travels through my body, making the box dissolve at my fingertips; and I feel myself locked inside all the events of the past few days. "Like this garage is the key to you," I say as if in a dream, then dissolve back into my body.

"You think so, do you?" he says, laughing it off. But his eyes meet mine in an understanding without a shadow of doubt.

"You live in this garage where the view of the city skyline is wasted on you. So what was the point of moving across the street to one of these houses bordering the escarpment?"

"Don't much care to look at the office buildings when I'm away from work. It's kinda like bringing your work home with you." He shrugs away the thought then says, looking wistfully in the direction of our old house, "You and Eric, you--"

"You made the move for me and Eric?! Sure, Eric and I still got to go to the same school where it was cool to be smart, but I remember the move being not just a time-consuming pain in the neck but a major disruption in my life. My bedroom here never really became my room. Someone across the street got to have *my room*. And as for Eric, well, let's face it, the insects on this side of the street are the same, Dad." I didn't mean to be accusatory, but that's how it comes out. I watch him make figure eights with the toe of his shoe on the floor. The move is something he did for the woman he loves. But why bother? She would have found a way to be content with living on the wrong side of the street as long as she knew there were more people behind her on the social scale than ahead of her. Softening my tone, I say, "Here, Dad." I hold out the memory card to him. "Make sure Fitz gets this, ASAP. He's got a universal reader and can download the contents to my laptop." I open the door nearest to us. "And keep me posted about McPickles. If you learn anything, I don't care what it is, let me know."

"That goes without say. But before you go, Rane, what do you want me to do with these?" He points to a cardboard box on the floor under the bench. "The newspapers you wanted? Fitz had 'em dropped off."

"Gotta go." I continue on my way to the Duke. "I'll come back later with my car and pick them up." I come to a halt and backtrack. "While I'm here, there's a paper I need to have a look at." I rifle through the box, looking for the paper Al took with him. "Shoot, it's not in here." And the papers go back sequentially to last Monday. This is something Lulie can do at the library. Here I go again, losing my focus. Screw that. The one thing Al's consistent about is his need to propagate his view of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness in a diabolically sadistic mad world. There's something in that paper he feels the need to keep to himself. Something about the con artists plying him with fakes in return for his family's life savings, freedom and happiness, I'll wager.

I call Lulie and get her wheels turning. Then I rev up the Duke, but the wheels can't roll without gunning down my mother.

Standing defiantly and waving a corkscrew in front of the Duke, she hollers over its roar, "Tori Rane! You come inside at once and have something to eat!" She steps closer. Uh-oh, she's eyeing the front tire. "It's bad enough that you want to give me a heart attack by gallivanting around after murderers and what have you on this fancy suicide contraption, but now you want to worry me

to death by making me watch you waste away. Look at you! You're all drawn out and nothing but skin and bones!"

"I'm wearing my riding gear, for crumbs' sake."

She cups a hand around her ear. "Shut that thing off! I can't hear you."

Dad sneaks up behind her, flings his arms around her waist and nibbles on her neck while he talks to her. I swerve past them. Thank the gods that she picked a guy she still gets off on calling *Smooch*.

They don't box each other in. Nope, they open the doors for each other to worlds beyond themselves. Unlike me. I feel totally boxed in. And I know the precise moment the walls started closing in on me: When I first laid eyes on Nevar. It's time I kicked the bejzus out of his box. But like McPickles' toy, to do that I have to get inside it first. Hell, isn't that precisely where I'm at already? I glance at my watch. It's only quarter after four. Just enough time to ransack his place. Better than ransacking my brain the way I've been doing, to find the details, the pieces of truth that will link up into a noose around his godforsaken neck.

I pull over between two SUVs on a quiet residential street and look up one side and down the other. Normal houses with normal trees and normal kids chalk painting on a cracked sidewalk, then darting between the vehicles lining the street. My gaze lingers on the SUVs, one red, the other grey, sandwiching me and the Duke. They both have child safety seats secured in the back. Is all of life an oxymoron? How many unsuspected sex abusers and other offenders of the gods are crouched inside this pretty picture of normalcy? Ah well, I get out Nevar's phone and call his office to light a fire away from his house.

"I'd like to speak to Mr Nevar, please," I say.

"To whom am I speaking?" his receptionist says as surely and indifferently as a computer.

"Lydia Cranston."

"I'm sorry, but Mr Nevar is unavailable at the moment. Would you like me to have him call you?"

"Is he in court?"

"No, he's with a client at the moment...." Not hard to tell why he hired her: She lies like no one would have to pay her to do it. So why the pause? I answer that with images of rusty wheels turning in her head as she stares at his number on the call display. "If you'll give me your numb--Is this Rane?" So he has alerted his troops.

With the phone still on, I tuck it behind the right front wheel of the grey SUV. *Now go ahead and trace it, Nevar.*

Fitz's footprint is still on the back door at Nevar's place, and the shattered glass remains where it fell. The chaos is undisturbed.

That's about as comforting as knowing that this back door is becoming as familiar to me as my own.

Starting with the living room, I turn everything upside-down and inside out searching for that one you're-dead-if-you-don't-get-it detail he warned me to look out for. His thoughts slither out from under the rocks in his head, but he's right about the lethal power of an overlooked detail. I'm after the one *he's* overlooked. I race from room to room too furiously to savor the wicked mess I'm leaving behind. But I pause long enough to help myself to some mixed-berry yogurt and chocolate cake in the fridge. I wash the chow down with bottled water and ransack my way to the basement.

The wide, carpeted stairs turn at a right angle two-thirds of the way down, then open into a large, laidback den with a pillow-laden sofa and chairs forming an arc that faces a maple-paneled wall adjacent to the stairs. This isn't a den, it's a media room. It's even money his child porn collection is stored behind that wall. But what other cherished evils are collected there? I run a hand along a seam between two of the panels, but they don't open up. I slide over to the next seam then stop. He wouldn't get up and open this manually. Not him. He'd use a remote. I throw myself down on the end of the sofa with a cushy cube Ottoman in front of it. No remote in sight, which means he keeps it hidden in something within arm's reach. Like this Ottoman. I reach for it and freeze at the sound of footsteps above me.

His footsteps.

CHAPTER 17

Shit, shoot, shite!

I left the basement door open! I make a mad dash for the stairs. Halfway up, his shadow crosses the doorway, and the scent of him burns through to my throat. On these stairs, he has the upper hand. I nix the idea of shutting off the lights. He's the only one who knows the way around down here. I jump over the banister, leap onto the glass coffee table and over the sofa to a door leading who knows where? With the light from the media room, I glimpse a pool table and snatch up a cue. Then I close the door behind me, dive under the table and keep my eyes peeled on the door. Fruk, under this thing I can't hear anything but myself. My heart sounds like it's pounding outside my chest.

Where are you, Nevar? *You bastard.*

Is that my body rattling or a doorknob turning? I hold my breath and hear a latch clicking.

Suddenly, the lights come on and Nevar says in a gotcha voice from behind me, "Well, well, if it isn't Bambi."

Without wasting time looking at him, I scramble to get out and whack my head on the apron. Staying low this time, I spring out and lunge for the door. It locks as I grab the knob. The remote! He has it. I drop my hand, but tighten the other one around the cue and turn to face him. Not that there's much to see. The red felt on the table basks in light carefully measured never to be audacious, always to be invisible to whatever is inside it. We stand at opposite sides of the shadow cast by the hooded lamp that begins to rise slowly.

His casual clothes, flushed face and gnarly expression don't look like transplants from the office.

"Now down to business," he says with the ease of someone who has control of the whip. He's too cocky to deny himself the pleasure of giving me a sadistic smile. He walks towards me, glaring in the subdued light, and every muscle in my body flexes. But he stops on the other side of the table. As far as my body is concerned, though, he hasn't stopped anything. The small patch of felt between us is hardly worth claiming as a piece of turf or anything else, yet it's lying in wait to become the grave of the one who doesn't claim it.

"*Business?* So that's what you call it when you lock people in your basement."

Without changing his dour expression, he says, "Suppose I rephrase that: Let's get down to that talk you said you wanted."

"Down?! Just being with you, Nevar, is scraping the bottom of hell." And just saying his name feels like I'm eating a turd sandwich. "Where is Chanlee?"

His eyebrows shoot up. "You put your friend in harm's way by getting her involved in this, and now you're asking me where she is?!" He starts out quietly and ends up yelling.

What the hell?!

I hurl the cue at him, but he ducks and the spear sails out the door behind him. I grab another one from the rack.

He throws the remote on the table and smacks his forehead with the heels of his palms. "How could you lose sight of the dangers involved? You know she's a cop."

"What have you done with her?" My low, menacing tone is totally lost on him.

He looks me straight in the eye and says, "You know where she is." What's his angle? "What are you doing messing around here? She needs your help." He holds out his arms, palms down, as if his words need a push to get through to me.

My adrenaline-pumped body is wary of words. And him.

"Your concern for her is very touching, Nevar. But what did you do to her after you lured her into your dirty little tryst in the mountains, huh?"

First he looks dumbfounded, then his face lights up like he just sent himself a news flash. "Who told you I went with her to the mountains?"

"You did." I toss the cue from hand to hand, ready to spear his trap shut.

"I didn't do any such thing." He takes off his jacket and drops it on the table railing. I zip up the last few inches on my jacket even though I'm getting hot under the collar.

"You've killed her, haven't you? You have, or you wouldn't see any percentage in denying the two of you called this morning."

He grabs hold of the rail and extends his arms like he's doing push ups off the table. I seize the remote. He just stares at me like he's not sure which planet he's on. Then he bows his head, and with his gaze locked on the shadow he's casting on the playing surface, he says, "Let's see if I'm getting this straight: You think Chanlee and I phoned you this morning, and after informing you I was with her in the mountains, I proceeded to kill her and obliterate her body--no doubt after I violated it enough times to satisfy my depraved lust. But I had to do it all like Superman on speed in order to rush back here to do the same to you." He shakes his head in disbelief. "And that makes sense to you?"

"Nothing you do makes sense." So why is it myself I'm doubting? I'd like to say it's because something about that call this morning keeps echoing in my head like an itch I can't reach. But it's more than that. Hell, whenever I'm around him, reality takes on a strange hue, like I'm stranded inside the infrared end of the spectrum. And what do I see? The color of his hair and the outline of his chest muscles sculpted by a snug T-shirt. Or maybe it's even more primitive than that. Like the scent of him. The scent of a predator closing in on the prey.

This box in my hand is the safest way out of here. After snickering at my attempts to figure the thing out, he says, "Your version of the truth has a hole in it small enough to be overlooked by someone who doesn't want to see it, but big enough nevertheless to turn the phone call, the mountains, her torture and murder and my depravity into fantasy. I was in court all morning, and a judge and jury of your peers can attest to that fact."

"And I suppose Kenny is a fantasy too?!"

"He could be if you didn't know where he is. But you do, Bambi."

"I what?!" I lean so far forward I lose my balance and have to push myself back off the table. Fruk, he's completely loony tunes, yet he's whipping my butt. Because I'm letting him get to me. They don't call him *The Snowman* for sucking lemons. There isn't a man inside that facade. There's only white powder.

"You're the key to Kenny's disappearance. You have to know that much by now." He grits his teeth, grabs the hair on top of his head with both hands and turns around on his heels. "Who knew you were going to the mountains last Tuesday?"

"Besides you and all your goons?"

"Dammitall, Rane, how could you let her get into their hands?" The dismay in his voice increases with the volume, just as my anger stalls in the face of my increasing confusion about where he's coming from. "Now the risk to you is twofold."

"I can take care of myself."

"Damned right. But not your friends, evidently."

"She's no fool. She doesn't have to consult any damned book full of legal mumbo-jumbo to know the difference between right and wrong."

"So? It doesn't alter the fact that unlike you, she never had sufficient time to evaluate the risks. You shouldn't have let her out of your sight. You should have--" He stops suddenly and looks at me like he can't quite get me in focus. "You didn't get concussed recently, now did you?"

I don't have anything to say to that. What does he care, anyway? He's enraptured by the sound of his own voice. Fine. The more he talks, the greater the chances are that he'll trip over his

ego with some thoughtless gesture, some detail careless enough to allow me to escape.

"Given what you profess to believe I'm capable of as a degenerate reprobate," he bellows, "it didn't trouble you that she was with me?"

"If Chanlee were here, she'd be the first to tell you that friendship doesn't mean you get to make the decisions for your friends. I tried to stop her from keeping her date with you."

"When?"

"*When* what?"

"When was I supposed to have had this date with her?"

I wave both him and the question away.

"She told me this morning that she was with you, and I have absolutely no reason to doubt her or to believe you." That sounded dead on in my head, but it comes out sounding like the meaning died in transit.

"You don't believe me because you're lying to yourself."

"Where is she, Nevar?"

"I haven't seen her since yesterday afternoon. Maldoon shadowed her thinking she was you, but we lost her. Double checking, we found that it had to be her because you were in your apartment letting your daisies run wild."

"Really? I was with--" I clam up. My mouth twitches to contradict him. Instead, I say, "You lost her?! I keep asking you where she is, and you have the balls to give me this big song and dance about how I'm a stupid, thoughtless, dangerous friend, when the real answer is that you don't know because you're such a dumb fruk you lost her."

I motion to throw the cue at him, and while he's ducking, I hurl it.

Contact.

Well, almost. It rips through his shirt, grazing his right shoulder.

I think the words hurt more, because he ignores the blood soaking his ripped shirt and shouts, "Do you honestly believe I would endanger my lascivious appetites by calling to inform you what I was up to with her? You amaze me, you really do. That you could allow petty emotions to do your thinking for you in a situation of this import." He rubs his chin. "Unless...." He snaps his fingers and casts his gaze upwards as though he's thanking the devils only he can see. "Unless you've been letting your judgment be clouded by jealousy. That's it, isn't it? You removed yourself psychologically from her because you can't brook the idea of her being with me."

We both throw our head back and laugh. Why not? Neither of us means it. His laughter sends a chill up my spine, though, because I'm only willing to go so far in humoring his insanity. Like

every other psycho, he's too easily seduced by his own cunning. That makes him vulnerable to flattery. The flattery of fear, the psycho's ultimate aphrodisiac. As his intended victim, all I have to do is show him my fear, the more the merrier, but I'll be damned if I will. I'm so fed up with him that so help me, I'm relishing the thought of killing him.

"I should be flattered," he says, all smiles and chuckles.

"But--"

He stops at the sound of my cell ringing.

I pull out the phone from my jacket.

"Fitz?" he asks.

Yes, it's Fitz, but I slip the cell back into my pocket and keep my jaw locked. The ringing vibrates through me.

"Let him go, he's not right for you."

"Shut up. You don't know what you're talking about."

"You wish. I know he's aware of what's happening between you and me, and you didn't have to tell him. And, I know you." He points an accusing finger at me and draws out the last word long enough to make me cringe. "Why are you taking off for Italy? Why? You're smart enough to know that your heart is in two places, but you don't have the sense to beware of any love that kills your dreams."

That one hits too close to the bone. I look down and shake my head thoughtfully. He's just a snowman seeing me in a false light as he melts imperceptibly into the plush carpet. "Is this how you get your kicks, huh, Nevar? By locking your victims in your basement and torturing them *ad patres* by making them listen to your torporific speeches?"

"Tsk, ts, such a sad, sad song of freedom. Nevertheless, it's merely a shoddy disguise for a *cri de coeur*. You're never going to be free until you stop arguing with yourself about what you want. You've got yourself half-convinced that you don't know. But you know all right. You just don't know how to get it without feeling guilty."

"What I want is none of your business."

"Bambi, that's not true. You want me."

My face burns as I stare at him, transfixed. My hair would be standing on end at the back of my neck, if it weren't glued down with sweat.

"Your feelings for me are so strong," he rushes on, "I'd have to be dead not to be aware of them."

"Be it from me to make a psychopath understand the difference between love and hate, but--"

"And you would know all about that, because you love him and hate me. Strange, the way you love and hate. I'm the one getting all your passion."

Passion. The word grates against my soul. I don't know how to fight him on these grounds without exposing more of myself. If I defend myself, he'll learn what I'm really thinking; and if I attack him, he'll know what I'm really feeling. Are there any words powerful enough to stop him from wheedling his way under my skin?

He goes on, "It takes courage to face up to your--"

"Oh, so now I'm a coward on top of everything else!"

"Yes! Because you squander your courage on everything except what really matters. As desperately and fiercely as any warrior who fights herself, you hold Fitz in your heart as a hostage to avoid facing your true feelings."

"If my true feelings came to life, Nevar, I wouldn't be trapped in your basement listening to your garbage, because you'd be dead."

"The point is, Rane, I'm alive and your feelings aren't." His hair came unstuck with his temper, and he pushes the wayward locks back with his fingers. He winces and looks down at his shoulder. "I should get this cleaned up," he says quietly like his fingers pushed back his temper too. "Let's continue this upstairs. I don't feel safe with you down here." Holding his left hand over his wound, he gives me a sardonic smile and walks towards me.

I grab another cue so fast the rack comes with it and crashes to the floor. He comes to a standstill, but my heart races faster.

Seeing me touch the remote in my pocket, he says, "That won't unlock the door to your mind where you've trapped the truth about yourself." He resumes walking and corners the table. This is it: to the death. The blood rushing through my veins alarms every part of my being. I armor my balance by stepping my right foot back and turning slightly.

"If my nearness is making you feel crowded inside your skin," he says with infernal calmness, "then leave. The door's not locked."

"Like hell!" But I glance over my shoulder at the door as though I believe him.

"I opened it before I gave you the remote. No one's been holding you here but yourself."

He keeps coming at me. I eye the other door, but he'd beat me to it. So I step back, turn the knob and almost fall out the door. I don't trust any of this. He's too eager to get me out of here. The real trap must be upstairs. I vault over the sofa onto the coffee table and over the banister. He stays tight behind me like he's pulling my strings. I turn suddenly, hoping I can catch him off guard and help him chase his balance down the stairs with a quick, forceful shove. But he got my telegraph and blocks me. The only way to get him off balance is to keep him talking.

"We still haven't had that talk you promised, Snow White. Where are you from?" I manage to sound like I'm dying to hear what he has to say.

"Not far from Christmas."

"And my painting?"

He looks up at me with a certain amusement, like he's watching a fool call his bluff. "Chanlee was going to bring it with her on Sunday."

"I'm sure. Who's blood did you whitewash off your floor?"

"His name was Marc Bernardin."

"What did he do to deserve being trashed and obliterated? What was he threatening to kibosh besides your status as a fine, upstanding member of the legal community?"

"He's in a better place, the gods willing, but there's a chance that Chanlee is still with us. A chance, Rane, for you to make things right between the two of you and your conscience."

"Where's Kenny?"

"We have reason to believe he's in or around Banff."

"What reason?" His answer is in his silence. "You've had contact with his kidnappers?" He remains silent, but this time, his answer is in his face.

"Leave Kenny to me and the police. Get Chanlee. Fortunately for you, I like your friend, or I'd make you stay and clean up your mess."

"You're dreaming, Snow White."

"Suit yourself. I'll bill you for the cleanup. And while you're arguing with yourself about how you're going to get out of paying, ask yourself why you keep pushing your friends to the back of the line."

"Golly-gee, I can't imagine why anyone would want to push you back."

"I have nothing to fear, do I, Bambi? Because I'm not your friend." He starts to smile, then in a flash his face becomes cold and hostile as he glowers at me. No, his eyes are focused on the top of the stairs.

Keep talking, Nevar, keep talking.

"Behind you," he says from deep in his throat.

This time I telegraph him the body message that I'm turning around to look. Instead, I deliver a back jab with my elbow to the side of his head and strike his chest with my knee. Hard and without compromising my intent with hesitation. He grabs for the railing, but I knifehand his arm. As he falls back onto the landing, I step down, ready to put the whole force of my weight and fury into kicking him into the Elysian Fields where he can pick daisies to his miserable heart's content. But from his feeble groan, I'd say he's

gone somewhere else. Should I bother putting a boot through his face?

Suddenly out of the corner of my eye I see someone's foot coming at me.

The Hiker! Nevar's secret weapon.

Instead of blocking his kick, I help it along by yanking down on his leg and using the increased momentum to veer him onto the rubbish heap cluttering the landing. Along the way, his head whacks against the newel post. He's out cold by time he lands face down on Nevar's chest. Blood from the gash in his head soaks Nevar's T-shirt. *¡Qué lástima!* I lift the keys and wallet from the Hiker's pockets. The car keys are for a Honda. I shake my head. An old Soviet-made tank is more his speed. I open the wallet, then just as quickly throw it at him. The photo on the license fits his general description, but it's not of him. My gaze drifts to Nevar. The aging bruises on his face paint his expression all the colors of the rainbow. He's close enough to touch, close enough to share the same breath with and he's close enough to kill without any effort.

But we're worlds apart.

If I take his miserable shit life, he'll win in death because in murdering him I'll be forfeiting my freedom. But he's only part of the equation. More than wanting him dead, I want Chanlee alive.

The Hiker groans and tries to get up. I give him a goodnight blow to the head with my boot.

Bounding up the stairs, I try to savor the scene of the two of them crumpling on the landing, but sobering images of Chanlee crash the party.

I grab a knife from the kitchen, shove it up the sleeve of my jacket then get Fitz on the phone as I race outside.

"I have to find Chanlee," I huff, running down the driveway. A landscaper's truck is blocking the house directly across the street. Good. It'll give me a chance to make a mad dash to the Duke without anyone spotting me. Suddenly, a long, bald twig of a man appears around the front of the truck. I dodge behind a juniper. The tip of the knife jabs my arm.

"She's with Nevar," Fitz says over the phone.

"No, she's never been *with* him." The landscaper takes a swig from a bottle he retrieves from inside the truck.

"Unlike you."

"He's decked out on his basement stairs."

"You didn't kill him?!"

"No, Fitz, it's not your lucky day. If he tries to leave this plane of existence, they'll just throw him back down here as another reject. Never mind that, he's using her as bait."

"And you're letting him get away with all this shit?!"

"What exactly have I let him get away with, huh, Fitz?"

"Let's not get into that again. The best place to find her is in the messages she left us. Even if someone was butting cigarettes out on her eyeballs to force her to parrot their bullshit, she'd still find a way of planting a secret message for us."

"I know she...she sounded like she was trying to tell me something on one of the messages, but then she sneezed."

"And she sneezed on one of her messages to me. What do you make of it?"

"Hmm."

"Me too. But hey, cutie-patootie, listen, I've got more dope on your boss' landlord. Daddlewood's in Switzerland visiting his new grandson. Anyway, that's the story we got from Bersa, his next-door neighbor. And get this: she's madder 'n hell at him because she can't understand why he'd rather rent out the place than pay her to look after it." He laughs like someone just told him a sick joke.

"Yes, yes," I say impatiently. Nevar's going to be up and running after me any minute.

"Don't worry, with her pointing the way, how could we not find her?" What way? Hell, I'm the one who's lost.

The twig finally disappears behind the truck again. Yes! "I'm heading back to the Doré."

"Don't you want the scoop on Darien?"

"What do you think?! He's one of Nevar's patsies."

"You could say that. His name goes with one of the numbers on Nevar's call list. He's the proud owner of Tildy's Rent a Dick." He pauses to laugh. When I don't join him, he adds, "He and his wife Tildy are prying eyes. They're the peepers behind Til-D Investigative Services."

I run onto the street. The edge of the knife blade slides up and down as I hoof it, tickling my arm in the creepiest way and sending shivers up and down my spine.

"When she's not invading other people's privacy," he goes on, "she's protecting it by offering her services as a body guard for visiting big shots. I've heard some buzz about her, but I've never met the musclehead. Though I think I crossed paths with him once at the track. If he's the guy I'm thinking of, he's hard to miss because he's--"

"Damn to hell! One of Nevar's neighbors just spotted me." I hang up.

I should have known the neighborhood watch would be out to greet me behind that truck. At least the old snoop can't trace me through the Duke. I stashed it in a porte-cochère at a house two blocks away. One of the joys of swinging around with the Duke is that he gets welcomed in all the best places.

At the bottom of the hill, I slash the tires of the Hiker's 'borrowed' Honda, ditch the knife, then try calling Dan while I jog to the Duke. He must know something. After all, he spent the other night tongue-tangoing with her.

"How's it coming, Dan?"

"I'm at work," he says like he's been getting nothing but static on the phone all day.

"Sorry for interrupting your work, but has Chanlee been in touch with you since Fitz and I--"

"What bug got up his butt last night?"

"Don't mind him, or me for that matter, we're worried about Chanlee. Have you heard from h--"

"He made a point of being personally offensive, what with holding up a yardstick to me and such."

"I'm trying to get hold of Chanlee. Have you--"

"No! How many times do I have to say it?!" The vehemence of his tone hardly goes with milquetoast. "Don't mind me, it's been that kind of day. Could you use another set of eyes looking for her?"

"That'd be great, Dan. Where'd you like to meet?"

"The Parc? I'm such a git today I forgot my glasses at home. These contacts feel like they're trying to stitch themselves to my eyeballs."

"Glasses? I didn't know you wore glasses."

"Only for reading. But if you'll give me an hour--make that two--I'll have the paperwork cleared off my desk."

"Okay. I'll call my boss and cancel work tonight."

I get hold of Al while I'm nesting on the Duke.

"Sorry, Al, but I can't make it back to work tonight."

"No problem," he says, not sounding the least perturbed. "I will show you his masterpiece, and you can toddle off again. It should only take a few minutes. You can spare a few minutes, yes? Anytime this evening--"

"Al, I...."

"--will do."

"Actually, Al--"

"Smashing. Toodleoo."

"--that doesn't work for me--Shit! He's hung up."

Well, Caravaggio and his tempestuous love affair with himself are just going to have to wait till I find out what's happened to Chanlee.

Instead of shutting down the phone, I play back her messages. Over and over, and each time the same things separate themselves from the pack: *Baaa; the hat fits into the painting in the locker; this dress is a red flag; I'm off to my big date with*

you-know-who and a sneeze. They don't mean anything by themselves, and together they, well, mean even less. *Baaa* what? *This dress?* What dress? *You-know-who?* I'm not so sure anymore her date was with Nevar. Who then? *The painting in the locker?* I've been through both lockers how many times? And the sneeze. It sounds like, I don't know, like it's supposed to mean something else.

If only the questions ended there. Or even started there.

Nevar said that yesterday afternoon I was running around my apartment in my pjs. But I was with Lulie, paying my respects to the Duke. There are thousands of credible things he could have said if his purpose were simply to mind-fruggle me. Why that particular lie? Mind you, he has a clever way of using the truth to create lies. Or is he using lies to tell the truth? It's within the realm of possibility that he could have been telling the truth about being in court. But he was with Chanlee when she called this morning. Even if I were enough of a lamebrain not to recognize his voice, I couldn't mistake hers. Never. It was Chanlee, my friend.

My friend who could be dead because of me.

I cover my face with my hands.

"No," I say, lifting up my head, "that's what Nevar's counting on me to believe."

Where are you, Chanlee? If you have any say on the matter, there's cola nearby.

Oh, that's a big help. That narrows the choices down to about the same number as Nevar's lies.

My cell rings.

"This is Pete at the Spoke'n Wheels. The front derailleur you wanted is in."

"Thanks, I'll be right there."

Might as well, it's just a little offering to a friend who's down in the dumps. I need him with me in spirit as well as body. He's besotted with that bike, and if love can't embolden his spirit, I don't know what will.

As soon as I walk into the store, Pete makes a gun with his hand, points it at me and fires with a click of his tongue. "The derailleur," he says. Then he reaches under the counter.

I stare at the derailleur. "It's exactly like the other one."

His long chin lengthens like his protruding lower lip is suddenly too heavy to hold up.

"I mean, Pete, that it's *exactly* like the one I already have."

His long, narrow cheeks follow his chin, but his eyes remain riveted on me.

"So the one I have isn't broken?!" I snatch it from him.

"Not unless you did something strange to it since I saw it."

"You could've told me, you jerk."

"You never asked me if it was broken, you asked if I could get you another one."

Oh, shut up!

"Are you buying it for your brother?" he asks as I turn to leave.

"You know my brother?"

"You kiddin'? I know every cycling freak in town. You look like him, but you don't act much like him." He shakes his head in pity. "Danno's a great guy."

"Danno?!"

"Yeah, Danno Istenly."

"May I use your phonebook, please?"

I look up the address of Peace Tereny Insurance, where Dan works. I've been taking him so much for granted, I have no idea when something's broken in his life. But something's definitely amiss with him. Ten to one it has something to do with Chanlee. Something, something, something. Now I'm really onto something. *Latkey Street*, hmm, that's no further than the Doré.

The closest I can get to Peace Tereny with the Duke is across the street. But from this distance through the failing sunlight, I see that the place is closed.

Peering through the glass door, I see a woman from behind, her oh-so blonde ponytail wagging over the back of the chair and her runners jiggling up on the desk to the rhythm of something shaking up the world inside the book. I knock on the glass, and she jumps to her feet, hiding the book behind her, uh, him. This ample-rumped babe has a beard. Looking at me like I'm not worth being concerned about, he puts the book--something by André Gide--down on the desk, then shakes his head and taps his watch. I shout Dan's name, but he keeps shaking his head then wags a finger at me. I write *Dan Istenly* on the back of a receipt I find in my wallet and press it up against the window. He cranes his neck to read the note then resumes shaking his head, turns away, picks up a waste paper basket and dumps it into a bin beside the desk. I knock on the door again. He uncrumples a piece of paper, writes on it and holds it up. "You just missed him," it says. I must look like the kid Santa Claus missed, because he adds, "555-5370."

I smile my thanks, but 555-5370 isn't Dan's cell, and he doesn't have a home number. And it's not the listed number for Peace Tereny.

"Hello, Dan?" I say after punching in the number.

"Yes," he says, sounding stranger than ever.

"I'm standing like a dork outside your office. Thought I could save time if we rendezvoused here." I pause to let him pitch in his two cents' worth, but he doesn't say anything, so I add, "So much for thinking outside the box. I'll be right there."

"Who is this?" a complete stranger replies.

"Good question: Who is this?"

"We both know I'm Dan. Who ar--?"

"Dan Istenly?"

"Yes," he says impatiently.

"And you sell insurance at Peace Tereny?"

"For the last time, who is this?"

"Lydia Cranston. I'm a friend of Dan Istenly, the guy who works at Peace Tereny. Are you having me on, Dan?" I laugh. "You are!"

"Nut case," he says and hangs up.

CHAPTER 18

Danny my boy, you're really beginning to interest me. More than I ever thought you could, and a whole helluva lot less than you'd like me to, I'll wager.

I look both ways on the one-way street and start crossing at the first sign of an opening that allows me to hop, dodge, dodge and jump to the other side. That's almost as dangerous as crossing the path of a psychopath. But I need the cyber cafe on this side of the street. Inside the joint, I plug in Al's notebook and look up Peace Tereny, which links me to the web site of their insurance broker, Dan Istenly. Holy hell! The photo on the banner isn't the Dan Istenly I know. *Know?!* Obviously I don't know anyone by that name. Did this nameless stranger seduce Chanlee into giving up her life?

Dan?! Uh-uh.

Mind you, he's not really Dan.

With some people the action seldom takes place on the surface. Then again, with him there is no surface, only the illusion of one. Stand him up against anything, and he blends in. His center seems to shift around in the mid-ground where everything is a shade of grey. Like his apartment. But grey is only an illusion created by the blending of opposing extremes: black and white.

Stanley's got to help me get inside apartment 56.

I hop on the bike and let the Duke do the screaming for me. All the way to the front of the Doré. Running to the back, I see Dan's SUV. Damn, he beat me here. I backtrack to the super's office.

"Stop being a turd, Stanley," I say, knocking on his door. "I know you're in there, I can hear the football game on TV. Do you want to ride the Duke, or not?"

The door opens. "Who do I have to kill?" he says, leaning an elbow on the jamb. Hairs poke out from a hole in the sweat-stained underarm of his T-shirt.

I push past him into his postage stamp office and look at his butt extending to infinity in the mirror-tiled room. "Know what, Stanley?" I yell over the TV. "This whole room would really come together with a punch if you covered the ceiling with mirrors too."

He looks up. "Ya think so? That bimbo I used to live with--You know the one, that if tits was used for brains, she'd make Shakespeare look like a pinhead. Anyhows, the dumb broad talked

me out of it. Shows ya what a soft touch I am. Whaddaya want me to accommodate you with?"

"I need to have a look around number 56 without him being there."

His face changes abruptly from an open-faced pie to a steel trap door. "Sister, you're way outta line. My old man owns this yuppie dump, but if he was to get wind a me getting into that crappola, I'd be out like this." He slaps his butt.

"So what are you going to do? Tattle on yourself?"

"That jerkoff bum sure as shootin' will. He already stung me once when he caught me giving my ex a little love tap. Me and her was just minding our own business having a little lover's spat, that's all, like everybody does, eh, and he had to go and--"

"Well, here's your chance to get back at him, *and* get to stroke the Duke into the ride of your life." His face begins to melt into mush. "All you have to do is get him down into the lockerroo--Shit, shoot, shite!" I smack my forehead. "The hat fits in the painting in *the* locker!"

Not mine or Dan's.

Chanlee's locker!

"You lose some screws riding around on that there bike, or somethin'?" he says, giving me a look about as stupid as I feel.

"Seems so, but I think I just found them."

He shrugs. "Supposin', now just supposin', that I was to let you into his pad. What's you gonna do in there?"

"You want the truth?"

He nods. "The honest Injun truth."

"The truth is that I don't know. I'm looking for something that'll tie him to the disappearance of my friend."

"That prick's snatched Fitz?!" He punches a hand into his palm.

"Chanlee."

"Ahh, she isn't no more than a whatchamacallit--" He snaps his fingers. "--a decoy. Just like you. He's always going around brownnosing you to get to Fitz."

"Uh, all you have to do is tell Dan that someone broke into his locker."

He shakes his head. "I only just got done fixing the bloody door, and I don't need you or no other wise guy jacking around with it." He eyes me like he's about to make a lewd proposition. "How long would I getta ride?"

"An hour. But not solo."

He scratches the bald spot at the back of his head. "I got a parcel pickup card here for him. And the postal outlet doesn't close till 9:00. Butttttt...."

"Two hours on the Duke?" I offer.

"Make it three and solo."

"You're a gem, Stanley--"

"That's me, Carbone Man."

"--but don't let him get away without ensuring he's going for the parcel."

"How do I do that without a baseball bat?"

"Put on the same act you always do whenever anyone asks you to fix something around here."

He smiles and pulls up his pants with both hands. "You're some pushy broad, you know that?"

"Don't do anything until I get up to my apartment. I'll call you from there."

"Okay, Stan," I say from my apartment, "go for it. And call me at this number as soon as he leaves."

"Geronimo and out."

I stare at the zero displayed in my answering machine. Okay. Nothing new here or anywhere else in the place. Not okay. Nevar said I was here yesterday afternoon. So he must have been here. I race into the bathroom and grab my blue pjs from the laundry hamper. The smell of stale mentholated lavender makes my skin crawl.

What other filthy surprises do you have in store for me, huh, Dan?

When Nevar was snooping around in here, I'll bet he found one of the surprises meant for little ol' me. I jump onto the vanity to check out the ceiling fan again. This time, I unplug the fan, undo the bracket holding it in place and pull it out. Nothing. The hole isn't big enough to stick my head through, so I jump down, gather up a flashlight and a hand mirror then use them to see past the obvious. And voilà, I find fingerprints in the dust around all four sides of the hole. Just leftovers from Nevar's find. Or did he plant something here?

The phone pulsates against my heart.

"The coast's clear," Stanley says. I run to the bedroom window and catch a glimpse of Dan's SUV turning into the alley. "I'm on my way up to the fifth."

"10-4."

Outside Dan's apartment, I pat Stan on the back. "Good work, Carbone Man."

He stands guard in front of the door like his pants are too tight. "I'll stay posted down at the elevator." He keeps looking at me like I'm madder than a hatter, but he's not quite sure what to do about it.

"Who lives in 53?" I ask.

"Mrs Sillicum."

"How long has she lived here?"

He shrugs. "She came wit the joint like the silverfish when my old man bought it."

"Her apartment faces the front. Who knows what comings and goings she's seen."

"Forget it. You won't learn nothing from a nutso case with a gazillion dolls that soon as you touch them they squawk, 'I want to go to the potty.'"

"It's just that--"

"Finito." He cuts the air with his hands. "Whatever bright ideas you got cooking for me 'n that weird old broad, the answer's NO. And don't you go messing with her on your lonesome, or you'll wind up a permanent guest at her tea parties, stuffed like the rest of 'em. 10-4?"

I nod, step inside Dan's apartment then shake my head. For her, him, Nevar, Chanlee, Al, Dan and myself. Fitz too, because I can't be with him. When this is all over, I'm not getting out of bed until I've had too much of everything I'm not getting now.

An uneasiness overtakes me as I race from room to room finding nothing but what I've always found when I've visited him: a stylishly comfortable place for a stylishly comfortable kind of guy with uncomplicated tastes. Everything appears perfectly normal. Inside and out the tidy cupboards and drawers. Even his humdrum underwear is neatly folded and lined up in perfect rows. It's the perfect part that's disturbing. Leaning against the bedroom door jamb, I stare as though in a trance at his slippers lined up at a perfect right angle to the bed. This place with its pleasantly lived-in look and feel of security and stability has to be a ruse. The faint sound of music wafts through the unnerving stillness. Maybe my paranoia is making a jackass of me. *Quick, Rane, think past the meticulously designed illusion of homey comfort.* I squeeze my eyes shut and focus in on what's missing: There are no eyeglasses anywhere, no dirty laundry; no plants; no waste; no phone; no business documents or letterhead, not so much as a shred of paper that ties him to Peace Tereny and no photographs. The combined absences give the place the static intimacy and generic neutrality of a show home.

But there's something even more important missing. A mundane detail, really, that's ultra creepy in its implications.

His TV isn't hooked up to cable.

Heating and lighting come with the rent, that's one of the reasons I chose the Doré. The phone and cable are extra. He's set this place up so he doesn't have any utility bills. Nothing that might conflict with the real Dan Istenly and blast this phony creep out of the water into the real world.

No one lives here, it's the perfect hideout for a poser. Better still, it's the perfect abode for a ghost intent upon haunting the thin edge of the wedge.

So who is this man who pretends to live here, what devil sent him and what does he want with me and Chanlee? I look around the bedroom. *This is all very pretty, Danno, but where are you hiding the real stuff?* Behind the ceiling fan in the bathroom? I rush into the bathroom and attack the fan with a vengeance. I unscrew the bracket and yank out the fan. The phone sounds the alarm. Don't let it be Stanley. Crud, it's him!

"The jerkoff didn't get the parcel," Stanley says urgently.

"Stall him." I feel around the edges of the hole and my fingers hit pay dirt. It feels like a notebook, but I can't reach far enough to grasp it.

"Whaddaya think I'm trying to do?"

I need a pair of tongs.

"Yo, Dan! Didn't make it to the P.O.?" he says like his words are dropping sweat. "I'll be right with you. Soon's I'm done here....You still there, Mrs Sillicum?...No problem there at all, I can do that for youse. Be there in two shakes." Dan's onto him! No time for me to fetch anything. I start cramming everything back together. The fan won't stay put. *Come on, come on, you useless piece of garbage.* "But next time," Stanley goes on, "put the drain basket in the basin before you bath one of them dolls--exuse me, I mean them there babies. Otherwise, her other eyeball will go bye-bye down the drain....Allrightee, I'm on my way."

Fruk.

With my fingers shaking, I screw on the cover plate. Then I shut off all the lights and zip out onto the balcony. I climb onto the other side of the balustrade and lower one leg over the edge, while I hold on for dear life to the square wrought-iron balusters. The corners of the rough iron cut into my hands. All this just to be locked out on my own balcony below?! I'll have to get Stanley to rescue me if I don't end up with my eyeballs rolling around on the ground like one of Mrs Sillicum's mangy old dolls. Where the hell is the Watcher when I really need him? I lower the other leg. Suddenly, the lights come on in his apartment as I'm dangling in midair. The lights! No point in pretending I wasn't here, Dan saw the lights from the parking lot.

It's a long, hard journey back up. My arms must have stretched at least a couple of feet. I swear my legs weren't this far down when I first lowered them.

Back up on the balcony, I groan and get Stanley on my cell.

"Where are you?" he asks in a panic-stricken voice.

"On his balcony," I whisper, looking across the parking lot to the low rise apartment building directly opposite the Doré. Better

than even odds the Watcher is staked out inside one of the apartments. Probably the one on the top floor, with the curtains partially drawn and the lights out.

"Geez. Just you hold your horses there, I'm gonna crash your pad and haul ya down outta there from your balcony. Or how 'bout I call the cops?"

"No, I'm going to confront him. You go into my apartment, and the second you hear me say Fitz's name, tap the ceiling in the kitchen three times, stop, then three more times. Got it?"

"Fitz, love tap, love tap, love tap, sigh, then three more love taps."

"What would I do without Carbone Man?"

"Croak, probably."

"Just stay on the line, and for heaven's sake, don't make a sound!"

"10-4."

I rub my sore hands together to get the circulation back into them, then I push the curtains aside with my shoulder and come face to face with the man with no name.

We spare each other the futility of pretending we're surprised. He's wearing a suit and overcoat as any respectable insurance broker returning home from the office would. He looks darkly beautiful as he stands before me, calm, cool and way too collected, one hand shoved in his coat pocket. I try to hold my face in neutral, while he smiles at me like he's ready to close a deal to *his* satisfaction.

I play with the fantasy of slamming his head against the patio door and kicking his butt off the balcony. Instead, I say with the volume capped, "Since you've been spending most of your time this past week, parading around my apartment in my clothes, I thought it was time I paid you a visit." I circle around him to get between him and the safest exit.

"I'm glad you did--"

"No doubt."

"--because it gives me the perfect opportunity to explain." He pulls his hand out of his pocket to join his other hand in imploring me. "Rane, we've known each other for--"

"You haven't even finished one sentence, and you're already lying." He stares at me like my words pulverized his brains. "The only thing I know about you is that you're a skilled liar."

"I've had to lie to you to protect you fr--"

"That's what I need all right, another lying bastard in my life to protect me." I move towards him, check myself then step back and give him a look that matches the sour taste in my mouth.

He holds up his palms. "Ask me anything, anything at all, and I'll answer you. No lies. Don't look away, Rane. Please. No more lies, I mean it."

I keep my cool, but my toes go crazy in my boots. "What were you doing in my apartment yesterday?"

"I was trying to throw Nevar and his fellow miscreants off your scent by pretending to be you, while I searched for the heroin he stashed in your apartment Saturday night."

So much for his day out with Myrtle and her parents.

"What's wrong with your derailleur?"

"Nothing."

"You said it was ruined."

"Whatever you thought I said," he says, getting snippy, "I meant that my bike is damaged beyond repair."

Oh.

"Who's the Watcher?"

"A cop trying to keep one step ahead of the rat squad, while he plays dirty with Nevar and his ilk."

"And the Hiker?"

"He goes by the name of Joseph Stampe. Bit of a mystery man this one. He seems to have come out of nowhere to strong-arm for Nevar. Probably one of Nevar's customers who'd kill for another fix but wanted to come clean."

"Have you been fouling up my answering machine?"

He shakes his head. "Nevar's handiwork. I haven't been calling you because I know it's crawling with bugs."

I look down to keep him from seeing my surprise. His were the missing messages. The ones of such great importance, I can't remember a single thing he said. Hell, I never even noticed his calls had stopped.

"Why would he bother to erase your messages?"

"To confine your thinking by isolating you, I should think."

"Who's Myrtle?"

"She's a liaison officer working with Interpol Region Three."

"Where's Chanlee?" I narrow my eyes at him.

"Wish I knew. Nevar nabbed her. I haven't seen her since yesterday morning. If we're going to find her before he dispenses with her, we'll have to work fast."

"She trusted you, Dan. I don't, so your desire isn't my command. The love you steal is infinitely better than anything you have to give."

"I'm trying to help."

"Yeah, well, as Chanlee learned, any kindness from you is a form of hatred."

He shakes his head with a tsk, tsk. "You're one with your gender in confusing thoughts with feelings."

"What are you confusing with the small head rationalizations of your feelings?"

He tries to hide his contempt with a smile that never succeeds in being more than simpering. "Think what you will about me, but he's not a bloke anyone should--"

"Where do you live?"

"France."

I shake my head. "Where do you live in town?"

"I'll take you there."

I continue shaking my head. "You've been taking me for a ride long enough, Dan, er, who the hell are you?"

"Marc Bernardin, I'm on the job with Interpol." He reaches inside his overcoat, and I fly behind the sofa out of the range of fire. But he pulls out his wallet. The post office card is tucked inside it. He slides the card back into his pocket then holds out the ID to me.

"Well, Marc," I say with a lying smile and step towards him. "None of that explains my part in this drug sting, bust, operation or whatever you choose to call it." His soft, mellow exterior turns to stone as I approach him.

Looking past his opaque eyes, I raise my arms to hug him to death. All of a sudden, a long groan escapes from the vicinity of my heart. *Stanley, shut up!* The instant I hesitate, Dan grabs my wrist, twists my arm back and locks me in a side choke. "Why do you women always have to ruin everything by following your nature?" he seethes in my ear and yanks back hard on my neck. "You couldn't leave well enough alone, no, you had to let him listen in. Now you're forcing me to--"

A loud clang echoes from the bathroom. The ceiling fan cover's cutting loose! He jolts in the direction of the noise.

"Who the--" he starts to say.

"Nevar, who else were you--" He tightens his grip and drags me towards the bathroom. "--expecting?" I gurgle.

"What kind of fool do you take me for?"

"The worst kind."

"Women can't stop asking to be beat--" He jolts again at a loud crashing noise.

The fan. I knew it had to be good for something!

Taking advantage of his alarm, I push into him and throw his weight backwards. As he struggles to regain his lock on me, I quickly palm the postal card. Then I grab his coat and yank the unbalanced lug forward. The blood rushes to his face, rage burning in his eyes.

CHAPTER 19

"Fitz!" I yell in the direction of the bathroom.

Tap, tap--Dan jumps like someone shot him between the legs. The rage in his eyes ignites into terror. He bolts for the door before Stanley finishes the last tap.

"Stanley! He's coming for you!"

"No shit."

"Use the stairs."

"Whaddaya think I'm doing? Why did ya have let him go for? You lost your marbles?"

"Why would I want to keep someone else's sock puppet? He's on his way to do a little war dance for his master."

He groans. "Youse take your war somewheres else. You hearing me?"

I run into the kitchen for a pair of tongs, but settle for a fork and use it to impale the book in the bathroom. The padded cover has the smell, look and feel of uncaressed leather. Just like the one Nevar stole back from me. It's an address book. My heart soars from the throes of daunting cynicism. This book is the key to finding Chanlee. Clutching it to my heart, I jump down and race to the door then stop abruptly. Why am I running? This is the safest place in the world for me right now. He won't be back. Even if he was telling the truth about being an undercover cop, his cover is blown. Which means that as a hostage Chanlee has become more of a liability than an asset. One way or another, she's about to be released. And so help me, I won't let it be through death.

Leaning over the balcony railing, I see Dan gunning for his SUV.

"Relax, Stanley," I say into the phone. "The pig is in flight."

"Don't you never get me mixed-up in your weirdo criminal activities no more."

"I'll be right down."

"You okay, then?"

"Whaddaya think? I've had the help of Carbone Man."

"Okay. But ya'd better have your keys to that awesome bike ready, you hear what I'm saying? I'm taking 'er out as in NOW. 10-4?" He hangs up.

On the way down, I dial up 555-5370.

"Don't hang up, please," I implore.

"That's the last thing I intend to do," Dan the insurance man says. "You're going to tell me that some crook has stolen my identity, correct?"

"*Crook* isn't the word I'd use, but yes, that's what I'm phoning about."

"I was going to call you, because after you called I got to thinking, you know, about something that happened to me about a month ago. Only, it didn't register at the time, but I was shopping in a men's clothing store, and when the kid at the till looked at my bank card, he said, 'Our computer says your suit is ready, Mr Istenly.' I had a dickens of a time trying to convince him I wasn't having any suit altered. I'm the only Istenly in the phone book, would you believe? But if you're a friend of the other Dan Istenly, you must think I'm the fraud."

"Look, Dan, I'll help you if you'll meet me before 9:00 at the post office in the Moose Trail Crossing mall." He doesn't say anything, probably because he senses a trap, so I add, "I can't very well do anything to you with everyone watching at the post office. We'll both be safe there." I hope.

Stanley opens his office door before I have a chance to knock. He grabs my wrist and yanks me inside.

"*Hello, Stanley!*" He's wearing a sailor jumper, bellbottom pants and a white bucket hat on top of a straw wig.

"Don't you say a thing," he says, jabbing a finger in the air at me. "I got hijacked by that crazy broad in 53." I hold my lips tight to keep from laughing. "She caught me waiting outside her door, so I had to make her and that freak farm of hers happy to keep her from squawking."

Imitating a doll with round blinking eyes, I say, "I'm taking the Duke, squawk, squawk, but I'll be right back." I do a doll walk out of his office.

"Huh?!"

I blow him a big doll kiss.

He kicks the air in my direction. "I gotta be crazier than youse all. Geez, I don't believe it. I let myself be pimped over by another broad."

"If I'm not back with the Duke in the next couple of hours, you can tear all my stuff apart and chuck it out on the street."

"You come back here, you!"

The postal worker locks the door after me. I sigh with irritation rather than relief because Dan the insurance man isn't here. I walk past rows of bagged clothes hanging from dry-cleaning racks, to dumps of plastic-bagged greeting cards and finally to the post office crammed in a corner at the back.

"You wouldn't believe how many people become blind when they see the word *CLOSED*," the worker says as she settles back into the chair behind the counter.

Turning around, I see a man trying to get service through a locked door. With his freezing blue eyes, bunny teeth and shady banker's smile, he's the replica of the man featured on Dan the insurance man's web site.

"He's with me," I say.

"He can wait until you're done," the worker says, patting down her thinning, needle straight dyed hair. Given how little there is of it, she's probably counting to see how many strands she has left. I don't know, but it looks like she saves the perming for the hair on her chin and arms.

"No he can't. He's my husband, and I've got his parcel pickup card."

She shrugs with her shoulders and lush eyebrows then shuffles over to the door.

"Hi, honey," I say to Dan. "Here's your card."

Giving me a confused look riddled with suspicion, he takes it. "See the name?" He smacks the card. "*Dan S. Istenly*. And our addresses don't match." He hands it back to me. I push it away.

"Believe me, she won't look that closely," I say, taking his arm and pulling him towards the counter.

"May I help you?" the worker says in a commanding voice. Her inch-long plastic nails march like impatient soldiers on the counter.

After too much wavering, he hands her the card and gets out his ID. As he holds it out to her, I hug his neck and place a wet smooch as close to his lips as he'll permit. "Oh, I can't wait until we're alone," I coo in his ear loud enough for her to hear. He gives me a quick nervous look, and she shrugs with her brows then retrieves a cardboard box from the cubbyhole behind her.

Outside, he refuses to hand over the box to me.

"I could go to jail for interfering with someone else's mail," he says.

"Someone else's? How many Dan Istenly's do you think there are in this city? One too many, if I'm not mistaken."

He dismisses the insinuation with a drawn-out sigh.

"What's in here that's making you so anxious to break the law?"

"I don't know. Let's open it and find out."

He shakes his head and pulls the box closer to him. Although I'm trying to look and sound patient, if he weren't concerned exclusively with himself, he'd see that I'm not interested in negotiating with him. About anything.

I hold up my hands in surrender. "You're right. This is a police matter." I pull out my cell and offer it to him. "Call the police and ask for Levi Bangston."

He hesitates, thinks better of it and makes the call. Holding a hand over the phone, he says, "The dispatcher would like to know if I want to leave a message."

"Well, do you?"

He shuts down the phone and hands it back to me. He's as much of a poser as his counterpart.

I bring up Levi's name and number from the call list and show him. "Constable Bangston'll get you onto the right people to help sort out your identity problem."

"Chanlee hasn't shown up?" Levi asks, concern in his voice.

"No, but I know who snatched her," I say, coming out of the chute bucking.

"Snatched her?!"

"Before you say or do anything, listen to me. I need a couple of hours. That's all--"

"You have no right to play cop with her life. Odds are that a year of her life will go kaput with every minute you waste."

"You're wasting *her* time by lecturing me, Levi."

Dan shoves the box at me. "I don't want any part of this," he says, backing away. "I'll call him tomorrow." He disappears into the night, while I smile perversely at the sight of my name and address on the upper left corner of the box.

"Levi, listen, she left me a message saying that she hid a painting in her locker. You're not officially on the job until midnight. Give me till then before you bring in the troops. But two people have already died over that painting so don't even think about pulling a cowboy."

"I'm the cowboy?!" he snorts.

"Are you with me or not?"

"I'm with Chanlee."

"All right then. Help her by helping me, Levi. It's me they're really after. They're using her to force me to come across with the painting."

"Who are *they*?"

"I'm not sure. All I have--"

"That isn't what you said a minute ago."

"I know who one of them is, but he's only the frosting on the iceberg. I have to dig a lot deeper, and I can with the painting as leverage."

"Okay, I'll do it for Chanlee."

"Great, as long as you don't bring anyone else in on it."

A thousand yeses and nos could fit into the time I give him to agree.

"You saying one of us is involved?" he asks incredulously.

"I'll give you the name of one of them if you get me the painting."

"How tight is your evidence?"

I pat my pocket, partly to reassure myself the book's still there. If I tell him that her disappearance is tied in with Kenny Hironaka's, there's no way he will even consider keeping quiet about any of this for longer than a nanosecond. So I resist the temptation to tell him what I know. "Good, but it's nothing without the painting."

"Must be sommmme painting. I like art as much as the next guy, but I just don't get why anyone would kill over greasy pigment on rotting canvas. Whose masterpiece is it, anyhow?"

"Never mind that, just get it for me."

"Okay, okay! But I'm warning you, I'm on the job at midnight. Officially."

"If there's a red hat with the painting, grab it too. And there should be a sketchbook."

"Anything else?" he says sarcastically.

"Yes, do you know who Marc Bernardin is?"

"Haven't a clue."

"How about a tall blond woman about my age, liaising with Region Three?"

"Ditto."

"Could you stop--"

"Holy cow, don't have a connipshit! Save your shots for the bad guys."

Sitting on the Duke under a lamp in the parking lot, I open the box and rout around in the packing. Fruk, there's nothing in here but peanut Styrofoam. I dump the annoying plastic on the asphalt, and a cello-wrapped memory card glistens on the top of the heap.

By now, Fitz must know what's on the other one. I try getting him on the phone, but call forwarding kicks in. He's probably at Dad's finding out what evil is being sheltered on these damned things. I cringe at the very thought of it, but I need Nevar's help. Everything he yelled at me in the basement I've tried to mute into forgetfulness with genuine disbelief, but his words keep stampeding through my thoughts. Especially the ones about me being the key to Kenny's disappearance and knowing where Chanlee is. *You know where, you know where, you know....*

But I don't.

In this partially clear night with storm clouds obliterating the horizon, I can't make sense of anything that really matters. Not Nevar, not the stars or the wind blowing my thoughts around the

globe and back to me again. And especially not myself. I can't think straight with him in my head. His voice is all the more maddening and torturous because through the thundering I hear a sonorous love call. Absurd. When I looked closely at him out cold on the landing, I wanted to pummel him, ring his neck and, heaven help me, hug him like some freaking necrophiliac. It drives me crazy how he effortlessly surfs the primal waves he stirs up in me. Dan didn't hesitate to finger him as the perpetrator of everyone's woes. As if I'm going to believe any guy who breaks into my apartment to parade around in my dirty pjs. He answered all my questions like Hamlet is his favorite role. Was it only hours ago that I regarded him as the most thoughtful person I know? He's full of thought, all right. For himself. Even when other people talk, all he hears is the sound of his own voice. Whereas Nevar kept taking one shot after another at me, riddling my heart with so many holes, I still feel more dead than alive. He presumes he has a lover's prerogative to tell me that my feelings aren't good enough for him.

No matter which way I dice or slice all this, one and one still adds up to me crawling back to him, because to find Chanlee I need his half of the damned puzzle.

No lights intrude upon the darkness at Nevar's place. As I approach the back door, my throat tightens mercilessly, making my breathing labored. The Hiker could have finished him off, in which case, I'm an accessory to murder. But if he got to the Hiker first, it means I'm left with kowtowing to him. He's going to relish that too much for my stomach. Never mind that, he's going to arrest me. If he's here. Maybe he killed the Hiker, and he's disposing of the body the way he did with the other one. Or he's at the hospital.

Halfway through the kitchen and my nagging doubts, I stop at the sound of voices coming from the basement. One is Nevar's, but I can't make out the other voices. I tiptoe to the basement door and slowly turn the knob. Holding the door ajar, I peer down, seeing nothing but blood splattered on the landing. They must be in the poolroom, but I can hear them well enough to know that one of the other voices belongs to Maldoon.

"She's gotta go down. We can't let her run around halfcocked," Maldoon says.

"Granted, she's down to the wire, but I don't see her tripping up," Nevar says.

"No? You've set her up to take a fall," Maldoon says.

"Come on, you guys, she's already done that," the third man says. He's a fast talker without the patience to allow doubt to infect his voice. A real smoothie. "What do you expect? She went into this blindly, and she still doesn't have a friggin' clue what she's gotten herself into."

"You've picked the wrong time to lose your perspective, Stefan," Maldoon chips in.

"She cold-cocked you, man," Mr Smoothie says. "She's more than a risk, she's--"

Maldoon breaks in, "Wait'll she gets onto how you've been using her to get the drugs and take out Samente. Given half a chance, she'll kill you."

"She's had more than half a chance," Nevar says, not sounding convinced about what anyone is saying, including himself.

"How do you know she hasn't already tripped the light fantastic?" Mr Smoothie says. "I tell you, man, she's snowdrifting her way to killing you. Oh, don't give me that look. Forget about her. You should be protecting yourself."

"I think she..." Nevar's words fade away.

I open the door wider and crane to hear better. The scent of him causes me to jerk my head back. He knows I'm here, and he's coming for me. What the hell, isn't this why I came here? Suddenly, the lights come on all around me. Oh fruk, he has the remote! I slide into a chair at the table and sharpen my wits to negotiate my way through hell. Then out of the corner of my eye I catch sight of something blue on the countertop.

A blue cap.

A blue cap just like the one Kenny was wearing.

Suddenly I see red, and the face of Mr Smoothie. He's the Hiker.

Hell of hells, Dan's been telling the truth!

I can't take the three of them on. Not without Fitz. And Levi. Not Dan, though. He isn't the man I thought he was. But Nevar, well, he's always been the man I don't want to believe he is.

I grab the cap and dash outside. Gulping for air, I zip around the corner of the house and stare down the driveway. All I see between me and the street is death, with more of it charging up behind me. My name blows by me in the wind as Nevar hollers it. I push and scrape through the side hedge and leap, fall and scramble across one yard after another to an alley. I can't see or hear Nevar or his goons behind me, which makes me run harder because I know they're heading straight for the bottom of the hill where they think my bike is parked. It's only a scream away in the porte-cochère of a kindly neighbor called Orvin, who was easily seduced by the Duke and could just as easily be seduced by a false gesture from Nevar.

One house down from the Duke, I start cursing faster than my wildly pounding heart and legs can carry me, because I see the bike lit up like a can't miss spectacle in a showroom. No time to grab the Duke. Sweet as he is, the Duke'll betray me sure as shootin' if I roar out of here.

A security light flashes on me as I ring the doorbell.
Orvin, anybody, please be home!

CHAPTER 20

As I'm about to bolt around to the back, through the frosted sidelight at the entrance I catch a glimpse of someone approaching. I fling open the screendoor.

"Shut off the outside lights!" I pant.

Orvin stares at me in horror.

"Some thugs are chasing me. The lights!" I bend over, trying to ease my burning lungs.

The Duke is suddenly consumed by welcoming darkness.

Orvin slips an arm around my back and urges me into the house.

"You catch yer breath there now, young lady," he says kindly. Letting go of me, he runs arthritic fingers through his mane of white hair and watches me like he's having some luck accessing the risk to me and himself. In his golf shirt and self-ironing pants, he looks like the closest he's come to a bad time in a while is blowing a sure thing on the putting green. "And don't you worry none, I won't let 'em getcha." His heavy black eyebrows seem to be permanent fixtures halfway up his prominent forehead, but he smiles at me with beautifully defined lips that must make beggars of all they touch.

"Thanks, Orvin." I turn around and take hold of the doorknob.

"Where ya going?" He hooks an arm around mine and pulls me away from the door. "Give 'em time to think they scared ya off somewheres else." He reaches across me and turns off the foyer light. "There. Now you go on into the kitchen and help yerself to whatever ya'd like to drink. I'll move yer Ducati to the garage at the back."

"Uh, I don't think you can do that by yourself."

"Even if I can't, I'm gonna. No lights, neither. Bikin's in my blood. Got stung with the bug in The War." He scratches his freshly sprouted whiskers. "Don't need diddlysquat but what's left of this here body a mine to move that there Ducati. Yup." he says with a faraway look and takes my smile for a yes.

As soon as he's gone, I try getting hold of Fitz. No deal, so I try calling Dad.

"How's Mr McPickles?" I say, wishing I didn't need to ask. I dread the thought of the kitten being dead. I'm already weighed down into numbness by a malevolence I have yet to fathom.

"Scraping by on a song and a prayer one moment at a time in the land of the living like the rest of us. But, Rane, by the sound of you, I'd say he's doing better than you."

"Things have gone way beyond SNAFU to FUBB. But it would help if I knew what you and Fitz found on that memory card those vermin sewed up inside McPickles."

"Nothing--"

"Rotten hell! I was expecting anything but nothing."

"Nothing that drastic. We don't know what's on it because I haven't been able to get through to Fitz. I drove around to his house with it, but he wasn't there, either."

"They've got him, the maggots got him." My heart feels so heavy I can feel myself sinking through one plane of consciousness to another, down, down into the abyss.

"I can buy a reader first thing tomorrow," he offers. "Time I upgraded my camera anyway."

"Too late."

"Are you at your apartment? I'll bring the card to you."

"Sorry to say, I might have to take you up on that. But for now, you know where to keep it safe." Understanding flows unimpeded between us in a brief silence, our minds meeting inside McPickles' box. "If anyone, I don't care who it is, asks where the card is, tell them you gave it to me."

"Anyone except Fitz."

"Including Fitz. He wouldn't think twice about giving it to them to save us."

"Watch yourself."

"You too."

I hang up and blow on my hands. It feels like my heart has turned into an ice machine. Then I pull out the leather book from my pocket and look through it. *I know you're in here, Chanlee. And you too, Fitz, you're buried somewhere in here. I'll find you, I promise.* The names and addresses have all been done by one hand and with the same ink. And there's a sameness to the way the addresses are organized, like they were all copied from another source in one sitting. For one thing, the book looks unused. For another thing, there aren't many addresses with postal codes. I leaf through front to back, then back to front. Correction, there are no postal codes at all. The names and addresses all look like...like they came straight out of the phone book. I glance up and see the kitchen. My thoughts were crowding out the universe, obviously, because now I see the handmade tiles on the floor and backsplashes, and the intricate mosaic on the table top my elbows are resting on. Hand-blown glassware glisten through the beveled-glass doors of the cabinetry. Orvin's an artisan? A fastidious artisan who keeps his phone books out of sight of his art.

I get up and slide out one drawer after another. Come across a container filled with elastic bands and use one to hold back my hair in a ponytail. Then I resume my search.

"Finding what ya need?" Orvin says at the doorway.

I'm too weary and strung out to feel embarrassed at being caught snooping. I feel defeated more than anything. "I was looking for your phone book," I say, reaching over and grabbing the leather book off the table.

"No need ta go on a-worrying, young lady." He places a comforting arm on my shoulders as I slump down into a chair. "It's quiet as can be out there now, and I got yer Ducati where no one 'cept me can git it without waking up the whole dern neighborhood." He chuckles.

"They're not after the Duke."

"The Sam Hill ya say!" He sits down in the chair kitty-corner to me. "Ya haven't got no gang a marauding rapists after ya, now have ya?"

"No, they're after this." I lock the book between my hands and gnaw on my knuckles. "Amongst other things."

"Throw it in the way'a the police and make the buggers chase the cops for it."

I shake my head. "The maggots have two of my friends, and this book can tell me where to find them. If I can figure out how to read it in time."

"Would a fresh eye be a any use, ya reckon?"

I open the book and place it on the table, but keep hold of it. He reaches behind him and gets out a pair of eyeglasses from a drawer. "Let's have a look here."

"I think everything's been copied out of the phone book."

"Ahh. I was wondering 'cause ya don't need no phone book to git the police. It's in that there bread box behind ya."

After we check a few names and addresses against the phone book, we both see the writing on the wall. The address book's a poser, just like its author. I let Dan get away so I could get my hands on this?! I pick it up and slam it back down. This cursed little thing is crushing my hopes, my whole fruking life.

I shield my face from his watchful eyes filled with sympathy that plays havoc with my resolve. Nevar's right, damn him. I did put my friend--and now Fitz, too--in harm's way. And for what? To prove to myself that I never really flunked out of police training, I just didn't take it seriously enough to give it my best shot. And this is what my best shot amounts to, my friends die as a result of my lousy attempts at investigating? Me and my ego. Talk about the blind leading the blind. It takes a real dimwit to get lost in hell when all the roads lead to the same place: nowhere.

"What can I git fer ya ta drink?" he says, standing up.

"No tea with the sympathy, thank-you." I try to smile, but the corners of my mouth slump down with the rest of me.

He sits back down and resumes pouring sympathy all over me.

"I've been wrangling with all this for a week now, and I've come up with zip," I say feeling wretchedly exhausted.

I stand up abruptly.

"Thanks for your help," I say and make a quick exit out onto the back deck.

I see the garage silhouetted against the alley lights and step down off the deck into a garden. Ouch! My knee rams into a stone bench. No, it's a border that curves around to who knows where. I plunk myself down on it and wait for Orvin to come out and open the garage. It shouldn't take him long to figure out I'm not coming back in. Suddenly indigo lamps glow on the ground around me, and I see that I'm sitting on the toe of a horseshoe.

"Look up," Orvin says from up on the deck. "Don't look down. We all end up down there soon enough. Nobody never looked down from above and said this here was the best place ta be. Look up."

I don't bother. "If this is all there is, what's the point of anything?"

"The point a everything is that this here is all there is."

"Wonderful." My head sinks into my hands.

He sits down beside me, places the address book on the rock between us and looks up. "It's pretty dern lonely up there. Still, looking up's how I got through the long days on them there rigs. Yup. Ever since the universe took Vicky, I learnt ta stay busy ta keep from being done in by the sadness. Ya know what else I learnt? That the universe can git along fine, just fine, without ya, but ya can't git along no how without it."

"Has the horseshoe brought you any luck?"

"You betcha. I woke up today." He chuckles. "You know, young lady--"

"Rane," I snap. "My name is Rane."

He rubs his whiskers. "The other time ya parked yer bike here, didn't ya tell me yer name was Lydia?"

"That was then. My name is Rane."

"Whatever ya want to call yerself is fine with me, young lady."

If he doesn't quit nattering, I'm going to....What am I going to do? I'm tangled up, bound and gagged by the threads I thought were leading me out of Nevar's trap.

"From where I'm sitting I'd say yer only stuck because ya think ya are. I don't know, but when life kicks ya in the pants it seems once isn't enough. Ya have to git kicked again and again." I

stare at him with growing impatience. "Once to git your attention, twice to git ya going in the right direction and then forever, it seems, to keep ya on course."

"Mind if I ask what your point is?"

"I'm telling ya yer wrong givin' up, 'cause there's no surer way a staying stuck than giving up. Ya gotta stay true ta yer goals 'cause no one else's gonna. No how."

"I haven't given up, Orvin, I've struck out."

"Sure ya ain't just been hitting foul balls?"

"I've hit every ball they've pitched at me. Every damned one of them, right into the outfield like they wanted me to."

"Whaddaya think it'd take ta git ya unstuck?" While I'm thinking about it, he adds, "Knowledge, ya reckon? The right kinda knowledge." He chuckles and I groan. "Don't ya go a-sniggerin' now. The truth's in the things we know. Even if it weren't, ya can't learn nothin' by closing yerself off from what's really there."

"You think I haven't been looking? All I've gotten for my efforts is this address book I plucked out of the dung heap they're building for me and my friends. Everything I've learned, everything I've done and seen tells me that all the people left standing in this mess are behind the disappearance of my friends. I know, hell do I know, that can't be true. But with this book I was down to my last hope."

"Ya sure it's as important as all that?"

"Yes, because I was set up to find the damned thing."

"Ta keep ya from looking fer yer friends?" Watching my feet tap, I nod. "I got a feeling that this here book tells a story in the exact same way this here house and garden tell the story a me 'n Vicky. She's been gone pretty near five years now, but every single one a these here rocks holds a memory of our life together. Same goes fer the tiles and other things ya saw in the house. She put a little of our lives into each of her creations." He rubs a hand along the cover of the book. "Why such a fancy dern cover for an empty book some bastrich put in yer hands? Tryin' ta git ya ta look in the wrong direction, ya reckon?"

I look up. "You know, Orvin, I think you may just be...." I grab the book and try to rip the cover apart. "I need a knife."

In the kitchen, I slit open the front cover. Nothing. Then I slash the back, and a cello-wrapped memory card falls out onto the table.

"Oh hell, not another one," I groan and pull out the card from the parcel at the post office. They're a match.

"I getcha. Nothing's on 'em."

"No pretty pictures, that's for sure. I'm supposed to collect these damned cards, not enjoy them. The maggots have been

throwing them my way like dog biscuits." Mr McPickles notwithstanding.

"No harm 'n seeing what's on this one, ya suppose? I got a computer in my office, nothing fancy, mind. My bridge partners are inside the dern thing. Anyways, June, my neighbor 'cross the street, has all kinds a doodads fer this here kind of thing. She's always a tinkering around with pictures of herself and givin' 'em to me. She don't look half-bad in some a 'em, I suppose. My eyes, they're not so good as they once was. No matter, I can see with my own two eyes that she isn't no Victoria. I hate ta ask June for anything, 'cause every time I cross that dern street she thinks I'm coming over ta propose ta her."

"I'll ask her for the reader." I'll do more than ask her, I'll steal it if I have to. This little piece of plastic in my hand could contain shots of a man being pushed off a mountain. Or worse. "Which house?"

He shakes his head and points to the front of the house. "She'll git those yappy dogs after ya. They don't bite, but she does."

"If you mean the house directly across the street, it's all shuttered up."

"She had them roller blinds installed on the outside a her windows so as to keep the sun offa her furniture. Only time she ever opens the dern things is at night. Sometimes. Sure as yer standing here, she's sitting there like a dern fool in front a her computer, with one eye glued ta the TV so as not to miss nothing."

Later in his office, with his computer all decked out with the right peripherals on a desk loaded down with antique marbles, glass paperweights and oil rig mementos, we stare blankly at the screen as we move from file to file filled with row upon row of numbers, characters and symbols. On both cards.

Orvin shakes his head. "More mumbo jumbo ta throw ya off track. Or is it modern art, ya reckon?"

"Neither. I think it's an encrypted user list. The maggots who've been feeding me this stuff are worshipers of a powerful deity."

"Some sort a newfangled cult?"

"Not new, no. They've sold themselves to the most lucrative of devils, a drug lord." I stand up. Ten to one there's another memory card inside the computer chip the Hiker planted on my car. "I need to get into the garage because I have another card in my bag. If I'm right, it's going to contain more of the same shit--if you'll excuse the language."

"Well, ya know," he says, scratching his cheek, "*shit* about covers it."

With a knife, I pry open the computer chip and voilà, inside is another memory card. I put it into the reader and what pops up on the computer screen?

"More gargledeegoop," Orvin sighs.

"More reasons to kill."

He squints and puts his face up close enough to the screen to kiss it.

I reach around his head and tap on the upper left-hand corner of the screen. "See these numbers, 1874, here at the beginning? The card from the post office doesn't have a number up here, but the first file on the card from the address book started with 6144. I have another one of these things, and I'll bet you anything that it starts with four thousand. Give or take a hundred."

"Maybe," he says, pulling his head back, "maybe not. Could just be more a nothing."

"No," I insist, "because these numbers make sense. There are 6144 victims buried on the three cards. And I think the maggot who 'owns' these users is selling them off. He's been using me to transfer them to the new owner. I've been their willing puppet." My face burns with anger and humiliation. "Look at me closer, and you'll see the strings. They might as well be buying, selling and trading fruking baseball cards for all it matters to them." He looks at me doubtfully. "There's only one way to find out. I'm going to have to see what's hidden on that other card."

"Well, let's give 'er a look."

"I don't have it on me." I give him the sorriest look I can muster. "I'm going to need your help to get it, I'm afraid." His gaze doesn't shirk from mine. "Would you be willing to get this reader to my parents' place on Brittanski Drive?"

"Don't see why not, I reckon."

"Wearing my jacket and helmet?"

"Hell ya say! Never thought I'd ever git any dern closer to a Ducati than some highfalutin bike show." He jumps up and says thank-you, looking up. Way up.

"Orvin, you'll have to change into jeans if you're going to convince anyone that you're me. Oh, and I don't want you to bring the card back. Tell my father to keep it. But you phone me as soon as you find out whether I'm right about the first file starting with four thousand."

"Looks like I'm gonna have ta borrow June's mobile phone. Dern it, I never been partial ta that month."

"No time. My father'll give you one. Don't worry about what to say to him, I'll warn him you're coming. But when you call, don't say anything about the card, just say yes or no. Then I want you to drive to Kirkewood Place, park the Duke in front of 2597 and ring the buzzer. I'll be inside waiting for you."

Wherever I go, Nevar and his goons are always at least three steps ahead. Always some damned carrot for me to nibble on. I've watched a man falling to his death for them, landed face down in the blood of a murdered man for them, watched my father's car being blown up for them and led my friends into deathtraps for them. But somewhere along the way, I messed up and got something right for myself instead of them. Something that doesn't fit into Nevar's plans. Al's is the only place left where I'll be safe enough to think this mess through and plot it out on the computer.

The key's in the computer. That's why Nevar was trying to pry info from me about my computer. "Shhiiiiittttt!"

"Wanna tell me who ya've declared war on?" He waves the thought away. "Nah, better not. Ya know, in case I get captured and tortured by the enemy."

"You're safe as long as I hold the cards. Don't forget to take the reader. Think your neighbor will mind?"

"She's gonna wanna dunk ya in hot oil till you're a crispy-critter then feed ya to her mutts."

After he's decked out in my riding gear, and he's blasted off on the Duke, I turn out all the lights except the ones in his office. Then I try sliding into his broken-in jean jacket and get stuck. The best laid plans.... Scrambling to find a jacket big enough to fit, I end up getting stuck with a yellow oilcloth raincoat. Ah well, I pull the hood up over Kenny's cap and head for the garage. Nothing disturbs me but the mountain-tossed wind. From what I can tell in the dark, Orvin left a pickup for me. But the keys don't fit. I fumble my way around to the other side of the truck and grope the cold metal of a sedan that looks more like a submarine in the deep shadows. I try opening it. The key glides in but won't turn. The second key does the trick. I open the door and wish I hadn't. For letting him ride the Duke, Orvin's rewarding me by letting me drive his '50s Studebaker. An opportunity of a lifetime, for sure, but how the hell am I supposed to go unnoticed in this thing? I'll be lucky if I don't get pulled over just so some cop can ogle it.

While I'm warming up the old buggy, I try the controls. They all work, even the radio.

"...The top stories on the tens," the announcer says in a smoker's voice. "Shock and tears have greeted the news that the body of nine-year-old Kenny Hironaka has been found by two hikers in a heavily- wooded area north of Banff. Police say he died as a result of a fall from a precipice. His family--"

My cell jolts me back to life.

"Yes and no," Orvin says and hangs up.

Orvin!

I fold my arms around the steering wheel and bang my forehead against my arms. Kenny was just a kid. He's never going to grow into his own voice or choose his own song. All the friendship, laughs, triumphs and discoveries that should have been his have died with him. Gone with a fall from a precipice. I should have seen this coming because I've been up on the precipice with him all along. I can feel them pushing me, baiting me, stabbing at me.

I lift my head and see a face staring at me in the window straight ahead lit by the headlights. At least I think I did. Even with straining, all I can see are frostbitten plants in a window box.

Keeping a wary eye on the window, I call Orvin.

"Hello?" Orvin says like he doesn't know it's me.

"What did you mean by--" Holy hell, the door's opening! I kill the lights, throw down the phone, slam the gear into reverse and careen out into the alley. The phone flies off the seat onto the floor.

No one comes after me. The sneaky bastards must be waiting for me on the street. But this old buggy is the closest thing I see to a car on the street for several blocks, so I pull into someone's driveway and reach under the passenger seat for the phone.

Grabbing the cell, I shout, "Orvin?"

"They after ya again?" he asks.

"Yeah, but they're keeping their distance because they want the cards to get to their destination safely."

"Shiver my dern timbers!" he says. "Ya should a heard what it sounded like from over here."

"Never mind that, what did you mean by *yes AND no*?"

"This one started with 8029."

Which means there are 10 thousand users all together. Shit, shoot, shite. I'm missing one of the cards.

"Ask your fellow compatriot what he meant when he said to our uninvited dinner guest the other day that the kidnapping must be particularly difficult for him." I roll down the window because I'm fogging myself in. The smell of freeze-dried leaves seeps into the car.

After a pause too short for me to go through my whole litany of expletives, my father's voice says, "He was Kenny's uncle."

"He's what?!" All the muscles in my face contort into a painful knot.

"Was, Rane, was. Haven't you heard? He's--"

"I know. I heard it on the radio."

"You having Stefan over and all, what reason did I have for believing you didn't know his connection with the boy?"

I finish my litany of expletives then say, "How long have you been in contact with Nevar?"

"I haven't seen or spoken to him since--"

"Why are you lying? Has he--"

"Rane! I sympathize with his plight, but if I have prided myself on anything as a parent, it's that I have been on guard against any feelings that may be injurious to my children."

The anger and hurt in his voice shames me, but it only adds fuel to the conflagration of suspicions rearing up in my mind. "Then how did you know about his connection with Kenny? It hasn't been in the media."

"Patricia at work plays hockey with Kenny's mother. Stefan is her brother."

"I should have guessed. He never concerns himself with anything that isn't directly related to himself. Sorry for snipping, Dad--"

"Save your sorrow for his family."

--but I'm turning a corner real fast on one leg. Tell your comrade there--please--to complete his mission."

"This isn't a public thoroughfare," a man with no head says from the other side of the passenger window.

"I'll keep you posted, Dad," I say, rolling the buggy out of the driveway.

"Hey! Is this a Studebaker?" the driveway hog yells like I'm his best friend all of a sudden.

Driving like an octogenarian out for a drive on a speedway, I head for Al's.

Ol' Uncle Nevar was telling the truth when he said Kenny was his problem. I shake my head in disbelief. The way this is all shaking out, Dan snatched Kenny to ensure that Nevar didn't double cross him; and Nevar, along with a couple of crooked cops, snatched Chanlee. Nevar hasn't come across with the goods, so Dan sent him a message at the bottom of a precipice. Then Dan grabbed Fitz to ensure I deliver all 10 thousand users to Dan. Unless they want a bloodbath that will attract the attention of the whole world, both maggots will release their hostages as soon as Dan has the complete list and Nevar's got his money. One small glitch, though: I'm missing around two thousand users.

I must have collected the card, somehow, somewhere, or they wouldn't have bothered to snatch Fitz as a warning for me to quit stalling and deliver. I'm not the only one who can hear the hooves of the cavalry closing in. But how could I have missed one of the cards when Nevar has been so meticulous in orchestrating my movements? Unless he planted it on me before I became suspicious of him. Hell, I've been suspicious of him since he approached me up at the mountains.

The mountains!

Did he stage the confrontation with me on the mountain to plant one of the cards in my carryall? No wonder he couldn't stop grinning like a porch monkey. "Shoot to hell!" I exclaim out loud. His thugs took the whole bag apart, thread by thread, paint drop by freaking paint drop.

Yes but....

My bike bag was in the carryall at the mountains. But didn't I rig it up to my mountain bike the next day? Yes, and they're both at Mabie-Toogod's.

I slam my foot on the break. Whew! No one's behind me.

CHAPTER 21

"Fruking frukarama! It's not in here," I say, dumping the contents of my bike bag on the cement floor of Mabie-Toogod's garage.

"In order for it to be here, one of the items would of necessity have to be the requisite dimensions to hold a memory stick," Mabie-Toogod says, squinting to see without her eyeglasses. Her eyes are bloodshot, but she said she wasn't sleeping when I called. I believe her. Unless, of course, she goes to bed wearing a ribbed chenille robe over a black wet suit, with rubber gloves and a pen hanging from a rhinestone chain around her neck. What's more, either she's concocted a merciless way of torturing her hair, or she's dyeing it. Strands slimed over with purple guck poke out of a plastic bag wrapped around her head. With her, the weird is normal. What's really weird, though, is that her face is all dolled up. I've yet to see her without pancake makeup, or see her touch her face, come to think of it.

Kneeling on the cement, I go through everything again and again. The memory card isn't hidden in my comb. Or the tissue pack, notepad, lip moisturizer, sunblock lotion, toothpaste, brush and floss, nailclipper, bandages, scissors, mirror, measuring tape and tool kit. My pen! It's missing. So what? The card couldn't fit in it anyway. A drop of the purple slime plops on my pocket mirror.

I gasp. Mabie-Toogod's glazed-over eyes widen.

"Sorry, I just caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror," I say, wiping off the slime. I flip the mirror upside-down then snatch it back up, run a fingernail along the seam attaching the silver tone backing to the front and gasp again as the back pops off. I stare at the card in my hand long enough to feel a sense of relief. Then I pounce on myself for being too vain to remember to carry a mirror around with me.

"I have to see what's on this."

"Ostensibly you can navigate your own way to the study. My hair is in need of a thorough rinsing."

After putting the satchel back on the bike leaning against the built-in cupboards on the entrance side of the garage, I rotate the tires. The pedal catches on a door handle, pulling the door open. An empty box labeled *Paper Recycling* is inside. As I bend down to unhook the bike, the memory card slides out of my pocket and wedges itself between the box and side of the cupboard. I can't reach the stupid doomajig with my fingers, so I push the box back a

bit. The shelf moves with it, creating an opening just wide enough for the card to drop down between the side and plywood bottom of the cupboard. I haul out the box and try getting a grip on the plywood. No deal. I lean back into the cupboard to see how secure the top shelf is. My fingers light upon a piece of wood that moves at my touch, and suddenly, the bottom shelf springs up against my back. I touch the wood again, and the shelf goes into abeyance. I scramble out and open the trap door again.

I thought so. A safe.

I grab the card and close up everything quickly before she catches me violating her privacy. And whose privacy will I be violating by peering into this card?

"3971!" I say to my ghost in the computer screen in the study. "Beautiful." It looks like each card, except the first, starts with the last user on the previous card. But do they add up to 8029?

I take the pencil from an antique mug and grab a sheet of paper from a stack on her cluttered but orderly desk and write:

$$8029 - 6144 = 1885$$

$$6144 - 3791 = 2353$$

$$3791 - 1874 = 1917$$

$$1874 - 0000 = 1847$$

Damn, they don't add up. I circle 3791 and transpose the seven and nine. Aha! That's better. And I start again:

$$8029 - 6144 = 1885$$

$$6144 - 3971 = 2173$$

$$3971 - 1874 = 2097$$

$$1874 - 0000 = 1874$$

8029

Mabie-Toogod walks into the study as I'm kissing the paper. "Rane!" She marches over to me and snatches the paper from my hands. "Refrain from purloining my papers!" She places it back carefully on top of the stack and resumes drying her hair with a black towel. "You are making refuse of two years of arduous scholarship." She opens a drawer in the massive antique desk and hands me a writing pad.

"No harm meant, Aurora," I say and take the card out of the reader. "But you see, with this last card I can annihilate all the lies standing between me and what I love." As I get up to leave, I point to the desktop on the screen. "Your computer is almost empty."

"Correct. Due to the fact that I caught a worm, I'm riddled with the onerous task of reinstalling." She twists the towel into a turban.

"Rotten. If you need any help, let me know. Well, I'm going to Al's. Any messages for him?"

"Rane, it's after midnight. Let the poor man rest in peace."

"I can't go back to my apartment or--Damn! The Duke's got my laptop."

"Refrain from overreacting. Your security is not in jeopardy here."

"Well, I could use your computer for the next hour or so."

The over-furnished room with its dark paneling is somber rather than restful, but it'll do. I have to take a closer look at the card Dan mailed to himself.

"By all means." She gestures for me to sit down at command central.

"How is Professor Faule's research progressing?" She smells like she rinsed her hair with coffee laced with something extraterrestrial from her husband's lab.

"Hasn't he discussed it with you?" I sit down, lock my fingers over my head and stretch.

"He will when he's confident that in his research he has attained a sufficient level of probability worthy of my attention."

"Talking about probability, I've been meaning to ask you, when you read Al's employment notice on the board, you said you thought of me for the job."

"Yes? My explanation did not suffice?"

"No one else? I mean, you can't think of any other grad students or colleagues who match the qualifications as well as myself?"

She thinks about it then says, "As far as I can ascertain, you're the sole candidate who meets the sufficient and necessary qualifications--with the exception, perhaps, of myself." She shakes her head. "My Renaissance research is appreciably more extensive than yours. However, my knowledge of forensics is negligible."

"Right. Like the notice was--"

"Written with you in mind."

Our eyes meet.

Even out of focus, she must be able to see my aha! expression, because she says, "I cannot concur with your conclusion. Mere supposition." She pauses for a moment, then adds, "His Caravaggios?"

"Fakes."

Her pursed lips speak of her dissatisfaction. I had expected her to rejoice that no one is about to reduce her to the world's collegiate B-team with his stupendous finds.

"And his research? Spurious, or merely skimble-skamble?"

"Spurious. Although his research into me and my life has been impeccable."

"Hooligan impostor." She pauses long enough to soak up my smile, then she says, "He will hear your allegations--"

"They're more than allegations."

"He will hear you impugn his motives equally as well in the morning. Hence, I presume that his fraudulent scholarship is not the reason you believe it is imperative to induce him to become fractious by disturbing his sleep?"

"I need to see him about a couple friends of mine."

"Something untoward has happened to Fitz and Chanlee?"

"How did you know?" I ask suspiciously.

"Know what? An evidential conclusion, assuredly, but they're the only friends you've mentioned in my presence." *Right*. "A word of caution: You're predicating your beliefs on the assumption that confronting him on his turf, as it were, will somehow put you at an advantage, thereby obviating the risk of deleterious consequences."

"The only thing I have left to risk is my life."

She leans across me to pick up something off the desk, and I give her a reassuring pat on the back. Harder than I meant to. But I was thinking of Al.

The way I've been jerked around, my bet is that nothing, no one I've encountered in the past few days is out of the loop. Nevar's been suspended in disbelief at my inability to put Al in the picture. Bless Nevar's evil soul, but he just couldn't believe I could be that dumb. Me neither. Al counted on me believing in fairy tales. My belief was so complete, I didn't even have to think about it, I just walked right in with my eyes open. And by time I blinked, two of the people I care most about were ensnared in a fairy tale world where right and wrong are interchangeable, depending on the caprice of the sick fruits behind all this. Al, with his lying smile and lethal charm, is as much of a player as I am.

Aurora coughs away the sudden intake of air and keeps herself from falling face-first onto the desk by bracing her arms. I move her eyeglasses out of the way.

"This is a whole other side to your psyche that fortuitously I have hitherto been unacquainted." She holds out a hand. "My glasses, if you please."

She puts them on and her mouth drops open. She slaps her cheeks and says, "You have gratefully spared me the funest details of what is currently transpiring in your life, but one would think you would have seen fit to inform me that you expired since we last spoke."

"I'm in a fight for my life, not a beauty contest, Aurora." I stand up. "I have an appointment with him. He's expecting me." Oh

yes, he's waiting with bated breath. Only this time *he's* going to be the fly. And I don't put flies outside when I catch them.

My phone comes to life. It's Levi.

"Any luck?" I ask him.

Mabie-Toogod points to the door and says as she leaves, "I'll return shortly."

"You tell me," Levi says, using an officious tone like he's about to read me my rights. "Guess what I found? No red hat, no painting and no sketchbook. But you gotta hear the kicker. It's a real winner: Chanlee phoned in to say she'll be on the job tomorrow."

"I don't believe it."

"Why? Because it doesn't fit into your fantasies of being super cop coming to her rescue?"

"I--"

"Shit, Rane. Because of you, I broke into her locker. When she finds out, she's going to have the rat squad breathing down my neck. If I catch you out on the streets tonight, I'm going to throw the book at you."

"Did you get anything on Myrtle or Bernard--"

He hangs up.

"Here," Mabie-Toogod says from the doorway. "Take these." She shakes out two pink pills from a brown bottle. "Vitamin B12. Great energizer. No wonder you're in a lethal predicament. All those toxins in need of purging from your system. You don't require stupendous amounts of energy to outthink or outrun a miscreant. All it requires is the correct amalgam of electromagnetic radiation."

I go to pop one in my mouth, but she grips my wrist. "Turn it so the writing's on the top, and it's facing you. It goes down easier that way." I shrug and do as she says.

She reaches across the desk, picks up a business card from a pewter holder and rips up the card over the waste basket. "Trash onto trash, Almit Faule."

That's a more dignified funeral than I'd give him. But *Almit*? He said his wife's name was Alma.

"You know, Aurora, I could use your rubber suit. Because I can't visit him without getting into the sewer. But you don't happen to have an old pair of glasses I can use? All I want are the frames."

"Will a pair of sunglasses suffice?"

"How about a wig?"

She nods and smiles like she's flattered I want to look like her.

"Well, all I have to do now is retrace the maggot's footsteps, and they'll take me straight to Chanlee and Fitz. Who would have thought that Snow White would stoop to turning Mother Goose's breeding ground into a den of inequity?"

"Don't converse with me unless you're going to make a modicum of effort to be comprehensible."

"Interesting, isn't it? how we like to believe that any form of intelligence that's inaccessible to us is nonexistent?"

Instead of chiding me for being impertinent, she smiles and says, "Finally! Some words of sense out of your mouth. The vitamin is working already."

Turning onto Kirkewood, I make note of the van and rusted two-door car parked across from Al's place. But what really catches my attention is the absence of his car. That, and the Duke is nowhere to be seen. By the looks of it, I'd say the Studebaker and I are the only things marring the tranquility of this street housing children tucked safely in bed. Children who are replaying in their dreams and nightmares the blood and gore they enjoyed so much in their games, toys and television shows today.

The only light coming from the house is the street light reflecting off the outside walls. Wearing Aurora's butterfly glasses and fluorescent red wig set off grotesquely by Orvin's raincoat, I walk up the path to the house. Somewhere, behind a window, hedge, fence or other mundane cover suitable for a coward, at least one death-loving maggot is lying in wait for me, watching me.

In the porch, I ring the doorbell a few times and rout around in the hanging baskets for the key. No dice. So Al's been back here. To snatch Chanlee and Fitz away before I can free them? I try opening the door. It's locked. I cup my hands around my eyes and peer through the living room window. Back by the entranceway leading to the basement, a faint streak lights its way across the floor towards the kitchen. Are Chanlee and Fitz struggling for their lives in the basement? There are only so many places they can be in a house this size. I've searched this place from top to bottom--That's not quite right. I didn't look inside the foyer closet. The one that Al claims has a broken latch. Looks like I'll have to go around to the back and break in. I clip the corner of the box planter as I head for the steps. What a stupid place to put a planter. I pause, my gaze transfixed on the two planters flanking the door.

I put the key Al gave me in this one! I lunge for the one on the right, up against the side wall of the office.

Voilà.

Before turning on the lights inside the house, I close the curtains. Paint odor wafts through the room that still looks like a colorblind painter with a sense of the theatrical let his imagination rip through the place without missing an inch.

The closet door is jammed, so I kick at it until it opens. Nothing but hangers. I run into the kitchen and look for the source of the light I saw through the window. Damn, it's nothing more than

a toadstool nightlight shining in the hall beside the basement door. I open the door slowly, turn on the basement light and step down carefully. It's empty except for the paint cans and lumber stacked on the floor. Back upstairs, I tear from room to room, turning on the lights as my prospects of finding Chanlee and Fitz grow dimmer. Al's not here. I didn't expect him to be. In my wild, frantic hope against hope, I thought I could get to Chanlee and Fitz on time. But I'm too late.

I get Nevar on the cell.

"I'm ready to negotiate," I tell him.

"Where?" he says, sounding putout like I'm taking him from something important, too important for him to bother acknowledging that I'm coming to kill him.

"The Doré."

"Rane--" I hang up.

Pocketing the house key, I open the Studebaker door then slam it shut and stare over the top of the car at the house. A gut feeling is gnawing at my brain, that I'm only seeing what they want me to. No, not simply *want*, but *expect*. Well, their benchmark for me is lower than hell. There's something about the office window that has never sat well with me. Something's not right with the proportions. The window takes up most of the wall inside the room, but looking at it from here, there's plenty of distance between the window and the outer walls.

Nevar expects me to go back inside.

He and his goons are keeping their distance because they're cutting me enough slack to ensnare myself.

I know.

But I'm still going back inside.

I get out the measuring tape I took from my bike bag, and with my insides twisting and churning like they're being mangled by the tape, I measure from the outside edge of the house to the inside edge of the projection housing the office: just under 15 feet. Inside the house, I measure the office. It's 7 feet 3 inches wide. The closet in the foyer is 25 inches deep, but it extends out a foot from the outside projection. So 13 inches of closet and over 7 feet of office, and allowing for the walls, that takes care of about 9 feet.

Chanlee and Fitz are in the other 6 feet.

Behind the books lining the outer wall.

In case Al and any other of Nevar's thugs are on the other side of the wall, I stifle the urge to call out to Chanlee and Fitz.

I yank out a shelf of books and stare in astonishment at empty boxes with dust jackets glued on. In frenzied sweeps powered by mounting rage, I rampage through the other bookcases. The shelves within reaching distance of the desk

contain actual books. Ditto for the bookcase on the opposite wall. Al knew exactly what books I would go for and where to put them.

Nevar's not the only one who's snowed me.

With the boxes reduced to rubble, I kick the wall. And kick. It doesn't budge. The fiends reinforced the back of the drywall. What the hell am I doing trying to get in like this, anyway? That's not how Nevar does it. He just breezes in through an open door. Knowing him, there's a remote somewhere around here. Unless everyone's packed up and left because the place is getting too hot.

The entrance to the hidden room has to be close by. I rush out of the office and swing on the jamb into the bathroom. The passageway can't be in here. Not with the sink and toilet plumbing at one end and the bathtub plumbing on the other. And there's a glass-block window in the outer wall above the sickening red tub. My gaze lingers on the apothecary drawers labeled with body parts on the walls. Is the remote hidden in one of them? I pull out the *PIMPLES*, *OVARIES*, *NECK AND COLON* drawers.

They're filled with boxed-in air like the bookcases.

Fruk, why am I being so methodical? I grab one drawer after another and chuck them into the tub. And what do I get for my efforts? Demon angels looking their noses down at me as they cruise around a celestial domain painted with the blood of heaven's rejects.

Bloody hell.

I'm going to poke their eyes out.

After I blast my way into the secret room.

I run into the kitchen for a mallet, anything to puncture a hole in the wall.

All the cupboards are bare.

So is the table. No more photos of smiling Al and his oh-so perfectly nauseating family. Who are they really, I wonder? Never mind that, there's bound to be something I could use in the pile of stuff in the basement.

Zippering to the basement door, I nearly jump out of my skin at the sound of the doorbell ringing.

Orvin?

I peek around the living room curtains. It's too dark in the porch to see who's at the door, but the Duke in all his majesty stands proudly by the curb. I open the door and stare down the barrel of a gun. Even with his helmet on and the visor down, I know it's Orvin. So all along he's been working for Nevar. Just another leg of the Spider.

"Whaddaya do with her?" he says, like he's impatient to pull the trigger.

I take off the sunglasses and flash my raincoat at him.

"What took ya so dern long?" he says, lowering the gun, a vintage pistol.

"They won't let me play in their games without a full deck. Where did you get that thing?" I point at the pistol. "It's a Luger, isn't it?"

"Yup, from The War." He gazes at it admiringly.

"It's not loaded?"

He looks at me like I'm a royal fool.

"Put it away. Quick, I need your help."

He lifts up the visor on the helmet then quickly drops it back down. "Whaddaya doing with this here place? Trying out all the dern colors in the paint store before picking one?"

"This isn't my place. Where have you been?"

He takes off the helmet and scratches his whiskers. "You wasn't here when I came by the first time nor the second. So I got ta thinking I should lie low 'n watch out fer ya instead of alerting the enemy yer troops are here." I grab the helmet out of his hands and motion him to follow me. "I parked the bike down a-ways 'n climbed the spruce next door. Yup. Must a dozed off, though, 'cause I never seen ya arriving. I rolled up that there bike quiet as a babe so as ta keep from alerting the wrong folks. It's just out this front door here."

"Did you see anyone leaving?" I toss the helmet on the kitchen table on my way to the basement.

Following me, he throws the riding gloves on the table. "Not long after I parked myself up that dern tree, I saw a woman come 'n go." I turn around so quickly, my chin flattens his nose. "Yup, she knocked on this here door a couple times then took off, all hell bent for election."

"A tall blond?"

"Couldn't rightly say. If she had any hair, it was tucked up inside a hat."

"A red hat?"

"No. Darker 'n that."

"What was she wearing?"

"Are you gals wearing anything these days? She was driving an old Buick that was burning oil like there's no tomorrow."

"There is no tomorrow. It's always coming at us, but it never arrives. Never mind that, I don't trust how dead it's been around here tonight." He gives me a guilty look like he's let me down. Touching his shoulder, I say, "Thanks for watching out for me. But you're lucky you didn't fall out of the tree."

"Howddaya think I woke up? Goldernit. You might wanna sneak up on that there van across the street, I reckon, 'cause I saw it rocking, ya know, as if someone's in the back a it. But you gotta watch out fer the woman living on the other side here. She's been coming outta her house a terrible lot, spying on this here place."

"We'll take care of them later. After I find my friends."

I look disparagingly at the lumber and painting supplies on the basement floor. "Ah, there's nothing here I can use."

"This here paint what ya been using upstairs to--"

"This isn't my house, I told you. And as you can see, these are cans of white primer."

"White? That there's about the only color you--they ain't used."

"The office is white. But you're right, there's an awful lot of it here." I pick up a can. "It's full. I think they were going to paint everything back to the way it was before they rented this place."

"Now I getcha. This dern place was their warehouse."

"Yes, and I've found the secret room. But I have to tear a wall down to get to it. I'll tear this whole fruking place apart if I have to." I look up. "Starting with this copper pipe. We can bundle it and make a battering ram."

"I'll shut off the water."

I hold my hands to my face and rub my eyes to get rid of images of Al lolling around in paradise with a boy, a spider, a woman, a cage and an axe. Five'll get you ten he's sleeping right now, the bastard. "His bed! We can use the framing from his bed." I snatch up a couple of cans. "Grab a few, would you? We're going to drown some angels in paint." He hesitates. "Don't worry, they'll think we're giving them clouds to play in."

"What the blazes?!" He shakes a can up to his ear. "This here can's empty."

"The maggots have probably been storing the drugs in them." I stride over to the stairs. "Come on, we're going to need the tool kit from the bike to open these."

"Or," he says, putting down the cans, "we might wanna use my pocket knife."

Prying off the lids of one of the cans I picked up, we find smelly white primer. In one swoop I empty it onto the floor. Nothing was hidden inside except a river, pure as the driven snow. It trickles and flows around us. The rest of the cans are either empty or filled with 2 ounce plastic bottles of acrylic paint.

"Holly jumpin' junipers! This here is where they hide rainbows on sunny days," Orvin quips.

"You think we're surprised? Wait'll Daddlewood, the guy who owns the joint, gets a load of all this. He's gonna want to strangle Mother Goose."

Al's bedroom looks the same as it did when I searched the house this afternoon. Which means nothing is really the same.

"Empty," I say, looking inside the closet. I close the sliding door with such force the petrified branches fanning the walls spring

to life. I help them along by freeing them from the scroll pots and letting them fly through the air.

Standing at the foot of the bed, Orvin yanks off the purple metallic throw. There's nothing underneath but a stained air mattress.

"Ya reckon?" he says, pointing his knife at the mangy thing.

"Go for it."

Swoosh! And the mattress breathes some life into the moribund air of the room.

Working as fast as we can, we unhook the steel frame from the headboard leafed with metal made to look like an oil slick.

"I hate this room," I say with a nastiness that arouses Orvin's interest, if not his suspicion. The only thing Al said that was remotely honest was that he's no artist. Everywhere I look, from the smoky-foiled walls to the chandelier lamp by the bed, I see the pretentious hand of a dilettante who can't tell the difference between talent and delusions of grandeur.

Instead of throwing the headboard down, I slam it against the nearest wall.

Glass explodes before our eyes.

A piece ricochets off the butterfly frames. I jerk back, feeling like the rest of the shards are tearing apart my spine. Through the violent opening we gape at ourselves gaping at ourselves in a smoky-mirrored wall on the other side.

The secret room!

CHAPTER 22

Orvin and I exchange astounded glances and kick away more of the glass wall to get inside the room, an oblong box about 4 x 6 feet that's mirrored on all six sides. And in those mirrors we see a nude boy, thin and pale, sitting motionless in a tight fetal curl, his face hidden behind his knees and his back wedged into a corner. Halogen pot lights glare down at him from all four ceiling corners.

"What in tarnation?!" Orvin cries out.

"Kenny?!" I say, my throat choking back most of his name.

"But you--you're--" I clap a hand over my mouth. Oh hell, Dan used the life of another child as bait to throw Nevar, the police and everyone else off the scent. Everyone except me. He and his fiends have baited and stabbed at me to get me here. I can feel the knife in the unseen hand, cutting through the flesh in my back. They're setting me up to die with him.

I shudder, more from rage than horror.

When Kenny looks up at me, will he recognize the mark of death on my face?

He remains deathly still. I take off the raincoat and approach him. As I bend down to cover him with the coat, he explodes to life, hissing, clawing, kicking, punching at me, his eyes squeezed closed.

"We got a funny way a opening up this here place, but we mean ya no harm, lad," Orvin says kindly but with parental firmness.

"Yes, Kenny, your Uncle Stefan sent us," I say, getting a rush of nausea at the ironic truth of those words.

Kenny grabs the raincoat, hugs it to him and sobs.

"This here's the boy in the papers?" Orvin asks.

"What do you think?" I snap. "Yes!"

Yes, yes, yes, the boy whose tormented cries for help couldn't be heard by anyone who gives a damn, because he only exists *in the papers* where the evil is intangible. But this close, the evil is more than simply tangible. Like the fires of hell, it scorches the soul. We're made of the cinders of hell and have the audacity to call it stardust.

I swear on my own grave that this will not stand.

Orvin doesn't take exception to my harsh tone, because neither his feelings nor mine are of any concern to him right now. I take a couple deep breaths to rein in my unbridled outrage. As if all

this anger and resentment is of any fruking use, anyway. It squanders my energy, and for what? From time immemorial, no amount of outrage has ever been enough to eradicate evil.

"Are the creeps still here, Kenny?" I ask. Keeping his head down, he nods. "How many?" He shakes his head. Even if he dared, he can't look up in this place because there is no up. No day or night. Nothing but yourself looking back at you.

"Don't ya trouble yerself no more, lad," Orvin says, stroking the boy's hair. "We're gonna git them there yellowbellies 'n git ya back home where ya belong."

"To get you away from them, we're going to need your help, Kenny," I say, using a piteous tone that assuages my rended heart, but which also tangles up his basic dignity in the fine line between pity and contempt. "Will you help us?" I say, ditching the pity. Without looking up or letting go of the coat, he nods. "You can't walk on the glass with your bare feet, so I have to pick you up now and carry you. Okay?" He nods, but closes himself up into a tighter ball. I put my arms around him and lift him. His sobbing subsides, but his body shivers against mine. As I start walking, he unfolds. First one arm reaches up and circles my neck, then the other. Then he lifts his head but keeps his eyes shut. I hug him to me. Orvin guides us because I can't see where I'm stepping. But I can feel broken glass crunching against glass under my feet. "We're out of the room now, Kenny."

Orvin grabs my elbow and points to the bedroom closet on our right. The sliding door furthest from us has been pushed back. He pulls out his Luger. I shake my head and motion to him not to let on we've seen anyone. Then I point to the cans of paint we brought upstairs with us, and I carry Kenny back into his prison. It's the safest place in this hellhole because it leads his captors away from the exits. He needs a distraction from the terror mutilating his soul.

"Kenny, I'm going to put you down now." Orvin quickly cleans the glass off the headboard for Kenny to stand on.

The boy tightens his grip on my neck, making it difficult for me to breathe. "I'd like you to open your eyes and look at me. Just me, nothing else, not the room or yourself, only me. Please, Kenny, because we're going to trash the mirrors with paint. You know, totally slime them, and we'd like your help." He tilts his head back and squints at me like he wants to believe me but doesn't dare. With the dark rings under his eyes, he looks like he hasn't had a welcome thought for way too long.

Orvin places a bottle of paint in Kenny's hand, and with his hand over the boy's, he squeezes. Yellow paint splatters the wall, floor and me.

Who's in the closet? Al? Probably. Is he trying to escape or keep us from escaping?

Kenny unfolds his legs, jumps down and disappears inside the raincoat. His dark eyes don't shrink away from me. But he's wearing an expression on his colorless face that's hard to read because it's a mixture of caution and excitement, fear and relief, sadness and joy. Guess you could sum it all up in the word *freedom*.

Listening for any movement in the closet, I draw the hood tighter around Kenny's face and look for needle marks on his arms as I roll up the sleeves. His arms are clean. He answers my smile with a shake of his head. "They poked the needles in the other end," he says, his voice shaky.

Orvin looks anxiously at the closet then joins us. He takes Kenny's face in his hand and peers into his eyes. "We're sure as heck no doctors, Rane. We gotta git him--"

"Rane? Do--" Kenny starts to say then checks himself.

"Don't be afraid, Kenny," I say. "What were you going to ask?"

"Nothing. Rane's a cool name, that's all." He shrugs. I keep my gaze locked on his face. He must know that I don't believe him, because he tries looking every which way but at me. Finally, he says, "I know someone else called *Rane*. Don't have a hissy or anything, but she's not like you. She's totally hot."

Orvin doesn't bother to keep his smirk to himself, but the seriousness of the situation gets to him again, and he says, "Whaddaya feel like after they shot ya full a them there drugs, Kenny?" Orvin asks.

"Out of it," Kenny says like Ovin's a dope for asking. "They stopped doing that. Then they started to....They did other things. They started to make me...make me...."

No, they didn't start, they continued to mortify your soul.

He bites his lower lip to stop himself from crying.

"Where did they hurt you, Kenny?" I ask.

He shakes his head violently. "They made me...they made me--"

"There now, lad," Orvin says, hugging him.

"It's over, Kenny," I say, making the hug a threesome. "So let's really trash this place." He tries to smile.

"Before you start, you might want this." I reach into the coat pocket and take out his blue cap. He pulls a face. "You don't want it? It's yours."

"That's for old fogies. Everyone'd call me a *faggot*. It'd look good on you," he says to me then eyes Orvin, who swoops down, grabs the cap, plunks it down backwards on his head and starts squirting paint with wild abandon on the wall beside us.

Fruk. I chased down the wrong clue to the right place. No, this isn't the right place for anyone, even the fiends who created it. So whose cap is it?

"Kenny, do you have a brother?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "Sister." *Aha*. "She's four."

"I see." No I don't. Who was riding around in the Prius and Lexus with Nevar?

"Watch where you're stepping," I say, using my boots to sweep glass out of the room. "And try not to squirt anything on the pot lights. They might explode if you do."

Orvin keeps a watchful eye on the closet while he makes a mess. Kenny doesn't cut loose with the paint, rather, he writes out, **"Suck it up assholes!"**

"Uh, Kenny, you've got quite the vocabulary for a nine-year-old," I say and kick out more of the bedroom wall to get a view in the mirror of the closet.

"I'm eleven."

The closet door slides open almost imperceptibly.

"But you're no taller than a grasshopper, and the papers said--"

"I'm not short! I'm average," he says indignantly. "And if you believe everything you read in the papers, you'd better not read 'em."

The door keeps sliding.

As he turns back to his painting, he trips over the raincoat. Red paint shoots out of the bottle he's holding. I wipe gobs of paint off my red face.

"I think you spend too much time with your uncle," I say.

A shadow, birdlike rather than human, appears on the inside wall of the closet.

"You sound just like my mom." He stops painting and looks at me, fear gripping his face again. "She's not mad at me, is she?"

"No way, they have a cake and everything waiting for you. Hope you don't mind, but I had a piece of the cake already because I knew I'd be coming here to get you."

"That's cool," he says with a shrug. He empties a bottle on the headboard and stomps in the paint.

"We need something to move the paint around. How about some branches?" I hop over the glass into the bedroom and gather up the barren twigs and branches I had strewn on the floor. Edging towards the closet, I steal a glimpse of what's inside. An owl?! A strange bird, corpulent and dapper, with dimpled fingers. Al, in his inimitable style, making a travesty of a noble creature.

I turn to go back into the mirrored box then swing suddenly in the opposite direction. The branches striking the door thunder inside the closet. I kick the door open all the way, but Al's gone.

"What in thunderation?!" Orvin says, running up to me.

"Stay here and watch Kenny. Use your German friend if you have to, but don't let anyone, not anyone, get him."

"Both yer friends are on duty," he says, patting his coat pocket.

I smile over at Kenny standing half in, half out of his torture chamber. "The paint job's looking good, Kenny. Truly disgusting."

"Kick ass," he says, giving me a thumbs-up. Finally, a real smile.

Zeroing in on the closet, I kick the end wall closest to the mirrored box. My boot gets stuck in the thin plywood. I yank it free and kick again. Voilà, the wall comes tumbling down. The doorway is no more than 4 feet high, so I have to crouch down to see what's on the other side of the opening. In a futile rather feeble way, given what I know about the fiends I'm up against, I was hoping that this isn't what I'd find. But directly before me is a paint-splattered glass wall through which I can see Orvin and Kenny drenching everything in sight. A narrow passageway dimly lit by the mirrored room extends the length of the wall. Cameras and spotlights dangle from the cavernous ceiling too dark to be perceived.

Kenny's torture chamber of two-way mirrors may have been built and sustained *by* an insatiable appetite for drugs, but it was built *for* other appetites. Appetites too primitive to know or appreciate the difference between exaltation and torture, bliss and pain, happiness and death. Appetites too base to acknowledge the difference between yes and no. Appetites without subtly or restraint, that invade the body and consume the soul and the flesh in the dark. Silently, because the screams of torture and pain are heard as sweet songs of orgasmic bliss.

Following the corridor, I make a right-angled turn into another passageway. This one looks like it runs down to the front of the house. Peering at the two-way mirror rather than through it, I see a door to the torture chamber. A step ahead on the other side of the corridor is a glass-block window that's cold to the touch. The outside wall is painted black like the ceiling and floor.

I stop at the sound of a faint humming.

It sounds like it's coming from the room or whatever it is next to Kenny's box. I hold an ear up to the wall and hear deep, monotonous chanting. Then I tap on the wall because there's no light emanating from it. I thought so, it's wood. Probably plywood. I press my back against the outside wall to get the thrust I need to kick hard at the plywood, but I stop at the sound of tapping. My heart skips a beat at the thought that it could be Chanlee or Fitz, and it turns to ice at the thought that it could be Al trying to lure me inside. It's too dark to see any door, and I can't feel any seams on the plywood. Moving further down the passageway, I come across

another cavernous space that runs at a right angle to the main corridor. No doubt harboring more lights and cameras from on high. This cavern leads to the kitchen, or at least in that direction. But without any light, there's no way of knowing what or who lies ahead. I go back into the hall and kick the hell out of the wall.

Yeowch!

Something is reinforcing the damned wall on the other side.

I eye a patch of light cast on the outside wall about 5 feet down the passageway. Approaching, I see that the source of the light is a glass-block window in the inside wall. The bathroom window! Useless piece of crap.

The rest of the corridor has no shape, no end because it's smothered in darkness. I feel my way to the front wall. Then feeling my way back, I touch something cold, flat and round with my hand on the inside wall. The object, a cover of some sort, moves with my fingers and a beam of light caresses my skin. A peephole?! Al and who else has been watching me in the office through this cheesy peephole?

This wall feels like it's made of plywood too. So what's between the drywall and the plywood that's giving the wall the strength of a vault? Or tomb.

No one's in the office.

Suddenly, someone's running the other way up the passageway. The faint light from the torture chamber reveals it's Al, still in his owl mask. So he was doing the tapping. I run after him, around the corner, through the closet opening and into the bedroom. I lunge for him, but he kicks me away. Fighting off dead limbs of trees, I scramble to my feet, pick up one of the steel cross pieces of the bed frame and race after him through the kitchen into the hall leading to the office. I can't see him because he closed the door. But he's in there. I half expect to hear glass breaking as he tries to escape through the window, but I know he won't do that because it'll alert the neighbors.

He's trapped.

I turn the knob.

He locked it.

"Give it up, Al!" I say. "As an artist you're a dud, a complete failure because your work not only sucks, it's fake." With the frame I ram the door near the catch. "The only thing you know how to do is copy because you don't have any genuine thoughts or feelings of your own." The frame rips through the hollow core door, making a hole big enough for me to stick my hand through to unlock the door. "And as copiers go, you're destined for the giddy heights of shopping mall mediocrity."

What the hell! He's not in the room.

My gaze rivets on the smaller bookcase against the foyer wall. It must open into the foyer closet. As I tug at the bookcase to dislodge it from the wall, Al darts out of the bathroom and hurls himself around the corner to the kitchen. I chase after him, but he flies out the front door and disappears into the night. He's no match for me, not in the long run. But I close the door on him because he's just another leg of the Spider.

I have to free Kenny from the web.

First, though, those damned angels in the bathroom helped Al escape. I push their faces in with the bed frame then clip their wings and watch them flutter to the floor. One last punch and voil--A flake of paint lands in my eye. I chuck the glasses, yank off the plaster-dusted wig and wash out my eye. The water turns red with the paint Kenny squirted on me. No, some of it's blood from the flying glass striking my face. Fruk, I never thought it was possible to look or feel this ugly.

Instead of joining Orvin and Kenny back in the mess, I head outside to get a flashlight from the Duke. Somewhere in this deceptive tranquility chilled by the fall air, Al is heaving his body towards oblivion. I step off the curb into a stream from an errant sprinkler watering the street further up the block. The surface of the water undulates with sunlight bounced off a moon playing hide and seek with the stars.

The van across the street rocks. Al in his new hideout, I'll wager, charging up his appetites from the bottomless pit he traded in for his soul. Holding the flashlight as a weapon, I start crossing. But the side door slides open. I dart back behind the Duke.

A diminutive redhead in a business suit steps out.

"Lulie?!"

"What are you doing here?" we chime.

"Don't tell me you're mixed-up in this mess?" I say, having a hard time giving her the benefit of the doubt. I don't trust her sudden keen interest in my affairs. Or her solicitude. No one gives up the Duke without a fight. Unless they're using it as bait.

"I thought I could help you with your investigation," she says like she expects me to be pleased.

"What investigation is that?"

"Damned if I know. Can't make heads or tails of the comings 'n goings around here."

"I never asked you to make sense of it. All I asked you to do was get me a copy of the newspaper." I unstrap my computer bag from the bike.

"I've got it." She hikes a thumb over her shoulder towards the van and follows me. "It's the September 3 issue."

I watched a man fall to his death on the 9th. What happened on the 3rd that made Al so guarded? Whatever it was, it's none of her business.

"This isn't the same kind of dirt you're used to playing in, Lulie. There are no goal posts here. Go home." I fish in the bag to see if June's memory reader is in one of the pockets. It is.

"I've got pins holding my bones together, hon. I don't need anymore bullshit about how tough you are."

"What do you think you can do for me besides get in the way?" A car turns onto the street. I dodge behind the Studebaker, with her breathing down my neck.

"I've got all this surveillance equipment in the van--"

"Coincidentally."

"It didn't just happen to be there, I loaded it up in the van when I went home."

The car rolls past us, with two young people of indeterminate sex driving each other wild while the car drives itself.

"Were you in the house all this time?" Lulie asks.

"All what time?" With the bag slung over my shoulder, the flashlight gripped tightly in my hand and her clinging to me, I make tracks for the house.

"I came here just before 6:00 as you told me to, hon, but the house was dead to this world, let me tell ya. So I waited until 7:00 then skedaddled home for some grub and hightailed it back here at 8:15. I've seen some strange goings-on, but I never saw you coming or going--till now." Before stepping into the foyer, I point to the Studebaker. "Oh. You're the raincoat. So you came equipped with fishing gear. Catch anything?"

"No, he got away. What strange goings-on?"

"The bozo went thataway." Her thumb points to the left towards town. "I caught him with my camera."

"What strange goings-on?" I insist.

"A few minutes after I arrived here, I was watching the house from the van, and this tall--"

"Everyone's tall compared to you."

"Tall like you. Happy now? Anyhoos, this blond chick appeared out of nowhere. Just like that--" She snaps her fingers. "--she was knocking on the door."

"Has she come back out?"

"She never went in. No one answered the door, so she made herself scarce. Then she gave a repeat performance just after 10:30."

"You got pictures of her?"

"On infrared. Don't know how good the shots are, hon. What do I know from cameras? They're my husband's toys."

"Was she wearing a red hat?"

"Black, I think. She sort of looked like the chick who drove by the Ice Cream Emporium, but this bow-wow wasn't driving a SUV, she was driving--"

"Where did you see her pop up?" I push her out of the way to get back into the porch.

"She didn't pop up, I tell ya. She materialized out of the air a little to the right of where you're parking your carcass." I step sideways towards the box planter beside the office wall. "Stop."

"Turn on the porch light, will you?"

In the light, I see scratch marks arced on the floor from the box being pulled away from the wall. I try shoving my hand down the back, but my fingers can only go in a few inches because the box is attached to the wall. Lulie, who had been watching me from the doorway, jumps out of my way to avoid being pushed. I tuck the flashlight into the waist of my jeans and drop the bag by the doorway to pick up the bed frame, but Orvin and Kenny appear at the kitchen doorway.

"We're about done," Orvin says, keeping a protective arm around Kenny's shoulder. "We haven't got no more paint."

"You're wearing it all," Lulie says and chuckles.

Staring at Lulie, Kenny's smile turns into a grimace. I give her a sharp look then glance nervously at the bed frame lying on the floor within her reach.

"The kidnapped boy?!" She slaps her thigh. "I had a crazy notion that this is what you were up to." She gives me a sneaky look, like we're sharing a dirty secret. "You've got 'em fooled. The whole bunch of 'em."

Oh hell, she knows about the dead boy found near Banff.
Don't tell Kenny, you grandstanding twit.

Walking towards Kenny, she sticks a hand in her jacket pocket. He shrinks behind Orvin. I block her with a side kick. The flashlight finds freedom on the floor. She staggers then leaps forward, fists ready. I jump to the side on my left foot and kick into her with my right. This time she goes down. What the hell? She's only wearing one sock.

Kenny darts around Orvin and streaks by us to the front door. I grab him. Punching and kicking me, he screams, "I won't let you take me. I won't, I won't!" I grab his wrists, twist him around and pull him to me. Hell, it's not Lulie he's afraid of, it's me.

Kenny looks back at her and pleads, "Help me, please, lady! Don't let 'em take me! Please."

She pats the sleeves of her jacket, not to dust herself off, but to ready herself for action. Then she leaps towards me but stops suddenly.

Orvin's introducing her to his German friend.

"I never played you for this stupid," she says to me.

I turn Kenny around so he's facing me. "Kenny, we're not going to take you anywhere," I say like I damned well mean it. "We're going to call the police and have them come and get you."

"Yeah, right," he manages to say without screaming. Then he spits on me.

"If you're so hot to get the police, why haven't you called them yourself?" I ask. His expression has gone way past suspicious to downright hostile. "When I gave you the coat, I gave you my cell phone. It's in the breast pocket."

"As if," he says, frisking himself. Hitting paydirt, he pulls out the phone and smiles until I wrest it from him.

"You can have the phone back as soon as you tell me why you're so afraid of--"

"I'm not saying anything until after I get to make a phone call," Kenny says.

"Sounds like too many hours in front a the TV watching them cop shows," Orvin says. "We're not playing cops 'n robbers here, Kenny."

"That's kid stuff. I help Uncle Stefan and Darien sometimes on real stuff," Kenny says.

"Yeah, real cool stuff, I'm sure," I say. "And this other Rane you said you know. It's me, isn't it, Kenny? You saw photos of me when you were visiting your uncle, and he told you I was part of a case he's working on?"

He shakes his head. "You were on TV, and I heard Darien tell him that you deserve to fry but you're going down till you're an ugly old hag." No wonder Nevar couldn't stop smirking when he accosted me up on the mountain. He never noticed I was wearing clothes.

"Who's this Darien fellow?" Orvin asks.

"Don't you doofuses know anything?" Lulie says, shaking her head in mocking disbelief. "He's a PI." Some of the tension and aggression in her stance dissipates. "Listen, old-timer," she says to Orvin and extends a hand to him. "They call me Big Lulu."

"Ya don't say," Orvin say, warily.

"Put that relic away. The silly thing doesn't even look real," she says over the sound of her teeth grinding.

"Ya reckon?" he says with a fleeting smile.

"You don't need to strut your stuff with me. I'm way ahead of ya. I know you're part of the rescue team." He keeps the pistol pointed at her and watches her with red alert eyes as she sticks a hand in her pocket. She pulls out a chocolate bar. "Here, kid," she says, tossing it at Kenny. He flubs the catch but snatches the candy up off the floor. "You look like you could use a truckload of 'em."

He starts wolfing it down before he has the wrapper off.

With her eyebrows raised, she glances around the room, then she looks at me and snickers. "Like to paint when you've had a few too many? Or are you some kind of somnambulist who likes to express herself in the dark?"

"You're a real scream," I say, glancing at blue paint sliding off the raincoat onto a green and yellow footprint covering up Al's faux carpet.

She shrugs. "Kenny, tell the woman what she wants to know so we can all scam."

"You said that you won't go," I say to Kenny. "Go where? What makes you so sure I'm going to take you somewhere?"

"Because I heard this one guy say they were gonna get help to move us to a safer place." He grabs for the phone. I almost lose it to him. All of a sudden, Lulie's shoulder-checking me and the phone flies out of my hand. While I struggle to regain my balance, Kenny jumps for the phone flying through the air.

"Run, kid!" she hollers, kicking me back into the closet.

Kenny swoops up the phone and whips around to the door. While I struggle to right myself, Lulie aims the heel of her shoe at my face. Jerking back, my head slams against the back of the closet. Orvin zips by, leaving me to my plight. I grab her foot, yank and twist hard. She crashes backward, her head just missing the bed frame.

"Get off me!" Kenny screams. Good, Orvin's got him.

I spring up, grab Lulie by the jacket, haul her back up, open the door, shove her outside and lock the door.

Kenny thrashes around in Orvin's back-grab hold.

"Cool it, Kenny," I say, grabbing the phone from him. Damn. No dial tone. "She knows who I am, and so will the cops in a few minutes because she's phoning them." I chuck the phone. "Don't bother, Kenny. It's broken." He looks at me like he half believes me. I pick up the bed frame. "Ask Orvin nicely and he'll let you use his."

Orvin gives me a guilty look.

"Where's the one my father gave you?"

"It escaped outta my pocket when I was climbing that blasted tree," Orvin says, sounding as uncomfortable as he looks. "And ya think I could find that dern thing in all them leaves?"

Kenny reaches into one of the pockets in Orvin's jacket. But Orvin grabs both Kenny's wrists and shakes his head at the boy. "Maybe we should git him somewheres safe. This dern place is giving me the willies."

"No!" I thunder, ramming the back wall of the closet. It doesn't budge, but it makes a hollow sound, like I'm banging on a metal drum. "She's out there. She'll snatch him. There's no time to lose. If the police get to Nevar before I do, they'll let him walk. Watch Kenny, Orvin, and don't let him go."

There has to be another corridor between the closet and the office, because the peephole passage is barely 3 feet, if that. So there's at least a couple of feet missing to make up the 15 foot width.

"No need ta be so dang hard on the boy. He's in danger."

"We all are." I back up and charge at the wall, making a dent. That's all. "Didn't you hear him?" I back up and charge again. The wall starts to give. "The monsters slithering around in their caves were going to move *us*. Kenny said *us*. As in there are others being tortured in this godforsaken place." Orvin's expression that oscillates between stupefied and wary, turns to one of knowing, and he grips Kenny tighter. "To the creeps doing this, life is what their appetites say it is." Backing up with the frame, I look at Kenny. "And, Kenny, you're going to have to learn that life isn't about *just* you. The other people being held here against their will deserve to be free too."

His bottom lip starts to quaver, and he bites it. I put down the frame and crouch down before him. He pulls himself back into Orvin, who has to brace himself to stay upright.

"Listen, Kenny." I try to reach out to him with my voice and plaintive expression, but he refuses to look at me. "The cops are on the way. In a few minutes, you'll be able to talk to your parents. That's what I want for you, Kenny, more than anything. If you can get the phone to work, call them. But Kenny, I want the same for my friends. They're still trapped in their cages, very much in danger. We know you're scared and don't know who to trust, but I don't know who to trust, either. Except Orvin. I trust him because he's putting his life at risk to help me save my friends." Orvin holds his head up with his chin out, unmistakably proud, yet the cockeyed grin he gives me looks like he's trying to spell out *aw shucks* with his lips. "But you know what else I'd like? I'd like to be able to trust *you*, Kenny."

Kenny finally looks at me, confusion creasing his brow. Hell, I'm only making things worse for him. I have to get Chanlee, Fitz and myself out of here before the cops come, because if it's the last thing I do, I'm keeping that appointment with Nevar. I pick up the frame and charge the wall. This time the closet framing crashes down and the metal sheet falls back, revealing another passageway. It's painted black, and like the others, the ceiling recedes into an abyss.

"I need the flashlight," I say, turning around to look for it.

"It rolled under that stupid-looking thing," Kenny says, pointing to a garish cabinet by the kitchen doorway. He looks up at Orvin. "Let me go! I'll show you where the lady is."

The word *lady* electrifies my heart.

Chanlee's here.

CHAPTER 23

Orvin lets go of Kenny, but stands guard between him and the front door.

"Don't go that way, Kenny," I say as he bolts towards the kitchen. "We don't know who else is in there, and I think this is the way in."

Surprisingly, he listens.

I flash the light in the passageway. It's deadended on this level, but a ladder attached to the outside wall leads up to the attic. As I climb, the air becomes laden with chamomile and mentholated lavender.

Dan, you rapacious prick. You have an unfair advantage over me. Unlike you, I need light.

Holding back on the ladder so my eyes are just level with the attic floor, I pause to listen for any sound of life. All I hear is my breath racing to keep up with my heart. The scent of lavender and chamomile is infused with a plastic odor. More cameras? I scan the attic with the flashlight. Oh yes, cameras, in a cornucopia of audio visual equipment, most of them pointing down. Hell, I've seen stores with less merchandise.

Dan's not in sight, but then he doesn't have to be here to realize his vile dreams. No, that's not it. This digital brothel is for the manufacture of dreams he and his 10 thousand customers are too chicken, vacuous and impotent to dream for themselves. Someone like him always in the throes of ennui devised and designed all this? No way.

I jump up onto the floor and search for a light switch. Nothing. But the flashlight reveals a whitewashed cave of particleboard hastily stapled in place. No one, nothing lives here. All the black boxes with silver linings are mute, sterile, impersonal chunks of plastic that turn children's dreams into nightmares to feed nefarious appetites incapable of being satisfied. Moving as fast as I can, my hands trembling, I try bringing up an image on the screen of the camcorder looking out at the street through a peephole in a door covering an oculus window. No batteries. Ditto for the camcorders staring through a peephole in the floor. I give one of them the boot. Fruk, there's a black plug in the hole. I put my ear up to the floor and hear chanting.

Elevator music in hell.

"Orvin!" I shout. "Get me a branch from the bedroom. And I could use your pocketknife. Quick!"

"Coming," he says, his voice moving away from me.

I zip from camera to camera, box to box. With this digital hardware, it's not reality at 24 frames a second, it's reality at 24 lies and torments a second.

All the peepholes are plugged. Worse still, Al took the guts out of everything. The stolen lives captured by the cameras, all dead and abandoned. Without memories.

Except me.

To Dan and Nevar, I'm just a carrying case for the real goods, an instrument that hasn't had her guts ripped out, or her memory defiled then erased. Yet. My appointment with Nevar is an appointment with death. And I still haven't figured out how I got on the devil's wish list.

Streaking around the cave with the flashlight, I catch sight of a piece of paper sticking out from behind a subwoofer on the floor. I kick the box out of the way and pick up a folded newspaper with a crossword puzzle up front. *September 3*. The paper I got Lulie to check out for me. Most of the puzzle is filled in, but Al got stuck on **14 Down**: a ten letter word with f as the fifth letter, meaning light bringer. I brought Lulie into this with her own set of knives to stab me for a ten letter word?!

Orvin gets showered with newspaper pieces as he passes up the branch and pocketknife.

I break off a twig to poke out a peephole, but the twig snaps without budging the plug. I don't want to try again using all my force because there may be another mirrored cell below, and the shattered glass could injure whoever's trapped inside. I resort to prying the plug out with the knife, and I find myself peering down at the desk in the office. The stars are hell's peepholes. I unplug a hole in the middle of the attic and see Kenny's defaced prison. So I take three steps back and pry open another hole. This time, I see a shadow receding into infinity. I think that's me.

Another mirrored box.

I tap the glass with the butt of the knife. Like a genie popping out of a bottle, the glass plug flies away, and chanting blasts out.

Then Chanlee steps into view and looks up.

"Chanlee!" I say from so deep inside, it feels like my heart is speaking. She doesn't respond. Her face scares me because it's drawn, hollow-eyed and drained, like they forced her into a time machine that aged her ten years. I cup my hands around the hole and bellow over the chanting, "Chanlee, can you hear me?"

Keeping her arms folded across her chest to hide her nude body, she moves her lips, but I can't hear what she's saying. She

looks totally pissed off, so I don't think she knows it's me. I whip out my notepad and write:

You're a sight for sore eyes. Where's the door?

I shove the note through the hole, and she grabs it on its way down. As she reads it, her face blossoms into a smile of a thousand meanings. She kisses her finger tips then jumps up, throwing me the kiss. That really has to be the best kiss I've ever had. She points to my left. So the entrance is through the passageway Al was hiding in.

Clambering down the ladder, I shout, "Orvin, Chanlee's in the hellhole next to Kenny's. Cover my butt with the bed frame, will you?"

Running through the bedroom with Orvin and Kenny charging behind me, I snatch up the metallic bed cover. With the flashlight leading the way, I see that the corridor opens up into another black box. This one has director's chairs amongst audio and lighting equipment.

And doors. Two of them.

But no cameras.

While I look for a way to open the larger of the two doors, Orvin and Kenny look for a way to shut off the chanting.

Finally, my fingers locate a recessed button, and the door slides back. Slowly. Chanlee's hand reaches out through the narrow opening. I clasp her icy hand in mine. Then she squeezes her body through the widened opening and into my arms. Some people give hugs you can't connect with. Chanlee's not one of those people. I swear my heart soared out of my body to meet hers. I don't have to hear what she's trying to say. I can feel it.

Even over the sound of the infernal chanting, the sliding door sounds like a cage rattling. Holy hell, she hasn't been trapped in a room with walls, she's been trapped in a metal cage.

And I've finally got the picture.

Al's picture of the unseen Spider overseeing a caged boy being caressed by a woman who looks as free as a bird. Looks. She's only as free as a bird in a cage, because the sketch Al showed me was a close-up. Pull the camera back and her cage comes into view. To Al, I'm just a fly he's locked in the embrace of two windowpanes.

Suddenly the chanting stops. We all luxuriate in the silence then explode with joy. Yet the merriment only masks the pallor and shadows of fatigue on her face. And Kenny's. And mine, if I dared look at the mirrors behind her. She reaches out a hand to touch my face, but I clasp her hand and say, "It's only paint. It'll wash away."

Her look says she knows it won't. Maybe she's right. We've all been scarred by this.

While she wraps herself in the bed cover Greek-style, I make the introductions and wipe the mist from my eyes.

I give Orvin a hug and whisper in his ear, "Before I met you, I had two best friends, both of them lost to me. Now I have three best friends. Thanks for your friendship. I only hope I can repay your trust."

He pulls his head back and says with a smile tinged with sadness, "Whaddaya call believing in me, eh? You go git that there pal a yours. I'll stay here with the boy 'n cozy up ta the police." I nod and let go of him reluctantly.

"Here ya are," he says. He slips off his, er, my jacket, helps me into it and pats the right pocket. "There ya go." My fingers circle the cold metal of the Luger.

"You and I were getting to know each other pretty well without ever having met, right, Kenny?" Chanlee says. He casts his gaze on the floor. She tries to reassure him by slipping an arm around his shoulder and leaving it there. But a part of her has been brought to heel. She's subdued, not in a thoughtful way, but in the choking, silencing way that comes from too much pain. She catches me studying her, and her eyes tell me that the maggots have been sedating her.

"All experiences change us," she says with too much resignation for my comfort. "Some of them redefine us."

"Yeah," Kenny says. Chanlee and I are both surprised to hear him speak. Like whenever we grownups think we're saying anything important, it's beyond the ears of any kid. "I seriously couldn't stand my little sister, but now...." He lets his voice fade into his thoughts then says abruptly, "She'd better not be jerking around with my computer and stuff."

"Kenny, were you lured away from your home by someone pretending to be your friend on the net?" I ask for Chanlee's benefit because I already know the answer.

He shakes his head and says to Chanlee like she's the one who asked the question, "Uncle Stefan phoned and asked me to meet him."

What? That's not the answer I expected.

"Sure it was your uncle's voice?" Chanlee asks. He nods.

"Chanlee, you and Nevar didn't phone me this--" I start to say.

"I haven't seen Stefan since Sunday morning. He--we--"

"Chanlee! Don't you get it?" I say and laugh at my own stupidity. "Those fruking maggots have been taping our voices and using them to put words in our mouth." Her perplexed expression turns sour.

Kenny gets the idea and pooh-poohs it, saying, "I figured that out soon as the fat guy shoved me in the car." Chanlee gives

him a look that makes his head pop out of the raincoat like a turtle's.

"Wouldn't you know," she says with a halfhearted chuckle. "The cop is the only one who didn't get it." Orvin and Kenny stare at her with confused interest. "I didn't get to see or hear any of them. Did you, Kenny?"

"They wore masks and stuff," Kenny says, sounding impatient to be somewhere, do something, feel something, hear something else. "Except I heard 'em a couple times."

"Well, Kenny, you said you wanted the police," I say in answer to his and Orvin's unasked questions. "You've been sharing this prison with a cop for the past two days." If Kenny's surprised, it's masked by the confused embarrassment on his face.

"A cop who'd kill for a cola," she says, breaking out into a sweat at the thought.

"I'll be a monkey's uncle," Orvin says.

Kenny's face brightens, and he looks at Chanlee like he's seeing her with clothes on for the first time. "You were doing an undercover job, right? And you slipped up, and these wacked bozos found out and threw you in this totally wacked dungeon, right?" he asks.

I shake my head, and she nods.

"You see, kiddo," she starts to explain but catches my pleading look to shut up. She gives me the slightest of nods to tell me she understands that the more he knows, the more he's contaminated.

"They've got Fitz," I tell her.

She catches her breath then sighs. It's like she's breathing in soot because dark patches shadow her face again, and her breathing is labored. I give her a hug and whisper, "Dan's got him. Staying or going with me?" The mention of Dan's name makes her body jolt, so I know the answer before she says, "Going."

"Quick, you guys," I say, "we have to check if any of the cameras are loaded. Kenny, we're going to hoist you on our shoulders, and--"

"Cameras!?" Chanlee says like we tripped off a flash in her face. "I thought the bast--" She severs the word with the precision of an axe.

"I hate ta throw a wrench 'n all in the works," Orvin says, stroking his whiskers that have sprouted into a beard. "Where's the dern cops?"

"Good question," I say. "Orvin, go check out what's happening on the street. But don't go outside, and stay on watch there unless there's something going on we should know about." He steps around me to get to the corridor. "No, try this door." I go to the small door. "It should come out somewhere in the kitchen or the

hall leading to it." The door won't open. "Okay, go around the long way then listen for my tapping when you get to the kitchen."

"Why didn't you answer my tapping?" Chanlee asks me. I stare at her like I'm not the only one who doesn't know what she's talking about. "You tapped six times, I tapped five, you know, the way we used to signal each other."

"Ahh, right," I say. "Well, I wasn't trying to signal--ah, never mind. Where's the light switch for this room and that passageway?" That's what I say, but that's not what I'm thinking. I can't shake the thought that I'm only here because Al, Dan, Nevar and all the other maggots want me to be. And I can't stop asking myself why Kenny and Chanlee are still alive. Al and Dan have jumped ship with their booty of false memories and stolen lives. Why are they leaving behind the living proof of their crimes? Maybe Chanlee knows. But we can't really talk with Kenny around.

"We'll look for a switch on our clothes hunt," she says, leading Kenny into the dark corridor.

"Fine, but you're better off with the throw," I say, running my hands up and down the walls. "Al's clothes are--"

"Did you say *Al*?" she says, her head reappearing around the corner. "Your boss *Al*?" I nod, and she groans.

"At least you came into this with your eyes closed. Me? With the birds chirping and the sun lighting my way, I walked right into the grave they've dug for me. You're not the intended target." I try getting the tech equipment to shed some light.

"Kuan-yin. Once they've got you, their intentions are the same regardless."

"All this is his choice for me, for us. But I'll be damned if I'm going to let him chose whether I live or die." I give up my search for the light switch. It must have been programmed into one of these gutless players. The only thing Al left working is a DVD player with the disk of chants in it to keep Chanlee from hearing us. To give him lead time for what? To do what?

"By *him*, you mean Al?"

"Al, Dan, Nevar--"

"Stefan? No, no, he doesn't fit into this the way you think. Unless you've tapped into something I should--"

"Shoot, SHOOT! She wasn't knocking, she was tapping!" She stares at me like the elevator's stuck between floors. "A woman was at this house tonight. Twice. And each time she knocked instead of ringing the buzzer. But she wasn't knocking, she was signaling Al."

"The woman in red?" Chanlee says, finally seeing what's in my mind's eye. "You deciphered my message! I was wondering how you found us."

"Actually--" I start to say.

The small door behind me springs open and Orvin steps into our box.

"Later," Chanlee says and disappears around the corner.

"Pretty nears as I can figure," Orvin says, beckoning me over, "when the pantry door's open, this here door is locked. Look, this here's another passage up ta the attic."

"That's why Al was acting like a scared rabbit. He was trapped in here along with his victims. When I was looking through the kitchen, I never bothered closing anything." I'd snicker if my weary heart would let me. "Good going, Orvin." I peer up the black passageway. Some tech equipment must be covering the opening that I can't see but know is there. "Uh, will you please get my helmet and gloves from the kitchen?"

"You betcha."

I go to the wall shared by Chanlee's prison and look for levers, buttons, anything that will move the wall between her prison and Kenny's. From the look of shame on his face when she said that they have been getting to know each other pretty well, I'd say they've been getting sneak peeks at each other. To nurture a voyeuristic appetite, Al's been reversing the lighting in their boxes to force Kenny to see her while he's in the dark, then forcing her to see him while she's in the dark. The wonders of glass and a warped mind. But one of the mirrors has to be moved out or back for this to work.

I hold the flashlight up to the corner that joins this room with both of theirs. I thought so, the three walls merge at this point without touching. Using the bed frame, I smash into the corner, and a narrow door extending the height of the room springs open. Voilà: a pulley and chain mechanism that moves the walls between Kenny's and hers. A metal one is sandwiched between two mirrored panels.

"I'm going to keep watch at the front," Orvin says, handing me the helmet and gloves. I nod and put them on.

Then I stand, bed frame in hand, at the doorway of Chanlee's prison and breathe in the lingering odor of the gas the maggots have been using to sedate her. They, the lords and queens of porn, slavery, drugs and snuff, dream us up and set the stage for their virtual postmodernist theater of the absurd by annihilating every boundary they can think of. And we play our parts like we really mean something. In return we get to partake in the look, the feel, the touch, the smell of evil.

I step inside, and all hell breaks loose. Thousands of images trapped in mirrored glass cascade down around me as I smash everything in sight.

Just like that, I'm standing alone in a heavy metal cage.

*Al, I will never choose to surrender myself willingly, ecstatically to this. My life is **my** work of art, and I will never surrender it to you or anyone else.*

Chanlee and Kenny join me to see what the commotion is about. He's still in the raincoat, and she's still wearing the throw, but now they both have towels tied around their feet. He has the relieved look of someone who just threw up. Holding onto Chanlee, he's letting go, retching up the sick ideas he's been force-fed.

"There's nothing in the cameras on the other side," she says.

"The cops!" Orvin huffs from the doorway. "They're here. And that dern Big Lulu's taken off with the Duke and the van." All of us stare at him like we're deaf mutes. He's stripped down to his undershirt and a pair of boxers with pictures of a woman's face on them. He tosses me the computer bag I had left in the foyer. The wig and eyeglass frames are stuffed into a side pocket. "I told ya, June keeps giving me pictures of herself," he adds hurriedly, tossing his jeans and golf shirt to Chanlee. I hand him the helmet.

Kenny throws his arms around her. "Your family and buddies have been waiting too long to see the Kenny they love," she says. "We've made it this far, you and I. The rest is a piece of cake." He glances at me. "Go with Orvin." She pushes him away gently.

"Orvin," I say, "try to keep them out of this area for as long as you can. I have to check the rest of the cameras. If you need to get hold of me, call my father."

He nods, takes hold of Kenny's hand and leads him into the pantry.

"You're going to be A-okay, Kenny," I say. "Because you're stronger and smarter than them."

"Make scrotal purée of 'em," Kenny says as the door closes. Chanlee and I exchange sly glances.

"Grab one," I say, pointing to the speakers.

"As soon as I get into these." She takes her time changing into his clothes.

"You can shake a leg faster than that, Chanlee." I hop onto a speaker to reach a camcorder retracted up against the ceiling.

"Let the police do that. It's not like we don't already know what's in the damned things."

"Anything I can get on those maggots is another negotiating tool." My strip search of the camcorder is fruitless, and I rush onto the next. "There's no such thing as having too much to negotiate with. If I end up with six aces, it just means I'm playing with two decks to their one."

"All right, all right. But first I have to pee up the yin and down the yang."

"You can pee to your heart's content after we finish this."

No sounds, no cops, nothing disturbs us as we tear from camera to camera like fleeting moments being chased by time. Nothing disturbs us but a rising tide of panic. No time and no guts of any kind in any of them. Feeling as useless as a bandage stopping up a hole in a wet sponge, I whisper, "We should be able to make it out through the back."

"I'll help you get out, but I'm going to stay and--"

"I'm meeting with Nevar, and Dan's going to be there because--" I stop at the sound of voices echoing down the passageway leading to Kenny's chamber. "Shit! They've just discovered the caverns."

I bolt past her to the pantry door. "Stall them!" The kitchen's crawling with cops for sure. I tuck the flashlight into my pants and tear up the ladder. If the attic doesn't have another way out through the back of the house, I'm going to be trapped up there. I push up on the attic door with all my strength, but it only gives an inch then falls back. I jump down to get the bed frame and almost land on Chanlee.

"Why are you trying to escape the police?" she asks. "They'll bring Dan in."

"Unless I make that meeting, Fitz is going to die. I've got 10 thousand reasons to keep Dan from killing him." I ram the door, and whatever was on top of it topples over with a crash that's bound to attract the attention of the cops.

"You're acting like a fugitive. You didn't kill Dan, did you?" She uses the modulated voice of a cop trying to soothe and rearrange a deranged mind.

Throwing the frame up first, then my computer bag, I lift myself into the attic. "What would be the point in killing him? The gods are replicating him faster than I could kill him. If you can get away, meet me at--" I stop myself because she'll tell the police. She'll protect me and Fitz into our graves.

I shove the door back in place, throw equipment on top of it and zip over to the closet entrance. The scent of lavender and chamomile is gone, replaced by the smell of fear.

My fear.

"Check out this one," a voice says below. "It looks like it--" I close the door and pile equipment on it, then zero in with the flashlight on a lone speaker up against the back wall. It's the odd one out in this perfectly ordered chaos of plastic corpses. Looking for a trapdoor, I hurl the speaker aside. No door, only another peephole. This one with the plug out. I stare down into Al's bathroom. Where they made Kenny do "other stuff"? The speaker must have a camera in it. I rip off the face of it and yank out one of their solid-state camcorders.

I blink in surprise.

This one hasn't been denuded.

I pocket the memory card and freeze at the sound of someone climbing the ladder behind me. The closet trapdoor rumbles and shakes. I shine the flashlight along the floor by the speaker. There has to be another way out. Has to be. *Please let there be*. The closet door flies open, and the cave echoes with digital carcasses crashing to the floor. I don the wig and butterflies, turn off the flashlight--and my hope along with it--and step forward in surrender. The floor moves under my foot as I catch the edge of a board. No. Another trapdoor. As the cop climbs into the attic, I lift the trapdoor.

Shit, shoot, shite. I can't jump down into the passageway because it's filled with another cop staring up at me.

She's startled at first, then she smiles.

Oh hell.

Surrounded.

Cornered.

Defeated by good intentions.

"That you, Rane?" an unfamiliar voice says from behind a flashlight on the other side of the cave.

Holding an arm up to shield my eyes from the light, I say, "You've got me, where is she?" He can't be looking very hard, because the wig is perched precariously on the top of my head. "Nothing up here worth seein, I'm heading back down."

Keeping the flashlight on me as I walk past him to the closet exit, he says as if I were asking him for permission, "Go ahead." Instead of going down, I pull off the board covering the oculus window and look down at the street. Neighbors in their night clothes mill around behind the yellow police tape circling the area. They look and look in stupefied frustration for the crime, any crime.

Leaving, I drop my legs down into the hole leading to what? One delay after another, unless I can sneak by them all through the escape hatch. Yeah, escape right into the cruisers swarming the street. But if I stay low, I could cut across the porch and into the neighbor's yard--which is bound to be infested with armed sharpshooters. Or, I could just walk out of here like I have permission.

I give myself the briefest yet most satisfying of smiles, tuck my ponytail up into the wig and drop myself down the chute.

"You still in the basement?" the cop says, still standing by the door above. "We need some light....I don't care if *you* have enough light. *We* need light up here. Check the fuse box."

The fuse box!

Of course. Al broke the circuits to the cavernous porn factory. To...to....Why?

My feet are touching the floor now, but I'm not breathing easier at the thought of being a few steps away from freedom. It makes sense that he would leave his victims in the dark, but in the darkness that can't be touched by light. Not in this world. I didn't catch Al off guard and put him on the run. *Oh hell*. He was waiting for me to come and turn the lights on.

"Don't touch the fuse box!" I yell so loudly my throat hurts.
"It's rigged to blow!"

CHAPTER 24

All of one mind, everyone scatters in opposite directions.

Kenny and Orvin! Where are they?

I spot them nestled in the arsenal of police vehicles on the street. Then I jump to the side on the porch and search the melee for Chanlee. She whizzes by me, grabbing hold of my arm and yanking me forward with her.

"False alarm!" a man's voice says from inside the house.

His words are echoed in a woman's voice.

The panic dies down.

But I don't trust my relief or anyone else's. "Bomb!" I yell.

The stampede explodes into action again. **"Bomb!"** is a complete statement without attachments. You run for cover, then you thank the stars that you never thought to ask questions. Unless you're a cop like Chanlee, who questions the source. Instead of bolting, she eyes me like I'm a kid up to mischief.

I shake off her grip, jump over the porch balustrade and unhook the baskets of geraniums. There's no way I'm going to concede any life to Al and the rest of the monsters. As I'm leaping down the stairs, I wish I could kick myself in the butt. I'm acting like I don't believe what I'm thinking, feeling or saying. The only reason the maggots were able to bait me and jerk my chain is because I believed them.

My belief is their power.

Someone nearly knocks me over, crashing a metal box into my side as he zooms by me. Chanlee tears after him. Hell, how many cops were in there?! At the gate, I glance over my shoulder and see a shadow approaching the entrance from the inside. Without haste. "Move it!" I shout and keep going, with so much haste, the geraniums and I body surf the asphalt.

I gaze at the house. Calm, quiet, resolutely indifferent in the face of the tumult. Looks like I'm wrong. The maggots don't want me dead. They didn't rig the fuse box to blast me to hell along with the devil's house of joyous torments. Not me. I've got their 10 thousand captives. As the seconds pass and no one else escapes from the house, voices start to fill the restless air. One of them says, "Where is *she*? Let me talk to her."

"Never mind me," I yell in the direction of the voice. "Make sure the house is completely evacuated."

The oculus window lights up.

Oh freak! Someone turned the lights on.

"Duck!" I shout and violently kick over a uniformed cop trying to get up beside me. Then I cover my head with my arms.

Boom!

Flames lick the sky, and the earth jolts under and up through my body.

I gasp at the cruel, beautiful flames of evil flicking horror onto the faces around me. The wind teases, urges the flames over to the house next door.

A faint aroma of coffee flows through the hallucinogenic atmosphere, giving me a lift. To where? Up is just an illusion that leads us all six feet under. I dust off a fragment of green shingling from the back of my shoulder and pick up my computer bag.

An arm slips around my shoulders. "Here," Orvin says, handing me a coffee. My smile gets swallowed up inside the ceramic mug.

He's wearing a heavy overcoat, with a scarf and gloves. "That fool neighbor." He says in response to my questioning look. "She said she's the one that called the cops." He sticks a hand into the coat pocket and pulls out a phone. "She gave me this here. It's your pa's."

The coffee warms whatever's left inside me.

"It's a darn miracle nobody died," he says, watching the horrific, strangely alluring and mesmerizing spectacle.

One look at the desolation on my face, and his beatific smile vanishes.

"It's a worrisome commentary on our species that a miracle is what happens when our dark side doesn't win," I say, shivering from the heat burning my face.

"Maybe so, maybe not. I read somewhere--can't rightly remember where--that a miracle is the defeat of cynicism 'cause it gives the lie to what we're so darn certain is impossible."

"Hell, Orvin, I'm not cynical enough." I stare down at the geraniums spilled out of their baskets on the cold, ungiving road. "True cynics are *always* prepared for the worst. If I'd been more prepared, we wouldn't be standing here decorated in the ashes of the person who just got blown away."

"I thought they was all out," he says, tugging at his whiskers.

"Someone flicked a switch in the fuse box. And somewhere unseen, part of the universe is laughing. I didn't worry about the lights because I felt we were safer in the dark. But you know, Orvin, the more I learn of life, the more I suspect that darkness is an illusion. There are only realities that can't be seen."

He squeezes my shoulders. "Go git your friend. Go on with ya. Show 'em a clean pair a heels."

I exchange the empty mug for the cell and make a run for it as fire trucks, sirens blaring, turn onto the street.

"Rane! Wait for me!" Chanlee shouts behind me.

"Rane! I can't keep up," she says, struggling to get the words out of her winded body when we're a block away from Al's hell-sent message to us.

I turn and jog on the spot. "Go back, Chanlee! You'll be of more help there."

The fire lighting up the eastern sky behind her looks like a tempestuous sunrise. But this is a starless night with rain hanging in the air. And it feels more like early evening than early morning, because the lights are on in all but one house on this street that only a few minutes ago was just another sleepy retreat. Now it's alive with the fire threatening and beckoning everyone to follow the wind to the flames.

"You need my help, too," she says trying to catch up to me and her breath.

"Do you really think they're going to negotiate with a cop present?" She shrugs with her face and shoves her hands in the service jacket one of her more gallant colleagues shrouded her in. "Huh, do you?"

"I'm more than a cop, Rane. I'm also your friend."

"In this case, which one comes first, huh? I know you, Chanlee, you're a cop through to your soul." She comes to a cold stop.

"Keep moving, will ya? Stopping like that is bad for your heart."

She shakes her head but resumes jogging in place. "What you're saying is bad for my heart. I know the dangers involved with your mission."

"And I don't?"

"Yes, but--"

"*But* nothing.

"--I'm not on the job, and I'm not going to let being a cop come between me and your life."

"Really? That's easy for you to say when the decision isn't yours to make."

"So you've tested me and flunked me in one fell swoop?! All with the unthinking certitude of a fascist. You've forgotten, kiddo, that when they tested you for the service they gave you a chance to fail. And they're giving you another chance."

"Is that what you think this is about? That you made the cut, and I didn't? It's not enough that I saved you, I have to--"

"Why bring that up? It's not my gratitude you're after, it's--" She shoves me so hard I have to step back quickly from the curb to

keep from whispering sweet nothings to the sidewalk. I'm still blinking when a car swerves up from behind me onto the curb.

Not a car, Lulie's van. "Get in!" she orders.

Using different words, Chanlee and I tell her to get lost.

"Where's the Duke, Lulie?" I say, clenching my jaw as if she'll cough up the bike if I growl long and hard enough.

"The Duke?! Lulie?!" Chanlee says to no one in particular.

"Chanlee, this is Loco Lulu," I say, keeping my gaze on Lulie. "Where's my bike, you fuckhead?"

"Safe and sound where you'll never find it unless you stop calling me names," Lulie says and gives me a prissy, caustic smile.

"You're completely nuts if you think we're getting into that deathtrap with you," I say, turning my back on her. Chanlee starts hoofing away from the van before I do.

"Oh, I think you want to get in. I have something for you," Lulie says in the most unenticing of voices.

"Let me guess: it fits between my eyes and makes blood soup of my brains," I say, and trip on a crack in the sidewalk as I race to catch up with Chanlee. I'm getting so tired, my coordination is off. I'm tired of Lulie's bullshit, of running through a morass of evil. The faster I try to go, the more it sticks to me.

Lulie lurches the van forward onto the sidewalk, backs up, swings around and follows us. "Look here, back at the house I thought you were in cahoots with this piece of shit," she yells out the passenger window. "I hid the Duke from you and the scuzzball."

A shitty scuzzball?

AI?!

She has AI in the van?

I'd like to get my hands on the S & M professor. But he's probably using her and his carcass as carrots to get me and Chanlee back into the cage as sacrificial offerings for the Spider. Lulie has to be another leg of the Spider, or she wouldn't bother to dig up something that grows and thrives in the darkness. And dirt. On the other hand, she likes to amuse herself by kicking up dirt and leaving a trail of it behind her. Either way, no more nibbles for me. Uh-uh. "It's not your bike," I say, keeping her in the dark about my suspicions in order to give her enough lead to dangle the carrot.

Chanlee joins us.

"Chill, Rane. CHILL," Lulie says. "That's what I thought then. Hell will freeze over your dead body before I'd let you sully the Duke with the blood of an innocent child. Hear what I'm saying? Scuzzy wasn't the one I was set on hogtying. No sirree. Not till I got ta thinking. I know Fitz. He's totally not into boys or any of this sick shit. And you're his babe. Didn't hurt none that I heard the news about Kenny's body being found near Banff. So for kreessake, hop in."

Chanlee breathes out Dan's name, and I nod. She looks down and shakes her head.

Seeing that so far she might as well be blowing it out her butt, she adds, "That got me real curious. Were all you guys having me on, or what? But I had to scram because the snoopy old biddy next door picked up a phone out of the leaves, you know, like phones grow on trees, and she goes 'n calls 911. I heard her blabbing about people hiding in cars and in her tree, yadee yada."

"You're a lying moron, Lulie," I say. "But even you're not enough of a moron to leave a child in the hands of people you believe are mashers, just so you can joyride around with a scuzzball."

Chanlee and I approach the corner, and Lulie swings round in front of us, cutting us off from crossing the street. "Enough hemming and hawing," she says, sliding open the back door. "Get in!"

What I see disgusts me no end, but puts a smile on my face.

I punch the air out of a plucked owl, bound and tethered, with the toe end of a sock dribbling out of electrical tape sealing his trap shut. Or is it a stuffed goose dressed up as an owl? "Here's your chance to meet Al," I tell Chanlee. "The pimple on the butt of death."

Chanlee stares at him in disgust without smiling, while he tries to gasp for air. Against the blue-grey of the van's interior, he looks like a beached sea monster. The kind that dies violently, only to rise from the murky sea again and again.

"The unseen eyes," Chanlee says quietly. A muted voice, not in abeyance but in the face of the unspeakable. She turns away and throws a look up at the night sky that's lowering itself to meet us. The unseen stars are sprinkled with poisonous thoughts of him.

"Actually, Chanlee," I say, "he's had you hooked up to 5 thousand pairs." I catch Lulie's eye. "Did you have him corralled in the van when you were in Mother Goose's playpen?"

Lulie cackles and nods. "I saw him come flying out of the house like this demented beach ball, and I snapped a flash at him. Then all it took was a boot in his gut--Can't ever get close enough to a scuzzball like this to cane him--and kaboom! he was sucking up asphalt. Hauling him back up was the hard part."

Without warning, Chanlee reaches inside and tears off his tattered mask. "You! You don't deserve the luxury or dignity of being covered up." Her eyes glisten like mirrors lit from behind. She toys with the front of her uniform like she wants to tear it off. If we were back in her prison, this turkey would be stuffed and dressed with mirrored glass. "You've been disguising the wrong part, you dumb shit. Your brains are in the other end." His eyes, indifferent

rather than hostile, meet hers. Is it possible to get through to someone who's empty inside?

"Will you guys shit or get off the pot?!" Lulie says. "Someone might see him."

"Here, Al," I say, yanking off my wig. It was beginning to feel like mutant lice were waging war on my scalp. I chuck it at him. "For your next incarnation." I throw the eyeglass frames at him. "What's he doing in your van, Lulie?"

"Like I told ya," Lulie says impatiently, "I snapped a flash in--"

"That's how he got in here," I say. "I want to know why he's in here. And this time, don't take the tourist route."

"You're not the only one who wants to bag this babe," Lulie says. "The whole city's up in arms about the boy's kidnapping. The ones who aren't lusting after the \$100 thou reward, want the pervert shoved where the sun don't shine."

"And which camp are you in?" Chanlee asks.

"All I think he's good for is pushing up daisies," Lulie says. She tugs at her seatbelt to get it off her neck. "But I also believe in the law and due process."

"Sure you do," I say. "But your kidnap victim might beg to differ."

Lulie stares at me with disdain bred of thwarted pride. "I still don't know if you two shit-magnets are on the level, but I was hoping you'd take this crazy pile of shit off my hands." She keeps looking around nervously, like she's expecting company. "What about you? What camp are you in?"

"They abducted Chanlee and--"

"Shitaloo!" Lulie says, casting a sympathetic gaze at Chanlee.

"You're only wearing half your uniform, hon," Lulie says to Chanlee. "Can't make up your mind which side you're on? Or are you just covering all the bases like every other ambitious cop?" Chanlee's about as interested in answering as Lulie is interested in hearing an answer. Why would she need to hear Chanlee's answer when she knows more than we're telling her? But Al stirs and gives me a weird look like he finally learned something from me. "But you've bagged the wrong babe, Lulie. This maggot's just a singer, not the song."

"*Babe*?! As if!" Chanlee scoffs. "He only seems like an infant because the concepts of right and wrong are too abstract for him. All he cares about when he wants something is how much effort it's going to take to get it."

"Infants are way ahead of him," I say. "They have potential, and they're not moral cowards. He won't take a stand on anything because he's afraid it'll bore him."

"He's smart enough to know how to get around his conscience."

"What conscience?"

In the face of her passionate hatred for the man, I feel rather vacant. A mislaid leg of a Spider doesn't hold all that much excitement for me.

"Hey!" Lulie yells. "For crying out loud, will you two cut it out and--" Without warning, she peals out, leaving us stranded.

Not quite.

Two cops in a cruiser screech into her place.

"Eh, Chanlee! How's it going?" a dark-eyed beauty in the passenger seat says.

Stepping forward with a welcoming grin, she says, "Trying to get some space between myself and the past two days." She braces herself with her left hand on the roof of the cruiser and bends over for a tête-à-tête with him. "So, Smiley, what's up?"

"This your friend, Rane Lavita?" he asks, trying to see me through the crook of her arm.

I smile at him like he just asked me out on a date, and try to look like I'm too cool to fall all over him right away. He doesn't see the tremor in my hands, because I have them shoved in my jacket pockets. I wish I could see her face. Which way is she going to go on this? Is she going to buy me more time by lying to him?

"That was her in the van," she says, sounding like lying's her forté. "She's heading ho--"

"To 724 Belisaire," I say quickly to direct them away from the Doré.

"Belisaire Place," Chanlee adds, drumming the roof with her fingers. "Have you met Lulie?" They both look at me, both smiling for different reasons.

"Told you," the cop in the driver's seat says, sounding ticked off about being right. "Lavita has red hair and glasses." He gasses it.

"What do you want her for?" Chanlee yells to the back of the car.

Smiley sticks his head out the window and yells back at her, "The Sergeant wants to talk to her. And Levi wants you to check in with him."

With them still in view, we walk with forced restraint across the street. "There are a lot more of them where they came from. All of them hot-to-trot to get me to lead them to a cop killer," I say. She remains silent, probably because she needs time to chastise herself for going against her better judgment. I hope that's not the reason. As soon as the cruiser is out of sight, I grab her from behind, lift her off the ground and swing her around in a bearhug. "My bud's back."

"Think so?" she says as I set her feet back on terra firma. "Maybe it's just compassion fatigue, but I think I left her back in that room." She gives me a wounded smile. "I told myself not to look at the boy. I told myself I wouldn't. But I looked. That old Chanlee belongs back in the time when safe streets didn't mean disposal bins for needles, and there was nothing sinister about a nude picture of a baby. Remember, kiddo, how our parents proudly displayed au naturel baby pictures of us in gilded frames? Seems like a hopelessly long time ago."

"Almost as long as your face," I say, trying unsuccessfully to inject something light into the lead balloon enveloping her.

"Maybe the universe isn't nearly as linear as I like to think," she goes on like I hadn't spoken. "Remember how we used to try imagining infinity? No matter how hard we tried, we'd always end up thinking of a straight line going on forever."

"Right, until it occurred to us that there's probably no such thing as infinity because like the universe itself, it's always creating and being created."

"Maybe that's all cockeyed too," she says thoughtfully. "Maybe we can't grasp infinity because the gods are the keepers of the boundaries. Ya think?"

The wind carries my answer to the gods.

Ahead of us, a man and woman wearing housecoats over their pajamas, cross the street, in a hurry to partake of the disaster. I drape an arm over Chanlee's slumped shoulders. She points to the chairs on the porch of the vacated home, but I shake my head and start jogging.

"Time isn't my mortal enemy, but it will be if I don't get to the Doré before the cops do. Fitz's life depends on it."

She keeps pace with me without complaint. "We have to get him out of their hell. I know what he's going through. And I never want to feel that helpless again. Kuan-yin. Imprisoned by my self."

"That fruking cage was just for show. We enslave ourselves with our sense of sin. The difference between them and us is that the creeps get off on being a slave to their sense of sin so much they use it to enslave others."

Neither of us speaks for a few minutes, her unspoken words weighing heavily upon us. Then she says, "I never saw them watching, but I could feel them just as surely as I can feel the cold air tightening my face." She pauses. "I feel like my soul has been wrenched from me."

"To them, your body and soul were merely products being prepared for consumption. Don't give in to those feelings, Chanlee. Don't."

"I...I... They fuse a cancerous growth onto your soul like you're a lab rat. Then they record every excruciating detail as the

cancer consumes you, twisting, warping you into something malignant. Until you're begging for death to rescue you."

Death, tangible and merciless as a predator's breath on your neck, can it ever be a gift? Either my lungs are burning, or my soul has caught fire. Either way, I'm not going to feel comfortable breathing again until I get Fitz back.

"Out here, it doesn't seem possible that we could ever get so mind-fruggled that we would actually believe it was our own fault," I say.

"Insane, isn't it? But that's how the unhinged criminal mind operates. The perpetrators go about their business of destroying you as though they're just Wish Masters executing our wishes."

"Tell me about it. I played my part so well there was virtually no difference between my will and theirs. But we got a few things *wrong*. For instance, I wasn't *supposed* to take Mr McPickles over to my parents'."

"And I wasn't supposed to sneeze or make the connection between the paint--"

"So the sneeze was a message?!"

"You mean you didn't--" She stops and stares at me in disbelief.

"Keep moving."

She resumes jogging then stops again. "You didn't remember our old signal?! Remember? When we got on the phone, a sneeze meant DANGER. You know, when we couldn't talk because our parents or brothers were circling our wagons." She starts running again to catch up with me.

"Chanlee, we haven't used that dumb signal for at least fifteen years. My mom figured it out after about the second phone call. And why would you use the damned thing in one of your messages to Fitz? How the hell would he know what it meant?"

"He could have let you listen to it. Except, I didn't use the signal with him."

Trying to hide my surprise, I turn my face to the street and say, "You sure?"

"Uh-huh. Rane, I got mind-fruggled, as you say, but they didn't abduct my brain."

"Did you see him on Sunday?"

"No, no. I haven't seen him since last--"

"Never mind. Dan's goons chased you thinking you were me, but in your last message you said you had lost them and were going on your big date. With Dan, I take it? And he threw you in the funny house?"

"That wasn't my last message. The sneeze was. But you're right about my date being with Dan. I played into his hands by going along with his story about Myrtle's parents, you know, so we

could be together without being hassled by the likes of you. But as I was leaving the house, I decided to check the painting. You know, to see if anyone had gotten to it while I was dancing on fire in your shoes. And presto! there she was, the woman in red."

"Hiding in your house?"

"No, in your sketchbook."

I snap my head to the side to see if she's joking, and a branch hanging down whips the side of my face. Blood warms my hand. It's only a scratch. *But bloody hell.* "I never sketched any woman in a red hat."

"She's wearing a toque in the sketch."

"The only person I sketched with a toque on was--" I stop abruptly and stare at her incredulously. "--was at the bus station in Banff. The bum snickered at my work. But if you're right, he wasn't a bum or a woman in a red hat. He was your date, and my assassin. No way. What makes you think the three people are one? You said that the hat was covering most of her face."

"So I couldn't see her face. So what? I also said that she ran like she was arthritic. When I was with Dan, one of the things I learned about his--" She stops herself, covers her eyes and shakes her head. "I can't believe I reveled in his touch." She shudders. So do I. "I couldn't believe my luck. This wonderfully unmarried hunk just fell onto my lap. But there's absolutely nothing about him too good to be true."

I start to speak, but she rushes over my words. "I know, kiddo. That's what you think of Stefan. But I thought Dan was the most attentive lover anyone--Attentive?! The louse wasn't attentive, he was vigilant. Always in control, always on the lookout for something more to consume. Kuan-yin, why dwell on the hideous unchangeable things? It's just more mind-fruggling." Keeping her eyes covered with one hand, she waves away the thought with the other. "One of the things I learned..." She uncovers her eyes, but stares out blankly. "...about his body is that he's had surgery on his right hip. In your sketches, you caught his body weight shifting to the left."

"He was dragging his right foot a little, but I thought I was capturing the shuffle of a ghost with nowhere to go. Besides, it's more of a caricature than a character study."

"But Rane, it's your exaggeration of his features that reveals his identity. You gave him a prune for a nose, and Dan's is just like that except his is--"

"Where are the sketches?"

"Well...."

"Dan took them?"

"That's just it, I don't know. I left the house with them. And the painting. The idea was to give them to Levi for safekeeping. To

be on the safe side, I didn't tell him what I was up to or what was coming down. But I intended to go through with my date with Dan, you know, with Levi covering me. I never got the chance. When I opened my garage door the lights went out on reality. I came to tied up in the back of my car. The bastards used duct tape." She rubs her wrists. "My coat was pushed up around my head, so I couldn't do, see or hear much of anything."

"Sure it was your car?"

"Absolutely. All cars smell like cars, but like snowflakes, no two are exactly the same. My car smells like...like my car. But the cocky bastards left the cell in my pocket. Whatever they used to knock me out gave me a wicked hangover. Geeze, it felt like explosions were going off in my head. But I kept pressing radial with my nose until it started to bleed. I finally got through to you, and sneezed to warn you. But they punched me with a needle, and the stuff they injected into me sent me right into orbit again."

"If anyone but you told me that, I wouldn't believe a word."

"What difference does it make whether the three people are one? We both know that it's Dan, Dan, Dan, up the yin and down the yang."

"No. Dan's just another leg of the Spider."

"What Spider?" She doesn't wait for my answer. "You think Nevar is the Grand Wish Master? Kiddo, you can't seriously be thinking of climbing back on that old hobby horse?! All roads lead to Dan."

An image flashes in my head of me traipsing down the yellow brick road while Nevar watches me. In my chains. In my cool shades, protecting, obstructing me from enlightenment. Hell, for all the good I've been, I might as well be one of Al's victims stuck to flypaper. If I'm ever going to make sense of Nevar--no, not of him, but of this whole rotten mess he's got me trapped in. I have to deconstruct his actions stone by stone because he's built his life getting stoned from one day to the next. Or so Fitz would have me believe. Fitz...what rock has he buried you under?

"Your car was parked in Nevar's driveway," I say, trying to get back into the rhythm of what she wants me to believe and why.

"By Dan."

"We don't have time to banter with Fitz's life. Listen...." I give her a crash course in how to round up 10 thousand suspects while the Wish Masters send you their best wishes by jerking your chains.

Instead of clarifying matters, however, my efforts only seem to puzzle her. "You think the memory card from the post office didn't have any number up at the top left corner because it was the first card and it started with zero? That's a weird way of going about it, because if you just have that card, how would you be able to

reference it to the others? Unless all the numbers on that card add up to more than a client list. Maybe it's not a client list at all. Maybe it's code for something else, ya think?"

"Fruk if I know. Yet how could I not know when it's a dead certainty that it holds my life in the balance?" My anguish comes out in my voice.

"We'll get it analyzed. But if Dan's not the woman in red, then..." She pauses to connect the dots before my eyes. "You think she's the blond who was chasing Stefan up the mountain?"

"No, I think the woman in the red hat *is* Myrtle."

"And Myrtle is Dan?"

"No, because I've seen them together. Never mind that, Chanlee. We have to concentrate on the 10 thousand suspects. Don't you see? The person who hid the memory card in my hand mirror planted it in my bag the day I went to the mountains. Nevar definitely got his hands on my bag. And if Dan is the guy in the toque, then he had access to my bag too. Which ever way it goes, both of them knew I was going to be there."

"They can't be working together, if that's what you're getting at."

"No? Why not?" She catches my accusing look and quickly averts her eyes. "Nevar told me to think about who knew I was going to the mountains that day. The list is awfully short. Besides you and--"

"You don't think I--" She gags on the thought.

"Sunday, when you were being chased, you weren't trying to warn me, you were trying to get me in the line of fire so you could force them to play their hand."

"I knew what I was doing. I--"

"Sure you did, that's why you ended up being Mother Goose's little dog that got whipped for getting its tail burned. But even if you did know what you were doing, I didn't. And it was my ass you were putting on the line for them."

"You think--" she sputters with rage flashing in her eyes. Then in the silence that seems to stretch past all boundaries, the rage vanishes and she says, "I swear to you that I never betrayed you with *him* or *them*."

"I know." I touch her shoulder lightly. "At least I hope they haven't programed you to believe what you've been saying is true--but, and this is a big *but*--"

"You think I'm too mind-fruggled by Stefan to know where my loyalties and duties lie?"

"My relationship with you isn't about him." *Or is it?* my facial expression asks.

"It is if you have to ask."

We both try to hold our own while backing away from something tearing us asunder.

"Either way, it means I was set up right from the start. I didn't just happen to see Kenny with Nevar. I was set up to think I was seeing Kenny."

"Why you?"

"Proximity."

"Uh-huh. To what?"

"Maybe not my proximity, but my expendability. Because I'd been making noises about splitting for Italy, I gave them an erasable target. Just another hapless soul who vanishes on her travels."

"You haven't blown away any roads leading to Dan. And no wonder! You can't see past that wall you've put up between yourself and Stefan. At first I thought you were closing yourself off from his feelings. But you know what, kiddo? It's getting as clear as that dismal look on your face that it's your suspect feelings for him that you're rounding up and choking off. Talk about 10 thousand suspects."

"His feelings for me?! My eye! None of them are real. Sunday morning he said that he went to bed with Bambi and woke up with a Gila monster."

"He what?!" she says, trying not to laugh. "I can't--I don't believe he--" She bursts out laughing. "Sometimes, Rane, you can be so dense. He was paying you a compliment. It's a take on Rita Hayworth's line about her lovers sleeping with Gilda, the sex goddess, and waking up with Rita."

Oh.

Suddenly, I'm aware that I'm standing on a sidewalk in a collapsed reality without left or right, day or night, sky or earth, nothing but thoughts cruising at the speed of light in the infernal moment.

"Chanlee, while we stand here, Fitz is--he's--" Troubled, troubling thoughts dispose of my words. Was he kidnapped, or is he working with the police? But why would he work with the police to stage his own kidnapping? Damned if I can make sense of my suspicions. "Chanlee, is there anything you know about this as a cop that I should know before I confront Dan and Nevar?" She looks at me like she doesn't know what I mean, but I can see through the gossamer web they've spun around her. "Who did the blood samples on my blouse belong to, huh?" She doesn't want to answer, because she must have found out it belongs to a cop who was slaughtered by the snuff pronographers I'm pursuing. So she set herself up as a decoy to flush out Dan and the rest of them.

"How does it benefit you to keep me in the dark? *Shit!* My bloodstained skort. I don't remember seeing it amongst my things

after the psychos reassembled my place." One look, and I know she's wearing the skort under her skin. "You and Dan let the Watcher get away. Who's the Watcher really working for, Chanlee? Who are you really working with? The Watcher? Nevar? Fitz?"

Without batting an eye or making any attempt at being surprised or indignant, she says, "Been wondering how long it'd take you to ask me that. He's working with us, uh, with the police."

"Every corrupt cop on the take is working for the poli--" I stop myself. "Who? You don't mean Fitz?! I don't believe you." Oh yes I do. All she'd have to do is use me without Italy as bait to get him onside. But she's shielding Nevar, and I wish I didn't know why.

"I was going to tell you this after--"

Lulie's van screeches around the corner up ahead and careens towards us, followed by Smiley, looking grim as hell in the cruiser. We jump back into a freshly pruned bush. What the hell, I'm getting used to being stabbed in the back.

With the smoke from their tires still rising, we run in the opposite direction.

CRASH!

Metal crunches metal.

Then metal clangs and screams like it's being dragged with great force against metal. Chanlee whips around and bolts towards the accident. I hold back. Only for a split second. Then I resume my race to the Doré.

CHAPTER 25

Seven blocks to go.

Fruk.

By time I get to the Doré, Nevar and Dan could be on their way to conquering and defiling other worlds. The creeps must have heard about Kenny by now. But Kenny isn't the loose cannon they've been trying to blast out of commission. I am. I can think of 10 thousand reasons why they'd swim in a sea of narks for a chance to blow me out of the water. But they only need one reason to run for cover. I give Nevar a shout.

"Rane?!" he says. All he did was say my name, and I know he's peeved, antsy, nervous, volatile and looking for blood.

"Still at the Doré?"

"Yes, but--"

"Dan there?"

"Yes, b--"

"I'll be there in 15."

"Rane!" he yells.

I hang up.

The phone buzzes in my hand.

"Screw off, Nevar," I say, holding the phone away from my ear.

"It's not safe here. Let's meet at--" he yells.

"What?" I yell over him. "Can't hear you."

He swears under his breath then says a lot more quietly, "It's not safe here. We should meet at--"

"Is it safe anywhere on a spider's web?"

Ice pellets stab at my head and bounce off my jacket.

"There are too many police around," he says, dodging the question.

"Really? So why aren't you in custody?"

"It's you they're after."

"Do you have my painting?" I throw at him while he's thinking the other way.

"Uh, no."

"But someone working with you does?"

"Yes."

"Chanlee?"

Pause.

"Who gives a damn about the painting? It's not worth--"

A cop car joins me on the sidewalk from behind.

Maldoon's voice booms through a speaker, "Boss wants to see y--" He swerves to avoid wrapping the cruiser's front end around a fire hydrant. The side mirror catches the sleeve of my jacket, swinging me around. The twisting motion of my body frees the jacket and the phone. It says a big *hello!* to the sidewalk. That's one way to turn Nevar off. I bolt for the intersection. Maldoon tears after me like his life depends on finishing what he was saying. As in: *the boss wants to see me dead*. If he doesn't use his superior power and speed to mow me down before then, I'll turn south at the corner, run like hell long enough to get him to follow suit, then do a sharp about-face and head north away from the Doré. The headlights of an approaching vehicle blind me as I cut a tight corner, stretching every muscle past the max to avert being slammed out of this world by one of Nevar's goons.

"What are you waiting for?" Lulie screams from behind the headlights.

The side door is open. She slows down just enough to let me take a flying leap into the van. Then she smokes it. My feet land on Al's bedimpled face. Through the back window, I watch Maldoon tear south--without slowing down.

"Doesn't look like he's going to pursue us," I say, too suspicious and mystified to be relieved.

"Probably been called to help his buds out at the accident," she says. "If they haven't already mailed themselves to hell." She chuckles, then in the rearview flashes me a self-satisfied grin.

Al gives me a look of comprehension worthy of a walrus in need of feeding. I don't trust her determination or reasons for rounding up this gift-wrapped lame duck and offering him to me. If due process was all she was concerned about, she would be stealing the show at the bomb site, by dumping him on the ashes as the last torment rages. For her own reasons, which I'm sure have nothing to do with the law, she's trying to take up the same space as me. She doesn't leave any room for trust. What I trust is Orvin's friend in my pocket. We catch each other's leery gaze in the rearview, and I give her my address.

"So, Al," I say. "Wish you wouldn't look at me like that. It makes my heart go pitter-patter and my stomach growl."

His eyebrows hang down, still and broken.

Turning my attention to Lulie, I say, "You're stirring up grief for all of us by taking off like a crazed bat out of hell. The cops don't take too kindly to hit-and-run drivers."

"Unless they're the ones doing the hitting 'n runnin'," she says.

Even with the seats folded back into the floor, the monster out-of-his-element is taking up most of the space back here. Where the hell am I supposed to sit?

"They took the corner too wide and did an up-close and way too personal with the back end of a truck parked on the street," Lulie sings on in a smoky key that's uniquely hers. "Then trying to back out of the mess, the cluck-clucks tried mailing themselves in a postal box that grabbed hold of their tail and wouldn't let go nohow." I don't say anything right away, so she adds after a few har-hars, "What's the bright idea of siccing them on me?"

"Fitz."

I don't hear her speak, but I see her fold into herself as his name caresses her lips. She knows something about his disappearance. So does Al, but for him truth is what you lie about.

"Who told you he was taken hostage?" I ask.

"You did."

"Like hell I did. I never mentioned his name."

"Duh."

"You can deduce a lot from the absence of something, I suppose, but nothing I said or didn't say spells out *hostage*. When was the last time you saw him?"

"On Saturday when we made the trade for the Duke."

She's only making a half-assed effort to convince me, but if what she's saying is true, then I must have been the last one to see him before he disappeared. No. He put the Duke in Stanley's care. When, though?

"When on Saturday?" I ask.

"He--"

"Cut the bullshit! You're going in the opposite direction to the Doré."

"Thanks to you, this van's way too hot. I have to do a switcheroo with the Duke. Mind chilling, hon?"

"You put the Duke out on these roads, and the three of us will hydroplane slick as hell through the pearly gates." The sleet pelts the windows like the gods are coming to get us.

"You should have thought of that when you turned the cops on me. So unless you've got any other bright ideas, shut up."

In the rearview, I watch her eyes, restless, alert, steeled for instant misery. I can't say that I like her all that much, but I admire her audacity. She drives like she has nerves of steel and the wings of Al's angels.

One little nudge from Orvin's friend and she'd spin around on a dime, but she's right about the van. What the hell, I could use the time to squeeze some shit out of my pal, Al. If ever there was a gift horse that deserves to be kicked in the mouth.... And I should forearm myself with the contents of the memory card I found in the

attic. I'm pretty sure it was left behind for me. As a trump card or the card that ruins the flush? My talk with Chanlee has left me in the dark. The darkness that comes from crashing through a level of consciousness. A raw, primeval, filthy, sickening, pestilence is oozing all over my thoughts, making me question whether they're mine.

Time for a little diversion.

"So, Al," I say. "How do you propose to get out of this, huh? I can see that you're stumped like you were with 14 Down in your crossword." I lean forward and lower my voice conspiratorially. "For about two weeks now you've been savoring the moment when you finally figure out the answer for yourself. But because I know how much you love pain, I'm going to hit you where it really hurts." His throat emits this toothless, candyass growl. "Shh, you don't have to thank me now. Wait till I give you the answer." I whisper it in his ear.

He throws death wishes at me with his eyes.

"Feel like giving up your pet role as Mother Goose's retarded son?" I ask. "How about playing a guinea pig instead? I have a theory I'd like to test. Your limitless passion for pain will guarantee you a knighthood in hell, never fear. But I'm curious to know whether your passion for inflicting pain on others comes from your inability to feel your own."

I reach into my jacket and pull out two peephole plugs I took from the attic to poke his eyes out if I ever got the chance.

"What are those?" Lulie asks.

"Eye-candy and ball ticklers for psychopaths," I reply.

With him watching, first with a defiant kind of interest, I point the black butts at his face. "Ever seen a more beautiful pair of eyes?" I say and smile like I'm giving candy to a baby. "First you kiss these, then you kiss the dust." In a flash, his eyes fill with terror--what he sees as sensual fire in the eyes of his victims. "Gee, Al, I haven't even started yet, and you've already proved my theory wrong. Obviously, your love affair with pain is limited to trying to get others to do your suffering for you." I tickle his chin with the sock dribbling out of his mouth. His jaw, turning to petrified putty with tension, vibrates from a deep-throated growl. "I know you don't believe in Burke's dictum about everyone having the right to be protected from their own stupidity. But guess what? Neither do I, Al. I can't think of any reason to resist your eyes begging me to brand you with your love of insulting and torturing the body. I can see that you're dying for a love poem, so ardent it will make your soul take flight."

His neck, waist and ankles are tethered to the floor and his arms are cinched behind his back, so his attempts to rid himself of my ardent attention and allurements are in vain. "The art of torture

is to make the excruciating moments last, right, Almit? Or is it *Alma*?" I press the plugs against his eyelids. His whole body stiffens and quavers. "Like what you see, my sweet? Am I whetting your taste for suffering? Is it excruciating enough for you?" He grunts, his nostrils flaring, his pores oozing. I increase the pressure. "Let me know when this starts to bore you. I have countless imaginings of what I can do with this fine set of eyes. Oh dear, you're making them sweaty. But that's what happens when you give me the liberty to use and abuse your body without any restrictions. Ooo, keep it up, keep it up, Alma. Your stifled cries are moans of ecstasy to these eyes watching you flower."

His eyes, pleading, desperate in the crudest way, look past me to my silently approving audience in the front of the van. "You're in luck, Alma," I say. "We're the most understanding, compassionate, empathetic of watchers. And not a spider amongst us."

"Whatever you do," Lulie says, "don't trash him. Not in my van. And no mess. He's not here, remember?"

"Funny, but I'm not here either," I say. "No wonder you and I were destined to meet, Alma."

His body, racked with anticipation of what is and isn't bound to come, begins to convulse. "Oh, Alma, cool it with your cries of praise for the indomitable, unrelenting, incredible decency of my art," I continue. "There's a stench in the winds of your fanatic lust for more." I ease the pressure. He breathes with relief so intensely the air blasts out his nostrils in spastic snorts. "Which is your favorite: this way, or this?" Putting the plugs together, I roll them up and down his neck, softy, slowly suffocating him. His bulging eyes show no particular preference. "Want me to stop?" I ask. He's too choked off from his sanity to nod with any enthusiasm. "Sure? As a purveyor of human flesh, you know that when you say *no more*, you're only asking for more. Your body is dying for more: willingly surrendering your life, Alma, to transform you into nothing but a useless, unwanted thought of me. A perfectly thankless, pointless, worthless ascetic."

He escapes by passing out. A windbag choking on his own contaminated air.

He's too easy to kill.

It would be sooo easy to choke the truth out of him. What truth, though? Reality is a moving target.

The truth is, I don't want the murder of this empty carcass on my hands. We don't get to keep the lives we take, but we have to take them to hell with us. Screw that. My heart and soul are with Fitz. Well, that doesn't explain why I feel suspended like the rain stealing out of the sky into the wind. Everything I feel, deep and

superficial, exalted and base, is being consumed by my hatred of the Spider.

"Cruddy balls, Rane," Lulie says. "You didn't go and cock up his toes?!"

"He just fainted from too much ecstasy."

Her driving and griping ease up.

I feel him up, looking for his wallet. "Didn't he have any ID on him?"

"Here." Lulie tosses back a black wallet. "Nothing to get excited about, hon."

She's right. I toss it back.

"What's his real name?" she asks.

"Beats me. I'll give you 10 thousand guesses."

I pick up the peeper plugs then stamp the sweaty butts onto his forehead. A residue of black paint remains on his skin, like two hollow eyes drilled into his head. But the tacky paint on the plugs lifted up part of his eyebrows. Reaching over, I pluck a couple of his remaining brow hairs and look at them with the flashlight. The roots are made of glue. I reach for an eyelash and voilà, several come unglued. He must paste on each and everyone of these suckers everyday. I try to lift up his hairline, but all I get is a peek because his rug is woven on. Shit, shoot, shite, what would the universe be like if gravity were as powerful a force as vanity?

The plucked goose stirs and opens his eyes.

"Al, Almit, Alma," I say. "You give a whole new meaning to the phrase *cut and paste*. How did a slimeball as ugly as you ever get to be so conceited that you actually believe you're special? So special you have the right to do to others what no one in their right mind would be able to do to you without puking."

"No getting away from it, Scuzzy," Lulie says. "You're one intolerably ugly pansy."

"You're not a pansy, are you, *Alma*?" I say. He looks at me like he's savoring a tragic ending for me. "He shoots his wad off at every increment on the Kinsey scale and right off both ends. Isn't that right, hotshot?"

"Ah-so, the dunghill's not gay, he's an omnivore," she says.

"Yesss sirree, Scuzzy, you're one butt ugly omnivore with so many folds on your butt, you could open up a bakery and sell your buns by the dozen."

So far, no cops. When she concentrates on her driving, her faults become invisible and the van becomes one with the night wind.

I leave the plugs on his eyes for him to push away with his limbless terror. Then I push back Lulie's camera equipment to make room for myself, and I sit back cross-legged against the side door, the computer bag on my lap. I retrieve the camcorder card from my

pocket and pop it into the reader. "You're going to help decipher what you left behind for me," I say to him. "Don't know how much help you'll be when you don't know how to move your lips without lying. If your body needed sincerity to stay together, Alma, you'd be a pile of bones and other rubbish in the gutter." I rip the tape off his mouth and the sock comes with it.

"Heavens! That's better," he says, gulping down the crowded air like he's the only one allowed to have it.

"Shut up!" Lulie says. "Life is as close as you're ever going to get to heaven."

Gluttonous predator that he is, he keeps gulping air. "You know, Alma, you're just a common thief," I say. The memory card isn't empty, but the only pictures coming up on the screen are of Al's demonic bathroom. With no one in it. He must have recorded over something he didn't want the wrong eyes to see.

"That I am not. No," he says.

"You're stealing every time you breathe, and the space you're taking up is nothing short of thievery," Lulie says. That's not quite what I was going to say, but it'll do. "Crazy pile of shit." With every word, she sounds more and more like all she wants to do is lose her temper.

"Crazy is one plea he can't cop," I say. "Alma here is certifiably sane. He just does whatever his heartless body desires." If thoughts and actions without feeling can qualify as desire. "A question for you, Al. Why did you try to incinerate me in your inferno back there? Nevar knows I have his 10 thousand customers."

His eyes, as inviting as mucus-infested putty, relay a vile message to me.

"You're hesitating, Al," I say. The more I see of the bathroom on the screen, the less I wonder what it would feel like to drop a load in hell.

"No, my sweet," he says, his voice dripping acid, "you are. You took your eyes off me."

"He's got you there," Lulie says. "You didn't finish choking him with those whatsits. But say, arse face, how does it feel to be taken as a hostage instead of being the taker?"

"Everyone gets taken," he says. "Oh yes, all of us we are all being held hostage by life."

"By death, you mean, fathead," Lulie says.

Al and I exchange glances. We both know he means *life*, but we let her correction stand.

"Tell me, Al, does anyone know how to get out of this universe dead or alive?" I ask.

"Art it takes us to the truth beyond the illusion of reality," he says with professorial condescension.

"This from the man who holds the truth hostage in his wacked brain," I say and tsk, tsk. "You're confusing reality with the universe. You can leave any number of realities without leaving the universe, you dumb fruk. Do you really believe that by confabulating reality in your maggot-infested head, that you can actually free yourself of any and all consequences of your actions?! Oh, but you're Caravaggio incarnate, the great creator of waspwaisted auto-erotic realities." I snap my fingers in his face. "I keep forgetting, you wallow in the realm of the gods where the rules of human existence don't apply." I shove my face into his and yell, "But, you pious fraud, all the gods that ever were and ever will be are as trapped as the rest of us because without any universes what are the gods? Where are they?" I pull back, a wound-up top. I glare into his eyes and come up with a blank. "You don't give a shit about anything. You can't even muster up enough interest in your own lies to defend them."

"Silly twat, believing it matters a whit. Life it is a one-way street, would you not say? Rant and rave all you want, nothing stops the relentless inexorable march into nothingness."

"You're always coming up with ways of being less than what you are."

"Less is more of nothing."

"You can't take refuge in your soul because you can't find it. Some people get off on escaping their nothingness through porn. But you, Al, escape into madness. I'm getting your point, though. You're nothing in this setup. Nothing but an obsessive-compulsive twitch of the Spider. Who's been coaching you?"

"You, you want answers, my sweet? Make them up like everyone else does, yes? Make them up the way you make believe that the gods they do not lie."

"And may the truth rest in eternal peace," Lulie interjects.

"The gods they do not give reasons for anything," Al says, "because there is no reason for anything."

"Ah, but there's an excuse for everything," I say.

"And you, you create a god for every excuse," he says.

"No I don't, but so what if I did? At least I don't incur my own disapproval then blame the gods like you do." Flipping hell, the thought of killing him is too palpable. I take a couple long, slow breaths. Not that it does much good. There's something incredibly exasperating and unsatisfying about knowing that killing him would be an unnecessary duplication. "You know, Al, you have the most modern and fashionable of diseases. No matter what you do, where you go or how much stuff you accumulate in that body of yours, you're always bored. Bored silly, bored out of your mind."

He smiles like I hit the nail on the head, but what he's really hearing is me racking up nails in his coffin.

"Wanna be seduced, huh, Almit?" I go on. "Well, tough shit. You're always in the throes of ennui. The only thing you can really feel is the mindless terror of boredom. Even death doesn't do it for you. Hell no, to you death is life's little treasure, your scrumptious reward for enduring life. That's what all this is about with you, isn't it? You and Dan'll do anything to avoid boredom." He shrugs with what's left of his eyebrows. "You never, and I do mean *never*, think about anyone or anything but yourself. And you can't figure out why you're always bored?! You need something else to think about." I kick him in the stomach. "Now answer my question about trying to roast me in Mother Goose's factory of lullabies to kill by."

Between groans, he tells me to piss off.

"He's not answering because he thinks you haven't got the guts to waste him," Lulie says.

"No, that's not the reason why he-who-is-about-to-die does not salute me," I say. "I was chosen to be fed to the Spider because I'll fight. Good ol' sport here and his fellow arachnid assemblage have been looking forward to the spectacle. Al's not answering because he thinks I have the answers. All 10 thousand of them."

"And do you?" she asks.

"Yes. Well, enough to know that I was supposed to fry in that inferno because they've duplicated the cards I'm holding, making me doubly expendable."

I pause.

I only said that to test Al's reaction. He looks bored. But Lulie's ears are flapping. I was led to the house, and the house was set to blow. Perfectly logical, but it doesn't make sense, because I'm their house of cards. They should have cleaned house first. Stripped me down to nothing but the memory of the cards. So why didn't they? Right from the start Dan, Nevar and the rest of them have been acting with paranoid desperation like they know they're being watched. Not just watched, but violated by a surreptitious penetration into their bowels. Until I gummed up the works at their factory, all they had to do with little ol' erasable me in the picture was let me leave for Europe then cut off my head, and the Hydra would spring to life in multiples. But like I've been starring in some fruiking B-movie, everything that's happened since I went to the mountains has plan-B written all over it. What else but desperation would induce them to paint me into the picture as the transportable, disposable embodiment of 10 thousand rapacious appetites? Because it means the flow of torturous, murderous, highly profitable sounds and images is being blocked at the source. As if someone, who's watching them from the inside, has been rewiring their nerve center, making the Spider lose control of its legs.

But who has control of the web?

Someone.

Clever, catchy word *someone*. It covers all the bases without separating the one from the some.

The Spider's someone who knows he's being ensnared from the inside. Someone who's willing to risk death by coming out into the open to snatch me, because as long as I'm alive, I'm taking the virtual out of his reality. Yet I can't shake the niggling feeling that he's already caught me. That I'm a loose bullet being propelled along a silk thread by a Spider waiting to welcome me because he's eager to feed me to the police with my pockets full of suspects. Like Lulie says, he doesn't think I have what it takes to sever the thread or demolish his web. He thinks he can avoid being caught in his own creation, because he has more than two eyes and spins bridges and parachutes to take him away with the wind.

"When I meet with the maker of this hell we're in, two of us will be holding the same hand. Two atoms touching in the night," I say like the afterthought that it is.

"I don't follow you," Lulie says. "What cards? What Adams?"

"Atoms! You silly sperm-sucker!" Al says, his voice rough and scratchy from trying to cough his guts out to make more room for air. "Two things they cannot occupy the same space at the same time, yes?"

Lulie brakes, and I whiplash into the back of the passenger seat. Her seat swings back, pinning Al's legs under it. He writhes and yelps. "Where are those eyes? This sperm-sucker is going to cork that prick."

Pushing myself between her and Al, I say, "Later. Drive, Lulie." Her desire for the corks retreats because she knows she's going to have to fight me to get them. She gets back into the driver's seat. Almit gives me a derisive look devoid of gratitude.

I eye the two plugs on the floor. I've never had the desire to get close enough to see the face of any spider. But those eyes rolling in the floor are morphing the face of the Spider into an image that I can't fathom. Or won't accept? Minutes roll away with the van. In the hum of the motor is a creeping silence. The icy rain has stopped pelting the van. Suddenly, it jolts to the left. I grab the back of the passenger seat to keep from sucking face with Al, and I glance out the windshield. "Where the hell are we, Lulie?"

"See for yourself," she says. "Scuzzy will fly away if we keep pumping his ears."

Looking, I see that we're in an industrial park.

"Watch yourself now," she adds. "The twisties bite back from here on."

I brace my feet against Al's thighs and turn my attention to the computer screen. "Well, Alma, are we going to see any pictures of you and your pretty family having rip-roaring sex together?" I ask. Now that he's ungagged, he uses his freedom to remain silent. "He

showed me pictures of his wife and two kids that were morphs of himself. Each and everyone of them. Right, my onanistic champ?"

Lulie roars with laughter. "Did Mommy slap poor Scuzzy's wittle hands when he played with his wee-wee?"

"She's right, Almit," I say. "You act like you're eternally pissed off with Alma because you can't escape her. And not a mirror in sight. But what are you going to do with her now that she's flowered into willful slavery? Aha, what do we have here?" The street outside Al's place pops up on the computer screen then vanishes.

I click *Back* and look at Kirkewood Place again. By the angle, I'd say this was taken by the camera looking out the oculus window in Al's attic. Before the street blanks out again, something shiny in the driver's window of a grey sedan pops up then disappears. I backup, freeze and zoom in on the window. Damn, the van's loosening my eyeballs from their sockets so I can't see straight, and the cars on the screen look like they're trying to hold their own in an earthquake. Whoa! It's the top of someone's head. The sedan's too decrepit for a ghost car. Must be one of Nevar's goons doing surveillance. Not of the house, but of me.

Darien?

"Know what ya mean, Tamas. *Köszönöm*," Lulie says out the window. She makes a sharp turn then kills the engine. "It's the end of the line for you, Scuzzball. We're gonna leave you in Tamas' hands. Now don't you go fretting none, he won't spare any pain in taking care of you."

"Here, Alma," I say, taking the card out of the reader. "You like to feast on the souls of your victims. Eat this." I shove it into his mouth.

While he gags on it, I slide open the door. A Rottweiler sniffs me like he's tired of waiting for breakfast. Lulie gives him her arm to chew on, roughhousing with him like his growling is canned and his teeth are made of cloth. "How's my baby-waby?" she coos. I step aside, and his nose twitches at the scent of Al. We're in a metal scrapyard. The rain-soaked ground smells rusted. Lulie's making a point by dropping us in this profanely unkempt yet business-as-usual graveyard, but Orvin's fast friend can shoot down any point she tries to make.

Looking through the darkness at the ungodly hulks looming around us, I say, "Cute. Everything to stock a nightmare, but no Duke."

"It's here," Lulie says. "First I want to say--"

"I don't have time for anymore of your cock and bull."

"Tough. I've got the Duke. Anyhoos, just want to say that when you're not an irascible shit, you're all right. You're no armchair warrior, hiding behind the courage of others. No sirree, you get right

in there and defend what you believe is right. Even if it is shit. That makes you dangerous, of course." Seeing me getting restless she adds quickly, "What I'm trying to say is that I'm just going to have to trust that you know what the hell you're doing."

"It's no skin off my butt if you don't trust me, Lulie. Where's the Duke?"

She laughs like I said something funny. "The circus is in full swing at your place. And guess who their star performer is?" With the Rottweiler sitting on guard on top of Almit, I reach carefully into the van and retrieve the flashlight from my bag, keeping my right hand in touch with Orvin's friend. "How'd you propose to get past them all without being noticed?"

"Why do you want to know?" I ask. "What's your stake in this?"

"Verlaine and Sacher-Masoch."

"What? Are you an investigator for some law firm or insurance company?"

She throws her head back and guffaws. Then just as quickly starts scowling again. "Just want to see you survive, that's all, hon. Got a problem with that?"

"Survive what? How would you know what's coming down unless you've been shoveling it?"

"You're taking a seriously wrong turn there, hon."

"Wrong?! I'll tell you what's wrong with this picture. I'm still hanging loose on the streets. They haven't sent anyone to snatch me. Have they, Lulie? Because you've already got me."

"Don't come unglued on me now, Rane. You're the cops' honey jar. The smoke from the house sent signals to the goons not to look for an unused needle in a stack of junkies. Hear what I'm saying?" She sticks two fingers in her mouth and whistles.

I scan the yard with the flashlight but don't see anything that isn't rusted.

"You're good, I'll give you that," she continues. "But you can't tell the difference between the clowns, freaks, knife throwers or sharpshooters. Face it, Lone Wolf, you need me for a diversion. Or else, when you walk into that arena, you'll be twittering around the valley of death before you can pick out the good guys from the bad."

I swing around abruptly at the sound of movement behind me, and with the flashlight, I see a man with long, dark, curly hair cascading down onto his brown coveralls. He's opening an overhead door. As the door rolls up, I see the Duke parked inside a truck. I turn slightly and step back to keep both him and Lulie in view.

"Why don't you just wave 'em on over?" Lulie says with a hiss in her sarcasm.

A helicopter is circling the western sky. Any closer to my place, and it'll be a roof ornament on the Doré.

I kill the light and say, "Shit, that's just what me and the world need: cowboys in the sky."

"Show her what you got, Tamas," Lulie says, shoving past me to take the Duke. "But watch yourself. She's a surly bugger."

He gives me a smile that opens up his whole face and squeezes his eyes shut. Why waste it on a surly bugger? He walks forward and tosses something to me. His smile keeps going as I let the black thing fall. It's going to take more than a widget to get me to forsake Orvin's friend.

I stare at a hunk of black metal sinking into the mud. My hand releases the Luger and shoots up to my throat. The excitable part of a bomb rigged to fast-track me and the Duke to Al's inexorable nothingness beyond the stars?!

"Don't like your own handiwork?" she says.

I throw her a sharp look. "You think I rigged the Duke to blow you up?"

"Simmer down, hon. Who said anything about a bomb?" she says, trying not to show how amused she is at my growing confusion and impatience.

"A tracking device?" I ask.

"Nah, it's just a piece of scrap metal. Now, anyway. But it was carrying valuable cargo. Me and the Duke go way back. My butt knows the saddle well enough to feel when he's not being true. Some jackass replaced the saddle cover. To bury this." She points to the mud, and Tamas reaches inside his coveralls and pulls out a memory card.

Oh hell.

Not more bankrupt mindless dreamers?

"Camcorder?" I ask. He nods. "Seen what's in it?"

He keeps nodding and looks at me like he's smiling inside but he's too timid to show it. "I was only thinking of...of helping out Lulie here...." He lowers his gaze, and his husky voice drops with it. Shoot to hell, I don't have to guess what's on the card, I can see it in his face.

Lulie watches the two of us with growing interest. She points at me and says to him, "She's the babe you told me was making out with the stud?!" And she doesn't need anyone to answer because she can see the answer on his face and mine. "This I gotta see." She hee-haws and looks up at the helicopter still circling in the sky, but ever closer to us. "Make it snappy. We gotta get the van under cover, or the cowboys are gonna get one terrific view of your sweet ass, hon." She laughs at the dirty look I give her.

We huddle around the open door of the van, our feet making an arc in the mud, and we gape at the computer screen on the

floor. I wince and cringe at the sight of me wearing nothing but someone else's face, having sex on my exercise bike with a monster in Fitz's body and another man's head. Watching the closeups of the face attached to my body, I feel like I'm breathing daggers. In and out. She looks vacuous like all her brains have escaped out of her head through her hair follicles. Her thick blond hair is the only thing above the neck that looks even remotely alive. She's--have I seen her before? Yeah, like the last time I saw a pair of fake tits posing as a sub-Neanderthal species of humanoid on the cover of a men's magazine.

"That's not you," Lulie says, and laughs like she's forcing herself. "And that's definitely not--that's not *him*. Is it?"

Tamas avoids her questioning eyes, but throws me a knowing look before he reaches over to the Rottweiler to stop it chewing on Al's rug. The dog obeys, then sniffs Al's face. In one lick, Al's eyebrows disappear completely.

The scene on the video changes to my bathroom. This time I'm in my own skin. Now it's so hot I can't bear to be inside it. Her gaze riveted to the screen, Lulie lets fly an expletive of surprise.

"Curtains," I say, slamming the notebook shut.

I've been hoping--well, no, ever since I found the card hidden in the ceiling fan hole, I've been *expecting* to find a card with myself on it. I also expected to be able to watch the contents with a clear conscience. Why the hell not? In the video, I'm only doing what billions of people do everyday as a normal part of life, but my conscience clearly can't take the shame of being hideously unknowing. What good is a conscience to a madly enthusiastic unwitting porn star? Kenny said that he saw me on Nevar's TV, so the camera's been rolling how long? There must be enough prints by now to wallpaper the pleasure thrones of every frukhead in the world.

I've known all along that Nevar's a lying shit, but a hardcore dream merchant?

And just how do the memory cards fit into this? It would help if I knew what kind of hand they dealt me. But in one way, at least, the cards add up to more than a murderous exercise in futility. Because I've been starring in the dirty thoughts of shitterbrains, which means that every card has led me to a hot spot set up to start recording as soon as I came onto the scene. Their whole filthy world has been my stage. And I kept thinking I was lost. Hell, it's impossible to get lost in a world like that, because it's so small only one thought can fit into it.

Lulie, Stanley and Orvin have all had the Duke to themselves since the camera shot this garbage. But she's the only one who knows bikes well enough to dick around with them without harming anything. Or is she?

"Tamas, are there any scenes of me in the bedroom?" I ask, shoving the notebook back into my bag.

"No," he says. So Nevar kept himself out of the line of fire.

"You're kicking the oomph out of paper in the last part." I don't say anything. He gets fidgety as I strip him with my eyes, layer by layer.

Keeping my gaze on him, I say, "Okay, Lulie, get the truck rolling up. And you, Tamas. Start stripping."

CHAPTER 26

"Lawdy, lawdy, the look on his face when you told him to strip!" Lulie says as she steers the truck with the headlights off, into an alley three blocks from the Doré. "Never seen a guy shrink down to nothing so fast." She mocks me with an exaggerated leer that makes Tamas' cap and baggy coveralls I'm wearing feel too tight. "But, hon, you're gonna have to grow some long lovely locks to match his if you wanna get my heart a strummin'."

I tell her to shut up by opening the passenger door while the truck is still moving. "Remember, you and the Duke bomb down the street in front of the Doré then swing around to the back. Rile them up and get them rocking." My boots scrape the ground as the truck stops.

"You forgot to tell me again how long from now I should get the Duke all hot 'n bothered."

"Twenty minutes from now," she chimes along with me. She furrows her forehead in imitation of mine. "And don't let 'em catch ya," she says, a split second before I do.

Running towards what feels like my doom, I watch the truck pull away then turn onto the street. I rapidly breathe in the rain-washed air, misty from a dammed heaven slowing down the dawn. My spirits, cold, heavy and restless, sink with the air. My dire fate is how many breaths away? And Fitz's? His fate lies up ahead, too. Yet I still don't have a clue how he ties into this.

Friend? Absolutely.

Lover? Oh yes.

Hostage? Yes.

False friend? No way.

Headless lover? Yes.

Willing hostage, heartless lover and lying shit? Uh....

The fact is, he knew I was going to the mountains, and he knows Dan. And Lulie. So what? Opportunity doesn't equal motive, and knowledge doesn't equal intent. Not necessarily, anyway. But he hasn't been straight with me. For one thing, he lied about the sneeze in Chanlee's message. Because he was trying to find out what it meant? What an insipid, sloppy lie from a man I admire for his clarity of mind. A man who's envied with suspicion by friend and foe alike for his ability to get what he wants. His conscience places limits on his greed, this I know without doubt. But I wouldn't put it

past him to refuse to answer my father's calls about decoding the memory card, if his goal all along has been to get rid of the cards by foisting them on me. Ah, none of my suspicions add up to the Spider. What would be the point of letting me catch him with that tittering leather job on his bike? Unless he was trying to set up an alibi.

Oh shit!

The woman romping around in my body in the video! The face isn't quite right--the eyes aren't wide enough apart and the neck is too thin, but the silky blond hair matches and the come hither insolence is dead on. The bastards defiled my body by erasing my head and replacing it with hers in the fruking close-ups. On the video. That's me all right, a two-headed, brainless porn star.

Fitz, Fitz, Fitz, I'm going to knock your block off. And he knows it. No wonder he set himself up as a fake hostage. But if he's been in on all this from before the beginning, where does that leave Nevar? The fact is...I hate facts. The obstinate beasts sully my cherished beliefs. No! I won't give into my doubts. I know Nevar's a predatory crawler, I can feel his fangs gnawing at my bones. Oh hell, the dynamics of all this have changed so much since I told him I'm ready to negotiate, that I'm not sure anymore which way the facts turn this merry-go-round. Is it Nevar to Dan to Fitz to Lulie to me? Or Fitz to Lulie to Dan to me to Nevar? It's crucial I get the order right, because the Spider is at the nexus making the world spin.

Maybe my ego is just making a wish, but I'm certain that Fitz isn't the I at the center of the storm. Everyone knows how much he loves money and cars, but the fact is, I know something about him that no one else in the whole world knows as well as I do: I know how much he loves me. He's told me an annoying number of times that he gets enough money but too little of me. So if the Spider enticed him into his web, it wasn't with money. I also know Fitz'd never put his heart into being anyone's appendage. However he's mixed up in this, he's the loose screw the whole works hinges upon.

This ungodly Spider. His poison is making me afraid of everything good and decent in my life.

Where does that leave me? At the end of an alley.

I hold back in the shadows to let a car pass by on the street, then I dash across and splash through a puddle at the entrance of the next alley. A Chinese lantern cast on the surface of the puddle by a streetlight settles back into place, but a dog disturbed by the noise, starts barking.

I dodge to the right to avoid the next puddle.

All of a sudden, someone's powerful forearm is across my throat, choking me, and I'm jerked sharply backwards. First I struggle to breathe, then to stay conscious.

"Beddy-bye, Bambi," Maldoon breathes heavily into my ear. Death slithers down my throat into my lungs as a splashing noise behind us sounds the arrival of another of Nevar's goons.

"Release her!" an unfamiliar male voice says.

The instant Maldoon's forearm eases the pressure on my throat, an electric pain shoots out of my shoulder into my neck. He's been twisting my arm. And he's still holding on so tightly the pain is blinding me. I heave and gasp in his brutal embrace.

"Now step back," the voice says, rather quietly considering how menacing he sounds.

Maldoon pushes me away after he gives my arm an extra tug. I go down instead of forward because without his support my knees give way. The Watcher catches me before my body turns to mud.

"Got 'er," Maldoon shouts over my head to two more goons closing in on me.

"Well, well, if it isn't Bambi," Nevar says, emerging from the shadows. His face still in shadow, all I really see are the flaps of his black overcoat flaring out in the wind.

The Watcher pushes me towards Nevar like a cat gifting its owner with a mouse.

"Fuck you, Nevar!" I spit.

"Watch your mouth!" Maldoon yells, whopping the back of my head. I keep myself from acknowledging him or rubbing my smarting head. Instead, I scan the six foot high slat fence beside me on my right. My best bet for escape.

The Watcher grabs my arm. "Twist it, why don't you, asshole?" I say.

"Let her go," Nevar says, and assembled part that he is, the Watcher obeys. "She understands why we're here. Don't you, Bambi?"

While he waits for my answer, I refuse to look at him. I double over, slide my hands down onto my thighs, take a deep breath to concentrate my energy then give my answer to Maldoon with a dropdead back kick. He takes the hit in the chest, the one place my conscience tells me I'm not allowed to target, but my will to survive tells me I have to. He keels over.

While they scramble to see if I've killed him, I vault over the fence.

"That's understanding for you," I hear the Watcher say amidst the din.

Racing through the backyard guarded by an army of trolls and flamingos, I glance over my shoulder. *Fruk!* Nevar's scaling the fence. Around the side of the house, I jump the fence into the neighbor's yard and hightail it to the street. My lungs burn like I'm swallowing ignited Molotov cocktails. Nevar races after me in

silence, the sound of his footsteps fleeing with the wind. Truly a shadow worth its weight in gold. I turn abruptly and face him with the Luger pointing at him dead on.

He stops running but keeps moving towards me. "This is how you negotiate? With bullets?" He's close enough to grab the gun.

"Beats your lies."

He knows he can't outrun a bullet, but he thinks he can outtalk Orvin's shaky little friend. He's got some of it right. There's a part of me faster than a bullet, and I've already pulled the trigger in my head. If he comes any closer, he'll be racing the bullet to the other side of hell.

I shrink behind him to stay out of view of an oncoming car. It slows down. Shit, not more cops?! Nevar glances back at the car then passes me a relieved look that matches the surrealism of seeing a Studebaker pulling to a stop beside us. Orvin, still wearing the paint-splattered cap, reaches over and opens the back door. I step behind Nevar to urge him into the car with the gun, but he makes the gun useless by lunging for the car.

Orvin looks anxiously in the rearview at a car turning onto the street. "Better make it quick!" he says as Nevar slides over to the far side in the Stude. I relieve Orvin's anxiety and increase my own by climbing into the car, filled with the scent of geraniums. I stare through the geraniums keeping the peace between me and Nevar. The two people in the passing car don't notice us. They're too busy smacking each other. Orvin turns around, gives Nevar the once over with his eyes then gives me a look part knowing, part questioning. "This here yer fella?" he asks.

"This dung heap?" I say.

"Might a known you'd free 'im just so as ya could fight with 'im," Orvin says with a cockeyed smile that vanishes at the sight of Nevar and I glaring at him. He rubs his whiskers. "Smoley hokes if I haven't been circling round these here streets hoping ta run into ya. If ya got any ideas 'bout getting to yer apartment, scrap 'em. Looks like pretty derned near every cop in the city is practicing maneuvers on...."

He lets his words die in his throat because I put a finger to my lips to warn him to shut up, then I point straight ahead to tell him to keep going in the opposite direction of the Doré. He sees his little friend on my lap and gets the Stude rolling. I keep my back to the door, while Nevar makes himself comfortable by unbuttoning his overcoat.

"She's a real beauty," Nevar says like he's waiting to be served another drink.

"Got a good eye there, son. I'll give ya that," Orvin says.

"A Champion?" Nevar asks.

Suddenly sitting taller, Orvin beams and nods.

"A '56?"

"Close," Orvin says, his voice swelling with pride. "A yella-bellied '55."

"You wired?" I ask Nevar abruptly.

"Like you wouldn't believe," he replies. He smiles and holds his arms up and back like he expects me to go down on him. "Go ahead, frisk me."

Suddenly, Kenny's face pops up over the back of the passenger seat. Orvin's little friend automatically shrinks back under my coveralls. "Uncle Stefan?!" he says like he's confirming his own worst suspicions.

Nevar and I jolt then exchange accusing glances. Our stunned silence explodes with Kenny shouting over Nevar and Orvin trying to shout over me. I glean enough from the fracas to figure out that while the conflagration was still raging Kenny heard a cop give an order to have me picked up at the Doré, so he sneaked away to warn me. As for Orvin....*I'll have to stop yelling*. Uh...right. He drove away with the help of the cops because they told him to move his car.

"The cops!" I holler. Everyone but me shuts up and ducks. In the seconds it takes them to figure out I was crying wolf, I manage to get in, "Kenny! He's wired. The cops are hearing everything you're saying. Frisk him!"

Kenny hesitates, mumbling something to himself, his eyes swinging from me to his uncle. Eventually, he reaches for the geraniums, puts them in the front then dives into the back seat and frisks his uncle like a pro. Nevar's protests would be a lot more convincing if he'd stop snickering. But he doesn't have any incentive to stop. With Kenny between us, the Luger is just so much useless metal.

"Where'd you get the jeans and other clothes you're wearing, Kenny?" I ask, shedding the coveralls to give my intentions room to maneuver.

"Orvin," he replies.

"The neighbor," Orvin says with a shrug and a smile.

Some smile. Women can see it in the dark a mile away.

"Don't, Kenny, that's my cell," Nevar complains.

"Go ahead, Kenny," I say. "I need it." He yanks it out of Nevar's breast pocket and tosses it to me. Nevar's compliance is giving me the willies.

I give Lulie a buzz.

"Don't do anything until I call back," I say to her.

"Geez, hon, I'm absolutely lousy at doing nothing," she says.

"What kinda trouble you gone and--" I shut down the phone.

"No bugs," Kenny says. "Think he's got 'em in his shoes?"

"No, that's where his brains are," I say. "Do you ever tell the truth about anything, Nevar?"

"There's more 'n one way a being wired," Orvin says.

"Orvin, you never mind," I say, trying to sound cross, but succeeding only in feeling foolish. "Concentrate on the road."

Now that the fun's over, Kenny looks at me like someone's going to tear a strip off him.

"Okay, Kenny," I say, trying to reassure him with a soft touch. "Time to tell us why you don't want to go home." He glances at Nevar, and like a contagion, his guilt spreads over Nevar's face. "Kenny, have you--are you--"

Nevar interrupts, "You think I'm one of your suspec--"

"Like hell I do!" I say. "I know you're the Spid--"

"Tell her! Tell Rane the truth!" Kenny says to Nevar.

"I'd rather hear it from you, Kenny," I say.

Kenny looks at me like I asked him to pull out his own teeth. Then he lowers his gaze and says barely above a whisper, "Okay."

The three of us shift around like the seat is catching fire.

"When I said that...that I saw you on TV at Uncle Stefan's," Kenny says, keeping his gaze down and fidgeting with his jacket zipper. "I really did. Excepting he got the copy from me."

Fruk, I don't believe it. Kenny's one of the 10 thousand suspects?! He shifts his gaze to Nevar, and Nevar's face floods with Kenny's anguish. Together, they lay to rest my disbelief.

"You used your parents' credit cards?" I ask. He shakes his head, and Nevar concurs with his eyes.

"Tyler's dad has all kinds of girlie stuff," Kenny says. "We used one of his credit card numbers, and he never even knew we'd done it. By now on account of it Mom and Dad have snooped through my email and stuff, and they're gonna string me up by the--"

Nevar and I start speaking at once, but he cedes to me.

"Kenny, you're not giving them any credit for having brains. They have a pretty good idea what you've been through, and my guess is that they're madder 'n hell at the people who did it to you. I know I am." I look at Nevar, but my glare is tempered by the crazy notion that I'm looking at a victim of Kenny's prurient curiosity. Could it be true that he got into this by covering for Kenny? "Do you really think your parents haven't figured out that you learned a lot of heavy-duty stuff from your ordeal? Enough to keep you from getting tangled up in anything like this again?"

Kenny keeps his eyes down, but his fidgeting stops. "Yeah, I learned some totally weird stuff. Like in the mags and flics and stuff, none of the girls are really for real. You're majorly better in person." He looks up and his smile meets mine.

Hell, what am I smiling at? Does he mean that now he's going to peep through bedroom windows, sneak into strip joints and entice little girls to act out his fantasies? I'm not sure I want to know. I glance over at Nevar. His face mirrors mine with his eyebrows crowding his hairline. No doubt about it, he's been covering for Kenny.

"Don't take many brains to figure that out, lad," Orvin says, catching Kenny's eye in the rearview. "Ya don't learn ta have respect for yerself 'n others, the closest yer ever gonna git ta the real ones is them there flics and other garbage. Personally, I ain't got no taste for garbage. Or the stomach fer it, come ta think of it."

Kenny squeezes his eyes shut and throws back his head like all three of us struck him. Nevar already has an arm around Kenny, but I slide my arm above his and give Kenny a shoulder hug that he doesn't cozy up to.

"We all have those thoughts, Kenny," I say. "It's what we do about them that shows what we're really made of. And your parents know it. I'll eat Orvin's hat if they give you any heck." His eyes open to my smile, and he looks at me hopefully. Nevar gives the hat a thoughtful look. "No one's mad at you. Your uncle's right here, and he's not--"

"That's 'cause he thinks you're cool. Real hot," Kenny says with unthinking certainty.

Nevar stares out the window.

"Tell you what, Kenny," I say, catching Nevar's smirk reflected in the window. "Orvin's going to get you to one of Chanlee's best buddies on the force. You talk to him, and he'll talk to your parents." He nods without enthusiasm. He's only eleven, yet he looks so defeated by life. The Spider's venom has paralyzed his soul so he can't feel the love that has nourished him. I signal Nevar with my eyes to agree, but he's back to sharing Kenny's expression. This time I detect a difference, however. Kenny's gloom and resistance are rooted in shame. Nevar's is rooted in what looks like fear. Of what, though? Of losing his prey? One thing is clear: He doesn't trust me. Tough. That's the way it's always been with us, bound together by mutual distrust.

I tap in Levi's number.

"Rane, you rotten desperado!" Levi says. "Chanlee's frantic to talk to you."

"Who isn't?" I say. "Where the hell is she, anyway?"

"At your pad," he says.

"Tell her to get her butt over to her place. Kenny's--"

"The abducted boy?!"

"--going to meet you and her there."

"You shitting me?"

Nevar waves to get my attention. I shove the phone at him. He listens to Levi calling me names, then says, "Bangston, no cock-ups this time....It's Stefan Nevar...." When he's done, I motion him to give the phone to Orvin. He does in his own sweet time.

The phone buzzes and Orvin hands it back to me. I answer it and pass it back to Nevar, saying, "Your sister."

He nods.

Kenny shakes his head, and his whole body starts vibrating.

"Hello, Sheri," Nevar says, "I have someone with me who'd like to--" She blasts him so loudly, I feel like I'm getting a dose of shrapnel in my ears. "I didn't tell you because--"

"Hollicats! She don't need no phone," Orvin says as Nevar tries to get in a word between blasts. "That ain't no wind blowing outside. It's her."

"Would you have preferred to know he was still alive? Then be--" Nevar manages to say. "Then be told he was....I've only known for certain in the last few minutes....The police have known for about an hou--Didn't they notify you?"

"I told 'em I was Tyler," Kenny says. And while Nevar and the rest of us stare at him in surprise, he grabs the phone. "Mom?!" He starts to cry. "Don't cry, Mom...."

Nevar reaches over and touches my hand. A simple gesture, a hand touch. But in this case, confusing as hell.

"Mom...MOM! Tell Jenna to stop blabbering! I wanna hear what...."

While Kenny's soul awakens, I say to Nevar, "So far, I'm the only one who's been doing any negotiating. Start talking, Nevar."

"Maldoon's--"

"No more subterfuge. Where's Fitz?"

He looks taken aback. "You don't know?!" He searches my face for the answer. "Of course you don't. That explains why you--"

"Will you guys cool it?" Kenny says, his hand over the phone. "I can't hear what Dad's saying he bought me." Without consulting each other, Nevar and I lift Kenny into the front seat.

"Where is Fitz?" I say fast and furiously. "If you've killed him you bastard--" I choke on my thoughts. "What have you done with him?" I hardly recognize my voice, it's so hoarse.

"He died in the house Faule--" Nevar starts to say.

"You murdering liar! I would have found--" My throat tightens, making it difficult to breathe. And I'm afraid that if I breathe out, I'll throw up. I don't trust what I'm seeing on Nevar's face, but there's something about the way Orvin's looking at me that's making my heart feel like it's slicing through my ribs.

CHAPTER 27

"They found the remains of two people," Nevar says. "All the police have been accounted for, including the brave unfortunate soul who never managed to escape on time. That leaves one of Dan's boys or one of his victims."

"What do you hope to gain with these lies?" I ask. My back stiffens and prickles like some fruking devil is playing a concerto on my spine with burning knives.

Orvin clears his throat. "He's telling it straight as an arrow there, Rane. Heard on this here radio myself that at least two people got done fer in the explosion. It sure as tootin' makes sense--"

"No it doesn't," I say.

"--that the maggots would round 'em up in one corral. And you was wondering yourself why the place didn't blow sky-high as soon as the lights came on...."

He keeps talking, while I meld into the painful truth.

They must have had Fitz bound and gagged behind one of the walls, in the bedroom ensuite, maybe. I was going to search there. I was going to...What difference does any of that make now? Who was it who said that only good things can be abused? As if it matters. He's...he was better than good. He was there all the while, listening to every sound we made. With the hope that we wouldn't make the wrong move? While I was--He never made a sound. Not that I heard. Maybe I would have heard him if I'd been paying more attention instead of...But no one else heard him, either. Because he was already dead? No. It wasn't the fuse box that was rigged to blow. The cop who flicked the switch in the power box opened one door too many, because the one leading to Fitz's coffin was rigged to blow when someone opened it. Fitz kept quiet to keep us from opening the door. Without grandstanding or any other ego-driven bullshit, he saved us all.

Before and after all the evil the universe has and will ever know, his will never be a captive soul.

Everything collapses into my soul, stilling my heart while the horror rages on.

"You would'a done the same," Orvin says.

"What?" I say, my voice sounding like I left it behind with Fitz. I blink Orvin, Nevar and Kenny back into focus. All three of them are staring at me like I'm wearing my face inside out. Guess I

was talking out loud. We've all been brought to a standstill by more than the Stude.

Kenny offers me the phone. I take it, shove it into my jacket and blow on my icy hands. "Kenny, the voices you heard when you were trapped in the house--"

"Uh-huh," he says, his face muscles tightening.

--Think you would recognize them if--"

"Uh-huh." He nods vigorously.

"What were they talking about?" Nevar asks.

"I don't remember," Kenny says, getting fidgety again. Nevar slides forward and clasps Kenny's shoulders. "What were they talking about?"

"He said he doesn't remember," I say, pushing him away from Kenny. "Leave him alone!"

"Yeah," Kenny says, making it sound more like *nah*. "Leave me alone."

Nevar tries to shrug me off and clips my chin with his elbow. It dammed well hurts because I bite my tongue. He makes a whining noise like he's the one sucking up the pain.

"Look at me, Kenny," Nevar says softly but sharply.

The boy obeys. "They were just talking about weird stuff," he says quickly. "Guess what? My dad just bo--"

"You can do better than that," Nevar says, holding Kenny's gaze. "Did one of them sound like he didn't want to be there?"

Kenny shrugs. "This one guy kept saying bleepity bleep, bleep this and bleepity bleep that, and he had this weird sneeze. Sort a like Mom's around my duvet."

I catch my breath, and it feels like I'm swallowing a sword.

Nevar turns sharply to me and says without moving his lips, "I'm sorry." Then he slumps back into the seat. If I followed my bliss, he'd be kissing bullets. Kenny's the only thing in the universe keeping him alive. The air in here is so thick with unrequited evil that I can't breathe. I open the door and gasp for air.

"Rane!" Kenny cries out. "Don't be mad at me, Rane." Tears well in his eyes.

"I have some things I have to take care of, Kenny." I hug his cheek, and his tears on my face whet my appetite for revenge. "When you see me again, I'll be wearing my party hat and you can show me what your dad bought you."

"How long you gonna be?" Kenny asks like the idea of me in a party hat is making him want to puke.

"In time to have some cake. So save me some, okay?" I pull away. "Hold onto this for me, will you?" He nods while I put Tamas' cap on his head. "Keep your hat on, Kenny."

He grabs hold of my neck again and says, "Kick ass, Rane."

Orvin leaves Nevar and I facing each other as though the Studebaker and the rest of the universe were still between us. I shove my hands into my jacket pockets, and the feel of the cold Luger against my skin makes me shiver.

"Notice something strange?" I ask. He looks around and shrugs. "Well, I do. Where are the cops, huh, Nevar? I'm their flavor of the hour, so why aren't they crawling all over me like lice?"

"I can explain that." He takes a step towards me, but I shake my head. He pays his respects to Orvin's ready little friend by stopping.

"So can I. You've convinced them you can bring me in so they can throw me like a bomb into Dan's lap."

"I haven't convinced them of a single th--"

"Shut up! I know it's your idea, not theirs, because if they knew what they were doing, they'd be using Dan to blast the hell out of you. But there's a slight glitch in your plan: You're not taking me anywhere because this is the end of the road for you."

"You're standing on this road too, Rane. Haven't you noticed?" While I'm searching for a less obvious answer to his question, he rushes on madly, "Here you are, face to face with...When you look at me, what do you see?" Now there's a question that doesn't have a less obvious answer.

"As far as I can see, there's only one person left standing, because you're dead meat. And I'm not going to like what I see until the cavernous vacuum you tout as your heart is filled with lead."

My finger pulses on the trigger as Orvin's little friend slides willingly out of my pocket. Such an effortless gesture, killing the talking dead. The Luger catches the glint of headlights coming from the direction of the Doré. Two sets of them. I dart behind a camper on the truck parked to my right. Nevar disappears around the other side of the camper. A cop car emerges from behind the first set of lights. Suddenly, they veer right at me. Fruk! They've spotted me. The front left tire of the cruiser jumps up onto the curb in the space vacated by the Stude. Further down the road, the second car comes to a stop, and the frozen glare of its lights commands my attention for a split second. How many cops are there? Who gives a shit! I bolt for the yard directly before me, but end up with my forearms slapping against the sidewalk to keep my face from getting a cement facelift. Nevar tripped me from behind.

An effortless gesture, taking down a prey caught in the web.

Before I can get up, he grabs my arms like they're jug handles and yanks me up. Tightening his grip on my right arm so his fist is punching into the small of my back, he wrenches the back of his left wrist against my throat, forcing my head back. I fight to keep my weight grounded, but my back arches. With my balance gone, this sick fruk can throw me any which way he dammed well

pleases. But why is he so eager to feed me to the police? They know I'm not the Spider. Or do they? It's Chanlee's word against his.

"Now you're going to listen to reason," he says with an intensity that makes the words sound like they're being fired out of a gun.

"Il ne faut jamais défier un fou," I say, the words vibrating against his wrist.

"Or seduce one," he says, in a voice I hardly recognize as his.

Holding me like I'm a fruking bow and he's the arrow, he pushes me towards the cop car. In the cold, I break out in a sweat. My right arm and shoulder, still too raw to be forgiving of the bruising they took from Maldoon, make me want to cry out in pain. It feels like my whole body is being crushed into fluid. It takes everything I've got to stay focused on Nevar's body. How it feels and moves against mine. How the points of contact shift and change pressure. Somewhere in the cocksure brutality of his movements is my chance to counterstrike.

Two doors of the cruiser open.

All of a sudden the car comes alive without moving. A scorching pink light accompanied by a series of loud popping, hissing noises explodes from under the car. The cops scatter, and Nevar jumps back. His hold on me is erratic, slackening and tightening, as he drags me back with him. Faking unconsciousness I suddenly go limp, making him bear the full weight of my body. He swiftly braces himself to keep us both from falling backward and slides his choking arm down onto my chest to hold me up. The instant the pressure eases on my throat, I come to life kicking. In one continuous motion my left heel strikes his shin, scrapes down hard on it and smashes down on his instep. He doesn't let go. But his energy is concentrated in his lower extremities, leaving the rest of him vulnerable and giving me the opportunity to drive my left elbow back into his stomach and slice down into his groin with the edge of my hand.

"Rane!" he croaks.

Breaking free, I run for it.

Fruk! Orvin's treacherous friend has given me the slip, and Nevar's obsessed with staying within shooting distance of me.

"Rane!" he calls out breathlessly from too close behind me. "You damned fool. The police have this covered."

Yeah, with all the cunningly woven lies you've been spinning them.

I run and run until it feels like my gimped up shoulder has dislocated itself and is ramming into my lungs. Why am I running? He's already caught up with my thoughts, and the only place left to

hide from the Spider is in my mind. I keep running, but all I'm doing is picking up my feet and plunking them back down without going anywhere. My best chance of getting out of this alive is to let him get even closer. So close, that all twenty-four of his claws will be within reach. The thought makes me shudder, but how else to mangle them? My body slows down, sparing me the necessity of making a decision. What the hell, I've been tasting his venom on my lips right from the start.

Rubbing my shoulder, I look around without glancing back. I'm caught between a rock and a hard to find place at the end of a road. Backyards, those closed-in prettified repositories of partially realized dreams, run parallel to the street on both sides. Oh hell, daybreak. If I can call it that. The perverse sun is rejoicing with its warm blissful light on the other side of the clouds, leaving us with a dreary, dismal, sullen dawn that chills to the bones and beyond.

Nevar stops so close behind me, his heavy breath feels like scopulas sweeping my neck. "Finally," he says. The fight or flight impulse grips me with such strength, I can't stay put without shaking. Because I don't turn around or answer him, he steps around to face me. He has one hand in his overcoat pocket, fondling Orvin's slutty little friend.

After a cursory look he says, "In the name of Zeus, Rane, relax." The permanent crease across his forehead is joined by several tension lines. "I'm not going to--"

"Says the Spider on the right side of a Luger."

For a moment, I'm taken aback by how awkward he looks holding the gun. But then, why would he concern himself with guns? Predacious fruks like him come ready-made with an arsenal of deadly weapons. He's such a clever little Spider, he waits for others to spin the web then devours their victims.

His hand slides out of the pocket, loaded with the pistol.

No point in acting compliant. He'll know I'm faking. I focus intently on the alley entrance behind him on his left and nod subtly. The garage shadow on the ground changes shape. Too quickly to believe my eyes, it's right as rain again. He glances over his shoulder, and I pivot swiftly around to his right. As I'm grabbing for his gun hand, he shoves the pistol at me. "Here," he says. "Take it."

My plan of attack goes limp. That's how quickly his venom works. But I'm not too stunned to let him keep the gun. I step back and check to see if he emptied the magazine.

"It's loaded for bear," I say, puzzled.

"You're a better shot than I am."

"I see. You expect me to join the fruking feast as a hired gun. Sure, why not? I'm game, you'll be my first cull."

"Bambi," he says then tsk, tsks. "Come now, you have no intention of killing me. If your brain were even a fraction as quick on

the draw or as accurate as your heart, I'd be wearing a toe tag by now." I roll my eyes then let them settle on the garage shadow. "Look at me, Rane." I keep my gaze peeled on the shadow, ready this time for it to try playing tricks on my eyes. He steps between me and my shadow. "You're not going to shoot me. You know why?" He steps closer like Orvin no longer has a little friend. "When you look at me, you come face-to-face with yourself. You don't trust--"

"I knew you'd stoop to a cheap appeal for sympathy and trust."

"Come on, admit it. You haven't come up with one consummate knock 'em dead reason that has convinced you beyond a reasonable doubt that I'm the master criminal your guilt-ridden heart wants me to be. Deny them as you may, but your feelings for me are such that you can't shoot me without killing your heart."

The pain in my shoulder eases as my mind casts off the onerous burden of being true to a web of lies.

He barrel-hugs me and wraps our bodies together in his overcoat. The urge to fight takes flight, leaving me with a body that welcomes the warmth, while my heart pounds like it's demanding to be freed.

Disarming. Disarmed. Not exactly how to mangle a Spider. Not even close, actually. But then, he's not the Spider. He's worse.

"The advocate rests his case," I say.

"The devil's?"

"Not entirely." His soft laughter ripples through me. "It wasn't anything you said or did. It was something you didn't do. The fundamental rules of self-preservation alone dictate that the Spider would never hand an adversary a loaded weapon with the safety catch off."

"The truth be known, I thought it was on." He pulls his head back abruptly, matching my astonishment. "The first thing I did when I picked it up was switch the lever." We exchange knowing glances. "You had it on?!" I cringe to the sound of his laughter.

Part of me wants to join in his laughter because part of me, I'm not so sure is the best part, is rejoicing that he's not the Spider. At the same time, part of me, the part that has kept me flying by the seat of my pants as I dodge the evil intentions of others, that part is holding back. In judgment, yes. Or how about in just plain ordinary garden variety sanity? But could it be in hesitation?

When he's had a bellyful of laughs, he says, "Don't look so undone. And don't let this distract us. You know it's Dan we're after."

"Do I?" I say, stepping back and standing akimbo. "The Spider's--"

"Why do you keep referring to him as *The Spider*?"

"Faule showed me--" His nod finishes the rest for both of us. "The Spider's alive. I mean, really alive as in totally predacious and lethal. Dan lacks the warmth to be truly alive."

"That's apparent, not factual. I wouldn't stake my life on--"

"You wouldn't stake your life on anything without a retainer." He actually looks offended by that. "Okay, okay. That was a cheap shot. He's a dumb fruk."

"By what evidence do you make that claim? From what I've witnessed--"

"You've only seen what the Spider wants you to see. Only a dumb fruk would think it's clever to use *Dan Istenly* as an alias."

"He only used that aka for your benefit. He's been operating here under *Samente*."

"Yeah, and it spells *dumb fruk*. Because he's using it for your benefit, not his own. He's too cretinous to figure out that by giving him that handle, the Spider was advertising to the law enforcement world to come and get him. I mean, if you're going to play the part of a gladiator, you should expect to be thrown in with the lions, not fed to them on a platter. You know how many police there are in this town alone who know that *dannosamente* means *evil* in Italian? I haven't had time to check out what *Istenly* means, but I'll bet it spells *dumb fruk* in capital letters."

"It means *God* in Hungarian." He pauses thoughtfully then says, "If only Lucifer were a dumb fruk." Still sounding skeptical, he adds, "Surely you don't think Krudmin is the web master?" My eyebrows form a question mark. "The 200 hundred pound sack of swill you threw at me on the stairs."

"The Hiker? No. Where is he?"

"Right where he should be: Climbing the walls in a holding cell."

"What did you learn from him?" I put Ovin's little friend to rest. With the safety on.

"He only knows how to talk with his fists. But if he's not your Spider, then who?"

"The woman in the red hat."

"What woman in the red hat?"

I study his face for signs that he's feigning ignorance. I see consternation and lips parted in anticipation, but who knows what's festering under the mask. "The woman who outran Chanlee."

The creases in his forehead iron out. "Oh," he says like the answer is a letdown. "She wasn't wearing a red hat. She was wearing a red coat--"

"Like hell."

Dammit all, I think he's right.

"More to the point, *she's* Dan."

"Uh-uh. I've seen her and Dan together."

"Oh. Then why is he holed up in his apartment like a cornered rat? Why not give himself up?"

"Because he's not there."

"He certainly is. We've been doing round the clock surveillance, and--"

"We?"

"The police and--"

"So you're not just cozying up to them, you're bedding down with them."

"Listen, Rane, I--"

"You, Maldoon, Hulladin, Chan--" He grabs me by the shoulders and the pain causes me to catch my breath. He drops his hands to my waist. "I'm sorry I was so rough with you back there, but if you would let me explain, none of this would have hap--"

"Shut up and get on with it." There's something about him that makes me want to jump him. Every which way possible. "After being implicated in this through Kenny, I decided to go undercover and throttle the organization from the inside. It wasn't difficult to get in, because they believed they already had control of me through my apparent addiction to--" He waves the rest away. "You know all that."

"Like hell I do. Why do I bother listening to you?! The only thing that comes out of your mouth is shitterbrain rejects. You're trying to tell me you've been on the inside, yet you're pretending to be a mind-swoggled ignoramus who couldn't recognize the Spider if he were standing here."

"I haven't been pretending any such thing. I know it's Dan."

"And I know it isn't. So one of us is--"

"They kept giving me assignments that were as challenging and time-consuming as they were odious and spurious. They had no reason to be trusting. They had just cleaned Joseph Stampe out of their hair by throwing him off the mountain. The truth be known, Kenny managed to penetrate deeper into their organization than I did. He hacked into one of their core systems and got--"

"The video--amongst other crap." The smutty look on his face says I'm right.

"An uncut version of you with--" I wave a finger in front of his face and shake my head. "The police were able to match your face, which led us to Dan. Then they warned me to back off on the grounds that I was jeopardizing their undercover operation. So I worked out a deal with their undercover operator."

"Maldoon?"

He nods. "The pedophilia investigation against him was a ruse to get him in solid with the organization. It might have worked if he wasn't the Spider's plant in the force."

"And he convinced the Spider to snatch Kenny to expose you as a plant?"

He nods. "If you hadn't fled from the alley, you would have witnessed him being arrested."

"So what are you doing here with me? You should have wrung the Spider's identity out of the creep."

"I thought I knew who's behind all this. More importantly, I suppose, I don't think Maldoon knows. They don't trust him because they know he serves two masters."

"Yeah, he's been kissing the butt of his god's shadow. But the Spider doesn't trust anyone. Not him or Dan. No one."

"He trusts Dan to be sure, because he is the Spider."

"You're dreaming, Snow White. Dan's such a dumb fruk he actually believes that if he copies the Spider well enough, he'll become one." The more I speak of Dan in this light, the darker Nevar's eyes become. Probably because my voice is hardening along with my conviction that the Spider we're looking for wears many hats but only one red coat.

"There's something else making the back of my neck twitch," I go on. "The cards I'm holding. The Spider has been paving my way with them, but you and the cops don't seem to care squat about them. Which means you and the whole fruking world must have a list of the 10 thousand suspects. Maybe they're not the same lists, or mine have sensitive data embedded in the code, or--"

"They're odious and spurious--"

"Time-consuming shitterbrain remnants. Fruk." I punch a fist into my palm. "I take it you didn't plant one in my bag at the mountains?"

"No. Why would I? They're of no use to you or me."

"Right, by then you had already zeroed in on Dan," I say, thoughtfully. "He planted it on me when I was waiting at the bus station in Banff. Seems you had no difficulty making the connection between him and me, which isn't all that direct, considering I never really knew him all that well."

"No, because--"

"Yet you couldn't make the right connection between me and Faule even though you had your spook covering his place."

"At first I thought you and Faule were holding Kenny there, but then they distracted me--"

"By leading you to believe they were holding him up in the mountains."

"Precisely. Then when they killed him...when they killed that boy...."

"Kenny's going to freak when he finds out another boy died in his place." He holds his gaze on me. I understand the whole

panoply of emotions displayed on his face, because when it comes to Kenny, our hearts touch base.

"Like I did when I learned they had killed him. I knew you were next." The dismay in his voice increases with each word, like he still expects it to happen. The shadow of fear crosses his face, darkening my thoughts and making my heart skip.

"It wasn't just the safety latch cockup that's corralled your paranoia. What finally convinced you I wasn't one of the devil's shadows?" His phone buzzes in my jacket. "The cops?" Yes and no. "It's Chanlee, calling from her home phone."

"Mission accomplished," Orvin says over top what sounds like a shouting match in the background. "The lad's folks have arrived. Guess you can figure that out fer yerself, what with the racket 'n all. I tell ya that there lady's missed her true callin'. They should send her on the next moon mission, and she can tell us what's happening just by hollerin' from there."

"Chanlee around?" I ask abruptly, cutting off his chuckling. I'm saving my smiles and chuckles for my good-bye to the Spider.

"I'll git her fer ya," Orvin says, in his soldier voice. "'Fore I do, me and the Stude are ready for action."

"We've got company," I say to Nevar and point at the garage. The shadow is on the move again. "Orvin, tell Chanlee I'll get back to her in five." I hang up.

Nevar stares at the shadow making a fool of me again by resting in peace. He turns back to me and starts to say something, but I whiz past him, saying, "With any luck that shadow could be wearing a red coat." My hand flies out of my jacket pocket with Orvin's little friend hanging on for dear life.

In the alley, I stomp on the shadow, an ordinary, lackluster nothing of a thing. I can't see anything stirring down the full length of the alley. Nothing intrudes upon the sound of wet leaves tumbling over gravel. Nothing but the breath of the gods blowing my hopes and everything else helter skelter.

Nevar runs into the shadow, his thwarted expression mirroring mine. "What do you think you saw?" he asks as I exchange the cell for the gun in my hands. I look up, and he falls in a heap at my feet, leaving Lulie standing before me like she's waiting for applause.

CHAPTER 28

The rock in Lulie's hand explains how, not why, Nevar hit the dirt. She shrugs away the ticked off look I throw her as I drop down on my knees to check him out. "Start praying to all the gods in your books that he's not dead," I say with my jaw so tight it punctuates each word with a crack. I don't think anyone should get away with hitting him, let alone killing him. I brush a lock of hair from his forehead. *Am I that far gone?*

"No need to spit any bricks. I only tapped him," she says, tossing the rock behind her. "Just hard enough to give us time to split." Wincing, Nevar tries soothing the back of his head with his hand. "See?" she adds, sounding proud of herself.

"And how do you propose we do that with him tagging along as dead weight, huh? We need him, you dope. A pair of the Spider's eyes have been watching me from the apartment above mine, and I need him to help me get past the cops surrou--"

"Chill. I've got the picture." She crouches down beside me and gazes at him intently. "He kinda looks familiar. Who is he, anyway?"

"Stefan Nevar, a--"

"Ah, thought so. The big shot mouthpiece for corporate criminals. But when Fitz meets up with this guy, he's going to leave another bloody signature on his face."

My body jolts at the sound of his name. She doesn't know yet that his name is all that's left of him. And I can't tell her now, because she'll--Who knows what she'll do? There isn't enough time left for her to act out her own version of the sorrow and rage doing a slash 'n burn through my heart.

Responding to my reaction, she says, "Hey, from where I was standing, it didn't look or sound much like you two were finkydiddling."

"Shows you how deceptive appearances can be. *Finkydiddling?*"

"Having it off."

"Off or on," I mutter, helping him up. He looks like his worst nightmare has been etched into his face. Is this what Fitz looked like when he went down? "It seems I can't tell the difference anymore. Come on, help me get him mobile."

Sandwiched between Lulie and I in her truck, Nevar is with us enough to see the light of day. But he's still too discombobulated to protest being put through the paces while Lulie plays Florence Nightingale.

"How's he looking?" I ask.

"Like someone's been using his face for batting practice. Either that or someone's been mighty confused about on and off," she says, eyeing me like I should be ashamed of myself.

"Just give me the good news," I say, feeling ashamed in spite of myself.

Peering into one of his eyeballs with a pocket light, she says, "Want him to live?" I nod. "Then it's good news."

He smiles, and she tosses me a know-it-all look.

I get on the phone to Stanley.

"Will you turn down that boxing match?" I shout.

"Howd'ya expect me to hear it if I turn it down?" Stanley says over the blow-by-blow commentary of the fight.

"I have something important I want to ask Carbone Man."

"Keeerrsst! Don't you never let your balls down?!" He turns down the fight from ear-blasting to loud.

"Did you see or hear anyone coming or going late Saturday night?"

"Saturday night--Grrrraaa good one!--uh, yeah. That was the night the Great Titanium had the ref in a headlock, and I couldn't hear the squirt squealing on account a some turd was revving a bike out back. Right hook, man, right, right! Ahhh, serves you right, ya dumbbell."

"Yo, Stan?! You didn't see who it was?"

"Whaddya think? No one comes between me and the Great Titanium. It was some broad leaving."

"In the morning, you mean?"

"Nah. It was before I closed up shop for the night."

"It couldn't have been Saturday night, Stan. Believe me, I would have heard the bike myself."

"Blood, blood, blood, more! Argg, I said *more* not *less*. Coulda been Sunday when I was watching the repeats. Same diff."

"See anything unusual going on?"

"Nah. The cops always picnic in the trees and bushes around here. Whaddya think?"

"I was talking about Saturday, uh, Sunday night. What did she look like?"

"Dunno. She was wearing a helmet. And lots of ball-bustin' brown leather. Yeowch! One more slam, and he's gonna go down. The way the leather was stretched over her ass, it could'a been Dan's muffin."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"What does she look like?"

"The few times I seen her was mostly from behind."

"Wearing a red hat or coat?"

"Aaagrrr, whew! That was a close one. No, black. And the hat was so ugly I'd rather kiss someone's hairy--"

"Stanley!"

"--stinky--"

"I get the idea."

"--keister than look at that hat."

"Was the bike a Kawasaki?"

"Yeah. Black and beauteeeeful. Ahhh, kiss my keesster!

Now look what ya gone and done?! He's down for the count 'cause you brought him bad luck. Arrgg. He's a goner."

I cover the phone with my hand and say to Nevar, "Lulie and I have worked out a plan to get into Dan's apartment."

"It's about time you came to your senses about him," he says, pain straining every word. The deep lines on his face show his struggle to buck the pain. This is a man who's not used to experiencing life from the sidelines.

"He's not there," I say.

"Then why--" Nevar starts to say.

"Because maybe there's something in his apartment that'll give us a clue where to look for the Spider." Getting back to the phone, I say, "Who needs luck with a good right hook?"

"Don't give me that crappola. I heard some a what youse was saying. Whose rights ya want me to trash this time?"

"I need to get around the army camped on your doorstep."

"Nah ya don't."

"All you have to do is set off the fire alarm, and make sure the goods elevator isn't locked."

"Nah I don't. What the cops want you for anyhow? You dangling some guy from his balls off some cockamamie balcony?"

"No, they're after Dan. But I need to talk to him before they do, that's all."

"Talk?! Then why don't ya just shake your little beehind and thumb your nose at all those gun-toting hombres outside and--"

"They want to talk to me because they think I'll lead them to the kidnappers of--"

"That kid? He's gawking back at me in the boob tube right now. Uh...he says he was rescued by a porn star. Now who'd ya think that could be, eh?" He laughs. "You're a bowl a cherries, a real ballsy babe. I'll pull the alarm if you'll give me some stills."

"Yes, yes, but you have to be ready to set off the alarm in the next few minutes."

"Make that six," Lulie says, getting the truck rolling.

"First I wanna know when I'm gonna get that bike ride," Stanley says. "And no cockamamie bullshit this time, or I swear on my mother's apple pie, I'm gonna--"

"The Duke is here with me," I say. "So in six minutes make all hell break loose."

"10-4, and no stills smaller 'n 14 by--" I shut him down.

"Listen, Nevar," I say. "Soon as we get within two blocks of the Doré, we'll leave you with the truck and--"

"No!" he says and winces. Holding the back of his head, he adds, "You're not the only one who's earned the right to get a crack at him."

"For crying out loud!" Lulie intrudes. "I didn't knock his block off. Have a good look. Nothing's missing." She gives him the once over with her eyes. "And getting better by the minute."

"The last block and a half, I'm going to race like a maddened fiend on foot. If you can keep up with me, then you're on," I tell him. "But you can't rush the pain."

"Or the heart," he says in a low, choking voice then smiles. There's a warm feeling in that smile, but the jerk is directing it at her, not me. Eventually, he lets his gaze drift to me like an afterthought. At least he's not looking at me cross-eyed.

"Lulie's going to divert the attention of the cops by making them think it's me on the bike," I explain, emptying my jacket pockets.

"Yessirree," she says. "Seems whenever Rane says my name, she thinks of a big noise."

"You threw the flare under the cruiser?" he asks.

She nods then shakes her head. "Flare?! Humph! I'd be throwing my life away if I threw one of those suckers, 'cause the cops don't take too kindly to being attacked by any weapon, no how. Get this straight, fella, all I did was create a distraction with a flashlight and some penny crackers."

"A distraction can be a weapon in and of itself," he says. "The police are quite capable of defining your distract--"

"Skip it, counselor. All I need for this job is this and the Duke," she says and shows him a slingshot.

"You aim that thing at anyone, and your love of rocks is going to land you--" he starts to say.

"I hate 'em," she scoffs. Keeping her hands on the wheel, she quickly makes a cross with her forefingers. "But I hate the buzzards who snatched Fitz even more. When we find him, I wouldn't put that pretty face of yours within smashing distance of him, if I were you."

"Fitz is--" I jab him in the ribs with my elbow. He gets the message and says, "Fitz is your connection to this?"

She nods vigorously. Keeping her gaze on the road, she takes some rocks out of her jacket pocket and rolls them around in her hand. "You know how many races I've blown on account of these murderous devils? You can comb the track for a week. Not a pebble in sight. Then once the tires hit the course? You guessed it."

"She races bikes," I interject. With my shoulder protesting like hell, I take off the jacket.

"I find it helps me get hyped for a race by shooting the little shits at cans," she goes on while stopping the truck. "Don't knock it. With this thing I can split a pea off your head at fifty paces."

"Snow White, you're going to have to loan me your suit jacket. Hers is too small." I toss her my jacket.

Wincing, he begins to remove his overcoat but says, "This cloak and dagger rigmarole is asinine. The police aren't working at cross purposes with us."

"I have a personal stake in this," I say, my voice rising. "To quote someone I'm getting to know, they're not the only ones who've earned the right to get a crack at the Spider."

"*But*, you're not going to fool anyone with this," he insists. "As soon as they spot you with me, they'll know it's not you on the bike."

"Will they?" I say, helping him with the coat.

"The least they'll do is a double take," Lulie joins in, "and in those seconds the two of you can be on the other side of the door. Lickety-split."

Six minutes later, with Nevar by my side--winded and obviously shaky with pain--I slow down and turn the corner onto the street where I live. It's surprisingly quiet. Perfect haunt for ghost cars. They're the only vehicles in sight. I unwrap an after dinner mint I found in Nevar's jacket. Seven minutes and no alarm. Affecting an air of nonchalance, I pop the candy in my mouth. Really, what could be less suspicious than two beaten up, dog-eared yuppies walking to the bus stop to get to work? I slow down in the face of an incessant urge to run like hell in the opposite direction.

Eight minutes.

Stanley, don't you dare trade me in for--hell, I can't think of anything the cops could offer him that he'd relish more than smutty, slutty stills. So what's keeping him?

Nevar gives me a questioning look.

He's right.

We'd better run for it.

The cell buzzes in Nevar's jacket.

"Chanlee?" he asks.

"No, my parents. What the hell?" I stop and answer it. After all, what could be less conspicuous than two beaten up, dog-eared yuppies yapping on their cell on the way to the bus stop? Not that the cops give a shit, shoot or shite. They were probably onto us before we got out of the truck. The idea is to get into the Doré without them detaining me or moving my goal posts.

"Tori Rane!" my mother screeches. "We've been sick with worry that you were one of the fire victims. How could you not die in that fire and keep us in the dark about it? How could you be so selfish? To your own mother?"

"And father, I might add," Dad says.

"As it happens, I'm on my way to a fire. If I die in this one, I'll be sure to notify you."

She gasps. "My own daughter...joking about tearing my heart out."

Nevar slides an arm around my shoulders and whispers in my ear, "There's a police officer in jeans closing in on us from behind." We resume walking, and the Doré comes into full view.

"Mom, can't you just be happy I'm alive? I am." I pause to let her speak, but she waits for me to keep going like I haven't finished making my point. "Okay, I'm not happy, because Fitz was in that hou--"

"Not Fitz?!" Dad says over Mom's sobs. "I hate having to tell you this, Rane, but he left a will and other documents with me awhile back in case anything should hap--"

"Dad! I don't want to hear that kind of--" I jump at the sound of the alarm blaring. "Gotta go!"

The cop breaks into a run behind us. Neither of us turns around. With Nevar's arm still draped over my shoulders, we keep walking. The cop overtakes us, talking a mile a minute into his cell.

The first one to run out of the building is a stout man, whose belly starts at his neck. He clutches onto two cats shelved on his belly, while he clenches the only other thing covering him: a towel with a woman's bikini-clad backside gracing his privates. I thought the old bat in 53 would be the first one out. Mind you, the place would burn down to cinders before she could grab all her dolls.

Where the hell is Lulie? Nevar and I are totally vulnerable out here. Fruk, the cops have probably confiscated her rocks.

We bury ourselves in the people pouring out behind the man wearing the bikini. At least when we get inside we'll be spared having showers, because the Doré was built before sprinklers became code.

"Stay outta there!" a voice commands behind us.

Suddenly, rap music belches out at us from on high.

"...Gangsta Jones flyin' by his seat beats Jake for the stake to jack the wacked wigger's bean stalk 'n steps outta the chalk circlin' the

same game a juicing the feds til the games dead..." Truly da m'youseek of d'ssfears. Nevar and I enjoy our smiles. But I have to shake my head. Trust a librarian to know how to grab the attention of the troops.

We push faster and harder against the tide and plunge into the lobby. "...ballin' 'n wreckin' da berry...dumm dumm do-yaa boo-ya dumm..." Oh yeah. The whole place smells of smoke. I didn't tell Stanley to burn down the fruking place. We push and dodge our way to the goods elevator. Whew! He remembered to unlock it.

"If Stanley has any brains at all, he'll be waiting for us up on the fifth," I say.

There's not a soul in sight as we get out on the fifth.

"Fruk, we need his key to get in," I say.

"We'll just have to kick it down," Nevar says.

As we approach the apartment, the door opens and Stanley waves us to come inside. "Get a load out," he scolds. "I want youse outta here. Faster 'n pronto."

I hesitate, while Nevar pushes past him into the apartment. Equal and opposite reactions to the same realization that Stanley wouldn't be talking to us now if Dan were around. Sure Nevar is eager to prove me wrong, but he's even more eager to get to Dan because he's afraid that if I get to him first, I'll kill the Spider. As for me, my stomach is pouring acid all over my hopes. Dan's the only loose end left, but he's gone. And my reasons for believing that the maggots left any other loose ends that'll lead to the Spider, are corroding with my hopes.

Stanley watches Nevar with an unsavory glint in his eye. "So, man, that's what you look like with your clothes on." My eyebrows shoot up. "Sunday morning, I caught him flashing through the lobby starkers. Now whose bed ya suppose he got booted outta, eh?"

"If you're so interested, why don't you ask him for a date? He's right there." I push past him.

I follow the sounds of a melodic humming that counterpoints the echoing rap music. It doesn't lead me to Nevar. No, he's searching through the cupboards, but his lips are drawn tight, announcing what I feel. His hopes have been reduced to less than the shadows being cast on the curtains by the projector rigged to keep the cops blissful in their ignorance. The humming is emanating from a recorder beside the projector on the coffee table.

With Stanley nagging us to hurry, the rappers egging us on to jack off with chrome, and Dan's ghost humming *Hallelujah*, I search the place with harried thoroughness. The kind of thoroughness that comes from looking for something you know isn't

there, but damned well would be if the gods were really taking care of things like they ought to.

Or gave a damn.

"Move it! We gotta scram," Stanley urges with annoying impatience. "I don't want no fricking cops combing my butt, looking for nuttin'."

Nevar points to the door, and I nod.

We've come this far only to end up back at the starting gate. This time without any leads. Like nothing ever happened, and all I have to do is awaken and Fitz will be alive. Funny, isn't it? how life always catches up with death. Part of me wants to jump in the grave with him. Fruk, I'm so tired. Too tired to seek out a path for myself in the past. Maybe it's just as well, because the Spider has dispersed into the future.

And tomorrow?

Tomorrow the Spider will be another day ahead of us all.

When we're in the elevator, Nevar says, "You might want to stay on this elevator, Stanley. The police are waiting for us, and they may be interested in talking with you in light of what they heard you saying in the apartment."

Stanley's mouth opens almost as wide as the door.

The elevator faces the back, so Nevar and I head for the parking lot, while Stan beams himself back up. I touch the outside door, and it opens without being pushed.

The Watcher steps aside.

No questions, nothing but a smile that's in sharp contrast to the worried, pissed off looks on the nippy faces of the people shut out of their homes.

"I'm going to hit the sack at Chanlee's," I say, without slowing down.

Nevar stops to talk with him.

The sight of the ridiculous ugly yellow propane car waiting for me, warms the cockles of my heart. Or it would if I weren't too numb to feel anything. But the sight of Dan's SUV steers my heart off course.

"Don't bother," the Watcher says from the door. "We've already searched it."

Standing beside the propane job, I search my pockets for the keys. I don't have them, and I can't remember where I left them. Chanlee's maybe. Or does Fitz have them--Oh hell, *did* he have them?

"They're in the glove compartment," the Watcher says. "Go ahead, it's open."

How accommodating of him to rifle through my car then leave the door open for me.

Nevar makes a dash for the car as I pull out of the lot.

"Sure you want to go my way?" I ask.

"Do I look undecided?" I shrug, and he climbs in. "Well, you do." I shrug again. "Given up?"

"No, just need to refresh my battery." I yawn, and my body turns to jelly.

"You're not surprised," he says, sighing with relief at the woman I almost sideswipe.

"At the cops backing off? No, it just means they think they know where he's really hiding out. But all they're going to find is him, not the Spider."

"Hulladin says they have solid evidence Dan's the prime mover."

"You know what? Dan would agree with him. The Spider has convinced even him that everything's his idea. But I don't think the cops are going to find Dan. Not yet. And by time they do, he'll be so liquified, they'll have to clean him off the floor with a straw." I turn into the alley. "Want me to drop you off at your place?"

"No, I'm following you."

"You don't look that far behind," I say without looking at him.

"I've found that the best way to follow you is to stay beside you."

"Meaning you think I know where the Spider is?" He says yes without nodding or saying anything. "I don't, but my only hope--and it's a long shot--is the woman in the red hat--red coat. Do you know whose head I was wearing?"

"I haven't seen you wearing anyone else's head. Thank Zeus."

"Then my only lead is Fitz. He's no one's fool." Fruk! I meant he *was* no one's fool. Nevar wishes Fitz away by ignoring my mistake. But what he's really doing is wishing my heart away. "She had to pose as a customer to lure him. Not as a tire-kicker, either, but as a real sharp shooting buyer. He could spot a phony with his eyes shut. But I've got a lure of my own: him. Maybe this is a long shot, too, but I don't think Dan knows they torched Fitz. Telling him what they did to Fitz is the only foolproof antidote to the Spider's venom."

"Perhaps. I suspect that as with too many others, he finds the devil's arguments more convincing than any god's."

"Lose any cases using the devil's arguments?" I ask with deadpan sarcasm.

He looks at me like I actually expect an answer. But then he says, "The woman in red *may* lead us to Dan, *but* we have to find her first."

"You know why we can't find him? Because he's such a dumb fruk he's hiding in the one place he shouldn't be: in the web with the Spider."

"But this is one web that has no center, so he could be anywhere."

"Anywhere she is."

He points straight ahead. "High beams flickering at 11:00. Duck! It's your rocky friend."

I pull over, and she flips a U-ee, stopping on a dime behind us. Seemingly out of nowhere, Stanley rushes up to her as she hops out.

"I promised him he could stroke the Duke," I explain, getting out of the car.

"The emergency's over," Stanley says with an irrepressible smile.

"But not the muss," she says, walking with him to the back of the truck.

Nevar and I join them.

"We're calling it a wrap for the day," I say, truly feeling how weary I am.

"Yeah, I could use a five-hour shower, and three square meals in one shot before I mosey in to work at 10:00," she says like none of this has been work.

At the sight of the bike, all Stanley's desire muscles go into overdrive. Especially his mouth. While he rants with lust at the gutsy, elegant porn star, I listen in on Nevar's conversation with Lulie.

"You said that you became part of this investigation through Fitz," he says, leaning back against the truck. "But he wasn't part of this until--"

"Not Fitz, exactly. Nope. I got mixed up in these shenanigans through Rane when she gave me a boo about riding lessons," she says, helping Stanley unload the Duke. "But I didn't get a real hankering for what was going on, till I saw those two dudes locked together in the missionary."

"What dudes?" Nevar and I say, crowding each other and Stanley to get closer to her. "What missionary?" I add. I don't know why Nevar's so surprised. He doesn't know what the hell she's talking about. But then neither do I, and I'm more than surprised.

"The ones in Professor Frankenstein's museum," she says.

"Mabie-Toogod's? I never saw any dudes," I say, becoming more perplexed. She nods and tries to say something, but I talk over her with gusto. "What dudes are you talking about?"

Looking puzzled by my feverish interest, she says, "Verlaine and Sacher-Masoch."

"You mean Paul Verlaine, the writer?" I ask, more rhetorically than anything else because I'm finally getting the drift. Turning to Nevar, I say, "She's talking about some musky books staving off decay in a cabinet."

She and Nevar start speaking at once, but she lets him have the floor.

"I gathered that," he says. "But they're not simply books, are they, Lulie?"

"You got that right. They're rare editions worth a pretty packet, I can tell you. Only, the way she had 'em stacked in the cabinet, is a surefire way *not* to stave off decay. They weren't in there as trophies, but--How to say this?--as manuals, working tools for a collector and connoisseur of pain and suffering. If you get my meaning. Foxy devil had 'em stacked right in one way, though. Sacher-Masoch's strictly a bottom. Ya know, he and Hitler are both Austrian. Between the two of them they about cover obscenity from A to Z."

I throw my head back and curse the sky for small wonders and big pains in the neck. "You think I'm Mabie-Toogod's sex toy?!" Stanley quickly shifts his leer from the Duke to me. "Oh, shut up, Stanley!"

"Whoa, there, boy! And get in line," she says playfully.

"Forget it, Stanley," I say. "I like a man who can be seduced."

The corners of Nevar's lips jerk upwards.

"Being seduced is one of my most favorite things," Stanley says, licking his lips.

"Believe me, I know," I say. "But you do it all yourself. I'm only interested in guys hot to share." Clearly amused, Nevar begins to speak. "Not a word, Snow White."

Lulie bursts out laughing, and Stanley goes back with renewed vigor to being seduced by the Duke.

Suddenly, Nevar snaps her out of her jollies by grabbing her arm and yanking her towards him. He looks grim like the long shadow of the Spider is crossing his path. With her attention riveted on him, he says, "You knew Rane had an exceptional interest in the abduction case. Then when you saw the books, you read between the lines, thinking the books implicated her in the boy's abduction. Is that it?"

"Can you blame me?" she says. She doesn't try to break free of his grip, but if he's smart he won't trust that bright, shiny twinkle in her eye. "Good thing I'm not all that sharp at connecting dots I can't find, otherwise I would have gone to the police." He lets go of her and gives me a meaningful look that leaves me cold.

"You thought the same thing, Nevar," I say, looking at Stanley.

"Why you scoping me out like that for?" Stanley says. "I never thought you was no abductioner." He takes his hands off the Duke long enough to entreat me with a show of palms.

"True enough," I say. "You just thought I was one of the Spider's--" Suddenly a realization hits me with the force of a thousand lightning bolts that hammer my head with a thousand thunder claps. My heart jumps into my throat and breathes out, "Mabie-Toogod."

Of course.

Ever spinning a yarn with her research that takes her hither and yon. A perfect way to hide out in the open.

Nevar's thoughts collide with mine. His face is electrified with the image of the Spider. We stare at Lulie, whose face lights up with the power and speed of lightning escaping the clouds. The gathering storm zeros in on Stanley.

"Youse know who done it," he says, mounting the Duke. "I'm gonna take myself for a ride 'stead a giving you guys another chance to stick it to me."

CHAPTER 29

"It's way too dangerous," Lulie tells Stanley. "Wait till the roads dry, then the Duke'll stroke your engine in any gear."

"Listen to her," I tell Stanley as I make tracks with Nevar to my car. "Lulie doesn't win by being a nipple-surfing chump and eating dirt sandwiches."

"Lulie?" Stanley says incredulously. "You Big Lulu?" We all nod, including him. "Ah, do I look like a sucker? I've seen her, man. She's one big momma, a real bruiser." He sizes her up, then his cheeks explode off his round face in an immense grin.

"You can take the bike, Stanley," I say, tapping my pockets in search of my car keys. "But don't ride it until the roads ar--"

"Chanlee?!" Nevar says, looking past me.

I turn around in time to see my jeans polish the chrome bumper of Orvin's Stude. Chanlee gives me a weary smile from behind the wheel, while Orvin waves from the passenger seat.

"Rane, the keys are in the ignition," Nevar says, sliding into the propane job.

I open the door but don't get in because Chanlee has me in a full body hug. "How were we to know Fitz was in the house?" she says dismally. "We could have saved him if--"

"Fitz was in the house that--" Lulie starts to say and doubles over. Keeping her head between her legs, she says, "We're breathing his ashes. I think I'm gonna be sick." Orvin, Chanlee and I rush to console her, while Nevar gets the car started and Stanley revs up the Duke.

"Stanley!" I holler. "Shut that thing off!"

Suddenly, Lulie's upright again. "They get a positive ID?" she asks me.

"No, but--" Chanlee tries to reply.

"Thought so," Lulie says, her face awash with relief. "Fitz wasn't in that house."

"What makes you so--" I attempt to ask.

"It died, and I can't restart it," Nevar yells from the car. Neither can I.

"Because it's running on empty," I say, smacking the indicator. "Orvin, we're going to need your Stude."

"You betcha," he says.

"We'll drop you off on the way," I say.

"Uh," he says, rubbing his whiskers and eyeing the Duke. "Junie's gonna git a big kick outta shooting the dickens outta me in this here gitup."

"Save one for me, Orvin," I say, getting into the driver's seat of the Stude. "Yo, Stan! Move over. Orvin's needs the Duke to escort him home. You can ride the Duke to your little heart's content tomorrow."

"What's up? Where we going?" Chanlee asks. "The special unit is saying good-bye to Dan at the airport. Surely you're not thinking of crashing their party?"

I shake my head. "We'll explain on the way," I say.

Stanley takes his time dismounting and throws poisonous looks at everyone and everything-- except the Duke, of course. "I don't believe this," he says, stomping his feet. "I just got pimped over again by a titzy double-crossing porno slubberdegullion with--"

"What did you call her?" Nevar says, abandoning the propane job and making a beeline over to Stanley.

Oh Fruk.

I jump out of the Stude, but I'm not fast enough to cut him off from Stanley, who's pie face looks like it's overcooked.

"A titzy double-crossing porno slubberdegullion?" Stanley says weakly.

Nevar swings out his arm, slaps him on the back and laughs.

"So much for male chivalry," Lulie says, climbing into her truck.

"Thanks for your help, Lulie," I say.

"Yeah, sure," she says as she shuts the door.

Instead of turning her truck towards home, however, she follows us to the Spider's nest.

Staying in the Stude across the street, Chanlee, Nevar and I stare in silence at Mabie-Toogod's house, clean, tidy and forgettably pretty in the dismal grey light.

Then Chanlee says, "Nothing looks amiss, but, kiddo, don't you even think about going inside. This is something for the bomb squad."

"We're looking at a dead end. She's not here," I say without being resigned to the fact. "The gargoyle guarding the entrance is gone."

"Along with all her camera equipment and other incriminating evidence," Nevar says.

"You know," I say bitterly, "we're probably the only incriminating evidence left." I get out of the car.

"Us and Dan," he says, getting out at the same time as Chanlee.

"The police net has been tightening around them to the point they haven't had much room to maneuver," I say, waving Lulie over. "So my guess is that the Spider hasn't had time to eliminate him."

"Even if he is inside," she says, "it'd be freaking suicidal to go in there."

"Right," I say. "That's why we're going to smoke him out." I open the back door of the Stude and pull out the hand-knit throw protecting the seat from the geraniums. "Nevar, you cover the back. Chanlee, you take the front." They disperse. "Lulie, you stay here as lookout. I'm going to take the garage. Chanlee, as soon as you hear glass breaking, yell, 'Fire!' As many times as it takes."

I run down the driveway to the garage that's towards the back to give a semblance of authenticity to the fake Victorian house. I wrap the blanket around my arm to break the side window. Chanlee yells, "Fire!" like she's using a bullhorn. I climb through the window into the garage and lie in wait for him to spring up out of the nether world. That trap door in the cupboard isn't harboring a safe. I've learned my lessons with the Spider hard and well enough to bet it leads down to a passageway into the house. And if he's hiding here, he's going to make a break for it before the fire fighters arrive.

Suddenly, the cupboard counter lifts up.

First I get a whiff of mentholated lavender with a touch of chamomile, then Dan stares at the Luger in my hands, his eyes cold and hard.

He doesn't hurry climbing out of the hole, like he's got all the time in the world because she's going to get him out of this. Using my elbow, I push the button for the overhead door.

"Give it up, Dan. All she's doing for you is stripping you of your humanity, and giving you a one-way ticket to easy street in hell."

"Aurora?! You in there, Aurora?" a woman says, poking her head through the paneless window.

Dan bolts under the door.

Nevar bolts after him.

"Let him go!" I yell. "No matter where he runs, or how far, he's only got one destination."

Nevar gives up the chase and waits for me to catch up with him. We watch Dan zigzag around harried neighbors, hyped up, and frantic to protect their homes. He tears by Lulie on the road. Suddenly, his face slams down against the pavement, and Lulie drops her slingshot back into her pocket. She walks back to her truck as Chanlee rushes to him.

"Let her and the other cops take care of what's left of him. I'm going to catch some shuteye at Chanlee's," I say and slide into the Stude.

Looking intently at Dan's motionless body, Nevar hesitates. He's reluctant, I suppose, to leave the scene of a homicide.

"He's still alive," Chanlee says.

"I take it he's not going to be talking any time soon?" She agrees, and he heads for the car.

"Your house first?" I ask.

He glances at his watch then rubs his eyes. "No. I'm due in court in two hours, and my car's at your apartment."

"My car's back at--the piece of--You know, it's been bugging the hell out of me that it ran out of propane. Fitz said he filled it up."

"The police surveillance team would have spotted anyone tampering with your car."

"Would they? So where in hell did all the propane go? And there's something else that's been creeping around in my brain--" My foot involuntarily slams on the break. Lulie's truck rocks us with its bumper.

I stare at Nevar without seeing him or anyone else and whip out his cell.

"Yo, Stan," I say in a sucky voice.

"Forget it," Stanley says. "I'm not talking to any of youse no more." He hangs up.

"I'll drop you off at your place, Nevar," I say.

He looks at me warily then he says slowly, like he's still ruminating, "You don't think Stanley's the web master?"

"Let's just put it this way: He knows a helluva lot more than he's been letting on. Like he wouldn't give me a description of Myrtle. And if there's one thing I know for certain about Stanley, he could give me full-blown color description of any woman he's been carousing with in his fantasies."

"But any info he has was more than likely planted on him by the Spider."

"Yes, that's why I want to talk with him."

"But, Bambi, Dan was hiding out in *her* house."

"Yes, yes, but he was just being set up like the rest of us."

"And Stanley's the one leading us around by the nose?" he scoffs. "Besides protecting his nefarious fantasies, what motive does he have?"

"What motive does Mabie-Toogod have? You've seen how she lives, so you know it's not money. And she likes to shove her victims into the light while she stays under the cover of darkness. So it's not fame."

"Apparently, she doesn't do the killing herself so it's not lust for blood. Perhaps the thrill of getting away with murder, or knowing her power extends to harming people from a distance?"

"She could go into legitimate business, or politics if that was her game. Besides, I've never seen her be thrilled about anything."

But I've never seen her face, so what the hell. No, it's like she picks her victims at random."

"Then you do think it's her?"

I throw my hands up in the air. "Damned if I know what to think anymore. I don't know whether I'm coming or going. Ask me again after I've had some sleep."

He gapes at me like he can see my car running over all my thoughts. "I don't like the look on your face. What are you up to now?"

"What look? Know what you're seeing on my face, Nevar? Too much Spider venom and not enough sleep."

TV commercials pitching sex at me wake me up. *Shut up! I'm going to kill the bastards. Where the hell is the remote?*

The bed moves before I do.

The Spider?!

Fruk, it's too dark to see anything. I roll off the bed onto the floor, taking the bedding with me to cover myself from attack and to expose him. *Him?!* All my senses are readily alert to the opportunity to kill the Spider in self-defense.

He lunges at me.

I circle his neck with my right arm and yank him down onto the floor, keeping my arm up off the floor to squeeze his neck up into a choke. I hesitate because he's not struggling enough, and it feels like he's not wearing anything.

He isn't.

I loosen my grip.

"Want to play cops and robbers tonight, do we?" a familiar voice says a little too gruffly to peg. "I love it when you play rough. Ruff, ruff!"

I jump back, turn on the bedside lamp and stare at Bruno. Even in the blinding light, I can see why Chanlee calls him Heehaw.

"Rane?!" He grabs the covers and scrambles to get up.

"What are you doing in Chanlee's bed with your clothes on?"

"Believe me, nothing that involves you, big boy."

As I'm leaving, Chanlee appears in the doorway, in full uniform.

"Arrest him," I say, walking up to her. "He won't calm down till you do. Heehaw, heehaw."

"Slow down, kiddo," she says, blocking the doorway. "Where you going in such a big hurry?"

"For a quick bite. Then I'm heading back to my place."

"Nothing's happening there," she says. "Dan's in custody. They've pulled the surveillance."

"I know. That's one of the reasons I want to go back there."

"I recognize that look in your eyes," she says. "You're hiding something."

"Well, he isn't."

"Rane!" they say in tandem. "Spill it. What are you up to?" she adds.

"Ever seen a spider smile?" I ask. "Well, I have."

I walk through the back doorway into the Doré, leaving both her and everyone else out in the cold. I don't need them to help me find what I'm looking for. I've already found the Spider in the answer to Chanlee's question when all this began, "Why you, kiddo? Why are they after you?" The answer came to me in a good day's sleep. They didn't pick me. I picked them. Inadvertently for sure, but I blundered in, choosing them when I saw the Doré for the first time. I trusted what I saw, and what I felt to be real. I *knew* it was right for me.

So I moved into the Spider's web.

"Stanley?!" I call out, pounding on his office door. "Lulie's brought the truck back, and she's going to Orvin's to retrieve the Duke for you."

My lie opens the door. He glimpses the desperate, feverish look on my face and swiftly closes the door again. On my foot wedged in the doorway. He keeps pushing, and I push back.

"Stanley, I'm going upstairs to get some sleep."

"You don't need my help wit that."

We both push harder.

"You'd better hurry up, or you won't get the Duke because Lulie isn't the waiting kind." I can feel by the pressure on the door that his resolve is weakening. "She'll give you free tickets to her next race."

The door is mine. And now I can sneak up on the Spider--if my hunch is right--without anyone interfering or knowing.

Up on the fifth with Orvin's little friend for company, I take a deep breath then knock on the door of number 53.

No answer.

I knock again and the door opens.

CHAPTER 30

"I've been expecting you," Mrs Sillicum says with venomous sweetness like she's talking to one of her dolls. I look behind her at them, sitting pretty in their mangy preciousness. All perfectly content to remain in a perpetual stupor like empty carcasses. Just the way she likes 'em. Her long, curly, hair is covering her ears, but if I yanked off her wig, I'd see mercilessly stretched lobes. And if I peered into the recesses of this carapace she lives in, I'd find a brown leather miniskirt with matching belt, knee-high boots, ho stockings and a slinky turtleneck top. Along with a red overcoat.

Although she's wearing dirty white gloves, a dowdy brown coat and faux fur collared boots, she says, "Come in."

I shake my head and point the Luger at the brown vinyl bag slung over her shoulder. "Ditch the bag. You're not going to need it where you're going."

With a shrug, she lets the strap slip off her shoulder, and the bag drops to the floor. Orvin's nervous little friend points the way to the stairwell, and I stand aside for her to go ahead of me.

"You're pathetically slow on the uptake," she chides in her dotty granny voice calculated to complement her guise as a house spider, too old and common to be anything but harmless.

"Maybe." I stroke the side of her head with the Luger. Good thing I have my indiscriminate little friend. Mrs Sillicum is too creepy and repulsive to touch. Her body stiffens, but with strange, disquieting dignity, she refrains from crying out or trembling. "But I wouldn't count on it."

The door to number 59 opens.

"Get back inside, and stay there!" I bark.

The door slams, and I poke her in the back with the pistol to get her going again. "Okay, so I was slow to look in your direction for the source of the web. That's because I was looking for a nihilist who knows everything and cares about nothing. Then I got led astray by looking for this crazed nihilist with a motive. That was my fatal mistake. What motive could you or a sleaze pot bimbo or a loopy effete pedant possibly have for kidnapping a boy and wanting to kill little ol' me? I should have known that no one needs a motive to be a predator." My voice follows us down the dreary cement stairwell as my heart beats to the rhythm of her descent onto death.

"All you need is prey," she says, sounding pleased to finish my thoughts. I'm close enough to wring her neck, but she's exuding an attitude that I'm too far behind her to ever catch up.

"You attract flies that stick to you. But like the predacious fruk you are, you just couldn't settle for sucking the life out of Dan. No, you had to have one more tasty morsel: me. But I'm your fatal mistake. You see, Myrtle, I didn't come to this place to die. You did."

She stops, turns around, gazes up at me and says with an expression akin to glee, "We all come to this place to die, Rane. The earth is our burial place." Her eyes are level with the Luger.

"You know what happens to big, bad wolves that stare down the barrel of a gun?"

She shrugs. "What do you intend to do with me?"

"*With* you? Nothing. *To* you? Everything. You're going to see how wrong you are if you really believe I'm going to let you get away with killing Fitz."

"Fitz?" She says his name like she's tasting him as her lips move. "Nice catch, but I didn't kill him."

"I know. You never touch your victims. Keep moving. *Down!*"

"You're wonderfully adept at thinking the obvious."

"And you at stating it."

"However, your thoughts never get past mere conjecture, you useless bitch."

Die, die, die, my heart beats, making me crazy to empty the Luger into her head that knows everything without thinking. I was wondering which persona was the real one, but she slinks effortlessly and conveniently from voice to voice according to what she's saying.

Stepping down off the third floor landing, I say with all the force I can without yelling, "So help me, I'll shoot you right here if you try to escape from the main exit. Just keep going down to the basement." She continues her descent. "In your storage unit, you have a nice old trunk with an even nicer lid. The kind with sharp metal edges. Not as quick or clean as the guillotine, but ultimately as effective. And with a few adjustments to your legs it will make an ideal garbage can for a spent predator."

"You kill me, and you're the predator."

"Oh no, I have no intention of killing you. The trunk will do that. You see, I never touch my victims."

"Harming me is internecine."

"You wish this was zero-sum. But it's always been strictly winner take all with us. Except this time you're the one batting zero. The only other people beside us who know you're here aren't in a position to give a shit anymore. Your body's going to have to create quite a stench before anyone notices that the garbage needs to be

taken out. 'Poor crazy old Sillicum snapped her head playing with her dolls in the trunk,' they'll say as they fumigate the place. Too bad I'll miss the show, but I'll be long gone to Europe by then." She doesn't turn around, but I know I'm the only one smiling.

Orvin's impatient little friend steers her past the exit on the main floor.

All of a sudden, the door flies open behind us, and Stanley barges in with Lulie swearing a blue steak at him. Taking advantage of the split second hesitation in my surprise, the Spider scurries down into the basement.

"Fruk!" My heart is beating faster than I can come up with ideas for an alternate plan.

Carbone Man stands at attention, his gaze frozen on the Luger. Lulie pushes him out of her way. "You know what this bum--"

"No Duke, no deal," Stanley says with his lips still unfrozen.

"--did? He--"

"Who gives a shit?!" I thunder. "You've just let Fitz's killer escape!"

Lulie's peevish expression turns murderous as she glowers, not at the ghost of the fleeing Spider, but at Stanley.

"How come she--" he starts to gripe.

"Shut up, Stanley!" I snap and run down the stairs. "The Spider can only come out through these stairs or the elevators. Stanley, watch the elevators, and Lulie--"

"Shit, yes, I'll guard this exit," she says, sounding winded like the urgency hit her midstream.

"What are you doing here, anyway?" I ask her as I open the door.

"By that hairy eyeball you're giving me, I'd say I'm here for the same reason you are: to string up the bastard by his entrails for messing with Fitz. What does this Spider dude look like, anyhow? I didn't snatch a glimpse of him."

"She's the wacked old broad who lives in 53," Stanley says.

While he gives her a description, I race to the storage room. But I stop inside the deathly quiet, unevenly lit room, like I'm trapped between four invisible yet impenetrable walls. Everything in me tells me to keep running, but she could be in any one of these units. All she has to do is fire at me or throw open one of the doors as I'm running by, and I'll be another hollow shell in her web.

Reaching back, I open the stairwell door and shout up at Lulie, "You'd better cover the exit from down here. Tell Stanley to do the same."

"Done," her voice echoes.

Treading with the utmost respect for the inert shadows falling on me and hiding inside the cages, I yank on the lock of the storage unit nearest to me. The Luger stays on guard in my right hand.

What weapons has she sequestered in these shadows? Is that a raised club over there? I shrink back and crane my neck around a stack of boxes in the cage.

Whew, a snow board.

Wherever she is, I have to see what's in the shadows quickly enough to save my life. I tug at row upon row of locks, all safe and secure for the gods only know what. A door creaks open on my right. I stop breathing to hear what's trying to be hidden.

It's only Lulie.

I take a deep breath that only serves to send my nerves into orbit.

"Can't see her from here," she says.

"Nuttin'," Stanley says, joining us in the storage room. "How 'bout you, chief?"

"Only units 102 to 110 left to check," I say. "Something tells me that we're whispering to our echoes down here." I move onto unit 106.

The pin tumbler lock comes open in my hand.

The shadows are nothing but wusses in this unit because it's empty. I halfheartedly check the remaining two units. Nothing. As expected.

"Fruk!"

I look down at my fretful feet dancing on the cement to the tune of my deranged nerves. Then I look up.

The heating vent runs along the back inside of these units. I clamor back to 106.

The vent screen is gone.

"Run!" I exclaim, running like I have eight legs. "She escaped up through the vent. Take the front, Carbone Man."

"She's gonna come crawling out by the back door," Stanley huffs.

"Right," Lulie says at the same time I say, "Wrong tense."

"Myst allcritey, she's split!" Lulie says, racing ahead of me outside.

Aside from us, the parking lot is empty of people, but the sky is filled with ice, fine and friendly as dagger tips. We push ourselves harder instead of slowing down. But turning into the alley, we see something that stops us cold: Under the alley lamp up ahead, a man is walking away from us with his arm draped around the Spider's shoulders.

"The counselor himself, walking off into the sunset with his best bud like there's no tomorrow," Lulie says, shaking her head in prickly dismay.

"No one ever lives long enough to see tomorrow." I grip the Luger with both hands and charge after him.

The slippery gravel jostling with my boots alerts him. He glances over his shoulder, smiling like he's going to see tomorrow. Seeing the Luger, he quickly drops his arm, spins around and exclaims my name. She turns around like a tottering old fool, her lips flaunting a fuck-you smile.

"Step apart," I say with my on-again little friend eyeballing them.

Nevar exchanges glances with her, but they both stay put.

"You think you get to call all the shots?" I say, securing my stance. "How about this one?" I aim the pistol between them, and I fire.

They jump aside.

"Rane?!" Nevar says, exploding with rage and fear. "I gave you the gun so you wouldn't shoot anyone. Put it away!"

"Like to see people dancing to your tune?" I ask. "How about this?" I shoot at their feet. "Seen better," I jeer. "Now keep moving." I motion with my head towards the Doré.

This time they obey my brusque, argumentative little friend who doesn't know how to quibble. I wish my hands would stop shaking, but the Spider's got my heart pounding erratically. Without a conscience to recognize boundaries, the wily predator only precludes the impossible.

Lulie stays behind me and the gun as I close in tightly behind Nevar and Sillicum. "Which one's the Spider?" she asks.

"The one who's been poisoning us with carrots; the one who can't be found because he's part of the search; the one who can't die because he's death. Not that it makes much difference, right Aurora?" She glances back at me, her hapless soul shrouding her face. "You know that by time he's finished with you, you're not like him, you are him."

"Aurora?!" Lulie says, grabbing Mabie-Toogod from behind. "And who let you out of Frankenstein's Museum, eh?" She breathes down Mabie-Toogod's neck. "Go ahead and struggle, you rabid old hag, I like feeling you choke."

"Wrong one, Lulie," I say. "Let her go. Stay where you are, Nevar. No more butt kissing for either of you. Humph! This is how you work with the cops?! Asking you to infiltrate evil is like asking the air to breathe."

"Put the gun down, Rane," Nevar demands. "Your vigilante cowboy antics aren't helping secure anything but trouble for yourself and--"

"Shut up, Nevar!" I say, glaring at him. "Because you're crazy, you get to win?"

"Don't do anything stupid," Nevar says. "She means business." He's talking to Stanley rushing to join us.

We're approaching the spot where I ditched the Hiker's knife. I trust that knife more than Lulie. "Hey, Lulie, take the reins, will ya?" I say. "I need to get--"

The sound of a motorbike turning into the alley nearly drowns out my voice. I glance at the bike. Fruk, it's Orvin on the Duke, and it looks like he's brought someone with him. June? For a photo op?! How the fruk am I going to hear the Spider's fangs rattling with the Duke sending Orvin's babe over the top with his seductive roar? No, there's no babe. Just Orvin's jacket flapping.

Stanley brushes by Mabie-Toogod to get out of the way of the bike.

She elbows him in the side of the head.

His head snaps to the side and back, and he crumples down.

I lunge at her, but her leg swings back into my chest. The boot smashes through my ribs.

The pain crushes in on me like jagged pieces of my ribs are puncturing my lungs, but I tuck forward enough to keep from slamming my head on the ground. As I go down, I see the Spider's eyes shining on me, until a branch loaded with icy needles whips against my face. I can't torque out of the fall fast enough, so my left elbow hits the ground before my hand does. Crack and crush again. I didn't feel the Luger leave my hand, but I smacked the ground with both hands free.

Suddenly, the Luger is Lulie's best friend and she's shouting, "Chill, everyone. No one's going to get hurt as long as you dumbbells keep your short-arms in your pants and stay where you freaking are." No one moves except me. "How you doing, Rane?"

I groan and roll over onto my stomach with my right hand under me. In this position, my body is crushing down on my ribs, suffocating me. My hands claw into the ground covered with frosting that sparkles and bites. Sweat rolls off my nose and my right shoulder twinges from the pain zapping my strength. But I force myself to get up, making sure that my right hand pulls the hidden knife out of the ground and up into my sleeve.

Standing up, broken, bruised and shaky, I face the Spider. "Ecdysis," I whisper, and the Spider's eyes flash with recognition.

Only the Spider's.

The Duke's roar has faded to a hum, and the sound of ice falling on dead leaves clinging onto lifeless branches is giving a chilling rhythm to the moment. I look into Nevar's eyes. "No, Rane!" he pleads and steps in front of Mabie-Toogod.

Lulie gives me the gun and stays out of striking range but close enough to Mabie-Toogod to give her a rock eye with the slingshot if she tries to escape.

"Get away from her, Nevar!" I command.

He refuses, but she steps out from behind him and gives me a look of resignation that's meant to be disarming. It's a look that she and Nevar are waiting to see on my face because it comes upon you when you know you're licked. I want to shoot the fruking Spider so badly, I can't keep my trigger finger from twitching. But I have to choose my moment. *Mine*, not the predacious fruk's.

"Rane!" Chanlee's voice says from the other side of the universe. "Don't--"

I glance in the direction of her voice but catch the Spider's legs hurling at me. I jump aside. And stumble, my arms flailing in a desperate attempt to right myself.

The knife shoots from my coat.

Before I can blink, the glint on the blade vanishes and reappears in the eyes of the Spider, who stares up with glistening doll's eyes.

I look up at the sky and let it fall on my face. The ice pricking my skin feels wonderful because I know I'm alive and the Spider's dead.

"She's dead," Nevar says, leaving her to help me up.

Having seen enough of someone who's no longer there, Lulie congratulates me with her smile and gives a helping hand to Stanley.

"An unfortunate accident?" Nevar says, shaking his head in regret that's anything but perfunctory.

"Yeah, a fortunate accident," Lulie says to me. "Two witnesses saw you trip and fall, hon."

"You're shivering," Nevar says and covers me with his overcoat. He rests his hands on my shoulders briefly, then pulls them away.

"You can touch me, you know," I say to him. "I'm not breakable--"

Lulie guffaws.

"--well, I am where it hurts, I suppose. But not where it counts."

He smiles at me in the way people do when they're not enjoying it. Then he looks away, keeping his thoughts and hands to himself.

"Was I hallucinating or did I hear Chan--" Suddenly, someone slaps me on the right shoulder. Zzowwee! As I sputter forward, Stanley grabs me and smothers me in a bear hug. "Game takedown!" he says, planting a wet kiss in my ear.

"Ain't love grand?" Lulie says, trying to pry him off me.

"Never mind, Carbone Man," I say, hugging him back.

"You're sunshine in the rain." I catch Nevar's eye, but he quickly averts his gaze.

"Uh," Lulie says. "Nah, skip it. You'll get a load--and I do mean load, hon--of it for yourself. Got your running shoes on, Stan?"

He gives her a knowing look that isn't shared by Nevar, who's looking at me like he thinks I'm getting away with murder. I meet his gaze with a questioning look. "I not only saw you fall, Rane, I felt it," Nevar says.

Looking past him and his disapproval, I see Lulie getting on the phone to the police, while Stanley blocks a car from running over the Spider. But no Chanlee. No Orvin or Duke, either.

"I would have settled for having her crawling around in a trunk with her smelly dolls for a few hours," I finally say, struggling not to sound defensive.

"Forasmuch as I'd like to believe her death was accidental," Nevar says with a strain in his voice I've never heard before, "I could see it in your eyes, in the way you moved, that you were intent upon killing someone. Rane, you passed the marksmanship part of your training at the top of your class. I knew you couldn't miss. I truly believed I was staring death in the face. If --"

"Did you?" Lulie says to him as she pockets the phone. "Because I was absolutely sure you were toast." My eyes keep wandering back to the Spider, but Lulie steps between us. "Let's have a look, hon." She peels back the coat and feels my arm.

"My arm's okay, it's my shoulder." Then she touches my elbow, and it feels like she set fire to it. "Your ulna is wacked. Just hang in there, hon. I've called for an ambulance."

"What made you change your mind, about killing me?" Nevar asks. He keeps his distance on the other side of me.

"When I first spotted you cozying up to Sillicum--" I start to say.

"Who?" Nevar interrupts.

"Mabie-Toogod," Lulie says at the same time I say, "The woman in red."

"Myrtle," Nevar says knowingly.

I shake my head. "No."

"No? Ah, yes, I see. There is no such beast," he offers with a finality that seems to satisfy him.

"Oh yes there is," I say.

"Yes, *no*, which is it?" he asks.

"Let me answer that by getting back to you and Mabie-Toogod in the alley," I say. "When I first saw you with her, I trusted what I was seeing, what she was contriving for me to see."

"What were you doing trucking up to the Spider, anyhow?" Lulie butts in.

"She's been looking for her cat, Kiken, for the last couple days," he replies. "As you know, Stanley." He runs his fingers through his hair like he'd rather be pulling it.

Standing guard over the body like his eyes have turned to plastic, Stanley says, "If that crazy old broad ever had a cat, she musta ate it before I was super."

"I think you'll find, Stanley, that the real Sillicum suffered a similar fate before you came on the scene."

"But *Kiken*?!" Lulie says with a mocking laugh. "Whatever it means, you just know it means someone's being snookered. In any language."

I can't bring myself to laugh because I can still see the Spider's claws all over him and feel them snapping at me.

Suddenly getting serious, Lulie says, "Hey, counselor, that doesn't answer what you were doing poking your nose around in this alley."

"I'll give you my excuse if you'll tell me yours," he says edgily. He turns away from her and looks to me to continue.

"As I was saying, I tried luring Aurora into a false security with the same deceit she used on all of us," I say. "But she didn't fall for any of it. Both of you did, because neither of you is the Spider. Let's face it, Nevar, I had the edge because you weren't sure who I was targeting. If you had known for certain I was targeting her, you would have made it impossible for me to get to her without taking you out too."

"For good reason, Rane," he says, his voice getting testy. "What are you trying to prove? And who are you trying to prove it to? You've known for some time now that you've surpassed the requirements for the police test. But you have to surpass yourself. To the point of diminishing returns, I might add. Have you been listening to what you've been saying? Have you? You're talking about premeditated murder. You knew who she was before you saw us in the alley."

Lulie butts in, "Listen, buster--"

I hold up a hand warning her to back off. "Yes, I got onto Sillicum through my car." I stay calm partly because my injuries are keeping me grounded in my pain, but mostly because I know he's shooting shit. "Someone was jerking around with it. In full view of the stakeout crew. So I figured the Spider had to be someone who could come and go from the Doré without anyone caring to notice. Then a whole slew of details fell into place. Details like the mangy old doll on the chair at Mabie-Toogod's and--"

"Huh?" Lulie says.

"Sillicum's place is full of dolls. But the detail that cinched it for me was that no one, not even Stanley, saw Myrtle or the woman in red entering the Doré. They were always leaving."

"Her apartment is on the same floor as Dan's?" he asks. I nod. "So that if anyone saw her up on fifth, she could pretend to be visiting Dan." He turns to go. Away from the Doré.

"Where you going?" I ask.

"To my car," he says without arresting his departure.

"Yes. And?" I ask.

"The rest is up to the police," he says. "They know where to find me."

"So?" I say.

"In view of the circumstances, I've had the court date moved back," he says. "I was going to--To hell with it." He shrugs away the thought and keeps going.

"Don't let us stop you from leaving the scene of a crime," Lulie says.

Nevar stops and turns back to her, Stanley, me and the woman I killed.

"Did I miss something?" Stanley says. "I never seen no crime."

"You're right, Nevar," I say. "The police know where to find you." I do too, but I won't. Don't want to. I don't think.

"Slay 'em in court, counselor," Lulie says.

"Before you go, I'm curious about something," I say.

"Yes?" he says begrudgingly.

"Where are you from?" I ask.

"I was almost born in a Monastery, but my mother had this Eureka experience," he says. A shadow of a smile creeps over his face.

"Say what?" Stanley says.

"Between Moose Jaw and Moosehead," Nevar says.

"Moosehead," Lulie says thoughtfully. "That's not far from Ecum Secum."

"Never mind, I give up," I say, rubbing my shoulder. It doesn't seem possible, but it hurts more than my ribs.

"Your mother calls you *Tori Rane*," he says. "I haven't seen it on any of your I.D."

"You really want to know why my mother calls me *Tori Rane*?" He looks at me in anticipation. "Good." Keeping my smirk to myself, I turn my back on him and catch Chanlee running through the parking lot.

Nevar grabs me by the waist from behind and tugs me towards him. "You're going to the hospital."

Lulie and Stanley nod, while I shake my head. I don't struggle because I don't know what his touch means. Not to him or me.

Chanlee stops abruptly at the sight of the dead Spider. "I thought Orvin was whistling up his yin and down his yang."

Lulie stares at her. "The difference a uniform makes." Then she shrugs and says, "That's cool. Sure beats being stripped to nothin' in a mirrored coffin."

Chanlee turns her attention to me, her eyes reflecting the horror we all feel tearing at our guts. "How you holding up there, kiddo?"

"We're taking her to the hospital," Nevar says.

"What are they going to do about my cracked ribs except tell me to take some painkillers and go home?"

"You might have something else wrong with you," he insists.

Chanlee comes over to me, and Nevar lets go as she wraps her arms around me. "You look like shit, kiddo. Ass kicking shit. But freak, Rane, do you look good to these grateful eyes!" I lean into her and hold her tightly, until the hardware on her uniform tries to wedge between the cracks in my ribs. I groan, and she slackens her hold to a fervently tender hug.

I pull my head back to see her face. "What made you think I was too dead to look like shit?"

"Dunno," Chanlee says. "I couldn't shake this feeling I got when I saw that look on your face when you left the house. Then wham! this freaky thought came over me that something was seriously wrong with you. Orvin just told me how much danger you were in. She died trying to kill you."

"Hear that, Nevar?" Lulie says. "Or are you too much of a rectitudinous anal retentive stuffed shirt to be grateful that Rane saved your life?"

I can't see his response because he's choosing to remain hidden behind me, but I turn and say to him, "It might occur to you be grateful."

He doesn't flinch from my searing look. "I don't believe in vigilante justice--"

"Because Fitz means sweet tweet to you," Lulie says.

"--or capital justice," he says. "Do you know how much knowledge you just did away with?"

"Shut up, Nevar," I say. "You're not in court now."

"Right, counselor. So stop judging her," Lulie says.

Stanley rushes up to Nevar and stands on his tiptoes to say in his face, "You're wacked, man, if you didn't see the twisted old broad going for her. What ya going to tell the cops, eh? That you was the one that busted Rane's ribs? Geez, all youse lawyers need books to prop ya up." He steps back beside me, and I squeeze his hand while Lulie gives him a shoulder hug.

"If I hadn't killed her, I would be dead now," I tell Nevar.

"Good thing I didn't let you decide for me, huh?"

Everyone stares at him, waiting for something he doesn't seem to know he has to give.

"Yes, well...", Chanlee says. Her expression is much like Nevar's: equally discerning, only hers is more amused and less mystified. Because her spirit is relishing a certain victory, while his brain is grumbling about conceding defeat.

"Orvin was here?" I ask her.

"Still am," Orvin says, chugging up behind us.

He's holding a package in a garbage bag, like he's carrying firewood. Then he dumps it on Nevar and crams his way between Stanley and me. "Brought the Duke back fer ya. Saw what was happenin' here and galloped round to the front there to git the police. Where in thunderation did all 'em git to? Golderned good thing Chanlee here came along. But I'll be jim-swiggled if I didn't see ya git her. Think ya could teach an old dog how ta throw like that?"

"And just who do you intend to kill?" Nevar asks.

"Dunno," Orvin says, scratching his whiskers. "Yet. But Rane's gonna want ta kill me if I don't feed the Duke." He walks off to the parking lot.

Chanlee gives me a penetrating look that rattles my bones. "Why so down?" she asks. "The pain getting to you?" I shake my head. "It's all over, kiddo." I keep shaking my head, and my whole body shakes with it. "You'll pick up again as the pain goes away."

"That's just it, Chanlee," I say, feeling dispirited to my broken bones. "It never will."

Chanlee watches me with heightening anxiety. "But we've got Faule and Dan, and Mabie-Too--"

"Mere prison bars and crematoriums can't contain her evil. Don't you see? The greatest gift the universe bestows on us is the power to make children happy. The flagrant abuse of that power is the root of how much pain, misery and evil?"

"Too goldammed much," Stanley says.

"It only looks like we've won," I resume. "We never pulled the legs off the Spider. She did that herself by ecdysis."

Ah, Lulie says with a big sigh. "The word you said before you kill--" She stops herself, glances at Nevar then says, "Before she attacked you the last time."

"The Spider grows by molting, and so does her power. She lives on in her offspring--the ones she keeps around to eat, and the ones she lets live as her safety-line to immortality. Somewhere out there is--"

"The woman in red," Nevar says.

--her latest ecdysial incarnation, beautiful, aggressive, solitary and predatory."

Lulie shakes her head. "Young, vital and lethal."

Looking puzzled, Chanlee says, "But the woman in red is Dan. And he has a limp."

"Dan serving as the Baby Spider's decoy," I say. "While we were chasing him, she got away."

"You're wearing her head in the video?" Nevar asks.

"And vice versa," I say.

"Then it shouldn't be difficult to track her down," he says.

"The Baby Spider will have cast off that identity by then," Chanlee says, sounding grim and looking pained.

"Here come the cops," Stanley says, shielding his eyes from the oncoming headlights.

"Here," Nevar says, dumping the garbage bag on Stanley. With his arms freed, Nevar hugs my waist and starts tugging me again away from the Doré. "You need to--"

I twist around and look at him, "I wish you didn't have this insatiable desire to restrain me."

"Bambi, what do you call the bashings you keep giving me?" he asks.

"An oxymoron. Bambi's a helpless orphan that--"

He interrupts, shaking his head. "Haven't you read the book?"

"Yes, a long time ago," I reply.

"All the way through to the end?" he asks.

"Okay, I get the point," I say, wondering whether the approaching ghost car is going to stop short of us. It does.

"Finally," Nevar says with a drawn out sigh. "I realize that knocking me around has been a great confidence builder for you. What with you bragging to yourself that if you could control and restrain me, you could do it to anyone. But, *but*, if you want more practice, you're going to have to use a punching bag from now on. As it happens, I have one at my place."

"You're dreaming, Snow White. I'm going to my apartment for a long soak," I say.

Hulladin gets out of the ghost car. "When you got a minute, Rane," he says, busying himself with the Spider. "A few words."

Stanley steps in front of him, holding the bag like he's collecting garbage. "Ain't you got no more respect than that? This--" He spits in the direction of the Spider. "--crusty old broad busted up Rane real bad."

"You hanging in there, Rane?" Hulladin asks. I nod, but he's not paying attention. He's bending over the Spider's body. Then he looks up from her to me and says, "Think it'd be safer if you're on our side." He hands Stanley a business card and points at me. "Don't make yourself scarce."

Stanley passes the card to me like he's holding a hot potato.

"Welcome aboard," Chanlee says like she couldn't be more delighted.

"Thanks," I say. "That's what they always say to the drowned rats."

"Hon, it's your ticket into the force," Lulie says to me like I'm sinking too fast to catch the drift. "It is what you wanted?"

"Isn't it?" Chanlee asks.

"Not right at this minute, no." I head for the Doré.

"Don't forget your paintings," Chanlee says, taking the garbage bag from Stanley and holding it out to me. "Hope you don't mind, kiddo, but some of your sketches are in there too. I tore them out of the pad so we could--"

"So you had them all along?" I ask.

She and Nevar exchange glances. "I did," he says. "I--"

"Later, Nevar," I say. "I'm getting soaked standing out here."

Stanley, Lulie and Nevar follow me into the building.

"Let's use the goods elevator," Stanley says. "It's way faster."

"Nice try, Stan," Lulie says then turns to me. "Think you might wanna have a boo out front first, hon."

Stanley's intent on inspecting a spot on the ceiling, so I turn my suspicions onto Nevar. He shrugs with convincing sincerity. I knew it. He's up to something with her. And Stanley. One thing's clear, they're not going to let me rest until I go around to the front. But what have they cooked up for me? And why is the hair on the back of my neck beginning to feel like it's infested with spiders?

"Take these up for me, will you Stanley?" I say, holding the bag out to him. He takes it like I've been scolding him. What the hell did I say? "Hold on, let me have a look at them first." *What the fruk?!* "These aren't mine."

"Yes they are," Nevar says, trying to wedge himself between Lulie and Stanley as they swoop in on the paintings and sketches.

I give him a dour look. "How would you know, Snow White? You think mountains are ice-cream cones. These are forgeries. And not very good ones."

"To be perfectly honest," Nevar says, "these look considerably bet--"

"How can you tell they's fakes?" Stanley asks.

Nevar smiles ironically.

"Shut up, Nevar," I say, putting them back in the bag. "I can't believe it. *Me*, a victim of forgers. And I haven't even gone public with my work yet."

"How valuable is this stuff?" Stanley asks on his way to the elevator.

"It's worthless, Stan," Lulie explains. "The creeps stole the valuable art and left this garbage."

Nevar catches my chagrin and smiles at me like I'm the organ grinder's monkey.

"Okay, let's see what you guys have waiting for me out front," I say. "It'd better not be something--" I gape at all my dismantled exercise equipment, clothes--*fruk*--the whole contents of my apartment strewn on the sidewalk. "Stanley?! Where is he? I'm going to--"

"He said you told him to do it," Lulie says.

"Holy hell, everything's wet," I say, bending down to pick up a glass frosted by the gods. Argg, my ribs complain bitterly and I straighten up. "I'm not going to be able to touch my toes for awhile, or--"

"I can," Nevar says.

--scratch my back or--"

"I can," he says.

--sneeze."

"You can plug your nose," Lulie offers.

"Yeah right," I say. "So it'll explode out my chest."

"I can hold your chest," he says.

"You," I say, pointing at Nevar. "Stop it. You're deliberately trying to make me laugh."

"No I'm not," he says, doing a lousy job of trying to keep a straight face.

"You know it hurts like hell to laugh," I say.

"Well, it's your fault I'm still alive," he says. "You saved my life, so what are you going to do about it?"

"He's got you there, hon," Lulie says.

"Hello, Tildy," he says, to someone behind me. I turn around and see the tall blond from the mountain. "She and Darien have been helping me find Kenny," he says by way of explanation. Not that I wanted one.

"Darien went inside looking for you," Tildy says as Orvin glides around the corner on the Duke like he's riding the wind. "Oh here he is." *Orvin?* No, she's looking in the direction of the building.

A brisk little man with very little hair comes out of the Doré.

I stare at him. "Snow White and the one--"

"Don't say it!" Darien warns. "I'm a small person, not a--Hey you!" He charges up to Orvin as he dismounts the Duke. "Gimme that!" He reaches up and snatches the paint-splattered cap as Orvin's about to put it on. "Look what you've done to my Blue Jays cap! It's a signed cap, you stupid old geezer." He pokes Orvin in the stomach repeatedly with a finger. "You owe me, man."

Orvin dodges the pugnacious finger and grabs the cap.

The cap.

The blue cap Kenny was wearing.

Not quite right.

The blue cap I thought I saw Kenny wearing in the Lexus.

"Lay offa him!" Lulie yells at Darien and joins Orvin in trying to reclaim the cap.

"Darien! Let him have the filthy thing!" Tildy commands. He ignores her. So she jumps into the fray.

On Orvin's side.

"I recognize Darien as the third voice I heard in your basement," I say to Nevar. "I thought he was the Hiker." He nods. Or was that a shiver?

Looking around and trying to decide what to do about the mess, I notice Stanley making out like he's washing the windows in the lobby. I motion him to come out and join us. He shakes his head. Chanlee crosses through the lobby and out the front door.

"What's all the commotion about?" she asks.

"Tell Stanley to get out here and clean up this mess, or the closest he'll ever get to the Duke is the dust from my riding boots kissing his butt," I tell her.

"Tell him yourself," she says, heading right for the fracas.

"They fighting over Kenny's cap?"

I nod and she pulls up her pants by the belt.

"Good," Nevar says, "Chanlee's going to restore peace and order."

"Just try stopping me," she says and jumps into the fray.

He takes hold of the lapels on his coat. "I'm cold and drowning out here. And you can't stay here, Bambi."

"Bruno's at Chanlee's...but I'll have the spare room to myself...but I could use a nice hot, um...", I say, half-outloud.

"Kenny will understand why you can't make it to his party, but I won't understand why you can't stay with me." His voice lowers, getting fuller and deeper with emotions he expects me to express. "You know, Rane, you have the ability to cut people to their knees with a smile. And when they're down, they bless you for not sticking the knife in somewhere else. It's a tremendous tool, especially if it's done naturally, as I'm sure yours is."

And I'm equally as sure that somewhere in that cutting remark, he's saying I'm a good aim. But was that look I threw him really that pointed? Any daggers left in me are reserved for Stanley. I eye him scrubbing the outside of the foyer windows. Good 'ld Carbone Man. He's only got a gazillion more scrubs to make his way back to the Duke. I swing my attention back to the ruckus raging over the cap amidst all my worldly possessions littering the ground, while the heavens shoot needles at us.

Nevar watches me intently. Watches? That's much too tame. His shivers are riding the rain needling me. "What the hell," I say. "Your place it is." And I fall into his arms, laughing.

###



*Who really died in the explosion?
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