

The May Day Murders

Scott Wittenburg

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CHAPTER 1

Sam Middleton held the door open for his ex-wife and daughter before joining them as they descended the steps of the funeral home. Leaves of brilliant colors blew in every direction as they made their way across the parking lot to Ann's white Toyota Camry. Sam stood and watched Ann search absentmindedly in her purse for the car keys; the tears welling up in her eyes for the third or fourth time that day.

He glanced over at Amy, who seemed oblivious to her mother's grief, and Sam silently wished that she would at least make an effort to console her. But Amy simply stood there apathetically and he was once again reminded of how dramatically his little girl had changed since the divorce last spring. She seemed almost a stranger now, no longer the sweet, freckle-faced little kid who was so considerate of others and nearly always obeyed her parents' demands without question. Amy had since become defiant and selfish—seemingly overnight—and was so wrapped up in her own little world that it was downright scary. Through some force unknown to him, his little bundle of joy had evolved into a bitter, incorrigible young lady of fourteen—a keg of dynamite just waiting to blow up at the slightest provocation.

Ann suddenly broke down and started weeping. Sam stepped over and put his arms around her comfortingly, feeling a little awkward as he did so.

"Why, Sam?" she sobbed. "Why did Marsha have to die? She was so full of life—so happy! And now she's . . ."

"There now, dear," he consoled. "Please don't get yourself all worked up again."

"And so *violently!* Who in the world would want to do that to her? Marsha wouldn't harm a fly. She was so . . . so kind. And Dave, and little Tommy . . . What will they do now?"

Sam hugged her tightly, patted her back. "I don't know, Ann. It's certainly an awful situation. I guess they'll just have to try to put all the pieces together and get on with their lives without her. Just like the rest of us will have to do."

She buried her face in his chest, and Sam's heart bled for her. He had known that Ann was going to take it hard when he'd called to give her the grim news of Marsha Bradley's murder, but he had never conceived that it would absolutely devastate her like this. She and Marsha had been best friends since grade school and had been practically joined at the hip in the years since. That was a lot of memories shared together; a lot of closeness. And for Marsha Bradley to die so abruptly like that; and in such a gruesome, hideous way . . .

"I hope they find the bastard who did this to her and string him up by his balls!" Ann declared bitterly.

She pulled away and faced Sam, her eyes moist with tears. "Do you know if they've found any clues yet?"

Sam stared at her gaunt, lovely face and replied, "When I checked with Roger this morning, he told me that they still don't have much to go on. Little Tommy is still in shock, and no one is going to interrogate him until he calms down. The shrink seems to think that could take awhile. And since Tommy is the only witness they know of so far, Roger doesn't think that much of anything is going to break until they can question him. Poor kid. I guess he's so traumatized over this that they've had to practically force him to eat, and he still hasn't spoken a word to a soul. Not even to his father."

"Is Dave going to be able to handle all of this, you think? He looked absolutely awful in there."

Sam shook his head slowly. “He’s taking it pretty hard, no doubt. My guess is that once the shock has worn off, he’ll be out for blood. I just hope they find this asshole soon. The whole town’s pretty stirred up, as you can imagine. Probably already forming a lynch mob, as we speak,” he added with a wry grin.

Ann managed a weak smile. “God, am I ever glad I don’t live in this little Peyton Place anymore!”

Sam ignored her remark. “The police are advising everyone to be on the lookout for anything or anyone suspicious and recommending that parents set up a voluntary ten o’clock curfew for their kids.”

“Are you covering the story, or is that a stupid question?” she asked.

“Yes, to both,” Sam replied dryly.

“Well, keep me informed. I want to know everything that happens, okay?”

“Sure,” Sam nodded. He let go of her and turned to Amy. “Why so quiet, kiddo?”

Amy shrugged her shoulders. “Nothing to say. I just want to go home,” she answered, her tone of voice bored.

Sam went over and kissed his daughter on the cheek and whispered in her ear, “Look after your mother, okay, sweetie? This has been really tough on her, and she needs all the emotional support she can get right now. Think you can do that for your old man?”

Ann remained expressionless and replied, “Okay, Dad.”

Sam held her bright green eyes in his a moment and could feel the familiar pang of remorse gnaw at him—just as it always did whenever he was about to say goodbye to his estranged family. He missed them both more than he wanted to admit to himself. Amy, as if reading his mind, suddenly gave him a bear hug. “I miss you, Dad.”

“I miss you too, honey.”

Then, as quickly as it began, this rare, magical moment ended. “Can we go now, Mom?”

Ann unlocked the car door. “We’re on our way.”

As Amy walked around to the other side of the car, Sam stood and watched as Ann got in. “Be careful,” he said. “I’ll call you as soon as I learn anything.”

Ann looked up at Sam and squinted from the glare of the sun coming from behind him. “Thanks, Sam. Take care of yourself.”

He nodded and waited until Amy was inside, then said, “You two take care of each other, okay?”

“We will, Dad. Bye.”

Sam closed the door and stood by as Ann started the engine and backed the car out. He waved to them as they pulled away.

As he sauntered across the lot toward his gray Grand Cherokee, Sam’s head was reeling from the events of the day. He reached the Jeep, climbed in and fired up the engine. He felt numb and more alone than he’d felt in a long time. Marsha Bradley’s rape, murder, and ensuing memorial service were agonizing enough. But seeing how hard Ann was taking it, then watching her drive away into the sunset along with his kid—leaving him here in this godforsaken town while they headed to a new city and a new life—was just about more than he could handle right now. Although Columbus was only a couple of hours away, it might as well be somewhere in China.

Sam floored the accelerator and pulled into the alley, turned onto Grant Street and headed north. Traffic was light for a Saturday afternoon; but then it was always light in this little burg of 21,000. One of Smithtown’s

few assets was its intrinsic charm; the rolling foothills that virtually surrounded the entire town, the fine old houses with their neatly manicured grounds, and the nearby state forest located to the west just outside the city limits. Otherwise, the town was a bust. An economically anemic place that was swiftly heading in the wrong direction as towns go. Shrinking instead of growing.

Smithtown was comprised for the most part of white middle class folks, coexisting with a smattering of impoverished but determined southern Ohio hillbilly farmers. Minorities existed to a considerably lesser degree, with the Indian and Asian American professionals—mostly physicians—equaling, if not exceeding the town's black population. Smithtown's County Hospital seemed to draw immigrants in search of a place to practice medicine like a streetlight to moths.

As he waited impatiently for a traffic light to change, Sam wondered for the umpteenth time why he remained in this depressing place. With the exception of his job as a reporter at the *Smithtown Observer*, there was virtually nothing else holding him here. Especially now that he'd split up with Ann. Even his parents had moved on, happily retired and basking in the Florida sunshine.

His game plan had fallen apart, he admitted to himself grimly. He had always had this crazy dream of being a novelist, and after having gotten his first bestseller published, moving his family to New England to spend the rest of his life writing novels in his den in front of a roaring fire in the fireplace. Now, at forty, he no longer had a family to move anywhere and his "bestseller" was yet to be written, stalled on page sixty-three where it had lain dormant for months.

Sam hung a right onto Court Street and heaved a long sigh. The divorce had been the beginning of his undoing, no doubt about it. He missed Ann and he missed his kid. His motivation to write was shot—his two greatest sources of inspiration now in a car heading north on Route 23 en route to Columbus . . . To a new city and a new life . . .

One mistake was all it had taken to end their once happy marriage of seventeen years. He'd fucked-up royally by letting his dick do his thinking for him. One measly night in the sack with that beautiful young thing had blown everything all to hell. Had he seen the consequences beforehand, he would never have let it happen. But it was too late now. Ann had been relentlessly unforgiving and hadn't budged an inch. She had surprised him. He had never realized that Ann was so strong-willed.

The joke was on him . . .

Sam shut his eyes for a moment in an effort to exorcise these nagging thoughts. When he opened them again, he focused on the road and thought about the matter at hand: Marsha Bradley's murder.

Once he arrived at the *Observer*, Sam resolved, he was going to research each and every minuscule detail the police had logged thus far concerning the case, as well any background info he could find on Marsha and Doctor David Bradley for the article he was writing for Monday's paper. He needed to call Roger and set up a time that he could visit the Bradley residence and take some shots for the article, just in case he needed them. Roger would question this, and probably laugh in Sam's face as he proceeded to ask Sam why in the fuck he wanted to take more pictures of the murder scene. Sam would then reply flippantly that it might add interest to the article, and Roger would know better, but say no more about it.

Smithtown Police Detective Roger Hagstrom was Sam's best friend and had been for practically four decades. He'd been with the Smithtown P.D. for twenty years, and was one hell of a good cop—when he was sober, that is. Roger had a serious drinking problem and many were the times that Sam had had to bail him out of

the fixes he'd often gotten himself into. His hangovers were legendary and he frequently missed entire days of work as a result of them. Sometimes he'd even get himself blasted while on duty, which never failed to create some major problems.

But the Smithtown Police Department was very small—only fifteen officers and patrolmen in total—and they needed Roger Hagstrom badly enough to overlook his shortcomings. Besides that, Roger Hagstrom was second in command, so they more or less had to. His only superior, Chief Frank Thompson, admired and respected Roger's skills as a detective and tolerated his tardiness and occasional inebriation on the job up to a point; his only stipulation being that Roger not make the chief's special leniency toward him public knowledge.

Sam often tagged along with Roger on his assignments. It wasn't a particularly unusual situation; cops and journalists frequently worked closely together to a degree, especially in a little town like Smithtown. What made Sam and Roger's relationship unique was the way in which they complemented each other. They were a good team and often aided one another in achieving their respective goals.

Besides the benefits attained from their working relationship, Sam had another reason for occasionally joining forces with his friend: it was interesting as hell. Murder cases were few and far between in Smithtown, but there were plenty of other crimes going on all the time: dope deals gone bad, burglaries, armed robberies, bar stabbings and shootings. A pretty lively town for its size, crime-wise. The faltering economy seemed to have a lot to do with it.

Sam pulled into the parking lot of the *Observer* and shut off the ignition. The parking lot was as desolate as he'd suspected it would be; the *Observer* had no Sunday paper and everyone had already cleared out for the day. He got out and walked over to the side entrance of the massive stone columned building and entered. He turned right and made a beeline through the ornate lobby to the elevator and pressed the button for the third floor.

When he reached his floor, Sam strode past the reception desk to the editorial offices. His office was located at the far end on the left, near the coffee machine. He cued up a pot on the Bun-O-Matic and checked to be sure that there was some milk in the tiny refrigerator beside it before entering his office and switching on the overhead lights.

Sam stepped over to the window behind his desk and opened the blinds, staring out at the view outside. Directly below him he could see downtown Smithtown; five square blocks or so of dead or dying businesses that were slowly but surely being strangled by the slumping economy. Further north, beyond the railroad tracks, was the Hilltop section of town where the majority of Smithtown's less unfortunate resided. It sprawled either way for a few miles, bounded by the Scioto River to the west and a range of foothills to the east. It was early October and autumn was already making its debut in southern Ohio. The trees were flecked in bright shades of reds and yellows, making the view even more impressive than usual. In another week or two, Sam thought, the hills would look as though they were on fire as fall peaked-out.

Sam turned around, rolled his swivel chair out from under his desk and sat down. The large oak desk was in its usual disarray, littered with files, sections of last week's papers and no fewer than three used coffee mugs strewn randomly around a black plastic ashtray in bad need of emptying. He tidied up the papers a bit and carried the dirty coffee mugs out to the sink by the coffee machine. When he returned, Sam switched on the computer, located the police file on Marsha Bradley in a drawer and pulled out its contents.

Sam felt a cold chill run down his spine as he stared incredulously at the eight-by-ten glossy photograph on top. It was an image of Marsha Bradley lying nude on her living room floor, face-up, her eyes frozen in a

hideous expression of terror. A narrow red welt running across the width of her neck where she had been strangled to death was crisply rendered in the photo, as were her breasts with the words *May Day*—one word per breast—meticulously inscribed in red lipstick by her murderer. And, as if all of this wasn't appalling enough, Marsha's assailant had then proceeded to cram the lipstick vial into her vagina; its end barely visible between her splayed legs.

The autopsy performed on Marsha's body had determined that this final gruesome act had been performed after her assailant had strangled her to death. No weapon had been found at the scene, but the coroner's hunch was that Marsha had most likely been strangled with a lamp cord or similar object. Prior to her murder, the victim had been raped and sodomized, and her assailant's semen and hair samples had been sent to a lab, pending analysis.

Sam laid the photograph aside and studied the police report. The victim, Marsha Lynn Bradley, nee Stilson, had been a white female, 5'6", 118 pounds, brown eyes, thirty-nine years old. Her husband, Doctor David Lee Bradley, had discovered her body on the night of October 8, at 9:47 P.M. The victim's son, Tommy, age five, had been present in the house when the body was discovered, locked in his bedroom closet. The child had been in a state of severe shock and literally unable to speak when police arrived at the scene. There had been no signs of physical trauma to the child.

Preliminary investigation revealed no apparent signs of forced entry and nothing had been stolen. Odder still was the fact that there had been no signs of a struggle at the scene. The entire house had been searched and dusted for fingerprints and it was later determined that none of the prints found belonged to anyone other than the victim, her immediate family and Mary Willis, the housekeeper. The lipstick vial was confirmed to have belonged to the victim. No usable prints had been found on it.

The victim's husband had been questioned. Doctor David Bradley had reportedly been at a friend's house, Matt Timmonds, helping him install drywall in his garage. David Bradley had left his house at around six-thirty P.M, shortly after dinner, and had remained at the Timmonds' residence until he had returned home and discovered his wife's body. Bradley's alibi was corroborated after an interrogation of Matt Timmonds. David Bradley, at least at this point of the case, was not being considered a suspect in the murder.

Sam glanced down at the right-hand margin near the bottom of the report and saw Roger Hagstrom's barely legible scrawl: "No clues, no leads." He could almost read his friend's frustration in the bold pen strokes.

Sam had been out of town the night that Marsha had been murdered. He'd driven to Huntington, West Virginia to interview a disc jockey that worked at one of the town's rock radio stations for an article regarding the recent format change of Smithtown's only radio station from rock to country music. When he arrived back in Smithtown shortly after midnight, Sam had played back the message Roger had left on his answering machine advising him to get in touch with him ASAP; that something "really big" had happened. Sam had promptly called the police department to learn that Roger was at the Bradley home investigating a murder. Sam had arrived at the Bradley's just as they were wheeling Marsha's body out.

Roger Hagstrom had been sober and in rare form when Sam had gotten there. He'd never seen his friend as exasperated and stressed-out over a case in all the time he'd known him. Roger had later confided that he felt particularly uneasy about the murder and that he had a gut feeling that Marsha's assailant was going to be tough to nab. Besides the fact that the police had so little to go on, his bet was that the murderer wasn't a local man. He based this on what he already knew about Marsha Bradley. She had been an extraordinarily friendly, easy-going

woman who was well-liked by everyone in town who had known her, and odds were that she had no enemies capable of disliking her enough to commit such a heinous assault. Her rape and murder, in fact, appeared to have been premeditated; well thought out in advance and executed without a hitch. Of course, Roger had gone on to say, someone local may have done it—nothing was impossible—but the odds were stacked against this. He conceded that until there was some kind of motive established, the murderer could theoretically have been just about anyone.

There were a couple of other things that had bothered Roger as well. One was the message the assailant had left on her body. "May Day." God only knew what it meant, he'd told Sam, but it implied something that he hoped wasn't the case here. A serial killing. It was often standard M.O. for a serial killer to leave either an object or a message of some kind behind for the police and the rest of the world to try and figure out. It was all part of the "psyche" of a deranged, cold-blooded murderer, Roger explained, to challenge the public, as if to say, "Well, now that I've done this, what the fuck are you gonna do about it? I'll even make it easy for you; All you have to do is figure out this . . ."

And another thing was bugging Roger. The fact that there had been no signs of forced entry and no signs of a struggle prior to or during Marsha's rape and murder. No signs of trauma whatsoever were visible on her body other than the welt on her neck. This almost suggested that Marsha Bradley might have known her assailant, perhaps even intimately, and that she'd trusted him enough to allow him into her home. This was the most unsettling aspect of the whole case, Roger had declared. If Marsha Bradley had indeed known her assailant intimately, it posed a number of disturbing and "touchy" questions that needed to be asked and answered.

Sam set the report down and went out to the coffee machine. After pouring himself a mug and adding a shot of milk he returned to his desk. He took a sip of the steaming brew, lit up a cigarette and inhaled deeply, staring pensively at the blinking cursor on the computer monitor.

Sam was no detective by any stretch of the imagination, but there was one thing that wasn't quite jibing in Roger's theory of Marsha Bradley's murder case. If it indeed turned out to be that Marsha had known her murderer, then why was Roger still so bent on thinking that he hadn't been a local man? It would seem most likely that he had been, and that Marsha had been having an extramarital affair with him, as unfathomable as that may be. Had the murderer been an absolute stranger who just happened to have blown in from out of town, Marsha would most certainly have given her assailant one hell of a struggle during the rape, one would assume. Unless of course she had been either drugged or unconscious during the act, neither of which being the case. The autopsy had shown no signs of drugs in her system and only a slight trace of alcohol. Dave Bradley had told the police that his wife had drank a glass of white wine with her dinner that evening.

Sam had brought this up to Roger the day before, and Roger had reiterated that his theory was by no means ironclad, and that he wasn't by any means ruling out the possibility that Marsha Bradley's assailant had been a local man. But Roger had then countered Sam by asking him what he thought the odds were of Marsha Bradley having an affair in Smithtown, Ohio and not a single person ever having known about it, or even suspecting it. Sam had had to agree that it was nearly impossible to conceive, considering the little town's penchant for gossip and flinging rumors around like there was no tomorrow. Never once had anyone ever breathed so much as a shred of gossip that Marsha Bradley might be having an affair with anyone, period. Her and David's marriage had been that seemingly rock-solid.

Roger had gone on to say that there was really only one thing he was absolutely sure of, regarding the murder case. Marsha Bradley's assailant was as clever as he was demented. He had somehow managed to pull the entire thing off without leaving any trails whatsoever. Not one of the neighbors questioned had seen anyone enter or leave the Bradley house on the night of the murder. Nor had they seen or heard anything unusual that night; no strange cars parked in the vicinity, no dogs barking, nothing. It was becoming more and more apparent that the only person living who might possibly have seen the murderer was little five-year old Tommy Bradley.

Roger told Sam that Tommy Bradley was probably their only hope. He had to have seen or heard something that night. After all, there was little doubt that it was the perp who had locked the youngster up in the closet. The big problem was the fact that nobody could interrogate Tommy until the psychiatrist gave them the green light; and that could be weeks, maybe even months. In the meantime, the murderer's trail was only going to get colder and colder.

Smithtown Police Chief Thompson had decided it best to keep fairly tight-lipped about the case for the time being as far as the public was concerned. Sam wasn't permitted to report any of the details concerning the murder, other than the fact that Marsha Bradley had been sexually assaulted prior to being murdered by strangulation. Not a thing was to be mentioned about the message left on her body, the possibility that it might have been a serial killing, nor that the only concrete evidence found so far had been nominal forensic evidence. There was no need to get the entire town in a panic that there might be a serial killer on the prowl, the chief had contended. Thus, until something broke in the case, the *Observer* was to portray Marsha Bradley's rape and murder as little more than an "unfortunate loss to the community" and blatant testimony to the "extreme violence in today's society."

Sam had vehemently objected to keeping the case so hush-hush. He had argued that the public had a right to know the facts about the murder. Public knowledge, he insisted, may actually help to open things up. Somebody might come forward with some vital evidence who may have otherwise remained silent, for instance. Or, if the killer had been a local man, then there was always a chance that someone local might be able to point a finger at him, having learned the details surrounding the case. Roger was sympathetic to Sam's argument, but Chief Thompson had refused to budge an inch. He had told Sam, in his infinite wisdom, that it might be a good idea to advise the public to be on their guard and to impose a curfew on their kids, but beyond that, he was not to report any more than what had been established. Sam had been forced to comply.

Sam took a drag off his cigarette and stubbed it out in the ashtray. He didn't like being muscled around like this, and he had let George McNary, the managing editor of the *Observer*, know it. McNary, of course, had given him his usual pompous recitation about freedom of the press and how he had always believed in it unconditionally when he'd been a reporter just starting out back in the "good old days." But, McNary had gone on to say, times have changed and one has to adapt. Furthermore, he added, it was never a good idea not to comply with the police. Hence, the old fart had whimpered-out as he always did, and Sam again found himself praying for the day when the ultra-conservative, stubborn dick-head finally retired.

Sam had already written two follow-up articles concerning Marsha Bradley's murder and now wondered how much more he could expound on it. The piece for Monday's edition was supposed to tie in with her memorial service today, and its intent was to more or less eulogize one of Smithtown's most beloved and popular citizens. That was fair enough, he thought, but he'd much rather be reporting the facts of the case, or better yet, that her murderer had been apprehended . . .

He glanced down at the police photo and once again felt a cold chill shoot down his spine. He had known Marsha Bradley well, and like everyone else who'd known her, couldn't understand why anyone would want to murder such a wonderful woman. The familiar wave of contempt swept over him and Sam felt his blood begin to boil. Somehow, he thought, they would catch the low-life asshole who did this to her and make him pay dearly for it.

And he wanted to be there when it happened.

Sam now wanted to return to the murder scene as soon as it could be arranged. Dave and Tommy had been staying at Dave's mother's house until the police finished up with the investigation of their house, which would be soon—perhaps even tomorrow. Sam hadn't remained very long at the Bradley house the night of the murder because Roger had insisted on letting his crew do their work. Now, Sam wanted to do his.

Maybe, he thought, the police had overlooked something. It was a long shot, he realized, but there was always the possibility. It had happened before, hadn't it? As thorough as Roger and his men were, Sam had seen first hand how they had missed seeing the forest for the trees a few times in the past. The edge always seemed to be missing in a lot of police work; that overwhelming drive to leave no stone unturned, that driving motivation to capture the full picture.

Sam, however, was motivated beyond words; certainly more than a handful of Smithtown cops would ever be. This was a dear friend of his who had been assaulted and robbed of her life; not to mention his ex-wife's best friend. Sam had made a pledge to himself from the very beginning that he wasn't going to sit around on his hands while Marsha's murderer was still at large. He was going to do what ever was in his power to see that this bastard was brought to justice.

Again, Sam tried to imagine himself in Dave Bradley's shoes right now. What if it had been Ann instead of Marsha who had been murdered? he wondered. How would he deal with it? Could he deal with it?

He didn't even want to think about it . . .

Sam picked up the phone and dialed Roger Hagstrom's number.

CHAPTER 2

It was seven-thirty when Ann Middleton pulled into her driveway and shut off the engine. It wasn't until she reached for the door handle that she noticed the light on the front porch wasn't lit, making her wonder if she'd forgotten to turn it on before she and Amy had left for Smithtown earlier that morning.

"Do you remember if I turned on the porch light before we left?" she asked, turning to Amy.

Amy, still half-asleep from the drive, replied, "Yes, you did, Mother."

"I wonder why it isn't on now."

“Maybe it’s just burned out,” Amy suggested sleepily.

“Maybe . . .”

Ann opened the door and got out. Amy followed suit and walked sluggishly around the car to join her mother.

“I wish they’d fix that damn streetlight,” Ann groaned as they walked cautiously up the walk in the darkness. “Watch your step, honey.”

Ann held onto the porch railing as she led the way up the four steps leading to the porch of the modest Cape Cod. She opened the storm door, groped around until she finally managed to get the key into the lock, and freed the dead bolt.

In the dim light afforded by a nightlight plugged into the wall at the far end of the room Ann located the switch and turned the living room lights on. She noticed that the other switch, the one that worked the porch light, was up, confirming that she had indeed turned it on. She waited until Amy was inside then stepped back out onto the porch and reached up to unscrew the bulb in the fixture. Noticing that it was already practically screwed all the way out of its socket, she tightened it up instead. It came on.

“That’s strange,” Ann muttered to herself.

“What’s that, Mom?” Amy asked from inside.

“This stupid light. It wasn’t burned out. It was just loose in the socket.”

Amy peered out through the door. “Maybe the boogie man did it!” she giggled.

“That’s not funny!” Ann scolded, shooing her back inside.

“Just kidding, Mom,” Amy chuckled, and made a beeline for the stairs leading to the second floor.

Ann strode through the living room to the kitchen, removed her coat and flung it over the back of a chair. Mandy, their three-year-old calico cat, suddenly emerged from the laundry room and squinted up at Ann with that unmistakable look that said it was well past feeding time. Ann reached down and petted her before going over to the cupboard to get the Meow Mix.

Even though they had stopped off at a Shoney’s near Chillicothe for supper on the way home, Ann realized that she still felt hungry. Deciding that it was probably due to the stress and emotions of the day, she went over to the refrigerator and took out a container of yogurt, got a spoon and dug in.

Amy suddenly waltzed into the kitchen. “I’m going to the movies with Amanda.”

Ann swallowed a spoonful of yogurt and stared at her daughter reproachfully. “What have I told you about asking first, young lady?”

Amy pouted before replying. “Okay, Mom. Can I please go to the movies with Amanda?”

Ann tried to hide her disappointment. She had hoped that Amy would stay home with her tonight; she didn’t want to be alone after today. But Ann knew that they would only get into an argument if she objected, and that was the last thing she needed right now. “Okay, honey,” she sighed. “Do you need a ride?”

“No, Amanda’s mom is picking me up in half an hour. I’m going to take a quick shower and change first.”

“Back by ten,” Ann warned.

“Mother! The movie doesn’t even start until eight-thirty!”

Ann shook her head in resignation and said, “All right. But I want you to come straight home when it’s over. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, I hear you,” Amy whined. She shrugged her shoulders and made a face before storming out of the kitchen.

Ann was hurt and angry at Amy’s lack of consideration. Her daughter had to know that she was overwrought from the memorial service but Amy’s social life apparently took precedent over her mother’s emotions. For what had to be the hundredth time since she and Amy had moved to Columbus, Ann wished that Sam was there to help her get a handle on their daughter. She was starting to doubt that she could ever do it alone.

With a sigh, Ann finished her yogurt and decided to give Karen a call. Maybe her friend could help cheer her up a bit. She went over to the phone and dialed Karen’s number.

“Karen, it’s me. What are you up to?”

“Hi, Ann. Just sitting here waiting for Bill. How did it go today?”

“Horrible,” Ann replied. God, Karen, this is awful. I just can’t believe she’s gone!”

“I feel so sad for you, Ann. I know how much she meant to you. All I can say is that she’s gone to a much better place,” Karen declared compassionately.

“I guess so.”

“How was her husband?”

“Devastated. Cried like a baby through the whole service. I really feel sorry for him. And poor little Tommy. He wasn’t even there.”

“The poor child. Has he spoken to anyone yet?” Karen inquired.

“No, and Sam informed me that he’s practically having to be force-fed, too. It’s just awful . . . He won’t even speak to Dave! God only knows what that poor little boy must have gone through that night.”

“I shudder to think. Have the police gotten any more leads on who might have done it? They mentioned it again on the six o’clock news, by the way, but they didn’t give any details. They just said that the investigation is still under way.”

“No. Sam’s friend, Roger Hagstrom, the detective who’s in charge of the case, told Sam that nothing new has turned up. Apparently, they’ve done about all they can until they can interrogate Tommy. And that could be a long time, according to Roger.”

“In the meantime, there’s a psycho killer on the prowl,” Karen said.

“It’s frightening, isn’t it? I told Sam that I hope they hang him by the balls when they finally catch him.”

Karen chuckled. “You sure have a way with words, Ann.”

“It just infuriates me! Marsha was the nicest, most decent woman you could ever know. And for some crazy bastard to do that to her just makes me want to go out and find the monster myself and make him suffer.”

“I don’t blame you one bit. Not to change the subject, but how is your ex doing? Did you two get along?”

“I have to admit that I couldn’t have made it through all of this without Sam. For a while I almost forgot we were divorced, in fact. Sam’s basically a good man, and he’s always been at his best during a crisis.”

“You miss him?” Karen asked.

Ann sighed and paused a moment before answering. “Well, yes and no. I miss the stability of having Sam around more than I miss the man himself. And Amy . . . Christ! She’s turning into a regular delinquent! I know for a fact that she drinks because I’ve smelled alcohol on her breath a couple of times. And she’s smoking cigarettes now; I don’t think I told you about that yet. Found a pack stashed under her dresser yesterday. She’s

become incorrigible, Karen. She hardly ever minds me anymore. I know that the divorce has a lot to do with it—she still resents it—and she blames me for it ever happening. She wants Sam and I to get back together; that I know for sure. This is so difficult, Karen . . .” she added, her voice wavering.

“C’mon, dear, pull yourself together. You’ll get through all of this. You just need to get your mind off everything for a while. You’ve been through an awful lot lately, but things will look up. As for Amy, I’m sure she’ll come around eventually. Just give her some time. Part of her problem has to do with her age, bear in mind. I sure wouldn’t want to be that age again! Remember how tough it was? Teenagers are in their own little world and tend to shut everyone else out of it. But Amy’s a good kid. She’ll come around; you can count on it.”

“I wish I were as optimistic as you are, Karen. As usual, you’re probably right. I only hope I don’t have a nervous breakdown in the meantime. There are just so many things going on that I feel out of touch with. Like Amy’s choice of friends at school, for instance. They all seem okay, but what do I know? We’ve only been in Columbus for three months and I still hardly know a soul in this neighborhood. And I’ve only met one of Amy’s friend’s parents so far, Amanda Givens. Her mother’s divorced and seems to be a nice enough gal, but her home is apparently the big hangout for all of Amanda’s friends. How do I know that she’s keeping an eye on things when all those teenage girls are congregating there?”

“Ann, you worry too much! Woodcrest is one of the best suburbs in Columbus and has an excellent high school. Amy’s in good company, believe me. Speaking of which, how’s her schoolwork coming along?”

“Lousy,” Ann replied flatly. “And it’s no wonder. She hardly ever does her homework.”

“Well, all I can say is give her time. She just needs to adjust to everything.”

“Thanks for the encouragement, Karen. I need all I can get right now.”

“No problem, dear—I think I just heard Bill pull up. We’re taking in a movie tonight. I sure wish you’d hurry up and find a man so we can double sometime!”

Ann laughed. “I don’t think I’m quite ready for that yet, Karen. I’ve got enough problems as it is.”

“Well, you should still keep your eyes open anyway. It may be just what you need now, a relationship of some kind. It would help get your mind off your troubles.”

“I doubt it. I don’t think I’d be very good company to anyone right now,” Ann lamented.

“Nonsense! I can see that you need an ego-boost, dear. Trust me, any man in this town would kill to go out with you! If I looked just half as good as you do, I could be taking my pick of eligible bachelors!”

Ann laughed again. “You’re too much, Karen! But in spite of your tendency to exaggerate, I’ll take the compliment anyway. At least you’ve managed to make me smile.”

“Come on in, honey,” she heard Karen say. “Ann, Bill’s here. I want you to think about what I said and cheer up! Everything’s going to be fine.”

“Thanks, Karen. If I don’t talk to you tomorrow, I’ll see you at the office Monday.”

“I’ll call you tomorrow and check in,” Karen asserted. “Take care of yourself, Ann.”

“I will, Karen. Tell Bill I said hello, and you guys have a good time tonight.”

“Thanks, dear. Talk to you tomorrow.”

Ann hung up the phone feeling grateful for having a friend like Karen. She always had that knack for making her laugh, she thought to herself.

Karen Walker was office manager at the travel agency where Ann worked. She was fifty years old, divorced, with two kids who were all grown up and married. And although she might look her age physically,

she possessed a lighthearted attitude toward life that made her seem years younger. When Ann was introduced to Karen on her first day at the agency, the two hit it off immediately and had become best friends from then on.

Bill Warner was Karen's boyfriend—mid-fifties, balding, and worshipped the very ground Karen walked on. They had been dating for over five years and Ann often wondered why they didn't simply get married after all this time. Karen's explanation was that she'd "already made that mistake once," and insisted that she was quite content with their relationship the way it was. Ann had the feeling, however, that Bill wasn't in total agreement with Karen, and would gladly marry her at the drop of a hat.

Ann stared blankly at the kitchen table as her thoughts shifted to Marsha. She felt a tear come to her eye as the stark reality of her death hit home once again. Already she missed her lifelong friend, and she knew that life would never be the same without Marsha Bradley in it. Before moving to Columbus, Marsha had been her confidante and sounding board during the divorce, always there to comfort and support her. Marsha had in fact been one of the few reasons she had been hesitant to move out of Smithtown after the divorce. Perhaps had she not moved away, Marsha might still be alive today . . .

Ann held her head in her hands and shut her eyes. She suddenly felt very alone, living in a strange new city in unfamiliar surroundings. Had she done the right thing? Would she have been better off forgiving Sam for what he'd done and staying with him, instead of stirring everything up as she had? The after-effects of the divorce had so far been anything but auspicious. Nobody was happy. Not Sam, not herself, and certainly not Amy.

And now, Marsha Bradley was dead.

Was somebody trying to tell her that she'd made a mistake?

The sound of the squeaky hot water faucet coming from the bathroom reminded her that Amy was going out tonight and that she'd be left alone in the house for the rest of the evening. She had never really gotten used to not having Sam around since the divorce—especially at night—and she had been even more apprehensive about it since moving to Columbus. Even though Woodcrest was supposedly a "safe neighborhood" as suburban neighborhoods go, it didn't make Ann feel any more secure. The porch light suddenly crossed her mind and she wondered how the bulb could have gotten unscrewed so far. Could the wind have done it? she wondered. Certainly not! Maybe it had been loose all this time, barely making contact, and had just happened to back itself out far enough to go out while she and Amy were gone. Yes, she decided, that's probably what had happened.

Just then, Ann heard a rustling noise outside, coming from the back yard. She stood up and ran over to the window and peered out. The yard was pitch dark and she recalled that the floodlight mounted on the roof had never worked right since they'd moved in. Ann had attempted to replace the bulb herself but it was too high up for her to reach, so she had called the landlord and asked him to do it for her. Mr. Ogilvy had come over the next day with his ladder and a new bulb, and having finished replacing the old one, had informed her that there was a short in the wiring and that he had gone ahead and repaired it. Since then the light had worked sporadically, going off and on randomly, as if it had a mind of its own. Ann hadn't yet taken the time to call Mr. Ogilvy back to tell him that it still wasn't working right.

She would call him first thing in the morning, she decided.

Ann's eyes adjusted somewhat to the darkness as she looked around the yard as far as she could see from her vantage point. Finally, a couple of moments later, she felt assured that there weren't any intruders outside. Probably a raccoon or opossum, she thought to herself.

Ann realized that her heart was racing now and she looked down at her hands to find that they were trembling. She smiled wryly, telling herself that she was letting her imagination get the best of her. She simply had to try and get her mind off of everything, she resolved. Maybe get into a good book after Amy left.

Ann turned around and strode out of the kitchen. She paused outside the bathroom and opened the door a few inches. “Save me some hot water, kiddo!” she shouted into the steamy bathroom.

“Okay!” Amy hollered back from the tub.

Ann closed the door, went upstairs and peeked into Amy’s bedroom. It was a mess as usual, but she had hoped that it would have lasted longer than this. She’d helped Amy tidy up only yesterday and it already looked like a tornado had blown through it. With a sigh, she crossed the hall to her own room and entered.

As she sat down on the side of the bed to take off her shoes, Ann looked around the room and felt grateful that she and Amy had been fortunate enough to rent this house, as opposed to having to live in an apartment. She had Sam to thank for that. When she had informed him that she and Amy were moving to Columbus, he had been predictably shocked and angry with her. He had fumed that it wasn’t fair of her to move his daughter out of town, and accused Ann of making an already bad situation even worse. This had made her feel guilty, but she explained to him that she couldn’t bear to live in Smithtown any longer, and asserted that she wanted someday to return to college and get her law degree. Furthermore, she needed to get Amy and herself settled in before school started in the fall so Amy could get herself adjusted.

Sam had reluctantly given in and wanted to know where she intended to live. Ann had replied that they would get an apartment and Sam had immediately objected, insisting that they at least try and find a house to rent because apartments weren’t safe. Sam had subsequently made a few calls to some friends he knew living in Columbus and one of them had tipped him off about this house in Woodcrest. Sam had even driven up with Ann and Amy to check it out and had ended up paying the first month’s security deposit as well.

The house was perfect, all things considered. The rent was reasonable and it was roomy for its size. Ann particularly liked the family room that had been added on to the rear of the house, complete with a working fireplace and a bar.

Sam was a good man, in spite of his faults, she thought to herself—

The image of seeing him emerging from that bitch’s apartment, arm-in-arm, flashed through her mind and made her teeth clench. She would never be able to forget that look on Sam’s face when he had spotted her parked across the street, watching them . . .

Sam had supposedly been working late at the *Observer* that night. He’d called Ann at around dinnertime and told her that he was running behind on an article he was writing, and that he had to finish it up that evening so it could go to press in the morning. It wouldn’t take more than a couple of hours, he’d said, and he told Ann to go ahead and eat dinner without him. She had immediately suspected foul play, because Sam had rarely stayed late at work in the many years they’d been married. He had always preferred bringing his work home to finish because, as Sam put it, he would “rather be at home with his family than cooped-up in that fuckin’ office.”

Besides this break from the usual, Sam’s tone of voice had sounded different that evening, a little more distant than usual, as if he was already feeling guilty for what he was scheming to do. Ann’s suspicions mounted when Sam had called her the second time, at around nine o’clock. He was a little drunk, Ann suspected, when he told her that the article was taking longer than he’d anticipated and that he needed another hour or so. Ann had managed to remain calm though, telling Sam not to worry, that she fully understood.

There had been a few rumors going around town at the time that Sam had taken a sudden interest in a certain young woman whom the paper had recently hired as an apprentice photojournalist. Her name was Shelley Hatcher. She was around twenty years old and fairly new in town; having recently moved to Smithtown from somewhere in Kentucky. Apparently, Sam had taken Shelley under his wing since he himself was an accomplished photographer, and in fact, always shot his own pictures for his articles in the newspaper.

Ann had a funny hunch what was happening, so she had made a quick phone call to one of her friends who once mentioned that she knew where this Shelley woman lived. Apparently Shelley had had a few wild parties at her apartment and Ann's friend, who lived nearby, had twice seen the cops come to break them up because of complaints about the noise. Ann got Shelley's address from her friend, trying her hardest not to arouse her suspicions yet knowing all the while that she wasn't fooling her for a second.

Ann had then hopped into her car and drove by the *Observer* to see if Sam's Jeep was in the parking lot. Just as she suspected, it wasn't. She drove to the address her friend had given her, which turned out to be a small apartment complex on the other end of town. And sure enough, the Jeep was parked out front.

Ann had parked across the street and waited for nearly an hour before Sam suddenly came out the door with Shelley Hatcher hanging all over him. The slut had just planted a big kiss on Sam's cheek when he glanced across the street and spotted her. He had immediately broken away from Shelley and run over to the car to beg Ann's forgiveness. He knew he'd been caught, and hadn't even tried to lie his way out of it . . .

Ann took off her other shoe, then went over to the dresser and picked up the family portrait. She stared at Sam's tall, slender frame, his long, unruly hair and his soft gray eyes. His expression was calm, content. She and Sam both had their arms around Amy and the three of them looked like one happy, loving family. Even Amy looked content and at ease, in contrast to her present demeanor; smiling and full of love for her mother and father. Ann's eyes traveled over to her own image and smiled pensively, recalling how long it had taken to get her hair to look that good . . .

She quickly set the picture down and felt a stab of sadness. A family once so full of love and togetherness was no more. She could still recall how hurt and angry she had been when she'd caught Sam cheating on her, and how old and obsolete she'd suddenly felt when she saw Shelley Hatcher for the first time that awful night. Ann no longer felt wanted; her husband no longer found her desirable. That's what had gone through her mind. Sam had risked everything just to sleep with a younger, more attractive woman, and she knew that she could never make love to him again knowing that.

Ann had filed for divorce the following day.

Word spread quickly about the incident and the public humiliation had been unbearable. Once it got out that Ann wanted a divorce, it seemed as though everyone in town started looking at her differently—as if she was the wrongdoer, not Sam. Everyone except Marsha, that is. Marsha liked Sam as much as the rest of the town did, but Marsha also knew how proud her friend was and how much it had hurt her to see her husband with another woman. Marsha encouraged her to go through with the divorce and supported her all the way to the end.

Amy, on the other hand, had mixed feelings at the time. She knew that what her father had done was wrong but at the same time didn't want to see her parents split up. It had been especially hard for her the day that Sam had packed his bags and moved in with Roger. Their house had suddenly become a broken home.

Ann had to admit that she'd actually felt sorry for Sam by the time the divorce had been finalized. He was really hurt and it showed, yet he had still managed to be a gentleman throughout the whole thing. He'd tried his

hardest to make it as painless as he could, just for Amy's sake. When the papers were being signed, Ann had almost gotten cold feet and backed out at the last second. But she hadn't.

Once it was all over, Ann knew that she had to get out of Smithtown. She had suddenly felt like she was living in a fish bowl and that everyone hated her for what she'd done. She wanted to leave town as soon as possible, to get away from the narrow minds and to get on with her life. To start anew with a clean slate. Columbus seemed to be the most obvious destination. It wasn't far away, but far enough . . .

Ann heard Amy coming up the stairs and attempted to compose herself. Moments later she went across the hall to her daughter's bedroom. Amy was rifling through her drawers when Ann entered.

"Do you know where my navy blue sweater is, Mom?" she asked.

"I think it's hanging in your closet, honey," Ann replied. "It's a wonder you can find anything in this room!" she added, staring aghast at the piles of clothes thrown all over the floor and on the bed.

Amy ignored her comment and went over to the closet.

"What movie are you going to see?" Ann asked curiously.

"Not sure yet. Probably the new Christian Slater one. I can't remember the name of it."

"Isn't that rated R?" Ann asked. She knew that it was. She'd seen a preview for it on television the other day.

Amy found the sweater and glanced over at her mother, a smirk on her face. "Yeah, but we'll get in."

Ann wanted to protest but didn't. She stood and watched Amy as she flung the sweater on the bed and took off her robe; in awe of how quickly her little daughter was growing up. The freckles on her fair skin were barely noticeable now. The baby fat was gone and her breasts were nearly as large and full as her own. Amy's proportions had become more defined as well. Longish legs, tiny waist, slender hips. And the cherubic face had suddenly taken on a young woman's countenance—high cheekbones, full lips, aquiline nose and haunting green eyes, all framed by a thick, luxurious mane of auburn hair.

Amy sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled on a pair of faded blue jeans that fit so tight they looked as though they were painted on. She stood up again, put on a cream-colored knit blouse then the sweater.

"Have you met any interesting boys at school yet?" Ann asked as Amy slipped into a pair of loafers.

"A few," she mumbled, feigning disinterest.

"Don't you have a school dance coming up soon?"

"Homecoming."

"Are you going?" Ann inquired.

"Don't know, yet. Doubt it, though," she replied.

"How come?"

"No one goes to school dances at Woodcrest, I've heard. Just nerds and cheerleaders."

"That's odd," Ann said. "Everyone went to school dances when I was your age. In fact, the 'nerds' were usually the ones who didn't go," she added.

Amy stepped over to the vanity and started putting on her makeup. "That was eons ago, Mom."

"Thanks a lot!"

"Just kidding!" Amy chided. "Anyway, this isn't Smithtown. Kids are a lot cooler up here."

Ann wondered what constituted *coolness* . . . drugs and sex? She shuddered at the thought. "So what do you think of the high school now that you've had a chance to settle in?"

Amy carefully applied her eyeliner. “It’s awfully big, that’s for sure. I think I’ll like it better when I’m no longer a *freshman*.” She spoke the last word as if it left a bad taste in her mouth.

Ann asked, “Are the upper classmates giving you a hard time?”

“Some of them. There’s a lot of snobs at Woodcrest, I’ve noticed.”

“There are snobs everywhere, honey,” Ann declared.

Amy reached for the blow dryer and said, “Maybe. But there are a lot of *rich* snobs at Woodcrest. There’s a difference, you know.”

With that, Amy switched on the hair dryer and Ann realized that their little chat was over. She returned to her own bedroom, slipped out of the uncomfortable black dress she was wearing, put on her robe and slipped into her house slippers before going downstairs to the bathroom. Ann turned on the water for her bath and was sampling the temperature when she heard a horn honking out front. She ran out to the living room window and parted the curtains to find Amanda’s mother’s car pulled up in the driveway. After making a gesture with her hand, Ann ran upstairs to alert Amy that her friend had arrived.

“Shit!” Amy hissed as she turned off the hairdryer. “She’s early!”

Ann ignored the profanity; she’d almost gotten used to it by now. “Do you want me to ask them to come inside to wait until you’re ready?”

“No, I’m as ready as I’m going to be. I hate my fucking hair!”

Ann cringed at the sound of the “f” word coming from her daughter’s lips. This time she wasn’t going to excuse it. “You’d better start watching your mouth, young lady! Do you realize how vulgar that sounds?”

Amy glared at Ann defiantly. “Come on, Mother! You say it all the time!”

“That doesn’t give you the right to, though. Not in my house!”

Amy held her mother’s stare and sputtered, “Oh, Mom, get a life!” She stormed out of the room.

Ann wanted to chase after her and give her a good piece of her mind but stopped herself. She knew they’d only get in a fight, and Ann wasn’t in the mood for it. When she heard the front door creak open, she hurried down the stairs just as Amy was halfway out the door.

“Come home right after the movie, Amy!” she yelled after her.

The door slammed shut.

Sometimes, I’d like to crown that little brat, Ann thought. With a long sigh, she went back to the bathroom and closed the door.

After her bath, Ann threw on an old faded Ohio State sweatshirt and a pair of sweat pants before retreating to the family room. After turning on the television, she went over to the bar and took out an opened bottle of white wine from the refrigerator. After pouring herself a glass, she plopped down on the sofa.

She sipped her wine and glanced over at the television—yet another new sit-com was premiering on the channel she was watching. She set the wine glass down on the coffee table and reached for the paperback she had started reading a couple of days ago. It was a true story about a young girl in Omaha, Nebraska who had been abducted then murdered by a deranged serial killer and previously convicted child molester. Deciding that the subject matter was hardly what she felt like delving into at the moment, Ann picked up the other three books lying on the table and scanned the titles. She finally opted for a romance novel that Amy had no doubt bought but never finished reading then settled back in the sofa and turned to the first chapter.

Ann was halfway through the third chapter when she thought she heard a scraping sound outside. She shot a glance toward one of the two windows that faced the backyard and listened for a moment but heard nothing more. Feeling her pulse quickening, she pressed the television mute button on the remote control and listened again. Nothing. She was just about to switch the sound back on when she heard the noise again, this time coming from the direction of the other window. In an instant, she sprung up and ran over to the window to look out. The reflection of the room lights in the glass made it difficult to see beyond it so she cupped her hands against the windowpane to blot out the ambient light and squinted her eyes.

At first she couldn't see anything except light coming from the bathroom window, realizing now that she had forgotten to turn it off. Both the bathroom and family room faced the backyard and were adjacent to one another, the family room jutting out further into the yard where it had been added on to the rest of the house. She felt her heart thumping rapidly in her chest as she stared out into the darkness and waited for her eyes to adjust. From this vantage point she could see the entire backyard, including the white picket fence that surrounded it and formed the boundary with her neighbors' houses on either side. She stood there for a couple of minutes, surveying the yard in the dim light coming from the bathroom window. After she eyed the gate located at the far end of the house near the backdoor and saw that it was closed and presumably locked, she finally stepped back from the window and breathed a sigh of relief.

This is crazy! she thought. For the second time that night she thought she'd heard something out back, and both times had been false alarms. Why was she being so paranoid? she wondered. Stress? Or was she letting herself get all worked up over Marsha's murder? A murder that happened a week ago and over a hundred miles away—

I need a cigarette!

She fled the family room and went into the kitchen to find her purse, which was lying on the counter. She opened it up and was searching frantically inside for her cigarettes when it suddenly dawned on her that she'd made a point of throwing every pack she owned into the trash when she had decided to quit smoking a couple of weeks ago. Cursing herself, she debated whether or not to throw on a coat and drive to the convenient mart to buy a pack. Then she recalled the pack she'd found hidden under Amy's dresser. She had stashed Amy's cigarettes in her own dresser as "evidence," but hadn't yet confronted her.

Totally disregarding the fact that she was about to break her vow never to smoke again, Ann ran up the stairs to her bedroom and over to the dresser. She opened the top drawer and found them neatly tucked away under her stockings. Snatching up the opened pack of Marlboro Lights like an addict about to give herself a fix, she slammed the drawer shut and ran back downstairs to the family room.

With quivering hands, Ann lit up a cigarette and inhaled deeply, the smoke feeling much harsher in her lungs than her regular brand. Her nerves were frayed to a frazzle, she realized, from the effects of the tumultuous, emotional week, compounded by her sudden grim outlook for the future. A couple of weeks ago she had actually started feeling like she was at last adjusting to her new life as a transplanted divorcee, but Marsha's untimely death had thrown everything back into turmoil and brought all her doubts to the surface once again.

And now, to top off everything else, she was alone in this house and starting to hear things.

Ann took another drag, retrieved her wine and sipped. She needed to calm her nerves; to try and relax, get a hold of herself. Nothing has really changed, had it? she thought. Her best friend has just been brutally raped and murdered by an unknown assailant, and she was shocked and devastated by this, but as Sam had told her:

life goes on. She had to come to grips with her loss, accept it, and let the healing process begin. Marsha's death had absolutely nothing to do with the present; her insecurity of being alone and on her own, her concern over Amy's incorrigible and frightening behavior, her doubts about whether she'd done the right thing in divorcing Sam. So why was she so fucking edgy tonight?

Was she in fear for her own life? If so, then why should she be? She was probably safer than anyone in Smithtown was; Woodcrest was a hundred miles away and most likely the last place on earth the murderer would be right now . . .

Hysteria, Ann decided. That's it. She, along with every other woman who knew about Marsha's murder, was naturally going to feel a little temporary hysteria right now, if not at least a little threatened. It was a perfectly normal response, given the circumstances. There was a demented madman on the loose who had just raped and strangled a poor defenseless woman in her own home. No clues, no motives, and the only material witness is a five-year-old who is so traumatized that he can barely utter a single word. What woman wouldn't be scared out of her wits?

Ann took another drink of wine and managed a weak smile. Amy would be home in a little while and she would feel like her normal self again. She stubbed out her cigarette, picked up the book and settled back in the sofa. Finding the place where she'd left off, Ann resumed reading and was soon totally absorbed in the developing plot. The heroine of the novel, who ironically had just been recently divorced herself and had a teenage child, no less, had just met a tall, dark stranger at the public library. As Ann read on, she started relating the heroine's thoughts and actions to her own situation and before long decided that maybe Karen Walker was right after all. Maybe she needed to start seeing somebody and get her mind off her troubles . . .

She eventually learned that the heroine of the novel, like herself, occasionally caught herself longing for her ex-husband. But she refused to let this stand in the way of her new-found freedom and the fact that there were other men in the world; and that there was a very good chance that she might someday find a man she could love just as much as she had once loved her ex—maybe even more so. The heroine, however, was strong and independent, unlike herself, with a more open mind. Ann realized that she needed to start being just as strong and independent as the heroine; otherwise she could never hope to shrug off her past and find someone else to take Sam's place.

The plot thickened, and during one of the more intense encounters between the heroine and the tall dark stranger, Ann found herself longing to be in her place; to be held in a stranger's arms and doted on by someone who loved and respected her for who she was. This longing, along with the richly detailed rendering of the scene, actually made her feel vital and optimistic for a change . . . if not downright horny.

Ann became so engrossed in the romance novel that she lost all track of time. Then it suddenly dawned on her when the eleven o'clock news came on that Amy hadn't come home yet.

CHAPTER 3

Lustful eyes peered through the partially closed mini blinds and watched Amy Middleton as she closed the bathroom door and went over to the bathtub to turn on the water. She was fully clothed, wearing a black skirt cut just above the knees, a black cardigan sweater and a white blouse buttoned all the way to the top. She bent down, rested a knee on the edge of the tub, and held her fingers under the running water. She turned the hot water knob a little further to the right until she was satisfied with the temperature, then stood up and began removing her sweater.

He observed Amy as she haphazardly flung the sweater onto the floor then turned and faced the mirror above the sink. As she watched herself in the mirror, she slowly unbuttoned her blouse, seemingly distracted by the image of her face. His heart raced madly as she fumbled with a couple of buttons half way down before she finally unfastened the last one. She brought her hands up near her neck and laggardly removed the blouse, allowing it to rest on her shoulders for just a moment before finally taking it all the way off and flinging it into the corner along with her sweater. He could feel his pulse surge as he stared at her breasts, concealed for the moment by a flimsy sheer white bra. It was the kind with the little meshed holes strategically placed in just the right spots that left little to the imagination.

Amy continued staring at her reflection in the mirror and brought her small, delicate fingers to the front of the bra and unfastened it, exposing her milky white breasts. Her nipples were rosy-red and erect, the curves of her breasts round and firm. She brought each arm through the straps of the bra and pitched it into the growing pile of clothes in the corner.

His unblinking eyes stared intently as Amy slipped out of the skirt; the movement surprisingly swift and graceful. His gaze was locked onto her smooth, slender legs as she tossed the skirt onto the floor and pulled down her cottony white, nearly see-through panties.

The window began steaming up and the observer silently cursed under his breath. Amy was still fairly visible as she leaned a little closer to the mirror for a better look at herself. He could hear his own breathing now—short, uneven gasps, as he stared at Amy's luscious body from head to toe. What he wouldn't give, he thought, to jump on top of her right this moment!

He felt the lump in his pants throb relentlessly as he strained his eyes to see through the droplets forming on the windowpane. Steam was everywhere now, a thick blanket of fog keeping him from eying his prey. He nearly screamed out loud in his frustration and for a brief moment felt the nearly uncontrollable urge to crash through the bathroom window and finish off what she had already started.

His foot suddenly slipped off the shrub he was standing on, causing the elastic-like branches to spring noisily against the side of the house. Instinctively, he glanced first through the window at Amy, who apparently hadn't heard anything over the running water, then looked around the backyard. To his horror, he saw Amy's mother peering out through the kitchen window. He stood there frozen in his awkward position for several moments, confident that she probably couldn't see him even if she tried; the yard was pitch dark and he was only partially in her field of vision.

Finally, after what seemed like a lifetime, he saw Amy's mother back away from the window. His eyes returned to the bathroom. All he could see now was the obscured form of Amy Middleton through a shroud of steam as she stepped into the tub, closed the shower curtain and disappeared completely from his sight.

CHAPTER 4

Sam knew that Roger was pissed off at him, and he couldn't really blame him. After all, he was off-duty today and midway through a bottle of Jack Daniels when he had called the lieutenant to set up a time to go over to the Bradley house. What really had irked his friend was the fact that the Bradley's were to be allowed to return to their home tomorrow morning; which meant that in order to comply with Sam's request, they would have to go over there this evening; no doubt the last thing Roger Hagstrom wanted to be doing in his present state of inebriation.

Sam had asked Roger why the police were surrendering the Bradley house now, all of a sudden, and he'd replied that the investigation of the murder scene was officially completed. The house had already been dusted for prints and gone over with a fine-toothed comb, so there simply wasn't anything left to do there. And besides that, he'd added dryly, Dave Bradley did have a right to live in his own home.

Sam told Roger that he would pick him up at five-thirty and as he pulled into the driveway of his friend's two-story frame house, he wondered what kind of shape Detective Hagstrom would be in by now. He pulled up beside the house and laid on the horn. A moment later, Roger emerged from the front door carrying a glass in one hand and a cigarette in the other. Roger Hagstrom was short and stocky with rusty brown hair, wore a two-day old stubble, wrinkled khakis, and a ragged Kent State sweatshirt as he lumbered over to Sam's Jeep and opened the door.

"Yo," Roger greeted as he climbed in.

He wasn't blasted yet, Sam thought to himself. "Yo, Rog. Sorry about interrupting your bliss," he said, throwing the gearshift lever into reverse.

"Fuck it," Roger growled good-naturedly. "Nothin' else shakin,' anyway. Just another drunk day in this sleepy old burg."

Sam turned his head and watched as he backed out of the narrow driveway and onto the street. "It's been pretty lively around here this past week or so, you've got to admit."

Roger nodded. "True. But socially speaking, let's face it: this town's the skids."

Sam smiled knowingly. "No shit."

"You want a taste?" Roger asked, proffering his glass of straight Jack Daniels.

“No thanks—too early for me,” Sam replied. “Did you make it to the funeral home today?”

“Yeah, I went this afternoon. Just missed you guys, as a matter of fact. Only stayed a couple of minutes, though. I can’t stand that depressing shit.”

“I know what you mean. Dave sure looked rough, eh?”

Roger nodded. “Yup, I really feel for the guy. Marsha was one hell of a lady. She really loved that kid, too. I sure hope the little tyke snaps out of it.”

“What’s the latest on Tommy, anyway?” Sam inquired. “Have you heard anything new?”

“He’s still got a zipper on his lips and that’s all I know. No one really wants to bother either of them now, so the shrink’s backed off for the time being.”

“Any chance he’ll come around soon?” Sam asked as he pulled onto Coles Boulevard and headed west.

“Hope so. Otherwise, I don’t think we have an ice cube’s chance in Hades of catching this bastard,” Roger said, the exasperation evident in his voice.

Sam reached into his jacket, pulled out a Marlboro and pushed in the cigarette lighter in the same motion. “Ann is taking this really hard, as you can imagine. I never thought I’d say this, but I’m sort of glad she’s living out of town right now. I’m not so sure she’d be able to hang around here and keep her sanity with all the reminders of Marsha staring her in the face all the time. Ann’s pretty sensitive anyway, as well you know, and it’s probably best that she’s where she is for the time being.”

“Out of sight, out of mind?”

“Something like that. I sure do miss her, though,” Sam added, his tone of voice somber. He lit up his cigarette and slowed down for a stop sign.

“I know you do, man,” Roger said sympathetically. “But you can’t spend the rest of your life pining for her. You need to get out once in a while, buddy. At least get laid, if nothing else!”

Sam grinned sardonically. “Sort of a slim market out there for that, don’t you think?”

Roger guffawed. “Pretty fucking lame, I admit. This bachelor’s been stalking these hills for a coon’s age and ain’t never seen times as lean as they are nowadays. All the decent chicks blow out of this burg as soon as they graduate high school anymore.”

Sam chuckled at Roger’s hillbilly-inflected accent and said, “Can’t really blame ‘em, can you?”

“Nope.”

Sam swung a right onto Tindall Drive and drove a couple of blocks until he spotted Oakridge Court. He turned left onto Oakridge and slowed down, observing the handful of impressive stately houses situated on either side of the cul-de-sac. All of the two and three-story homes were surrounded by huge sprawling grounds, meticulously landscaped, and set back a good thirty or forty yards from the street. Sam drove the length of the court and pulled up the long winding driveway leading to Dr. David Bradley’s house.

The enormous brick and wood bi-level was awesome, complete with a heated swimming pool off to the right in the rear. Towering spruce trees lined either side of the grounds, forming a natural boundary before giving way to the foothills behind that afforded privacy from the neighboring houses.

“Dave’s dental practice has been good to him,” Roger quipped acidly as Sam pulled up to the three-car garage and parked.

“No doubt,” Sam replied. He turned off the engine and reached for his camera lying on the floorboard.

“You aren’t really going to take pictures, are you?” Roger asked, his expression incredulous.

Sam grinned over at him. “Of course I am. The lighting should be perfect this time of day.”

Roger shook his head slowly and opened the door. “Why do I have a funny feeling they aren’t gonna show up in Monday’s paper?”

“I may surprise you this time,” Sam said as he got out.

They strode across the driveway and up the walk leading to the front porch. Sam headed straight across the front yard until he was directly in front of the house. Roger looked on impatiently as Sam peered through the camera viewfinder, made a few quick adjustments, then snapped a couple of shots from slightly varying angles. He then walked over to the east side of the house, near the pool, and took a few more shots before continuing around to the back. A few minutes later, he returned and joined Roger, who was still standing on the front porch tossing the key up in the air and catching it. “Get some good ones?” he asked with more than a trace of sarcasm in his voice.

Sam leered at him indifferently. “Just keeping everything honest, buddy. What would the department think about this special privilege you’re giving your journalist friend if he didn’t follow through with what he was supposed to be doing?”

“It wouldn’t give a flying fuck,” Roger replied, deadpan, and unlocked the front door and stepped inside. As Sam followed behind, he felt that same eerie, indescribable sensation he always had whenever he was in the proximity of where death had raised its ugly head. And even though he knew that Marsha Bradley’s body was now buried six feet underground in a cemetery plot, he could still sense her presence inside the house the moment he entered it.

They stood in the ornate, marble-tiled foyer and Sam looked around. To his immediate right was the living room; the staircase leading to the second floor straight ahead. To his left, the den. It was enormous and resembled an amusement arcade more than anything else with its full-sized Brunswick pool table, pinball machine and big-screen television. He had only been in this house a few times before the night that Marsha was murdered. The Bradley’s had only recently moved here last winter, a couple of months before he and Ann had been divorced. Before the shit had hit the fan, he and Ann had come to their house warming party and were given the grand tour.

“Well, here we are,” Roger announced, making a sweeping gesture with his arm. “Where would you like to begin?”

Sam nodded toward the stairs. “Up there. I want to see the closet where Tommy was locked up.”

“This way, sir,” Roger said as if he were the butler. Sam followed him up the stairway and halfway up, Roger called over his shoulder, “Want to hear my theories, thus far?”

“Shoot,” Sam replied.

“After weighing all the evidence, which is minimal as you know, and taking into consideration all the clues we have to go on, which are about nil, here’s what I think may have happened: The murderer got into the house, either by stealth through a door or window, or perhaps by a reluctant and/or coerced invitation from Marsha Bradley herself. How he got in isn’t that relevant at this point; he got in somehow. It’s quite evident that once he was inside, he quickly took control of the situation by the use of force—immediately threatening Marsha in some way—most likely with a weapon of some kind, probably a gun. Otherwise, Marsha would have had time to call 911, flee the house, or at least do something. Are you with me so far?”

“Yeah, I’m with you,” Sam replied.

They reached the upstairs hallway and Roger led them past the master bedroom and bathroom to Tommy's bedroom. It was large by any standard, especially taking into account that Tommy was only a five-year-old child. Sam followed Roger across the room, past the twin beds, through the array of toys, Nintendo video games, and every conceivable type of sports gear known to the western world that were scattered everywhere on the floor.

"Did your men make this mess?" Sam asked in utter amazement.

"Nope, we just rearranged the shit. Tommy obviously has a problem with putting his toys away," Roger replied. "Anyway, the murderer forced Marsha and Tommy into this bedroom. Or, it's possible that Tommy had already been in here taking a nap or whatever. Either way, the suspect threw the little tyke into this closet and locked the door." Roger went through the motions of opening the door, throwing an imaginary person into the closet then closing and locking the door as he spoke.

Sam stared questioningly at the button-type lock on the doorknob and said, "I wonder why the hell this door even has a lock on it? Not much sense in that, any way you look at it. I mean, who in the fuck would want to lock their belongings inside a closet? It's not like the shit is going to go anywhere!"

Roger grinned expectantly at him. "I wondered the exact same thing, myself. So I mentioned it to Dave and he told me that the closet and bedroom doors were accidentally switched when the workers were painting the interior of the house. He said that he'd meant to switch them back, but had never gotten around to it. That's why the closet has a lock on it."

Sam opened the door and peered inside. The closet was very small and very cluttered. He pictured a terrified Tommy Bradley stuffed inside this dark, cramped space, unable to escape, while his mother was being raped and murdered, and suddenly understood why the child was traumatized beyond speech. He closed the door and asked, "Why didn't the bastard simply kill Tommy, too? Instead of letting him live, and possibly risk being identified by him?"

Roger replied, "There's several possible options. One is, maybe the creep didn't have the heart to murder an innocent, defenseless little kid. After all, Marsha is who he wanted, so he might have figured why needlessly kill a child? Furthermore, we still don't know if Tommy even saw the guy; and even if he had seen him, it's possible that the murderer could have been wearing a ski mask or something to hide his face. There's also the possibility that he intended to kill Tommy after doing Marsha in, but had gotten scared off by something or someone—maybe even Dave—before he could follow through with it. Who knows?"

"Anyway," Roger continued, "The crux of my theory is the fact that the murderer used Tommy as his leverage—his ace in the hole. He simply told Marsha that if she didn't do as he said, he would kill her son. That would explain why she hadn't put up a struggle. Her son's life was at stake, and what mother wouldn't do everything in her power to prevent her kid from being harmed? It also suggests that Marsha didn't necessarily have to know her assailant, thus squelching the notion that she might have been having an extra-marital affair. What do you think?"

Sam took a flash attachment out of his coat pocket and slid it onto the camera's hot shoe. "I think it's a hell of a lot of speculation," was his reply. He made his way back to the doorway, looked through the viewfinder then zoomed the lens out to its widest angle and snapped the shutter. "Let's go back downstairs."

"Don't you want to check out any of the other rooms up here?" Roger asked.

"Not particularly. Everything else happened downstairs, didn't it?"

“That, we’re pretty sure of. Don’t you think it’s a little strange that Marsha Bradley’s assailant chose the kitchen to rape her in, instead of one of the bedrooms?” Roger said as he led the way out of Tommy’s bedroom.

“I think all of this is a little strange, to be quite honest,” Sam replied. “I’m still having trouble with the murderer locking Tommy up in that closet. Think about it, Rog. What are the odds of this bastard making a ‘lucky guess’ that Tommy’s closet is the only room in the house that can be locked and unlocked only from the outside? I’ve been through this house before, and I’m pretty sure that all the doors, including the bedrooms and bathrooms, lock only from the inside, just as they are intended to. Yet the killer seemed to miraculously know right where to put little Tommy to keep him out of the way.”

Roger paused at the top of the stairs and glanced back at Sam. “What are you driving at?”

“I’m not sure, really. Except that it’s starting to look more and more like the murderer knew the layout of this house pretty damn well, and in fact seemed to know a whole hell of a lot about everything. I think he might have not only planned this whole thing out carefully in advance, but that he also thoroughly cased the house out prior to the night of the murder . . . from the inside. It’s got to be either that, or he’s been a guest here at some point in time—and most likely more than just once.”

Hagstrom shrugged his shoulders and started down the stairs. “Could be. You’re right about the locks; even the door to the basement has a two-way lock, which I thought was a little odd, I might add. But it wouldn’t have been very hard for the perp to notice the lock on Tommy’s closet door when . . .”

“C’mon, Roger!” Sam interrupted. “I don’t care how calm and cool this asshole might have been – the odds of him ‘just happening’ to notice that there was a lock on that door are slim to nil. Imagine the scenario you’ve just presented: he’s got a weapon of some kind, a gun, pointed at Marsha and a kid he has to get out of the way—quickly—because Tommy is probably already screaming and carrying on when he sees a stranger threatening his mom’s life. Let’s even suppose that the three of them are in Tommy’s room, with a fucking light on, no less. That closet door is in the far corner of the room with a little button on the doorknob facing away from the entrance, and is completely obscured from view by a dresser standing against the wall adjacent to it. The only way the killer could possibly have seen that little lock button would be for him to stand directly in front of the closet. Do you really think that he would sashay all the way across the room, through all that shit scattered around on the floor, just to see if the closet door, by chance, had a goddamn lock on it? Why would he even bother to? Nobody locks their shit up in a closet!”

Roger grinned at him, visibly impressed. “Okay, Sherlock . . . or is it Watson? You’ve just made an interesting observation; something I’ve overlooked, I must admit. It must be that photographic eye of yours, I reckon. But what does this all mean, may I ask, if you’re right?”

Sam reached the foot of the stairs and watched Roger as he took another sip of Jack Daniels. “Well, I think it’s pretty obvious that the whole thing was premeditated to the letter ‘T.’ And I don’t think Marsha’s murderer was a stranger. I think he was a local man.”

Sam could tell by the way Roger was eyeing him that he wasn’t buying the last part. “Hmmm,” was all he said before turning and making his way into the living room.

Sam followed him over to where Marsha’s body had been found lying on the living room floor near the sofa. The police had removed the black tape outline of her body, but he could still see the exact location and her body position clearly in his mind from viewing the police photos. Her nude body had been lying spread-eagle on the carpet just to the left side of the sofa, her head not far from the end table. Sam stood where he was and

surveyed the living room, which was enormous like every other room in the house. There were two doorways besides the one leading to the foyer; one to his left in the corner, which led into the kitchen, and one to the right of the sofa, which led into the study. Roger had already gone into the kitchen and awaited him in the doorway. “Do you want to see where the rape took place?” he asked Sam.

Sam nodded. “Okay.”

He strode over and entered the kitchen. Roger led him over to the island in the center and pointed to a spot on the floor. “This is where he did the deed. Marsha’s clothes were placed neatly on this counter; yet another indication that she’d been quite cooperative with this bastard. None of her clothes were torn or even wrinkled; just placed on the counter here in a tidy little pile. We suspect that her assailant told her to remove them since there wasn’t any evidence that he’d done it for her.”

“How do you know he raped her here?” Sam asked.

“We found pubic hair and small traces of semen right here on the floor and nowhere else in the house. The housekeeper had just cleaned and put fresh sheets on the beds earlier that day, which made our work a lot easier,” he added.

Sam looked around the kitchen, stared down at the cold linoleum floor and wondered the same thing Roger had: why here, of all places?

Roger resumed. “My guess is that he ordered Marsha to face the counter, place her hands on it like so, then proceeded to enter her from the rear. We found fresh fingerprints, Marsha’s, where she’d grasped the overhang of the counter, so that pretty much corroborates that theory.”

Sam found it hard to conceive that Marsha Bradley could allow this to happen without putting up some resistance. Either she was the most iron-willed woman imaginable, or there was more to all of this than met the eye . . . As a matter of fact, none of this was making much sense the more he thought about it.

“After he was done in here,” Roger resumed, “Marsha’s assailant apparently ordered her to go into the living room—why the living room is anyone’s guess. At any rate, not long afterwards, he strangled her to death. Again, from behind.”

“How do you know she was strangled from behind?”

“The coroner’s report. He determined from the angle and size of the wound on her neck along with all that other technical shit that the murder weapon had been a fairly thin cord of some kind; about the same gauge as ordinary lamp cord—that had been pulled around her neck from behind.”

“Suggesting that she was unaware of what the killer was doing—like she was taken by surprise,” Sam said.

“Exactly. You’re really catching on to all this police work, Watson. I’m proud of you,” Roger chuckled.

Sam forced a weak smile, but for the moment had lost his sense of humor. There was one thing about Roger Hagstrom that he found annoying at times, and it was one of the reasons he was there right now with him at the Bradley house. He didn’t know if it was the effects of alcoholism or just plain lethargy, but his friend had a real problem with following through on things. He’d seen it happen on a few occasions before when he had tagged along with Roger during an investigation. If a crime wasn’t solved quickly and easily, he tended to just give it up, or simply let it get away from him. It wasn’t intentional, of course. It just seemed to sort of happen that way sometimes.

But this wasn't an auto theft or a burglary. This was a murder case; and the victim just happened to be a very close friend of his and Ann's. He was going to lean on Roger Hagstrom all the way through this investigation until the murderer was caught and convicted, even if it strained their friendship in the process.

"How long was the murderer in this house?" Sam asked.

Roger sipped and replied, "It's hard to say exactly. Dave left at six-thirty to go to Matt Timmonds' and returned at about nine-fifty. The autopsy indicates that the time of death was between eight and eight-thirty. My guess is that he didn't stay long—just long enough to get Tommy out of the way, rape Marsha and strangle her; all of which could have taken between fifteen minutes and half an hour; depending on how quickly he worked, if you know what I mean. Tack that time onto her approximate time of death and that would put him in the house somewhere between the hours of seven-forty-five and eight-thirty."

"Again, a lot of speculation, I see. What about the lipstick and the message he left? Where did he get the lipstick, anyway?"

"From Marsha's purse—we know that for a fact. Her purse was found, opened, lying on the end table on the other side of the sofa. That was one of the first indications that the killer wasn't interested in taking anything because all of Marsha's credit cards and money—around \$150.00 in cash—was untouched. Dave confirmed that the lipstick was hers and that she always carried it in her purse."

"Is that where Marsha normally kept her purse?" Sam inquired.

"I knew you were going to ask that. The answer is no, it isn't, and yes, I've already asked Dave where she usually kept it; no doubt your next question. She usually kept it on the dining room table. Now, go ahead and say what I think you're going to say."

Sam was undaunted by Roger's brashness. "That definitely strengthens my theory, doesn't it? The dining room table is completely out of sight from the living room and the kitchen. The killer would never have spent precious time searching for a tube of lipstick after having just murdered Marsha and no doubt wanting to split the scene ASAP. But he didn't have to, because he already knew where Marsha kept her purse. Which indicates that her assailant knew this house and Marsha's habits quite well. She had to have known this bastard, Rog! Either that, or he sure did a bang-up job of casing out this house and its occupants before coming here that night to carry out his crime."

Roger drained the last of his Jack Daniels and stared at Sam. "I'm actually starting to think you may be absolutely right, buddy; you're making me a believer. The question now is: which is it? And either way, which ever it is, we still don't have jack shit to go on."

Sam sighed. "I realize that. But it does give us a little insight into this prick. We know that he's a clever sonofabitch beyond question; not to mention meticulous."

"That's a fact," Roger agreed.

"What about the message? Any guesses?"

Roger shook his head. "Nope. "May Day . . ." The only thing that comes to mind is the international distress call for help. And the first of May—that spring celebration or whatever the fuck it is. The killer's writing of that on Marsha's tits after murdering her makes no sense at all, in light of the former; she was already beyond help. The first of May could be significant, though. But in what way? Who the fuck knows? Nope, buddy. That's got me completely stymied."

"Still think he could be a serial killer?"

“Fuck if I know. I’ll tell you the truth, and I’ve been saying it all along. Until Tommy Bradley talks to us, we’re just pissin’ in the wind on this case. All we have is a bunch of goddamn theories and two items of physical evidence: hair and cum. Big deal! We don’t even have a concrete motive yet, unless we want to believe that this was sheer rape and murder for the fun of it; something for some sick ass to do on a lonely Wednesday evening. We need that kid to talk, Sam. That’s all there is to it.”

“Which could be weeks from now, you’ve been informed. What are you going to do in the meantime, Roger?” Sam asked purposefully, just to put him on the spot.

Roger felt the pressure and looked at his friend determinedly. “Well, we’re going to have to ask some people some more questions, for one thing. Canvass the neighbors again, just in case they’ve recalled something that might have slipped their minds when we last spoke to them. We’ll check and see if there have been any reports of prowlers in a twenty-block radius of this neighborhood in the last couple of weeks, too. And, it looks like I’m going to have to ask Dave some painfully personal questions about his wife—which I really hate to do. Find out if she was truly as faithful to him as he’s been leading us to believe, and ask him if she ever had any opportunities to play around on him that he can think of. He’s probably going to hate my ass for doing it, but we’ve got to check out every possibility, eh buddy?”

Sam grinned, pleased to hear that his friend wasn’t going to let him down. Roger was a man of his word, if nothing else. “That’s right, Detective Hagstrom. And if you need any help with the legwork, I’ll gladly offer my services.”

“I’ll let you know.” He glanced at his watch and said, “Why don’t you take your pictures so we can get the hell out of here. I’m getting thirsty.”

Sam looked around the room and said, “Fuck it. Let’s just go.”

Roger was tempted to rib him, but decided not to. “Want to hit the tavern and tie one on?”

It only took Sam a second to think about it. “Lead the way.”

CHAPTER 5

Ann stood in the doorway staring at her sleeping daughter and debated whether or not to wake her up. It was tempting, just to get back at her for coming home so late last night and worrying her half to death. But she relented when she saw how peaceful her daughter looked all snuggled up with her head buried underneath her pillow. She turned and quietly closed the bedroom door behind her.

She crept down the stairs and went into the kitchen, wrote Amy a quick note, then gathered up her things and headed out the front door. It was noticeably cooler than it had been the day before and the sun was shining brightly as she got in her car and started it up. As she was backing out the driveway, it suddenly dawned on her

that she'd forgotten to call Mr. Ogilvy about fixing the floodlight in the backyard and made a mental note to call him the moment she got back home. The supermarket wasn't far, only a few blocks away, so Ann drove slowly, taking in the quiet peacefulness of the neighborhood on a Sunday morning.

Ann waited for a traffic light to change then made a right onto High Street. She reached the supermarket in another three blocks and pulled into the parking lot, relieved to find that there were only a dozen or so cars parked outside. Since moving to Columbus, she'd gotten in the habit of doing her grocery shopping on Sunday mornings since it was rarely crowded then. Shopping had a certain therapeutic value to it, she had learned long ago. It helped to get her mind off things that were troubling her.

She went inside, grabbed a shopping cart, then spent the next half hour or so meandering through the aisles. When she was finished, she headed for the least crowded checkout line and waited.

There were only a couple of customers ahead of her: an elderly woman with a nearly full cart, and the man standing directly in front of Ann, who had only a few items. She'd seen the man before, last week in fact, and she remembered him because he was wearing the exact same thing he'd worn last Sunday; a gray wool suit and no overcoat. Her hunch was that he had just gotten out of church and had stopped by to pick up a few things before going home. He was strikingly handsome, she had to admit; tall, muscular build, with neatly styled longish blonde hair. His eyes were green, she recalled. A very dark, rich shade of green as stunning as it was unusual. He was probably about forty she guessed, and appeared fit and youthful with his trim, athletic physique and bronze, tanned skin; no doubt the result of numerous trips to a tanning salon.

The elderly woman was unloading her cart and taking her good old time about it. Ann heard the man in front of her sigh impatiently. She observed the handful of items he'd placed on the conveyer: a pound of ground chuck, a package of hamburger buns, a jar of pickles, a head of lettuce and a six-pack of Coke. Glancing over at the express lane, she wondered why he didn't simply go over to it instead of putting up with the old lady like this, and then noticed that there were a half dozen people standing in line there.

The checkout girl was quickly losing her patience as she was being forced to wait while the elderly woman took each item out of her cart, one by one, and set them on the counter for her to scan. The woman was old, granted, but far from feeble. Ann deduced that she was the type of ancient hag who seemed to wear her general contempt for the world on her sleeve and was thoroughly enjoying what she was doing. She saw the twisted smirk on her face each time she leaned over her cart to retrieve the next item. She could almost envision the old lady sliding in behind the wheel of her '68 Oldsmobile when she was finished here and purposely driving fifteen miles an hour all the way to her home just to tie up traffic.

The man sighed again, and began tapping the lid of the pickle jar nervously with his fingers. Although his back was to her, Ann could almost see the subtle scowl on his handsome face as he waited his turn. Suddenly he glanced back, apparently to see how many more people were being held up by this woman. He smiled a little when he saw her, shrugged his shoulders in a gesture of hopelessness, and turned around again. Ann had smiled back at him, unable to resist the temptation. His demeanor was quite charismatic.

When the woman had finally placed the last of her groceries out on the counter to be scanned, she took out her well-worn billfold and produced a wad of one-dollar bills then started counting them out. When she had at last counted out the thirty-eight ones she needed, she fumbled through her change purse to cover the sixty-four cents and handed the coins to the checkout girl, snatched her receipt, then went on her merry way. Ann began taking her groceries out of the cart as the man stepped forward to be checked out.

“Sorry for the wait, sir,” Ann heard the checkout girl say to him.

“That’s quite all right; it wasn’t your fault,” the man replied good-naturedly. His voice was deep and pleasant, with the slightest trace of an English accent.

“Nine fifty-three,” the girl told him.

Ann watched as the man handed her a ten-dollar bill. “Out of ten?” she said. “Thank you sir. Have a nice day.”

“You, too,” he replied. He picked up his bag and headed for the door.

Ann resumed taking out her groceries and noticed that the man had forgotten the six-pack of Coke. The checkout girl noticed it at the same time. “Sir! You forgot—” she shouted, but the man was already out the door.

Ann hesitated a second, then peered at the checkout girl. “I’ll take it out to him.”

“Thanks, I really appreciate it,” the girl said, relieved.

Ann swooped up the Coke and ran out the door. She spotted the man just as he was about to get into his car. “Sir!” she called after him.

He turned around as Ann continued running toward him. “You forgot this,” she said, holding up the six-pack of Coke.

The stranger smiled at her and said, “Oh, thanks! This is what happens when you’re in a hurry, I guess.”

When she drew up to him, breathless, Ann handed him the Coke and said, “I’m sure that woman in front of us wasn’t much help either.”

He grinned. “Hell could have frozen over in the time it took that old biddy to get those groceries out of her cart!”

Ann laughed and said, “I’d better get back inside.”

He seemed disappointed. “Thanks again, uh . . .”

“Ann.”

“Thanks, Ann. It was very kind of you.”

Ann nodded, then turned to leave.

“Wait a second, Ann.”

She turned back around. “Yes?”

“This may sound terribly forward of me, but I’d really like to repay you somehow for your kindness. Like dinner, perhaps?”

Ann suddenly felt uncomfortable. She replied, “That’s not really necessary . . .”

“Jerry. Jerry Rankin. I’m sorry; that was very rude of me putting you on the spot like that, and I see now that you’re married. Please accept my apology, Ann.”

Ann glanced down at her wedding band then back at him. He seemed genuinely embarrassed and in fact, ashamed of himself for hitting on her. Ann realized that she could simply let him go on thinking that she was married and that would be the end of it but for some reason, she didn’t. “I’m divorced.”

Instead of looking relieved, Jerry Rankin frowned. “I’m sorry to hear that, Ann. I’ve just recently become a widower and have a pretty good idea of what you must be going through. My life hasn’t been the same since I lost Marie . . . it’s been a very difficult adjustment to make.”

Ann felt a wave of pity. “I’m sorry too, Jerry. I might as well be honest with you—I was the one who wanted the divorce— but it hasn’t made it any easier to ‘adjust,’ as you put it.”

He suddenly glanced at his watch. “Listen, Ann. I’m running late for an appointment and I know you must go back inside, but I would be delighted if you’d reconsider my offer.”

Before Ann could object, he reached into his breast pocket, pulled out a business card and handed it to her.

“If you should change your mind, or simply want to chat sometime, just give me a call, okay? No catch, no strings.”

Ann stared at the card for a moment, then took it from his proffered hand. “I’ll think about it, Jerry. But I can’t make any promises.”

He smiled broadly and said, “I understand, Ann. If I don’t hear from you, I’ll only feel regret that we never had the chance to get to know each other. You’re a lovely woman, as well as kind.”

His flattery made Ann melt a little. “Thank you, Jerry. I’ll think about it—I promise. I’d better go back inside now.”

“Nice meeting you, Ann. Good day,” he said and stepped into his BMW.

“Goodbye,” Ann said, then turned and walked away.

When Ann returned, the checkout girl had already bagged her groceries and was standing patiently by the register.

“Did you catch him?” she asked.

Ann nodded. “He was very grateful. How much do I owe you?”

“Sixty-seven forty-two,” the checkout girl replied.

Ann quickly wrote out a check for the amount, feeling the eyes glaring at her from behind. She handed the check over and showed the girl her driver’s license.

“Thanks,” she said as she cleared the register and gave Ann her receipt.

“Thank you.”

Back in her car, Ann took Jerry’s business card from her purse and studied it. He was a real estate broker, apparently working independently, and the card listed a Dublin address with a local phone number. She wondered if she’d made a mistake in accepting it, then decided that she hadn’t; the ball was in her court, after all. She stuck the card back into her purse and started up the engine.

When she got home, she could hear the television coming from the family room as she carried the grocery bags into the kitchen. After setting them down on the table, she decided to go in and see if Amy wanted any breakfast.

“Good morning, sleepy head,” she said as she entered the family room. Amy was sitting on the sofa watching cartoons.

“Morning, Mom,” she mumbled, not taking her eyes off the tube.

“Have you eaten yet?”

“No. I’m not hungry.”

“You need to start eating, young lady. Let me fix you a bowl of cereal,” Ann insisted.

“I’ll eat later, Mom. Let me wake up first, okay?” she whined.

“All right—but don’t forget. Any calls while I was gone?”

“Karen called. I told her you’d call her back.”

“Speaking of calls, who was it that called in the middle of the night?” Ann asked, suddenly recalling the phone ringing at three a.m.

Amy glanced over at her. "I don't know."

"Don't lie to me, Amy. I know damn sure it wasn't for me!"

"Really, Mom—I don't know who it was. Some crank caller."

Ann immediately sensed there was more to this. "What do you mean? Did they say anything?"

"He sure did; it was some pervert!" she replied with a scowl.

Ann winced. "What did he say, Amy?"

Amy's eyes returned to the television. After some hesitation, she said, "He just breathed really hard at first—you know. Then he said something . . ."

Ann felt her pulse quicken. She strode over so she could face her daughter. "Tell me what he said, Amy."

Amy was silent for a moment, and then she looked directly into her mother's eyes. "He said, 'I want to fuck you.'"

Ann recoiled, but kept her composure. "Is that all he said?"

"Yes."

"And what did you say?" Ann asked, her hands beginning to tremble.

Amy leered at her. "Nothing, Mother! Do you think I'm crazy? I hung up the phone right away!"

"Well, you did the right thing, sweetie. And if he ever calls again, just hang up on him again. Don't stay on the line."

"Don't worry, I won't."

Ann could see that Amy was upset about the call but was trying her hardest not to show it. "Do you have any idea who it could have been, honey?" she asked.

Amy's eyes had returned to Bugs Bunny. "No."

Ann couldn't tell if she was telling the truth or not, but gave her the benefit of the doubt. "Did he sound young or old?" she asked.

"I couldn't tell, Mom. I was half asleep, you know."

Ann stared at her a moment and could feel her nerves becoming taut as she thought about her little girl being traumatized by an obscene phone caller. Once again, she wished Sam were here to help her now; he'd know what to do. But he wasn't here, and it was just two of them.

Then she recalled the sounds she thought she'd heard in the backyard as a huge wave of apprehension swept over her. Maybe it hadn't been her imagination after all. And the front porch light . . .

The floodlight! she thought. She must call Mr. Ogilvy right away.

But first, she sat down beside Amy and asked, "Are you all right, honey?"

Amy looked directly into her eyes. "Yeah, I'm fine, Mom."

Ann embraced her. "I love you, sweetie," she whispered, feeling a sudden urge to cry.

"I love you too, Mom."

Ann hastened to compose herself and started to get up, but Amy held onto her. "Don't worry, Mom. Everything's going to be all right," she whispered gently.

Ann rested her head on her shoulder. "I know."

She hugged her a few moments longer, then stood up again. "I think I'll go call Karen back." She started to leave, then stopped herself, and turned to Amy. "I really wish you'd wear a robe or something to cover yourself up," she said, regarding her daughter's scanty attire: a threadbare tee shirt and panties.

Amy looked at her, her mouth agape. “God, Mom, don’t be so paranoid!”

Ann stared at her reproachfully, let out a sigh and left the room.

She stopped in the living room to get her address book out of the end table drawer, and took it with her into the kitchen. After finding Mr. Ogilvy’s telephone number, she picked up the phone and dialed. He answered after the second ring.

“Mr. Ogilvy, this is Ann Middleton.”

“Yes? How are you, Mrs. Middleton?”

“Fine, thank you, but I have a little problem. The light in the backyard is acting up again.”

“What’s that? Is the bulb burned out?”

Ann could almost see the crotchety old man’s dour expression as he spoke. “I don’t think so, Mr. Ogilvy. It must be shorting out again because it goes on sometimes, then goes out for a while, and then comes on again. Just like it was doing before.”

There was a pause. Then, “Can’t be; I fixed that wiring last time I was there. Must be something else.”

Ann didn’t want to argue with him. “Well, whatever it is, I’d appreciate it if you’d take a look at it. As soon as possible, if you don’t mind.” she asserted.

Another pause, then he said, “All right, Mrs. Middleton. I’ll stop by sometime this afternoon and take a look at it.”

“Thanks a lot, Mr. Ogilvy. I really do appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome,” he grunted, and hung up.

Ann pushed down on the button and dialed Karen Walker’s number.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Karen. Amy told me you called while I was at the supermarket.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Not real great.”

“What’s the matter? Is it Marsha?” Karen asked, concerned.

“No, not that, something else . . . Last night I thought I heard a prowler in the backyard—two different times, as a matter of fact. Amy was at the movies—at least she was the second time—and I was here all alone. Anyway, I looked out the window to see what was making the noise, but that damn floodlight that’s always acting up wasn’t working. I could see fairly well though, and didn’t notice anything unusual, so I figured it must have been either an animal or just my imagination. I didn’t mention this to you last night, but the front porch light was off when we got back from Smithtown, too. It looked like someone had screwed the bulb out partially, because it was loose in the socket and not burned out. Again, I thought it was just pure coincidence and didn’t give it much thought at the time.

“Well, now I’ve just learned that Amy got an obscene phone call in the middle of the night! This guy apparently did the heavy-breathing routine, then said, ‘I want to fuck you.’ Amy, God love her, wisely hung up on him immediately. Jesus, Karen, this is so frightening! I’m scared . . .”

“All right, Ann, now calm down a second,” Karen said soothingly. “Do you think the prowler and the caller might have been the same person?”

“I don’t know, Karen. I’m not even sure that there was a prowler. All I know is that some sick son of a bitch terrorized my daughter on the phone!”

“Well, I certainly don’t blame you for being upset; I’d be too. Have you reported it to the police yet?”

“No, I called you first.”

“Then here’s what you do. Call the police and tell them what happened; tell them everything. They’ll probably tell you there’s nothing they can do about the obscene phone call, but surely they’ll offer to keep an eye on your house for a while, I should think. That will at least give you a little piece of mind. In the meantime, get that light in your backyard fixed. Do it today.”

“I’ve already called the landlord and he’s coming over this afternoon to take a look at it,” Ann said.

“Good. So will you call the police?”

“Yes, I will. Karen, I don’t know what I’d do without you . . . You always know the right thing to do. I’m not so sure I would have even thought of calling the police.”

“Well, hon, you’ve been under a lot of stress lately, that’s all. There’s just too much happening all at once and you’re not quite yourself. I’m just doing what any friend would do.”

“And I appreciate it. I feel a lot better already.”

“I’m happy to hear that. I hate to say it, but this is all the more reason why you need to get a man in your life. I mean, for security, if nothing else! Here you are, two gorgeous gals living all alone, without a man around, and you’re sitting ducks for things like this. Get yourself a man, Hon! Your troubles will be over.”

Ann managed to smile at her friend’s persistence. “You know, it’s funny you’d say that because I just met someone this morning at the supermarket.”

“Really? That’s wonderful! Tell me all about him!” she gushed excitedly.

“Calm down a little, Karen; it’s really not that big of deal,” Ann declared. She then proceeded to tell her friend about the brief encounter with Jerry Rankin.

When she was finished, Karen said, “So what are you going to do? You’re going to call him, aren’t you?”

Ann sighed. “I don’t know, Karen . . . I doubt it.”

“Why not call him? He sounds like a very nice guy and believe me, they’re few and far between nowadays. Plus, you said he was a hunk; what’s stopping you, gal?”

“I said he was handsome, Karen, not a ‘hunk!’ At any rate, as I told you yesterday, I’m just not ready for a relationship. I don’t know if I’ll ever be for that matter.”

“Who said anything about a relationship?” Karen persisted. “The guy just wants to take you out to dinner, not marry you! Listen. He’s a widower, right? So he’s probably not anymore interested in a relationship than you are. He’s probably lonely, like you, and at the crossroads of his life, like you. It sounds perfect! What do you have to lose?”

Ann sometimes resented the way Karen made everything out to seem so logical. She took a deep breath and said, “Okay, Karen. You’ve made your point. I guess when you put it that way it doesn’t seem like such a bad idea. I’ll give it some serious thought; I promise. But don’t get on my case if I don’t go through with it.”

“Ann, I would never pressure you over anything like this and you know it. I’m just trying to encourage you a little; God knows you need encouragement! One last thing before I drop the subject. It won’t hurt anything if you just call this guy and talk to him, just like he suggested. You know, get to know him a little bit and play it by ear. Then, if it looks good, go ahead and let him take you out. If he sounds like a creep, then just ditch him. Simple as that.”

Ann sighed. “I guess you’re right; it’s not like I have to go out with him, right? I could just call and talk to him, being careful not to tell him my last name or anything else that might enable him to find out my phone number or where I live. Then just take it from there. Actually, he didn’t remind me of the type who would hassle me; he was really sweet . . . Okay. I just might do it! But I’m still going to think about it first.”

“Great! Promise me you’ll let me know the scoop if and when you do call him, okay?” Karen said.

“I will,” Ann replied. “How was the movie, by the way?”

“Pretty stupid, really. We went to see one of those sci-fi action movies—Bill loves them—and I fell asleep. Dinner was nice, though. We went to Angelino’s.”

“I’ve heard that was a pretty decent restaurant.”

“It’s fantastic. Maybe if you hook up with this Jerry fellow, we can double sometime.”

Ann chuckled. “You are unbelievable, Karen!”

“I know it. Well, hon, I’d better let you go. If I don’t talk to you in the meantime, I’ll see you at the office tomorrow.”

“Okay, Karen. And thanks, again.”

“No problem. Bye.”

Ann hung up the phone and sat for a moment, thinking about what Karen had said. Maybe she was right, she thought. It wouldn’t hurt just to call Jerry Rankin up someday and chat with him. She might even be glad she’d followed through with it.

But right now she had a more important call to make. She stood up and went over to the refrigerator where the card with the emergency numbers was stuck to the door by a pear-shaped magnet, and carried it back over to the phone. Then she dialed the number for the Woodcrest Police Department.

CHAPTER 6

Sam stared blankly out the window at the frost on the ground, the morning rays of sun just now beginning to melt it away. As he leaned over the kitchen sink, he felt a relentless throbbing in his head and wished to hell the coffee would finish brewing and the aspirins he’d taken would start kicking in. He had a hangover of mammoth proportions.

He hadn’t tied one on in a long time. In fact, the last time he’d gotten that shit-faced was the last day he’d stayed over at Roger’s place. Since then, he’d kept sober for the most part; no more than a couple of beers before going to bed. Roger Hagstrom couldn’t stop at two drinks to save his life.

Sam had acquired this little house out in the sticks for a number of reasons. He knew he could never go back to the one he and his family had lived in before; the memories and the ghosts would have made it

unbearable. It had been a handsome house; an old Cape Cod on the north end of town that he'd renovated exactly to his and Ann's specifications. It had been their dream house, and they'd spent nearly as much money over the years making it everything they'd ever wanted as they had on the original mortgage.

Once the divorce proceedings began, he'd moved in with Roger until he could find another place to live. He had learned about this humble abode from one of the employees in the advertising department at the *Observer*, and had driven out here to the rural countryside to check it out. From the moment he'd first laid eyes on the little cottage nestled in a hollow between two steep hillsides, he knew he wanted it. The asking price was a steal, especially taking into account that the deed included ten acres of nicely wooded land. But the house had been in bad need of repair. This hadn't been a problem though, he had in fact looked forward to a project that would help take his mind off the divorce.

It was secluded here, and he liked that. The only thing standing between his house and Route 52 was his land and the road linking them together; a quarter mile of winding, bumpy terrain. His closest neighbor was over two miles away, as was the nearest convenient store; the only drawback to the whole arrangement. But he'd learned to deal with it.

The coffee maker fell silent. He took a mug out of the cupboard, filled it up, and carried it with him into the den. Plopping down on the sofa, he took a cigarette out of the pack lying on the coffee table and lit it up before stretching out his long legs.

Sam spent a lot time in this room. Not only was it bright and sunny, it afforded the best view in the house. Outside he could see the brightly colored leaves on the trees that sprawled up the north slope of the hillside and the winding creek that cut between the hills through his backyard, forming a natural boundary between his property and the state forest. He peered across the room at the typewriter on top of his cluttered desk. He had purposely left the last page of his manuscript he'd worked on in the carrier as a constant reminder of yet another ambitious project he'd started up and never finished, hoping that some day he would feel the inspiration to take up where he'd left off. Then he thought about Marsha Bradley's murder and the article he had to write for Monday's paper, realizing that his book would remain pigeonholed for at least one more day. Perhaps even forever . . .

His thoughts shifted to Ann and Amy, wondering what they were doing that very moment. Amy would no doubt still be asleep, he thought with a grin. Ann would be awake though; she was an early riser. He recalled how she was always the first one up in the morning when they were still married, how the coffee would already be brewed, and the way she would be puttering around in the kitchen when he would finally saunter in, still half asleep. And never once had she failed to greet him with her familiar bright smile and cheery, "good morning, dear . . ."

Sam closed his eyes to blot out the memories. Was he ever going to get used to this? he wondered. Hadn't he suffered long enough for his screw-up? Hadn't he been a good husband and father up until that one little fall from grace with Shelley Hatcher? She had meant absolutely nothing to him; she was just a young, perky temptation who had thrown herself at him one too many times until he'd finally given in to his animal instincts. What normal, red-blooded male could have resisted?

This one should have. That was more than obvious now.

He gulped his coffee and took another long drag off his cigarette. Nothing good had come from his romp in the hay with Shelley Hatcher. He had lost his family, couldn't add a single coherent sentence to his manuscript,

and Shelley had ended up losing her job at the paper and leaving town. He felt bad about that; she hadn't really done anything wrong. But McNary had wasted no time in firing her from the *Observer*, citing that the publicity of the affair was bad for business. After all, he couldn't continue employing a young woman who was a bona fide house wrecker. It was a damn shame, too. Shelley had shown great potential as a photojournalist. She was aggressive, creative and a fast learner. Only problem was that she was a fast lay as well.

He hadn't slept with anyone since Shelley. Six months, he counted on his fingers. Divorced and celibate at forty. And now he was living like a hermit in the sticks of Selecka County. What was his next move in life? Become a monk? Or a hopeless drunk?

Sam gazed out the window again. A squirrel sitting on a fencepost was cutting on a beechnut that it held in its paws. The squirrel could see him but wasn't intimidated in the least. It merely sat there chomping away at his nut, probably wondering how much longer before he had start to storing the things away for the winter.

Sam stubbed out his cigarette, stood up and went back into the kitchen to warm up his coffee. He plotted out his day, deciding that after breakfast he'd take a shower then drive into town to work on the Bradley story. He had just replaced the coffee carafe when the phone rang. He went back into the den to answer it.

"Feeling crispy this morning?" Roger's voice asked, gruff but alert.

Sam feigned a groan. "I've felt better. What in the hell are you doing up so early? I thought you worked the afternoon shift today."

"Something's come up. I think you ought to come down to the station ASAP. you're gonna want to hear this."

"What is it?" Sam asked.

Roger sighed impatiently. "We got a call from the New York P.D. earlier this morning. It may be something, or it may be nothing. I'll explain when you get here."

"Something to do with the case?" Sam asked, feeling his pulse quicken.

"Possibly. Just get your ass down here and I'll give you the details."

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes," Sam said before hanging up the phone.

He drained his coffee, went into the bathroom and washed up, dressed and was out of the house in five minutes.

When he arrived at the Smithtown Police Department, Sam could see Roger Hagstrom in his office huddled over some paperwork. He walked up to the desk sergeant, Mark O'Brien, greeted him and made his way over to Roger's smoke-filled cubicle. His friend looked the worst for the wear and apparently had been roused out of a coma-like sleep and ordered to come down to the station by the chief. He was unshaven and still wearing the same clothes he'd worn the night before.

"Yo," he greeted as Sam strode in.

"Rough night, eh?"

Roger glanced up at him and grimaced. "You don't look so hot yourself. But it was a pretty decent drunk, you gotta admit."

"Yeah, but we're paying dearly for it now. What's going on?" Sam asked, sitting down on the other side of the desk.

"Do you remember Sara Hunt?"

Sam thought for a moment then replied, “Yeah. She graduated in our class at high school. Then her family moved away not long afterwards.”

“Well, she’s dead. Murdered in New York City a few weeks ago,” Roger declared grimly.

Sam raised his eyebrows. “Jesus! What happened?”

Roger Hagstrom lit up a Camel filter, glanced down at the report he had been reading and peered across his desk at Sam.

“Raped and strangled.”

He studied the incredulous look on Sam’s face before continuing.

“I’ll give it to you from the beginning: we got a call this morning from a Lieutenant Mancuso of the N.Y.P.D. He told me that he was following up on a homicide investigation he’s been working on and was requesting our cooperation. He went on to say that Sara Hunt’s body had been discovered in her apartment by her roommate at around 2:30 a.m. Her assailant had entered her apartment, beat the shit out of her, raped and strangled her, then left her apartment without having been seen or heard by a single solitary soul in the building. Not a single clue to his identity had been left at the scene. No prints, no murder weapon, nothing. All the murderer left behind were a few strands of hair and his semen, deposited inside and upon Sara’s body.”

Roger took a drag, exhaled and resumed. “Mancuso suspects that Sara had known her assailant. Although the lock on the door of her apartment building had been broken and non-functional for several weeks prior to her murder, the door to Sara’s apartment showed no signs of being tampered with, indicating that she most likely had invited her assailant inside.” He paused a moment and yawned. “I need some more java. You want some?”

Sam nodded. “So this Lieutenant Mancuso thinks that Sara Hunt’s killer is the same guy who killed Marsha Bradley?”

Roger stood up. “Hold your horses a second and I’ll explain. Mancuso didn’t even know about Marsha Bradley’s murder until I told him.” He walked over to the coffee maker and poured Sam a cup, warmed up his own then went back over to his desk.

“I’m confused,” Sam said.

Roger sat back down with a groan. “Mancuso called us on a lark. He said that evidence has been so scarce in the case that he and his men were scouring every potential piece of evidence. They’d found a Smithtown High School yearbook stashed away underneath Sara’s bed and hadn’t thought much of it at first, but later on discovered that a page of the yearbook had been marked with a tiny piece of paper tucked just out of sight.” He shuffled through the papers piled in front of him and handed Sam a couple of documents stapled together. “He faxed these to me.”

Sam looked over the documents. In his hand were copies of two consecutive pages of The 1970 Smithtown High School yearbook depicting a couple dozen graduating seniors’ headshots in alphabetical order, beginning with “Jamison” and ending with “Martin.”

Roger said, “Mancuso wants us to do a background check on all of these people; the males, that is. He wants to know where they are now, what they’re doing, and most importantly, if any of them have a police record. It was after he’d made this request that I mentioned the Marsha Bradley case, noting the uncanny similarities between her case and Sara Hunt’s. He was quite interested, to say the least.”

Sam looked over the individual names and accompanying pictures, silently counting up how many were males. “Nine guys,” he mumbled.

“Yeah, and I can account for five of them already. You probably can, too.”

“Let’s see . . . Tony Jamison, Bob Jones, Bill Kellerman, Dick Korns; they all still live in Smithtown,” Sam said.

“You forgot Harold Justice; he works at the Seven Eleven in Milford.”

“Didn’t know that.”

“So that leaves us with four guys that we might have to do a little digging up on,” Roger said. “Anyway, Mancuso admitted that the yearbook angle is a long shot and the odds are slim that any of these guys are linked in any way to Sara Hunt’s murder. But it’s definitely a good thing he followed up on it, as it turns out. Otherwise, he may have never found out about the Bradley murder, and we probably wouldn’t have learned out about Sara Hunt. Now we have two murder cases that are not only curiously similar to one another, but involve victims who we know for a fact had at one time been Smithtown residents.”

Sam’s eyes widened as this correlation suddenly sank in. “Jesus, Rog! There has to be a connection! Look at the odds—”

“Wait—it gets even more interesting,” Roger interrupted. “There was a lipstick mark on Sara Hunt’s left breast.”

Sam gasped. “No shit?”

“I shit you not. And a lipstick vial, presumably Sara’s, was found near her body. It looks as though the murderer started to write a little message and changed his mind for some reason or another. Maybe he had to make a sudden getaway.”

“What does this Mancuso think about all of this?”

“He just about lost it when I told him about Marsha and the lipstick message. He thinks there’s a very good chance that the same guy did them both in.”

“And what do you think?”

“Hell’s bells, I agree! But not quite 100%, though. There are a few things that don’t quite stack up.”

“Like?”

“For one thing, it just doesn’t seem feasible that it could be the same guy. New York City is over five hundred miles away. The murders took place only weeks from one another. Unless this guy had a perfect game plan devised, I don’t see how he could possibly pull off both murders so goddamn flawlessly in such a tight time frame. Furthermore, who ever killed Sara Hunt had beaten the mortal shit out of her. Mancuso told me she had bruises and contusions all over her body—excessive ‘excessive force’ was how he put it—much more than was needed for Sara’s assailant to have his way with her. It’s more than obvious that this bastard wanted her to suffer a helluva lot before murdering her. Marsha Bradley, on the other hand, had been virtually unharmed physically, with the exception of the marks left on her neck from strangulation. The killer’s M.O’s just don’t jibe.”

“But Marsha had been threatened into submission, we’ve more or less surmised. Because she feared for Tommy’s life,” Sam pointed out.

“You’re missing the point, Sam. Serial killers usually duplicate their M.O.’s quite faithfully, especially in sex crimes such as these. Sara’s murderer obviously wanted her to hurt; he deliberately tortured her before doing her in. Marsha’s assailant, however, was merciful in this regard. Had it been the same guy, Marsha most likely would have been beaten to a pulp, too.”

Sam grunted. “This sounds like some overpaid profiler’s pat theory, to me. I’m sure it isn’t carved in granite.”

“You’re right; there are exceptions to every rule. I’m just saying that there are some arguable discrepancies between the killer’s M.O. in each case. The similarities certainly outweigh them, though. And as I already told you, I think that the same guy probably murdered them both.”

Sam took a sip of coffee and said, “This is really scary. If it really is the same guy who killed Marsha and Sara, that puts a whole new perspective on everything.”

Roger’s expression turned grim. “Sure does. If this is indeed the case, it brings up the obvious question of why the murderer zeroed-in on these two particular ladies. In other words, what was his motive?”

“And who might be the next in line,” Sam added solemnly.

“Well, before we start pushing the panic button we need to confirm that the two murders were committed by the same person. Fortunately, that shouldn’t be hard to do. I’m having the lab send the hair and semen samples to Mancuso so he can have them compared to the samples he has. If the DNA’s match, we will have at least gotten that much established.”

“And in the meantime?” Sam asked.

“In the meantime we’re going to find out what these characters have been up to,” Roger replied, gesturing toward the copies of the yearbook Sam was holding.

Sam studied the faces again. Of the four graduates presumably not still living in Smithtown, he knew only two; and hadn’t seen either one of them since high school over twenty years ago. The other two didn’t look familiar at all and judging by the scholastic achievements listed under their pictures, which was zip, neither of them had apparently spent a whole lot of their time within the hallowed halls of Smithtown High.

“Are you going to question everyone here?” he asked Roger.

“Yeah, every single one of them, including the locals.”

“How will you track down the ones who aren’t still living in the area?”

“Well, first we’ll go over records at the post office and the courthouse. Check out change of address records, census reports, and so on. We’ll also enter their names in the computer and see what we come up with. If none of this pans out for someone in particular, we’ll try locating any of their friends and relatives who might still be living in town and go from there. We’ll find them all, eventually. I just hope it happens soon enough.” he added uneasily.

Sam nodded. Although he already knew the answer to his next question, he asked it anyway. “And what about the press?”

Roger shook his head. “Mum’s the word, still—the chief has already informed me.”

Sam groaned in protest. “Why?”

“For the same reasons as before,” he replied. “Listen, buddy. Thompson still doesn’t want to incite any unnecessary panic here. So far, we know nothing more than we did before except that two female Smithtown residents, one of which hasn’t lived here in two decades, have been raped and strangled to death in their homes. Everything else is pure conjecture. Why stir up the dirt now? But I promise you, the minute we find out who murdered Marsha Bradley, you can get them presses rolling. Fair enough?”

Sam didn’t like it, but at the same time had to agree that printing an article about the cases based on pure speculation wasn’t a good idea. Maybe in the New York Post or the Daily News it would float, but definitely not

in the ultra-conservative, play-by-the rules *Smithtown Observer*. Which brought something else to mind. “How is the New York press dealing with Sara Hunt’s murder?” he inquired.

“From the way Mancuso spoke, there’s been little press coverage of the case. Apparently there’s been a bumper crop of murders in the Big Apple lately and the cops are under a lot of pressure, so they’re going with the attitude that they don’t have time to spare for press conferences when they could be out on the streets catching criminals instead. Evidently, it’s working.”

Sam made a mental note to check out the last few weeks’ editions of the New York Times, Post, and the Daily News to see what had been written regarding Sara Hunt’s murder.

“One thing puzzles me, Rog. How come nobody here was informed of Sara Hunt’s death until today? You’d think that someone would have been notified before now.”

“Hell if I know. The only thing I can figure is that Sara apparently no longer has any ties to Smithtown; family or otherwise. She wasn’t born and raised here—her family is originally from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania—and she only lived here for a couple of years. Her family moved back to Pennsylvania not long after Sara’s graduation.”

Sam vaguely recalled now that Sara Hunt had been “the new kid in town” when she started attending Smithtown High her junior year. He said, “She surely made some friends while she was here, though. In fact, I seem to recall that she hung out with Marsha Bradley occasionally, if I’m not mistaken. At any rate, I’d like to at least let the town know that Sara Hunt is dead. It may be old news, but I certainly think it’s worthy of mention.”

Roger thought it over and said, “Okay, go ahead and do it. I don’t think Thompson will give a shit. But don’t even hint that there might be a connection between the two murders. All right?”

“Gee, thanks for letting me do my job, good buddy! I’m forever grateful,” Sam jabbed. In a more serious tone he added, “I won’t tie them in, don’t worry. I’ll just go with the angle, ”Former Local Woman Found Murdered In New York,” or something to that effect. I’d like a recent picture of her though, and some background info if you’ve got any there.”

Roger leafed through the stack of papers lying on the desk and pulled out the New York police report. “I’ll make a copy of this report for you. As for a picture, I’ve already asked Mancuso to send me everything he has as soon as he gets a chance. There’ll probably be a picture of some kind coming.”

“Okay.”

“By the way, when are you going to be done writing the other article? Thompson’s been breathing down my neck to get Marsha’s file back from you.”

“I’m going straight over to the paper and finish it after I leave here. I’ll drop the file off on my way home,” Sam promised.

“Okay. I’m going to take MacPherson and go question some of the Bradley’s neighbors. I’m holding off on questioning Dave again until tomorrow. Give the poor guy a chance to get settled back into his home.”

Sam nodded in agreement. “Christ, I really feel for the guy. Imagine going back to that house and trying to get on with your life after what happened there.”

“I’d sure hate to be in his shoes right now, no doubt. He’s got to deal with his kid too, remember. It’s times like this when I feel thankful I’ve never gotten married. All I’ve gotta do is worry about my own fat ass and nobody else’s,” Roger declared.

Sam said, “But the good definitely outweighs the bad in having a family. I wish I still had mine.”

Roger shrugged. "I know you do, buddy. At least they're still among the living."

"Thank God for that. Well, I'd better get moving. This article isn't gonna write itself."

Roger scooted out of his chair and stood up. "I'll make those copies for you."

"These too," Sam said, handing him the copies of the yearbook.

Roger smiled, headed for the door, and led Sam over to the copy machine. When he was finished, he handed the completed copies to Sam and said, "Classified info, remember."

"Right. Catch you later, Roger," he said, then made his way out of the Smithtown Police Department.

CHAPTER 7

On Thursday evening, Ann sat at the kitchen table and fumbled with the business card, trying to decide whether or not to call him. It had been a slow week at the office with plenty of time for her mind to drift, and what time hadn't been spent mourning Marsha Bradley had been spent thinking about Jerry Rankin. Karen's incessant urging had also come into play; to the extent that Ann now practically felt obligated to call Jerry just to make Karen happy and to be done with it once and for all. Heaving a nervous sigh, she reached for the phone and dialed his number. After four rings she started to hang up, half hoping he wasn't home. Then he suddenly answered.

"Jerry Rankin," he said.

Ann forced herself to speak. "Uh, Jerry, this is Ann—we met on the parking lot at the supermarket last Sunday?"

"Ann, yes—what a pleasant surprise! I was beginning to wonder if you were ever going to call. How are you?"

"Fine," she replied, suddenly feeling a little more at ease. His cheerful voice with that irresistible English accent had a reassuring quality to it. "And how have you been?"

"Very well, thank you," he replied. "I'm so delighted you called, Ann. To be real honest, I've spent this entire week thinking I was a bit too forward last Sunday and deduced that I must have scared you off. I've always felt a bit awkward meeting someone for the first time like that anyway, and almost always manage to somehow put my foot in my mouth, as was the case that morning."

Ann gave a little laugh. "I don't do so well myself, as you might have noticed."

"I thought you handled it wonderfully; anyone else probably would have told me to take a hike under the circumstances. I'm truly flattered that you've given me another opportunity to talk to you again."

Ann gushed, wondering if he was really as sincere as he sounded. “Were you late for your appointment?”

“Almost, but I managed to make it just in the nick of time. I was showing a house in Muirfield to a client who was sort of, well, the pushy type. He’d insisted on seeing this particular house on Sunday morning at eleven-thirty and I already knew I’d be pressed for time anyway because of church services, so I sort of fouled myself up by trying to fit in the grocery as well. Looking on the bright side, though, I wouldn’t have met you otherwise, so I have no regrets.”

“I was a little curious why you were shopping in my neighborhood when I noticed that the address on your card was on the other side of town. Your church must be close by, I assume,” Ann said.

“Yes, it’s just a few blocks north of the supermarket.”

“And do you work out of your home exclusively, or do you have an office as well?”

“Just my home. I’m an independent broker and really have no need for an office,” he explained.

Ann said, “I hope I’m not being nosy, but how long have you lived in Columbus?”

Jerry chuckled. “You’re not being nosy in the least, Ann. I’ve been here just a little more than a year. I moved here from Cleveland shortly after my wife passed away. I had to get away from there; too many memories and all that. The real estate market is better in this area anyway. Columbus is quite a boom town now and I’m afraid to say that Cleveland is swiftly heading for the skids.”

Ann sympathized with his wanting to get away from memories—she had done the very same thing herself. “Has it been a hard adjustment for you to make; living here as opposed to Cleveland?” she asked curiously.

“It was a little tough at first, I must admit. Fortunately, though, business has been so good that I haven’t had a great deal of time to dwell on it. Have you lived in Columbus all your life?”

“Not hardly,” Ann laughed. “I just moved here a few months ago, as a matter of fact.”

“From where, may I ask?”

“Smithtown. It’s a little town in the southern part of the state.”

“I’ve heard of it. Isn’t it directly across the Ohio River from Kentucky?”

“Yes.”

“I guess it’s time for me to ask the same question: Have you had any trouble adjusting to Columbus?”

Ann balked a moment then replied, “Frankly, it hasn’t been easy. I have a fourteen-year-old who’s giving me fits right now; but it’s understandable in a way. After all, she’s been forced to start high school in a new town and is at that awkward age, anyway. My recent divorce no doubt has a lot to do with it, too. And on top of everything else, my best friend recently passed away. I’ve had a very difficult time dealing with that.”

“My God, Ann. I didn’t realize . . . It sounds as though you’re going through some pretty tough times right now. Do you attend church?”

The question caught her off totally off guard, and for a moment she was unable to speak. “No, not lately, anyway,” she finally replied.

“I see. I was just curious, and hope I haven’t somehow offended you by asking. It’s just that the church has helped me get through some hard times in the past, and I was simply wondering if you’d found the same thing to be true. At any rate, we’ll drop the subject right now before you start thinking I’m some kind of religious fanatic or something!” he chuckled.

Ann had to admit she was relieved. “No offense taken, Jerry. We used to go to church regularly when Amy was younger but we sort of got out of the habit over the years. Now that I think about it, it probably wouldn’t hurt either of us to start going again,” she added thoughtfully.

“Your daughter would probably resent it, if it was your idea. Kids her age tend to resent any kind of adult intervention in their lives.”

Ann laughed. “You’ve sure got that right. It sounds like you’ve had some experience with kids.”

“I don’t have any of my own unfortunately, but I’ve done some volunteer work for the church in the youth fellowship program. These kids nowadays have a lot more challenges to face than when I was a kid, it seems. These are tough times to be a kid, in my opinion. What with drugs, AIDS, crime and so on.”

“I agree. Our idea of a good time when I was a teenager was hanging out at the malt shop and going to teen dances. These kids today seem absolutely bored with everything; they sit in front of the television most of the time and spend the rest of their time trying to see what kind of trouble they can get themselves into.”

Jerry gasped. “I would never have guessed you’ve been around so long, Ann! You certainly don’t look as old as you’re implying you are.”

Ann melted from his flattery. “Thanks, Jerry. That was very kind of you. But believe me, I’ve been around awhile.”

“Well, it doesn’t show.” he declared. “What kind of work do you do, by the way?”

“I’m working at a travel agency right now, but I’m hoping to go back to college sometime in the near future and get my law degree.”

“I think that’s wonderful, Ann! I admire your ambition.”

“Well, you can tell me that if and when I actually follow through with it. I’m not sure it will pan out, but I’d like to think it will someday.”

“You’ll succeed, Ann. You remind me of the type who has set goals for herself and will stop at nothing to achieve those goals no matter what. Correct me if I’m wrong.” he challenged.

“Well, I guess you’re right, in a way. I appreciate your vote of confidence, at any rate.”

“My pleasure.”

There was an awkward pause in the conversation and Ann sensed that Jerry Rankin was rapidly running out of small talk. She felt comfortable talking to him and was in fact enjoying it, but she didn’t want him to feel obligated to continue.

“Well, I guess I’d better let you go. It’s been really nice talking to you, Jerry,” she suddenly said. “Maybe we can do it again sometime.”

“I’ve enjoyed it too, Ann.” he said, his disappointment more than evident. “If by chance you’d like to chat again, you can usually reach me any weekday around this time. And just for the record, that dinner invitation is still open,” he added.

Ann decided there was no longer any reason to continue playing the coy divorcée. She liked what she’d seen and heard so far, and had no doubts that Jerry Rankin was a good, decent guy. She replied, “In that case, I wouldn’t be opposed to chatting again over dinner sometime.”

There, she’d done it.

“Wonderful!” he exclaimed. “I’ll be honest, Ann. I’m really glad you said that because I’m not really very keen on telephones—they seem so impersonal and all—and I’ve found that I can relate much better when I can

see who I'm talking to, as opposed to staring at the walls. Anyway, just tell me when would be convenient for you. My time is always flexible."

"I'm free on the weekends . . . any weekend," she added, perhaps a little too quickly.

"Would tomorrow be too soon?" he asked.

Ann hadn't expected such short notice. She thought for a moment and decided that Friday would be just as good as any other time. "No, tomorrow would be fine," she said.

"When shall I pick you up?"

Amy was going to the football game tomorrow, she recalled. She could fix her an early dinner and still have time to get ready by eight. "How about eight o'clock?"

"Terrific! I'll swing by at eight then," he said. "What's your address?"

"It's 724 Meadow Lane, in Century Hills, Woodcrest."

"I know the neighborhood well; it's one of the few left in Franklin County that still has any character, in my opinion," he said. "Oh, and I'd better get your phone number as well."

Ann recited her number, and then Jerry said, "Wonderful. I'll see you tomorrow evening at eight o'clock."

"I'm looking forward to it, Jerry. See you then. 'Bye.'"

"Goodbye, Ann."

Her head was spinning when she hung up the phone. Then it suddenly hit her.

Amy! How was she going to react to all of this? she thought in a sudden fit of panic.

Ann's first impulse was to call Jerry Rankin back and immediately break the date with him. She picked up the phone and started to dial his number, wondering how she could be so selfish to make a date with someone without first discussing it with her daughter. Then she suddenly stopped herself, hung up, and dialed Karen's number instead.

"Karen, it's me. I've just done something really awful!"

"Good Lord, Ann, what's happened?" her friend asked.

"I just made a dinner date with Jerry Rankin for tomorrow night and I didn't even talk to Amy about it first!"

"You what? You've made a date with him already?" Karen asked incredulously. "Ann, that's wonderful! I'm so proud of you!"

"Well, I'm not proud of me. It all happened so fast, Karen! I talked to him for a few minutes, got to know him a little better, and before I knew it I was accepting his invitation for dinner without even giving a thought to Amy. I'm so ashamed . . ."

"Settle down now, dear." Karen consoled. "It's not the end of the world. The important thing is that you actually followed through with this thing and now you're actually going out on a date. That's good, honey—not bad. Now tell me exactly what happened."

Ann managed to get a grip on herself and proceeded to tell Karen about her phone conversation with Jerry Rankin. When she was finished she said, "I'm going to call him back right now and break off the date."

"Don't do it, Ann," Karen advised. "Listen, if you call him back and cancel out now, you may never get this opportunity again. Not only would it be rude, but you'd probably scare him off in the process. I truly think you're over-reacting to this as far as Amy is concerned. After all, you're just going out to dinner with this guy, right? It's not like you're jumping right into a relationship or anything. He could just as well be one of our

clients at the travel agency, for all intents and purposes. The point I'm making is, wait and see if something develops with this Jerry fellow before confronting Amy with it. For now, just tell her you're going out to dinner with one of our clients and leave it at that. You'll save both Amy and yourself a lot of unnecessary tension that way Ann, believe me. I've gone through the very same thing you're going through now and one thing I learned is this: don't dare tell the kids about a relationship until you're absolutely sure that you have a relationship in the first place."

Ann thought it over a moment. Then she said, "Maybe you're right. It's just that I don't like sneaking around; I want to be honest with Amy."

"And I agree—you should be honest with her. But give yourself a little slack, dear! You're entitled to a little privacy in your life; Amy doesn't have to know your every move. If something develops with this guy, by all means tell Amy about him and go from there. But until then, let it be a non-issue."

Even though Karen's sober advice made her feel a little better, Ann was still unsure of herself.

"I guess I could just tell Amy that I'm going out for dinner tomorrow night and leave it at that. She's going to the school football game so I'll probably make it back home before she does. She'll never know the difference."

"There you go! It's no big deal when you think about it. I have to admit I'm excited for you, though. Where are you two going?" Karen inquired enthusiastically.

"I have no idea; he never brought it up."

"Aren't you excited?"

Ann sighed. "I was until I thought about Amy. Now I'm not so sure."

"C'mon, get excited! Amy will be fine. You're going to have a great time, dear. I just know it!"

"I'll probably feel better once he comes by to get me. Until then I'm going to be a nervous wreck," Ann declared.

"You'll be fine. Remember, it's just a dinner date with a nice guy. That's it; no big deal. Right?" Karen coaxed.

"I guess so . . . I think I just heard Amy out front so I'd better go."

"Okay. We'll talk more about this at the office tomorrow. I'll see you then."

"All right, Karen. And thanks. See you tomorrow."

Amy was coming in the front door as Ann hung up the phone. She snatched up Jerry Rankin's business card from the kitchen table and slid it into her purse just as Amy entered the room.

"Hi sweetie! Did you get all your homework done?"

Amy threw her books down on the table with a scowl then walked over to the refrigerator and opened the door. "I hate algebra! This dick we have for a teacher assigned us two whole pages of problems for tomorrow!" Amy whined.

"Were you able to do them all?" Ann asked, watching her as she took out a can of Pepsi and popped the tab.

"Most of them. I'll do the rest in study hall," Amy replied, taking a slug. "We have anything to eat?"

"There's some fried chicken in the fridge. Didn't you eat over at Amanda's?"

"I had some ice cream."

Ann looked at her reproachfully. “You told me you were going to eat supper at Amanda’s; ice cream sure doesn’t sound like supper to me.”

Amy grimaced and said, “Her mother made a casserole and I swear to God it looked just like dog barf, Mom! I couldn’t have eaten it if someone paid me!”

“Well, eat some chicken then. There’s a tossed salad and some Jello in there too.”

“I’ll just have potato chips instead. Where are they?”

Ann stood up and went over to Amy. “You have got to start eating right, Amy! I’ll fix you a plate and you’re going to eat it.”

“I don’t want chicken, Mother!” Amy protested, glaring at Ann defiantly. “Can’t I just order a pizza instead?”

Ann wanted to put her foot down, but refrained. She sighed and said, “I guess so; it’s better than potato chips, anyway.”

Amy smiled triumphantly, having chocked up another victory. “Thanks, Mom.”

She picked up the phone and ordered a medium pepperoni pizza from the local pizzeria, to be delivered, and gave them the address. After hanging up she turned to Ann and said, “A bunch of us are staying over at Amanda’s after the game tomorrow night. Is it okay?”

Ann wanted to say no—she didn’t particularly want to spend another weekend night alone—but reconsidered when she realized that she could avoid explaining her dinner plans to Amy if she wasn’t going to be home anyway. “No boys, I presume?”

Amy gave Ann one of her finer performances. “Of course not, Mom! Amanda’s mom is very strict about that sort of thing, as you well know.”

No, she didn’t know, Ann thought to herself. She only knew what she’d been told by two teenage girls. “I guess it’s okay, then,” she said. “What time has Mrs. Givens told you to be home after the game?”

“Ten-thirty,” Amy answered.

“Well, see that you mind her, then.”

“I will, Mom.”

With that, Amy left the kitchen and headed for the stairs. Moments later, Ann could hear Guns ‘n’ Roses blaring from her stereo and sighed as she took out her billfold and found a ten dollar bill to cover the pizza. She strode into the living room and laid the money on the table by the front door then made her way into the family room. She sat down on the sofa, turned on the T.V, and picked up the romance novel lying on the coffee table.

Before she began reading, her eyes stared out the window at the backyard, now brightly illuminated by the floodlight that Mr. Ogilvy had fixed last Sunday. She breathed a silent sigh of relief. There hadn’t been any more signs of prowlers or any obscene phone calls since last weekend. She had called the police as Karen had suggested, and the officer promised her that a cruiser would do routine drive-bys past the house for a while. There was little else they could do, he’d told her. As for the obscene phone call, he suggested that she call the phone company and inform them of the call, which Ann had done. The phone company rep told her that if the calls persisted she might want to consider getting an unpublished phone number. Ann had thanked the woman, telling her she would think about it.

Sam had called later that same evening to ask how she and Amy were doing. He’d told her that there still weren’t any significant breaks in Marsha’s murder investigation, but that the police had a lead they were

checking on that could be important. He didn't elaborate. Ann almost told him about the prowler and the obscene phone call but decided against it. She figured it would only needlessly worry him. And besides that, Ann had resolved, she was on her own now and had to start learning how to deal with her problems herself instead of relying on Sam.

Ann opened the paperback to the bookmarked page and began reading. As she read, her upcoming dinner date with Jerry Rankin was in the back of her mind. Since meeting him, she'd whimsically substituted the tall dark stranger in the novel with Jerry, and the heroine with herself. Their relationship was really starting to bloom as the story progressed.

CHAPTER 8

Sam pulled off Route 52 and proceeded to make his way down the winding, slippery road. Rain was coming down in buckets and there was a thick dense fog setting in as he navigated the Jeep effortlessly through the quarter-mile long quagmire leading to his country home.

When he pulled up beside the house and cut the engine, he could hear the roar of the swollen creek over the din of the pelting rain. He grabbed his briefcase, opened the door and bailed out, holding the briefcase awkwardly over his head. He slammed the door shut with his foot and bolted toward the porch, deftly side-stepping the puddles along the way. Once inside, he made his way into the den, set the briefcase down on his desk and emptied out its contents before plopping himself down in the swivel chair.

Fridays were always hectic at the paper, but the latest developments in the Bradley murder case had made this a particularly grueling one. Roger had received another call from Lieutenant Mancuso of the N.Y.P.D. earlier that morning. The DNA samples taken from Marsha Bradley's body had been compared to those taken from Sara Hunt's body. Lieutenant Mancuso had called to report the results: a perfect match.

It was conclusive now: Marsha Bradley and Sara Hunt had been raped and murdered by the same man.

Roger told Sam that he was flying to New York to compare notes with Mancuso and to go over another lead that had just cropped up regarding Sara Hunt's case. Evidently, someone from her neighboring apartment building had called the police and informed them that he'd seen a man lurking on the fire escape outside Sara Hunt's apartment on the night she'd been murdered. The witness had been summoned into police headquarters and his claim was substantiated. The police were just in the process of working with the witness and a sketch artist to try and put together a composite photo of the suspect when Mancuso had called.

Roger had asked Sam to do a little investigation of his own while he was in New York. He wanted him to call Ann and ask her if she'd ever known Marsha Bradley to have been in contact with Sara Hunt recently; and if so, when, and in what respect. Roger had already interrogated Dave Bradley. He'd told Roger that as far as he

knew, Marsha hadn't seen nor heard from Sara Hunt since high school. Roger wondered if perhaps Ann might know something that Dave Bradley didn't.

After hanging up from talking to Roger, Sam had promptly called Ann at the travel agency where she worked in Columbus to fill her in on the latest details of the case. She had been stunned to learn of Sara Hunt's murder and Sam could sense that his ex-wife was as troubled over this new twist in the investigation as he was. It was all hitting just a little too close to home for comfort and they both knew it. Sam asked Ann if Marsha had ever mentioned Sara Hunt in any size, shape or form since high school. She replied that she hadn't, but went on to say that Marsha had hung out with Sara Hunt for a brief period near the end of their senior year at high school. Ann had always felt that Sara didn't particularly like her, and as a result, she and Marsha had ended up having a temporary falling out in their friendship during this period. The three of them simply couldn't get along with each other, Ann explained. At any rate, Marsha eventually quit chumming around with Sara and started hanging out with Ann again. In all that time since, Marsha had never so much as breathed Sara Hunt's name to Ann.

At first Sam was relieved when he heard this. It meant there was still the slim possibility that there wasn't any concrete connection between Sara Hunt's murder and Marsha Bradley's; except for the fact that they had both been murdered by the same person. Maybe it was just pure coincidence they had both once lived in Smithtown. Hell of a slim one, he had to admit, but nevertheless a possibility.

Then he thought: who am I trying to kid? Every indication so far suggested that the murderer had personally known both Marsha Bradley and Sara Hunt. And the only connection between the two women appeared to be that they had attended the same high school over twenty years ago. This implied that the murderer had most likely lived in Smithtown around the same time as well.

And that wasn't good at all . . .

He mustn't upset Ann needlessly, Sam had resolved. There still wasn't anything in the case to indicate that she was in any kind of danger, but he cautioned her to be on her guard nonetheless. Afterwards, just as he started to hang up the phone, Ann had suddenly stopped him. She started to say something, then cut herself off. She told him never mind, that it wasn't anything important. Ann had frequently done this sort of thing as long as he'd known her and it never failed to pique him. He had pressed her to tell him what she'd started to say but she wouldn't relent, so he'd ended up getting pissed off and hanging up on her.

Sam took out a cigarette and lit it up. It wasn't until after he had called Ann that everything really started sinking in. There was a murderer on the loose who had killed two Smithtown women in cold blood; and one of them just so happened to be his wife's best friend. And, his wife's best friend had at one time befriended the other victim. These were documented facts now—not idle speculation. And the implications were almost as scary as the facts themselves. Whom ever it was that had raped and murdered Marsha Bradley and Sara Hunt had known them both personally—he was certain of that now. And odds were, unless something came up to prove otherwise, the murderer knew Ann, too.

Sam leafed through the contents of his briefcase until he found the copies of the marked pages in Sara Hunt's 1970 Smithtown High School yearbook and studied them. He looked over the nine graduating seniors' headshots, wondering if one of them might be a cold-hearted murderer. Although Roger hadn't brought it up earlier, Sam was certain that he too now realized the sudden significance of Lieutenant Mancuso's half-hearted hunch. For not only had this evidence resulted in tying in two related murders, it may very well end up pointing to the murderer himself.

The five men still living in Smithtown had been checked out and interrogated by the police, and every one of them had clean records and solid alibis for the night Marsha Bradley had been murdered. This narrowed the potential suspects down to four, and the police were having a tough time discovering their exact whereabouts. All they knew for certain at this point was that none of the four men had local criminal records.

Sam still remembered two of the men, and neither seemed likely to be the type capable of rape and murder from his recollection of them in high school. Stanley Jenkins had been a nerdy, straight-A student; the type who wore thick horn-rimmed glasses, had zero personality, and made everyone sick because the teachers loved him; he always did his homework and excelled in academics. Buford Jackson, the other one, was a black guy who was as big as an ox, dumber than a coal bucket but one of the funniest, most likable guys in the entire class. Buford was probably either working somewhere as a laborer with a wife and ten kids, or doing stand-up comedy on the Holiday Inn circuit.

The remaining two men both looked like they were capable of almost anything sinister; even murdering their own mothers. They were what all the kids back then referred to as “hoods.” Both wore scowls instead of smiles in their class photos. Both had “automotive class” listed as their only academic credits. And both had probably packed switchblades whenever they decided to show up at school. Ernie Jones and Clyde Kastings: two guys you definitely didn’t want to bump into after school had let out for the day . . .

And both prime suspects, in Sam’s book.

As he scrutinized their faces, he wondered what possible motive one of these men could have to rape and strangle Sara Hunt in New York City, then two weeks later travel the five hundred miles to Smithtown to do the same to Marsha Bradley. It seemed incomprehensible the more he thought about it. Yet, it had happened. And there had to be reason.

What was the link between Sara Hunt and Marsha Bradley?

He set the yearbook copies aside then began reading over the articles written in the New York papers regarding Sara Hunt’s murder. Just as Lieutenant Mancuso had mentioned, the press coverage had been uncharacteristically lacking—in fact, damn near pathetic. The only articles covering the murder had been written the following day; there had been no follow-up. Details were scarce in all three of the articles, particularly the one in the *New York Times*, which had been little more than a cursory obituary:

ASPIRING ACTRESS FOUND MURDERED

New York City detectives reported that the body of Sara Marie Hunt, 39, was discovered in her Soho apartment by her roommate at approximately 2:30 A.M. Tuesday morning. Miss Hunt was reportedly beaten, sexually assaulted, and strangled to death by an unknown assailant who remains at large. Police say the incident is under investigation.

Miss Hunt, formerly of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, had lived in New York for the past ten years and appeared in a few off-Broadway productions as well as some local television commercials. She was employed part-time as a waitress at a Greenwich Village restaurant at the time of her death. She is survived by her parents, William and Clare Hunt, of Harrisburg.

Sam skimmed over the articles in the *Post* and the *Daily News* next. With the exception of the bolder headlines and wordy journalism, neither of the tabloids offered much more information concerning the murder, other than the fact that the police were refusing to release any specific details pertaining to the case at this time.

Out of curiosity, Sam went through and counted up how many homicides had been reported on that particular day and came up with seven, including the execution-style slaying of a notorious Mafia crime boss. Of all the murders, that particular one had by far received the most press coverage. No wonder there had been so little interest in Sara Hunt's murder, he thought with a wry grin. Not only had she just been one of several other homicide victims in the city that day, she had been upstaged by a more "newsworthy personage" as well.

He shoved the newspapers off to the side and opened the manila folder containing a copy of the police report. Lying on top was the eight-by-ten publicity headshot of Sara Hunt that Mancuso had sent. Sam was surprised at how little she had aged since high school as he stared at the black and white image, wondering skeptically how recently the photo had been taken. Her hair was jet black, in a bob, and her face showed very few lines and wrinkles. Her eyes were large and dark; her smile revealed a set of near-perfect pearly whites. She looked good. In fact she looked beautiful and not a day over twenty-five.

He turned the promo shot over and read the résumé pasted to its back. Sara had been a theater major at Pitt and there was a list of plays she'd been in while at college. Below was a list of the theatrical productions she had appeared in since moving to New York as well as a handful of television commercials she'd done.

Sam turned to the police report and noted the similarities between Sara's murder and Marsha Bradley's. Both women had been raped and strangled. Both were believed to have been strangled to death by a thin cord-like object from behind. And both had been found totally nude with lipstick marks on their breasts, or on only one breast in Sara's case.

Sam turned to the Xerox copies of the photographs taken at the crime scene and examined them closely. Then something dawned on him. Excitedly, he pulled out the police file copies of Marsha Bradley's case which he had kept for himself, then set one of the photographs of Marsha beside Sara's.

It was uncanny. Although the quality of the copies was poor and the camera angles differed somewhat, it was more than obvious that the relative positions of both bodies were virtually identical. Both were lying flat on their backs on the floor, their arms outstretched, their legs spread-eagle, and their eyes opened and frozen in terror . . .

The body positions were mirror images of each other!

Sam realized that even if the hair and semen samples hadn't been compared and matched, any idiot could plainly see that both women were murdered by the same person. The pictures were proof positive.

He stubbed out his cigarette and lit up another one. Staring pensively at both photographs, he wondered why the murderer had taken the time and effort to meticulously arrange his victims' bodies in identical positions. They almost looked as though they were . . .

Posed.

A light came on in his head.

The murderer had arranged the bodies in this way so he could take pictures of them!

What a sick fuck, he thought.

And what a meticulous son of a bitch!

But why had he done it? As a visual reminder of his escapades? *Every picture tells a story?*

Or was there more to it than that?

Sam retrieved the copies of the yearbook and stared at the pictures again. Simple logic now told him that none of these men seemed likely suspects, taking everything into account. The murderer was clever and fastidious, carefully thinking through his game plan in advance. He was relentlessly thorough and thus far, hadn't knowingly been seen by a single solitary soul who could positively identify him. Neither of Sam's "prime suspects," Ernie Jones and Clyde Kastings, was bright enough to carry out these two murders without leaving some kind of trail behind . . .

Sam heaved a heavy sigh of hopelessness. All of a sudden, the whole yearbook angle seemed like a dead-end street; for more reasons than just one. It had dawned on him before that even if the murderer were pictured here, why would he allow such an obvious slip-up to occur? It didn't fit into his modus operandi at all.

Sam gathered up all the papers, piled them into a haphazard stack and shoved them off to the side. Maybe he was giving this bastard more credit than he deserved. Maybe he really was pictured in the yearbook and had actually fucked up. Maybe Sara Hunt had managed to mark the pages while the prick wasn't looking and now he was gonna get nailed. Maybe, maybe, maybe . . .

He took a final drag off his cigarette, coughed, and stubbed it out with a vengeance. Running his hands through his long hair, he listened to the rain pelting down outside and began wondering why he was so caught up in all of this. Granted, he was personally involved and wanted nothing more than to see this asshole caught and fried, but how much was he really contributing? He wasn't a cop, had no capacity as a cop, so why didn't he simply just let the police do their jobs instead of sitting here pretending that he was Colombo? Was it because he had nothing else to do in life? Because it helped take his mind off Ann and Amy and how miserable his life had become since he'd lost them?

The answer to all of the above was yes, but there was more to it than that. He didn't like the uneasy feeling that Ann might somehow be in danger—that she could possibly be involved in this in some way. He had first gotten that feeling when Marsha had been found murdered, but he simply refused to allow himself to get paranoid at the time. But now that Sara Hunt's murder had cropped up, the feeling had resurfaced. And now that it was confirmed that both women had been killed by the same man, the feeling had suddenly become substantiated. And the fact that several hundred miles didn't seem to stop this lunatic from killing wasn't helping much either. Columbus was only ninety miles away . . .

Sam started to pick up the phone to call Ann but stopped himself. He wanted to hear her voice, to be assured that everything was okay. Then he recalled their conversation earlier; how distant she had sounded at first, as if she were annoyed at him for even calling her in the first place. Her mood had changed somewhat after he had told her about Sara Hunt, but he could still sense more than a trace of detachment in her voice throughout the rest of the conversation. It was as if she would really prefer that he back off and let her live her own life; that his services were no longer needed . . .

Fuck it, he thought to himself. She's on her own now, buddy. You've lost her forever. And your kid. And as much as you want to pretend that you still have a role in their lives, it just ain't so. You fucked everything up a while back and now you're history.

Suddenly the idea of getting sloshed came to mind and it appealed to him in a big way. There really wasn't anything else to do; his drinking buddy was in New York City doing his thing, his ex-wife and child were in

Columbus doing their thing, and here he was in the sticks of southern Ohio with the rain pouring down on a dreary Friday night and a twelve pack of Rock in the fridge.

So it seemed only fitting that he tie one on . . .

CHAPTER 9

Ann stared at herself in the mirror, straightened up her hair for what seemed like the hundredth time and glanced over nervously at the clock on her nightstand. It was 7:55. In a last minute panic she brushed her shoulder-length auburn locks for the last time then carefully examined her makeup before stepping back and eying the rest of herself in the full-length mirror. She was wearing a plain gray skirt with a navy blue silk blouse. She realized that the outfit was a bit on the conservative side, but that had been her intention. She didn't want to look flashy on her first date with Jerry Rankin. She was nervous enough as it was, and the last thing she needed was to feel like she was being gawked at all evening.

Just as she had expected, Amy hadn't bothered to ask her who she was going out to dinner with when she'd come home after school to get ready for the football game. Oddly, Ann had been a little disappointed; she would like to think that her daughter might at least be a little curious about her life once in a while. But this was typical Amy behavior nowadays; so wrapped up in herself and her own plans that her mother may just as well not exist.

The doorbell suddenly rang and Ann's heart skipped a beat. She took one last look at herself and realized in horror that she looked like a middle-aged schoolteacher. Shrugging her shoulders in exasperation, she turned and headed down the stairs. She paused at the living room window and peaked through the curtains long enough to spot Jerry Rankin's BMW parked behind her car in the driveway. She went over to the door and opened it.

"Good evening, Ann," Jerry greeted. He was dressed casually, she noted in relief, wearing a tweed sport jacket, sweater, and a pair of khaki Dockers.

"Hi, Jerry," she said nervously. "Come in."

"Thank you," he smiled. He stepped inside and glanced quickly around the room before looking her over approvingly. "You look wonderful, Ann."

Ann blushed. "Thanks. I wasn't quite sure how to dress; you never mentioned where you were taking me."

"I'm sorry," he said. "But I wasn't sure what kind of food you liked, so I decided to wait and see if maybe there was somewhere in particular you'd like to go."

"I like all kinds of food. And as far as restaurants go, I must confess that I haven't been to all that many since moving here."

"In that case, how does Italian sound to you? I know of a marvelous Italian restaurant in Dublin," he offered.

“I adore Italian food.”

“Then it’s settled,” he smiled. “Your house is charming, by the way.”

Ann strode over to the hall closet to get her coat. “Thanks. I’m still not quite done furnishing it yet.”

“I love these older homes. I live in a relatively new house and it doesn’t have half the character of this one. My neighborhood also leaves a bit to be desired. Hardly any trees, no sidewalks, and everything is so bloody new—*too* new.”

Ann returned, carrying her coat. “I’m only renting, unfortunately. I have an option to buy, though.”

“Here, let me help you on with that,” Jerry offered.

He took her coat and Ann slipped into it. “Is that your daughter?” he asked, glancing over at Amy’s school picture on the mantle.

“That’s my little girl,” Ann replied.

He went over for a closer look. “She’s lovely. Why, she looks just like her mother!”

Ann blushed again. “Maybe after you’ve tacked on a few decades or so.”

“You certainly don’t look old enough to be mother to a teenager, Ann. It’s quite remarkable.”

“Your flattery is a little overwhelming, Jerry,” Ann replied cynically.

He turned and stared into her eyes, his handsome face wearing an expression of sincerity. “I’m being quite honest, Ann; I’m not trying to embarrass you. I tend to be very straight-forward at times and say what I feel when I feel it. I hope that doesn’t put you off.”

His tone of voice almost made it sound like an apology; he apparently sensed that she regarded his compliments as so much bullshit. Ann said, “I appreciate honesty and frankness, Jerry. It’s been a long time since I’ve been complimented so much. I guess I’m just not used to it.”

“You’d better start getting used to it, then. Otherwise, I’ll find myself biting my tongue an awfully lot,” he declared with a grin.

Ann chuckled. “I’ll try to, Jerry.”

“I’d like to meet her,” he said, his eyes returning to Amy’s picture.

Ann replied, “Unfortunately Amy’s not here right now; she’s at the school football game. Maybe some other time.”

“I’d like that . . . Well, shall we go?”

“I’m ready,” Ann replied, heading toward the door. Jerry followed her outside and stood by while she locked up. When they reached his car, he opened the door and waited until Ann was inside before walking around to the driver’s side and getting in.

“Nice car,” Ann commented.

“Thanks. I prefer sportier cars actually, but this one accommodates my clients quite nicely.”

“What kind of real estate do you handle?” Ann asked as Jerry started the car and backed out of the driveway.

“Mostly residential, a little commercial. I lean more toward the speculative market. Condominiums in particular.”

“I see.”

It started to drizzle and Jerry turned on the wipers. They drove several blocks in an awkward silence. Ann noticed that Jerry was tapping the steering wheel with his fingers and suddenly realized that he was probably

more nervous than she was. This made her feel more comfortable for some reason. She assessed how things were going so far and had to admit that she felt fairly at ease in Jerry Rankin's company. He looked even more handsome than she remembered him looking the day she'd met him at the supermarket and she was impressed with his impeccable manners. Sam had only opened a car door for her a handful of times in all the years they'd been married. And two of those rare occasions had been on their wedding day . . .

"Would you mind a little music?" Jerry suddenly asked.

"No, not at all."

He turned on the stereo and inserted a CD. Ann immediately recognized the song, *Gimme Some Lovin'* by The Spencer Davis Group.

It's an oldies collection," Jerry explained. "They don't make songs like this anymore."

Ann smiled at him. "You can say that again. Amy plays some of the most nerve-wracking stuff imaginable! Rap music. Heavy metal. And she always plays it so loud!"

Jerry gasped. "That must be dreadful! How do you deal with it?"

"I put as much distance as possible between her bedroom and myself."

He laughed. "How's she doing in school?"

"Passing by the skin of her teeth. Amy's a bright kid, but her social life takes precedence over her studies. She used to get all A's and B's through middle school, but she simply doesn't apply herself anymore. I don't think she realizes that it's all going to catch up with her in the end if she doesn't start shaping up."

Jerry said, "She'll come around, Ann. Most of the kids her age that I've worked with at church have the same problem. It's not easy becoming an adult nowadays; the old, innocent days of *Leave It To Beaver* and *Ozzie and Harriet* are extinct. I think the family structure in today's society is partially to blame for a lot of this generation's problems."

"Divorce doesn't help much, either," Ann muttered half aloud.

"What was that?"

Ann sighed. "I said that divorce doesn't help matters any, either."

Jerry hesitated a moment, then said, "Divorce is an unfortunate fact of life. But it certainly doesn't have to destroy a child's life. As long as there's plenty of love and understanding at home, they can adjust eventually."

"How about the theory that two-parent families are more stable for children?"

"I won't argue with that. But remember, a divorce needn't be a death sentence, Ann. Many parents remarry and experience successful relationships between stepparent and child."

This was something Ann had given little thought to. "Are you sure you don't have any children, Jerry?" Ann said, grinning. "I mean, you seem so well-versed on the topic."

He chuckled, then his expression turned somber. "I wish I did, Ann. I really do. Marie and I tried for years to have a child but never had any luck. We were seriously considering adoption just before she passed away."

"I'm so sorry, Jerry," Ann said quietly.

"It's all right. At least I have my kids at the church, and believe me; they're quite a handful!"

Ann smiled and fell silent. For the first time, she realized just how lonely Jerry Rankin must be and felt sorry for him. Beneath the surface of that rugged physique and handsome, confident face beat a lonely heart. Jerry Rankin was a vulnerable soul who obviously loved kids and sorely missed his lately departed wife.

To look at him, who would ever have guessed?

The restaurant was crowded when they arrived. Once they were shown to their table, they each ordered a glass of wine and began looking over the menu. After they'd given the waiter their orders, Ann stared across the table at Jerry and said, "This is wonderful, Jerry. I'm glad you suggested it."

"The food is just as impressive as the atmosphere. If you like Italian food, this is the place to be." he replied.

"There's something I've been dying to ask you. Are you English, by any chance?"

"Not hardly!" he laughed. "I spent several years in Europe before I got married; I met Marie in England, as a matter of fact. After we were married, I brought her back to the States and we settled down in Cleveland, which is my hometown. Between the time spent in Europe and being around Marie all those years, I seem to have picked up a bit of an accent in the process."

"I'll bet I'm not the first to ask you then, am I?" Ann said.

"No, actually, you're not," he replied. "Have you ever been to Europe, Ann?"

"No. I've never even been out of the continental United States. I guess you could say I've led a sheltered existence."

"You really should go some time. It's marvelous—especially France."

"So I've heard."

The waiter came over and they ordered another glass of wine. Ann felt herself becoming pleasantly buzzed by the time their food arrived. Jerry had loosened up considerably, too. His somewhat formal way of speaking became markedly more relaxed as the evening progressed and his dry sense of humor began to surface. By the time they'd eaten and had one more drink, the two were carrying on as though they were lifelong friends. Ann wasn't sure if it was the alcohol or Jerry's company that had put her in such high spirits; maybe a combination of both. All she knew was that she was thoroughly enjoying herself for the first time in what seemed like ages.

It was raining steadily when they left the restaurant so they made a mad dash for the car. Jerry cranked up the volume on the car stereo and they sang to the oldies on the way back to Ann's house. When they pulled into the driveway, Ann hesitated only a moment before inviting Jerry Rankin in for a nightcap, halfheartedly stressing the fact that it was to be for only one drink and afterwards they would be calling it a night. Jerry happily accepted.

Inside, Jerry helped Ann off with her coat and followed her to the family room.

"My favorite room in the house," Ann declared as she turned on the lights.

"It's wonderful," Jerry commented, surveying the room.

Ann went over to the bar and set a pair of wine glasses on the counter. "There's still a few things I'd like to do in here before it's all finished," she remarked. "One is to replace that old sofa and chair. I've had them both for a couple of eons."

Jerry joined her at the bar. "Need any help with that?" he asked just as Ann pulled the cork from the wine bottle. Ann shook her head, poured them both a glass and handed one to Jerry.

"Thanks," he said as he followed Ann over to the sofa and sat down beside her. He eyed the romance novel lying on the coffee table curiously and picked it up. "Are you reading this?"

Ann blushed and giggled. "Yes, I must confess. I'm a real sucker for a good love story."

"I didn't mean to embarrass you," Jerry said. "I've heard that you can tell a lot about a person by what he reads. I, for instance, like a good crime story; especially the ones based on actual events. I guess you could say I'm a sucker for intrigue and suspense."

Ann laughed. "For a moment there I thought you were going to tell me that you were a criminal!"

He chuckled. "I feel like a criminal sometimes when I land a big, juicy real estate deal!"

"I take it you're doing pretty well."

"I certainly can't complain. I'm trying not to let the money overwhelm me, however. I like to live comfortably but not too extravagantly. I've never been a flashy person."

"I'm really glad to hear that," Ann said.

"I have one weakness though: I love the great outdoors. And that's my excuse for the country retreat I just purchased last spring in Hocking County. It's an A-frame nestled in the foothills complete with a pond and forty acres of nothing but trees and wildlife."

"Sounds nice," Ann said.

"It's beautiful. Maybe you'd like to see it sometime."

Ann spoke before thinking. "I'd like that."

"Great! Perhaps we could swing down that way some weekend before winter sets in," Jerry suggested enthusiastically.

Ann hesitated. "Well, let's just wait and see how things go in the meantime, Jerry."

For the second time that night, Ann caught the faint glimpse of hurt in his eyes, which he promptly attempted to cover up. He said, "I'm sorry, Ann. I didn't mean to be so pushy. Please forgive me."

"It's okay, Jerry. I just don't want to jump into anything right now."

"And I understand completely," he said with a shrug. "I guess I was jumping the gun a bit."

Ann didn't like seeing him like this. She wished now that she had been a little more tactful. "I hope I haven't scared you off by that last comment of mine. What I really meant to say was that I don't want to rush things. I really have enjoyed this evening, Jerry, and I hope we can get together again . . . soon."

Jerry Rankin leaned toward her. "I'm really happy to hear you say that, Ann. I feel a lot better suddenly. My problem is that I get a little carried away sometimes and end up sounding incredibly presumptuous. Anyway, I've enjoyed myself as well. You're a lovely lady and lots of fun. So let's make it a point to go out again soon and just take one step at a time, okay?" he offered, tipping his wine glass toward her.

"All right, we'll just do that!" Ann declared, tipping his glass. They both took a sip and Jerry said, "So how do you usually spend your weekends?"

Ann replied with a frown, "Housework, mostly. And running errands."

"Does Amy help you out any?"

She laughed. "You've got to be joking! I can't even get her to keep her room looking halfway decent, much less get any help out of her with the rest of the house. She's a hopeless case in that category, I'm afraid."

"And I suppose you can't somehow make her give you hand? Like threatening to cut her allowance off or grounding her?"

"I've tried everything, believe me. She's incorrigible. I don't like fighting and we get into a quarrel every time I try to discipline her, so I've all but thrown in the towel. I just don't seem to have any control over the child anymore."

“Did she mind her father?”

“Oh yes, she did. But she was a year younger when Sam and I were still together. I’m not so sure she’d even mind him now, if he were still in the picture.”

“It’s amazing how much difference a year can make, isn’t it?”

“You can say that again,” Ann replied.

Just then the telephone rang. Ann stood up and went over to the wall phone behind the bar.

“Hello?”

There was nothing but silence on the other end.

“Hello?” Ann repeated.

Suddenly she heard heavy breathing. At first Ann thought that who ever was on the other end might be hurt or in trouble; perhaps even Amy. “Who is this?” she asked uncomfortably.

Then a hoarse voice wheezed, “I’m going to fuck you!”

“You what . . .?” Ann blurted, then slammed down the receiver.

“What was that all about?” Jerry asked.

Ann’s back was still facing him as she struggled to compose herself. “Just a crank call,” she finally answered.

She turned and saw the concerned look on Jerry’s face.

“You’re white as a sheet, Ann!” he exclaimed. He stood up and ran over to her.

“Who was that on the phone?” he demanded.

Ann wasn’t sure why she felt so helplessly terrified right at that moment. Perhaps it was due to the hideous manner in which the caller had breathed those awful words and the fact that it was still giving her goose bumps. Or maybe it was because she now realized for the first time just how mortified she was of living alone in this house with her teenage daughter in a strange town and not having Sam around to protect them . . .

All she was really sure of was that there was a man there now and that she was grateful beyond words.

“God, Jerry,” she moaned, burying her head in his chest. Jerry put his arms around her as she felt herself trembling uncontrollably in his embrace. Ann felt the urge to cry in her frustration but willed herself not to. Instead, she closed her eyes and allowed herself to be held securely in Jerry’s arms until she finally calmed down enough to face him.

“Thanks, Jerry.” she said weakly.

His eyes were filled with concern and passion as he said, “What happened, Ann?”

Ann looked away a moment, and then replied, “It was an obscene phone caller. He said that he was going to, you know, do it to me. God, it was awful!” she cried. “I’m so stupid! I should have hung up the moment I heard him breathing . . . just as I told Amy to do.”

“He’s called before?”

Ann nodded slowly. “Last weekend. In the middle of the night.”

Jerry led Ann over to the sofa and motioned for her to sit down. “He talked to your daughter that way?” he asked incredulously.

“Yes,” Ann replied, draining her wine glass dry. “He said the same thing to Amy. I’ll be honest, Jerry, I’m scared to death. Not only have we been getting obscene phone calls but I thought I heard a prowler in the back yard last Saturday night. And to top it all off, I’ve just heard from my ex-husband that the man who murdered

my best friend a couple of weeks ago also murdered another woman that I went to high school with! In New York City, no less.”

Jerry Rankin was clearly flabbergasted by all of this. “Hold on a minute, here. What’s this about your friend being murdered? Is this the same woman you were referring to when we spoke on the phone?”

Ann nodded. “Yes, Marsha Bradley. She was raped and strangled in her home back in Smithtown. She had a little six-year-old . . .”

Ann burst into tears.

Jerry put an arm around Ann and tried to console her. Moments later, she managed to get a hold of herself.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I guess I just haven’t gotten over it yet.”

“I understand, Ann. I know how difficult it is to lose a loved one,” he said softly.

“I’m sorry I told you all of this, Jerry. I should’ve kept it to myself. Now all I’ve done is ruin what up until now has been a beautiful evening . . .”

He bent down and kissed her lightly on the cheek. “Listen, Ann. I’m glad you told me about this; you did the right thing by getting it off your chest. As for ruining our evening, we don’t have to let that happen if we don’t want to. We’re still together, aren’t we?”

“Thanks for being so understanding, Jerry. Next time, we won’t let anything spoil our date . . . I promise.”

“There now, that’s the spirit!” he said. His expression suddenly turned grave. “Ann, I am very concerned about all of this. Have you spoken to the police about the prowler and the phone calls?”

“Yes,” Ann nodded. “They suggested that I get an unpublished phone number if the calls persist and told me that they’d keep an eye on the house. Until tonight, the only other time he’d called was last Saturday.”

“Well, you should go ahead and get a new phone number as soon as possible, then. Nip this off at the bud before it gets out of hand.”

“I suppose you’re right. I’ll call the phone company on Monday.”

“Now I want to say something else and it’s very important, Ann. If you ever, and I mean ever, need me for anything at all you call me, okay? I’ll be there for you, anytime, any day. Will you promise me you’ll do that?”

His voice was emphatic, almost forceful.

“I don’t want to bother you with my problems, Jerry,” Ann said.

“Please, Ann. Don’t shut me out. I want to help you in anyway I can. As a friend, if nothing else. Let me help you.” he persisted.

Ann smiled, grateful and relieved at Jerry’s offer. “Okay, Jerry. That’s very kind of you.”

“Do I have your word on it?”

Ann nodded. “Yes, you have my word.”

“Excellent. Now what’s this about your friend? Do you feel like you can talk about it? Talking helps, you know.”

Ann sighed and took a deep breath. “Marsha was my best friend. We practically grew up together. She was the kindest, most out-going person you could ever know. Anyway, she was found murdered in her home one night by her husband, Dave. She’d been raped and strangled to death. Her little boy, Tommy, was found upstairs locked in a closet, so terrified that he still hasn’t been able to speak to anyone since. The police are totally stumped and don’t have a clue as to who did it.”

Ann swallowed hard before she continued. “This afternoon, Sam called me. He told me that the police in New York City had just confirmed that a woman who was found murdered there a few weeks ago was murdered by the same person who had killed Marsha. The woman, Sara Hunt, used to live in Smithtown and had been a casual acquaintance to both Marsha and I back in high school.”

Jerry’s eyes widened. “Good Lord, Ann! No wonder you’re so concerned! Do you think there might be a connection between these murders; a common motive?”

“That’s what has been so baffling, and frightening. There haven’t been any motives established in either of the murders according to Sam. And I guess the police in New York are just as stumped as the local police in Smithtown are.”

“And no one ever saw the murderer in either instance?”

“Apparently little Tommy Bradley is the only one who might have seen who killed his mother; and he hasn’t been able to speak a word. As for Sara Hunt, Sam indicated that there haven’t been any leads in her case either.”

“That’s incredible. This character must be as clever as he is deranged. Do you think you’re in danger?”

Ann shook her head in frustration. “I don’t know, Jerry. Sam is worried about me of course, but that doesn’t surprise me. He’s always had an overactive imagination. That’s probably from his being a journalist. I’m more realistic than he is, and I honestly can’t think of any way I could possibly be involved in any of this. Marsha just happened to be my best friend. And I barely knew Sara Hunt. My relationship ends there. It is frightening, though. And it really makes one think just how vulnerable we all are nowadays. Until this bastard is caught, no one is really safe.”

Jerry fell silent a moment as he took Ann’s hand in his. Then he said, “I’m here for you, Ann. I just want you to remember that. I don’t feel too good about all of this to be quite honest, and I don’t like the fact that you and Amy are living here all by yourselves. So please don’t hesitate for one moment to call me if anything suspicious occurs. I know I’m being a bit redundant, but I want to be able to leave here tonight assured that you’ll call me if you need me.”

Ann smiled warmly. “I will, Jerry. I promise.” She leaned over, kissed him on the cheek and said, “I’m afraid we’re going to have to call it a night, though. I think I drank a little too much wine; I’m suddenly feeling very sleepy.”

Jerry stood up. “I could use a little shut-eye myself. I worked out at the gym this afternoon and it’s starting to catch up with me.”

He followed Ann to the living room and turned to face her at the front door, his eyes showing regret for having to leave her. He put his arms around her waist and said, “Take care, Ann. Do you mind if I call you tomorrow?”

“No, not at all,” she replied. “Thanks, Jerry . . . for everything. I had a wonderful time.”

“So did I.”

He balked for a moment, obviously deciding whether or not to kiss her. Ann stood for what seemed a very long time before he finally brought his lips to hers. The kiss was brief and tentative, much like her very first kiss when she was in junior high school.

“Good night, Ann. I’ll call you tomorrow. And remember . . .”

“I know, Jerry. You have my promise.”

Jerry Rankin turned and made his way to the BMW.

Ann waited until he had backed out of the driveway before closing the door. She heard him toot his horn as he pulled away and it dawned on Ann that she regretted his leaving a lot more than she cared to admit to herself.

CHAPTER 10

Sam was two-thirds of the way to La-La Land when he awoke. He had no idea how long he'd been hearing the incessant pounding on the front door before it finally brought him to his senses, but he had a feeling it had been a very long time. It was one of those deals when you think you've been dreaming something was happening before you suddenly realized that it actually was happening.

Sam opened his eyes and saw the snowy test pattern on the television screen. The static was loud, but not loud enough to drown out the beating on the door. He sat up on the couch and gazed squint-eyed at the half dozen or so empty beer bottles on the coffee table in the foreground and let out a gasp of disgust when he saw the huge mound of cigarette butts in the ashtray. His head felt like lead as he forced himself up onto his feet, wondering who in the fuck would be banging on his door in the middle of the night.

He stumbled out of the room and headed toward the front door like a drunk being forced to run a marathon at gunpoint. The racket grew incessantly louder as he neared the door, as did the throbbing in his head. He flicked on the front porch light and pulled open the door.

When he saw who it was, Sam thought for sure he was still dreaming.

"Jesus, Sam! I didn't think you'd ever get here!" she exclaimed.

There in front of him stood Shelley Hatcher: soaked to the bone and her normally thick and lustrous blonde hair clinging limp and lifeless to her blanched but beautiful face.

"Shelley! What the hell . . .?"

"Let me in, Sam! I'm freezing!" she whined impatiently.

"Sorry," Sam said, opening the storm door.

She stepped in and stood on the mat, wringing wet. Sam peered out through the pouring rain and saw nothing but his Jeep parked in the driveway.

"How'd you get here?" he asked, stupefied and in shock at this unexpected visit from his former one-night-stand.

Shelley Hatcher stared at him with a pained look. "Well, I drove myself most of the way. Until my car got stuck in the mud, that is. Your driveway is like a river bottom, Sam! Why don't you get it paved?"

If she didn't look so pathetic now, Sam would have burst out laughing and said something like, Gee, I would have gotten it paved had I known you were going to show up unexpectedly like this in the middle of a fucking monsoon, Shelley.

Instead, he replied, "Sorry about that. How far is your car?"

"About a hundred yards from the highway—I sure hope my portfolio isn't ruined. I knew I should've left it in the damn car!" she exclaimed as Sam noticed the expensive-looking leather portfolio case that she was holding.

Sam said, "I have to admit that I'm a little speechless right now, Shelley. What are you doing here, anyway? How did you find out where I live?"

Sam could tell that he'd put her off with this line of questioning and he suddenly felt bad.

Shelley looked away for a moment then replied, "I found out from Bill Marshall . . . He was at the Hi-Light. I just came to say hi and to show you my portfolio . . . but it's obvious that you aren't interested, so I guess I'll just go now . . ."

She reached for the doorknob.

"Hold it, Shelley!" Sam said, grasping her by the arm. She peered at him questioningly. "I'm sorry I seem so rude. It's just that I'm still in shock that you're here. I was also passed out on the sofa and haven't quite joined the living yet. Here, let me help you off with your jacket."

Shelley nodded and lightened up a bit as Sam helped her out of her rain-sopped denim jacket. He draped it over his arm, noticing that the rain had soaked all the way through to the cashmere sweater she was wearing.

"Christ, Shelley, you're drenched to the bone! How long have you been out in this shit, anyway?"

"About half an hour. It took me at least twenty minutes just to trudge through the mud to get to your house. I've been beating on the door the rest of the time."

"Well, you need to get out of those clothes before you catch pneumonia. Why don't you take a hot shower and I'll throw your things in the drier in the meantime," Sam suggested.

Shelley smiled graciously. "Thanks, Sam. I'm sorry I'm such a pain."

"You're not a pain, Shelley. C'mon, I'll show you where the bathroom is."

She followed Sam down the hall to the bathroom. He switched on the light as Shelley brushed past him and immediately began to peel off her soaked clothes. Sam stood in the doorway and watched in awe as she wrestled herself out of her jeans, unable to take his eyes away. She looked every bit as good if not better than she had on that fateful night: tall and lean with slender legs, slim hips, and firm, nicely-rounded breasts. She gathered up her wet clothes and grinned nonchalantly as she handed them to Sam.

"Here. I won't be long," she said.

"Take your time," Sam replied, attempting to appear unaffected by her lack of modesty. "Would you like something hot to drink—some coffee?"

"You have something a little stronger?" Shelley asked as she leaned over the tub and valved in the water.

"Beer and whiskey," he answered.

Shelley glanced at him coyly. "Whiskey would be nice."

"You've got it," Sam said, feeling an electric pang in his groin as he watched Shelley Hatcher step into the tub and draw the shower curtain.

Sam closed the bathroom door, carried Shelley's clothes down to the basement and threw them into the drier. Returning to the kitchen, he realized that he was going downhill fast as he cursed the relentless throbbing in his head. He was more hung over than drunk now, having slept just long enough to plunge himself into the worst of both worlds.

He needed a good strong belt to set him back on course.

He went over to the cupboard, found the bottle of Jack and poured himself a couple of ounces. He drained the glass in a single gulp, grimaced, and refilled the glass before pouring another drink for Shelley. He made his way to the den and plopped down on the sofa.

Sam lit up a cigarette and inhaled deeply as he attempted to collect his thoughts. The sudden arrival of Shelley Hatcher wasn't only a shocker but an out-and-out mind-blower. Why, he wondered, had she really come here? He seriously doubted that she'd come just to say howdy and show him her photography portfolio; that hardly seemed worth all the bother she'd gone through. Nope, he decided, there had to be more to it than that.

But what?

All he knew for certain was that he felt uncomfortable about Shelley showing up. Seeing her reminded him that had he never fooled around with her in the first place, he'd still be a happily married man now. It wasn't Shelley's fault of course, and never once had he blamed her for his own folly. After all, it wasn't really her fault that she was young, beautiful, and had flirted with him one too many times on the job. He could still remember the subtle way she used to less than innocently brush up against him during an assignment; or the way she'd purposely lean over every now and then in such a way that he couldn't help but see those lovely tits beneath those perennially loose-fitting tops that she always wore.

Jesus, he thought. Did she even own a fucking bra?

But the bottom line was that Shelley Hatcher was bad news. There simply wasn't any other way to put it. She brought him bad luck. After all, how many guys in the history of mankind had gone out on their wives just one piddling time and ended up getting caught? Then, ended up being divorced over it? Not too many, he supposed. Only the sorriest of souls, like his own luckless self.

Sam heaved a sigh and drained his glass dry. Stubbing out his cigarette, he went to the kitchen to replenish his drink. He felt the welcome glow of inebriation returning as he went back to the sofa and sat down, staring blankly at the test pattern on the television set.

In spite of all the hell that Shelley Hatcher had created for him in his life, he now realized that deep down, he was actually glad she was here. Seeing her strip down to nothing but her birthday suit had been the biggest thrill he'd had in over six months. The inviting prospect of another round with her in the sack suddenly zipped into his head. What would he do if that opportunity arose? he wondered. More importantly, how would he feel afterwards?

Sam grinned to himself as he considered the absurdity to both of these questions. He'd jump on Shelley Hatcher's bones at the drop of a hat and wouldn't hesitate for a second. As for how he'd feel afterwards, what in the fuck difference would it make how he felt? He was after all, now a free man living in a free world, wasn't he?

This is probably just what the doctor would order, he decided. And he doubtlessly would feel like a million bucks afterwards. After all, he'd had nothing but an empty, lonely existence ever since Ann dumped him.

And lately, since Marsha Bradley's murder, he'd been more than a little stressed-out and on edge. It certainly wouldn't hurt to get his mind off that for a while . . .

He heard the water shut off in the bathroom. Deciding to check on Shelley's clothes in the drier, Sam stood up and went down to the basement. He felt the clothes—they were still soaking wet—then reset the drier and went back upstairs. After topping off his drink he returned to the den, found an old Cars CD and put it on, cranked up the volume. *Just What I Needed* blared out of the speakers as he plopped back down on the sofa.

Shelley Hatcher suddenly entered the room. She was wearing a towel that was wrapped around her just enough to cover less than two-thirds of her breasts and about one-tenth of her thighs. Her hair was still wet, combed out, and she was carrying the drink he'd left for her on the kitchen counter.

Shelley took a long sip of Jack Daniels as she sauntered over to the sofa.

"I borrowed your comb; I hope you don't mind."

"No problem," Sam said. "I'm afraid your clothes aren't dry yet. I can find something of mine for you to put on if you'd like."

She shook her head. "That's all right, I can wait."

She sat down beside him, close enough that he could smell her. Her scent was as enticing as her half-naked body was. Shelley took another sip, set her glass down, and gazed at him intently.

"Have you been able to forgive me yet for what happened?" she asked.

Sam held her eyes. "There's nothing to forgive, Shelley. It wasn't your fault. I told you that a long time ago."

"I know, but I still feel guilty about it. I mean, I know how much you love your wife. And it's my fault that—"

"It's all water under the bridge," Sam interrupted. "Let's not even talk about it, Shelley, okay?"

She smiled. "Okay, Sam. I guess I was just trying to see where I stand now. I mean, I thought you might hate me or something."

Sam couldn't help but laugh. "Hate you? You've got to be kidding!"

Shelley smiled again, apparently satisfied that all was okay between them. She retrieved her drink and took a sip. "I really would like for you to take a look at my portfolio. I've been freelancing for the Ashland Times the last couple of months. I don't get a whole hell of a lot of assignments but at least I've had plenty of time to work on my book. You want to see it?"

"Sure, lay it on me," Sam said. "Have you been in Ashland all this time?"

"Yeah. After I got laid-off at the *Observer*, I was totally directionless. So I moved back home sort of with my tail between my legs, you might say. Moved back in with my parents, got a part-time job at a jewelry store until I could get back on my feet. It's been a drag, really. But at least I finally have my own apartment now," she added with a shrug.

"That's good. And I'm glad you're sticking with it, Shelly. You have a lot of potential; I'd hate to see you waste it," Sam declared sincerely.

Shelly beamed. "You really think so?"

"Of course I do. I've been telling you that all along."

"It doesn't hurt to be reminded once in a while, though. Let me show you my new stuff!" she said excitedly, springing up from the sofa.

Sam's eyes were on her sweet little ass as Shelley scampered out of the room to get her portfolio. She returned in seconds, holding the briefcase as though it were filled with priceless jewels. She sat down and placed it on the coffee table then opened it up. Sam crouched forward and began examining the contents. The prints were all black and white eight-by-tens. The subject matter ranged from landscapes to portraiture and practically everything in between. The composition, lighting, and creativity were all quite impressive. Shelley had come a long way in the last six months, he concluded.

"Great stuff, kiddo! Excellent," Sam said after he'd examined the final photograph.

"Really?" Shelley exclaimed. "You don't think they're too contrived?"

"Not at all."

Shelley rested her elbow on Sam's thigh and leaned forward. "This is my favorite one," she said, flipping back to the first page. It was a shot of an old abandoned well taken in the late afternoon sun.

"I love the lighting—the long shadows and the way the background just sort of blurs out behind the well. It's got a nice mood, don't you think?"

Sam nodded. Shelley's face was within inches of his own and her soft blue eyes were wide as she gazed into his. He felt her other hand come down and rest on his knee. Suddenly, she threw her arms around him and kissed him hard. Sam was caught off guard but responded by embracing her and allowing himself to get lost in her soft, moist lips. His head started swimming as she brought her hand to the towel and inched herself away long enough to remove it and expose her flawless body. She then grabbed his hand and placed it on her breast, pressing his hand firmly as an invitation for him to take over.

Before long, Sam's clothes were off and what had started out as a lonely, rainy and miserable Friday night soon turned out to be a whole lot better than he could ever have imagined.

CHAPTER 11

It hadn't been more than five minutes after Jerry Rankin left when the telephone rang again. Ann hastily threw on her sweatshirt and ran across the hall to Amy's bedroom to answer it.

"Hello?"

As quickly as she spoke she heard the click of the caller hanging up. Ann waited a moment before replacing the receiver, wondering if it was the obscene caller again. Then she decided against it. Not his M.O., she thought to herself sardonically as she hung up the phone.

Ann returned to her bedroom and put on her sweat pants as the sudden urge to call Amy at Amanda's house came to her. She just wanted to hear her daughter's voice and make certain that she was where she was supposed to be. After slipping into her house slippers, she turned off the light and went downstairs.

Ann found Amanda's phone number scrawled on a note pad stuck to the refrigerator door and dialed it. On the third ring, a teenage girl's voice came over the line.

“Hello?” the girl giggled.

“Hi, this is Ann Middleton—Amy’s mother. May I speak to Amy, please?”

“Sure,” the girl replied. Ann heard the clunk as she dropped the phone and began yelling Amy’s name. A few moments later, Amy got on.

“Hey, Mom, what’s up?” she said. Her voice sounded a little too cheerful.

“Nothing, sweetie. I just called to see how everything went tonight. Did you guys win the game?”

There was a long pause, some whispering, and then her reply: “Yeah, we won.”

Ann had a sneaky feeling that Amy had never made it to the game. “I’m happy to hear that. What was the score?”

“Uh, I don’t remember exactly. It was close though . . . I think,” she stammered.

“You think?” Ann quizzed suspiciously.

“Well, we left kinda early.”

“And where did you go?”

“We came here, Mother! Why all the third degree?”

If Ann were a gambler, she’d bet her last dollar that her daughter had been drinking. “I was just curious, that’s all. Is Mrs. Givens there now?”

“Jesus, Mother!” Amy sputtered. “Of course she’s here! Do you want me to put her on just to prove it?”

“That won’t be necessary, I . . .”

“No, Mother. Let me go get her so you’ll know that I’m not lying!” Amy snapped. Then, after a long sigh, she said, “Why don’t you ever believe me, Mom? You never trust me!”

Here we go again, Ann thought. “I do trust you, honey. I’m sorry, It’s just been a long day and I’m tired,” she said, not wanting to start a fight.

Amy fell silent for a moment. Then she said, “I’m sorry, too. I shouldn’t have snapped at you like that. Hey, guess what!”

“What?”

“I got asked to homecoming!” Amy announced excitedly.

“That’s wonderful, sweetie! Who’s the lucky guy?”

“Jason Walborn. And is he ever a hunk!”

“I don’t recall you ever mentioning his name,” Ann said. “Is Jason a freshman, too?”

“Nope. He’s a *junior*! Can you believe it?”

Ann didn’t want to believe it. “Oh,” was all she could say.

“Don’t worry, Mom. He’s really cool. From a fine upstanding family, and all of that,” she added with a giggle.

Ann wondered what Sam’s reaction would be to his fourteen-year-old daughter going out with a junior. He simply wouldn’t allow it—she was certain of that. And she probably shouldn’t allow it either. But she didn’t have the heart to spoil Amy’s obvious excitement now.

“I’m really happy for you, honey. Isn’t homecoming next weekend?” Ann asked.

“Yeah, so we have to go out and find me a dress tomorrow!” Amy declared.

Ann sighed to herself and said, “Okay, I guess I can take you to the mall tomorrow. When will you be home? We’d better get an early start before the stores sell out of everything.”

“I don’t know. Probably around noon or so,” was her daughter’s reply.

“Well, try not to be too late, honey,” Ann said. “Be good and try to get some sleep tonight, okay?”

“I will, Mom. See you tomorrow.”

“I love you, sweetie.”

“Love you, too,” Amy said before hanging up.

As she replaced the receiver, Ann considered Amy’s sudden announcement that she was going to the school dance and realized she had mixed feelings about it. Although she was certainly less than thrilled that her little girl was going out with a boy who was two years older, she was nevertheless happy that Amy was so excited about something for a change. Recalling the child’s declaration that school dances were just for “nerds and jocks” brought a wry grin to her face. How quickly a teenager’s mind can change!

Ann realized that she no longer felt tired as she checked the time. It was just a little past eleven. Deciding that she could never fall asleep after all the excitement, she went over to the fridge, took out a can of diet Pepsi and went into the family room. After switching on the eleven o’clock news, she went over and plopped down on the sofa.

Ann began thinking about her date with Jerry Rankin and concluded that she had truly enjoyed herself. Besides his being handsome and a lot of fun, she had been equally impressed with Jerry’s impeccable manners and the way he had managed to comfort her after that terrifying phone call. His offer to be there for her whenever she needed someone had been awfully considerate of him, too. Although she could never see herself actually calling him up and bothering him with her troubles, it nevertheless gave her some piece of mind knowing that at least that option existed.

One thing troubled her, though. It was pretty obvious that Jerry Rankin was more than just a little interested in her. She could be wrong of course—and maybe she was just flattering herself—but Ann couldn’t help but sense that he wanted more than just a casual relationship with her.

And that was bad.

Because she was quite certain that she wasn’t ready to start a relationship with Jerry Rankin, or anybody else for that matter. And if he were as interested in her as she suspected, it would ruin everything. At this point in time, she needed a friend, not a lover. If Jerry could consent to being just friends, she would be more than happy to go out with him on that basis; in fact she would look forward to it. But if he was expecting more, then they were just going to have to part company now before somebody got hurt. It was as simple as that.

So when he called tomorrow, Ann resolved that she would approach Jerry with this. She wouldn’t rush into it, of course. She would test the waters first, then let him know how she felt. Hopefully, he would understand her position. She liked Jerry Rankin; she might even be capable of falling in love with him someday if she allowed herself. But she wasn’t about to let that happen now. And if she could convince Amy that Jerry was only a friend, maybe she could avoid her making a big fuss over him. She knew that if Amy thought there was something more to their relationship, she might well fly off the handle. Amy still resented the divorce and wanted her and Sam to get back together again. The last thing she wanted was to see her mother get seriously involved with another man.

Ann didn’t like sneaking around behind Amy’s back. She had always taught her daughter how important it was to be honest and straightforward about things, no matter how difficult it might be sometimes to tell the truth. For this reason, Ann had already decided she was going to tell Amy about her date with Jerry soon—perhaps

even tomorrow—providing that Jerry was willing to keep things on a friendly basis. Karen no doubt would disapprove, but she didn't care. Amy had a right to know what her mother was doing. And besides, Jerry had mentioned that he wanted to meet her. How could that ever happen if Amy didn't even know he existed?

She took a sip of Pepsi and watched the weather report. Smithtown was presently being hammered by thunderstorms, but the meteorologist gave his assurance that the storms would stay to the south of the state and avert central Ohio. By morning it was supposed to be fair and turn much colder in Columbus.

Ann reached for the romance novel she had been reading and read until she had to fight to keep her eyes open. Then she decided to go to bed, stopping at the bathroom on the way. After washing her face and brushing her teeth, she happened to notice that the mini blinds were fully open as it occurred to her that this was the second time in the last week that they hadn't been in their usually closed position. The first time she'd given it little thought, aware that Amy occasionally opened the blinds as well as the window a little to vent out the steam when she took a shower—

But Amy hadn't taken a shower today because she was running late for school earlier that morning and hadn't had time.

Then she had gone straight to Amanda's after school instead of coming home first.

Ann felt a pang of dread as she struggled to recall if the blinds had been open when she had gotten ready for her date with Jerry Rankin. She was almost certain that they had been closed then; otherwise she would have noticed. Wouldn't she have? Of course she would have. Being modest by nature her entire life, she had always made a point of closing the blinds whenever she was in the bathroom.

So someone had opened the blinds while she had been out with Jerry.

But who?

A thought suddenly came to mind: Amy. Perhaps Amy had come home while she'd been out with Jerry. She hadn't mentioned it on the phone when she'd spoken to her earlier, but that was no real surprise. It probably hadn't seemed worth mentioning . . .

Ann looked at the bathroom window. It was closed and locked. So if Amy had come home earlier, it hadn't been to take a shower. The window would still be cracked open.

So why had Amy come home, then?

Had she come home to do something she shouldn't have been doing? Ann wondered. Like sneaking boys in, or drinking with her friends? That might explain why she had seemed so suspiciously "cheery" on the phone earlier. But surely Amy wouldn't have taken that great of risk, Ann thought. She would have had no idea how long she and Jerry would be gone or whether she'd have enough time to pull off some kind of caper. And besides that, it would have been nearly impossible for her to avoid being found out somehow if she had been drinking alcohol in this house. Amy was much too sloppy and careless to have been able to cover her tracks so well.

Ann heaved a sigh of exasperation as she closed the blinds. Whatever had happened, she was going to get to the bottom of it. Tomorrow she would have a few questions to ask her daughter about all of this. And if Amy tried to lie her way out of it, she would be able to tell.

And if Amy told her that she hadn't come home and she was telling the truth, then what?

Ann didn't even want to think about it . . .

She turned off the light, went upstairs and went to bed.

It took Ann Middleton a very long time to get to sleep that night...

CHAPTER 12

Radiant sun poured through Sam's bedroom window when he finally decided to get up. He'd heard the phone ring earlier and his answering machine come on, but he hadn't been able to make out whom the caller was or what he was saying. He'd felt too wasted to get up and check it out at the time but now realized that the call might have been important and that he'd better go see what it was all about.

He was definitely hung over in a very bad way and it wasn't until he rolled over onto his back and saw Shelly Hatcher lying fast asleep beside him that the events of the following night began registering in his groggy head. She lay with her back facing him and the covers drawn up to her waist. Sam sat up and pulled the covers over her shoulders before slipping quietly out of bed. After throwing on a pair of sweats, he left the bedroom and made his way to the den.

When he pressed the message replay button, Roger Hagstrom's gruff voice crackled through the tiny speaker:

"Get the fuck out of bed, ya drunk!" his old friend chided. After a short pause, he continued: "I've got a ton of shit to tell you man, so give me a call as soon as you get your sick ass out of bed. It's 8:42 now and I'll probably be at the station by the time you hear this. Call me there."

Sam glanced over at the clock. Just past noon. He immediately picked up the phone and dialed the number for the Smithtown Police Department.

"Detective Hagstrom, please."

A moment later his friend answered.

"Hagstrom."

"What the hell are you doing back from N.Y.C. already?" Sam said.

Roger's voice was low as he spoke. "It's a long story, but in a nutshell there was a lot more happening here than there was there, so I took the first flight out this morning."

"What happened?" Sam asked. He could tell by his friend's tone of voice that he was onto something major.

"I can't tell you right now; I'm in the middle of a briefing. Can you get down her in say, a half hour or so?"

"No problem. Can you give me a hint? Something to do with the Bradley case?" Sam prodded, feeling a surge of adrenalin kick in, in spite of his hangover.

“Could well be,” Lieutenant Hagstrom replied in his typically vague fashion. “I’ll fill you in when you get here. Gotta go.”

He hung up the phone.

Wondering what the hell had come up to get the normally complacent Roger Hagstrom so fired up, Sam made a beeline for the kitchen and quickly got the coffee brewing. He suddenly recalled that Shelley Hatcher’s car was mired-up in his driveway and that it would have to be moved before he could go to the police station.

He went back into the den to get a cigarette and stood there for a moment debating what he was going to do about Shelley and her car. He wanted to meet Roger ASAP and find out what was going on but he also wanted, no, needed to take a hot shower so that he could feel at least halfway human again. He wasn’t going to have enough time to get Shelley’s car out of the mud and shower unless the road had by chance dried out enough to enable him to get the car out under its own power. The first priority, Sam decided, was to drive the Jeep down and check out Shelley’s car.

He started to leave the room and stopped himself cold as he realized that he was going to need Shelley’s car keys, which most likely were in her purse. He didn’t particularly want to go rummaging through Shelley’s purse without her knowing it, so it looked like he was going to have to wake her up after all. He’d wanted to avoid awaking Shelley any sooner than needed and Sam now seriously considered why this was so. The reality of having to confront her after last night, perhaps . . . ?

Yup. You got it.

Sam let out a groan and made his way back to the bedroom. Shelley was still fast asleep when he entered. He walked quietly over to the side of the bed and touched her shoulder.

“Shelley?” he said softly.

She mumbled something and opened her eyes. She smiled when she saw him.

“Hi,” she whispered sweetly.

Even after a long and crazy night of heavy drinking and unbridled sex, Shelley Hatcher still looked like a million bucks. Her silky blonde hair partially covered her lovely face and her deep blue eyes were just as wide and enchanting as they’d been the night before. Her full lips still had that sultry, seductive look that he had always found hard to resist.

“How are you feeling?” Sam asked, testing the waters.

She feigned a groan and replied, “Tired, but content. Last night was wonderful, Sam,” she purred with a playful grin.

“I have to agree with you there,” Sam said, knowing full well that he meant it. How the holy hell he was going to deal with all of this later, he didn’t have a clue. “Unfortunately, I have to go into town on some business now, so I’m going to try and move your car out of the way. Where are the keys?”

Shelley thought a moment before replying. “I left them in the ignition. I figured they probably wouldn’t get very far if somebody tried to steal it. But you can probably drive around it, Sam. It’s sort of off to the side in a ditch.”

Great, Sam thought. “Do you need to be anywhere in the next couple of hours or so?”

“No, I don’t have any plans.”

“Good. Then why don’t you just go back to sleep and I’ll take care of your car when I get back,” he suggested.

Shelley grinned. “I sort of hoped you would say that.”

Sam just smiled and said, “Okay. I’m going to take a quick shower then shove off. Just make yourself at home and I’ll call you if I’m going to be any longer than a couple of hours.”

“Thanks, Sam.” She sat up and gave him a kiss, the sheet falling down and exposing half of her luscious body. The kiss was short, but long enough to remind Sam of what had happened the night before.

“See you later,” he said, almost regretfully, before turning around and leaving the room.

* * *

Roger Hagstrom was standing beside his unmarked car when Sam pulled into the Smithtown Police parking lot. He pulled up beside his friend and rolled down the window.

“What’s shakin’?”

Roger came over to the Cherokee. He looked as though he’d been put through a wringer. “I need to get the hell out of here for a while. Had lunch yet?”

“Fuck, I haven’t even had breakfast yet!” Sam said.

“Let’s go over to the K&L, then,” Roger said as he walked around to the other side of the Jeep and got in.

Roger fumbled for a cigarette in his coat pocket, lit one up and looked over at Sam grimly. “Before you start grilling me, I’d better level with you first. Thompson’s in a real fucked up mood and just ordered me, in so many unpleasant words, to refrain from leaking police business to the press; referring of course to your ass. He’s at the end of his rope with the Bradley case and has decided to take it out on yours truly—like I’ve been just sitting around with my finger stuck up my ass all this time or something. Anyway, he has somehow managed to find out that I’ve let you have copies of the police reports and he’s ultra-pissed about that too. The chief is a real prick when he gets into this mode, as you well know. So, to make a long story short, we’re going to have to start being a little more discreet from here on out before the son of a bitch decides to fire my ass.”

“Great,” Sam groaned as he pulled out onto Court Street.

What Roger had just told him didn’t surprise him; it had happened a few times before in the past. The chief of police usually gave Roger Hagstrom considerable slack as far as Sam’s tagging along was concerned, but he had his limits. Especially when things weren’t going particularly well, as they apparently weren’t now.

“At any rate,” the detective continued, “I’ll start at the beginning. New York was a real bitch, any way you look at it. I met with the infamous Lieutenant Mancuso at his precinct and you might say that the two of us didn’t exactly hit it off together. The guy’s one of those arrogant Italian Stallion types who gets off on bossing everybody around, if you know what I mean. So here I am, Mister Small-Town Cop in the Big City, and Mancuso is constantly reminding me of my minor existence in the huge scheme of things; not in his words so much as in his goddamn condescending demeanor.

“Anyway, once we finally got down to business, he lightened up on me ever so little. I guess my natural charm and charisma eventually wore him down, eh? We went over our respective reports and theories on the Bradley and Hunt murders and then interrogated the witness who had claimed that he’d seen a man on the fire escape outside of what he believed to be Sara Hunt’s apartment on the night she was murdered. This guy lives across the alley from Sara’s apartment building—about a hundred yards away. He told us that he just happened to be looking out his window when he noticed a man climb out of the window and stand on the fire escape for a

couple of minutes. He couldn't see very well—it was late and pretty dark then—but he was able to make out some of the guy's features.

“The man was fairly tall, about six-two, Caucasian, medium build, and had long, dark hair and a beard. He was wearing an overcoat, like a London Fog, and had a small carrying case of some kind slung over his shoulders—possibly a camera or binocular case. The man looked real suspicious, the guy said, because it seemed more than obvious that he didn't want to be seen by anyone. He kept looking around nervously and kept his back glued to the wall. After a couple of minutes, the man went back inside and closed the window, then pulled down the blinds.

“The witness kept watching after the man had gone back inside. About a minute or so later, he saw several bright flashes of light come from the window—like a camera flash going off. He said that he observed five or six flashes within the span of a couple of minutes, then no more after that.”

“I knew it!” Sam exclaimed. “The bastard was taking pictures of the body, wasn't he?”

Roger eyed him curiously. “Yeah, I'd say that's a very strong possibility. Are you going to tell me now that you already had that figured out?”

Sam nodded excitedly. “I was comparing the crime scene photos of Marsha's and Sara's bodies yesterday evening and noticed how the positions were practically identical. Then it suddenly dawned on me that the killer had purposely arranged their bodies that way because he wanted an identically composed shot of each victim. I must admit that I was a little surprised nobody had noticed it before,” Sam added just a little too smugly.

Roger cast him a wry grin. “Hate to rain on your parade, buddy, but Mancuso had already made that very same observation prior to our interview with this guy. Gotta admit, I was pretty pissed off at myself for letting it slip by, but what the fuck? It gave Mancuso another feather in his cap while helping to boost my ratings as Mister Small-Town Cop at the same time,” Roger added acidly. “At any rate, this witness's account more or less corroborated both yours and Mancuso's hunch that the murderer might have taken some pictures at the scene.”

Sam could tell that his friend was taking his own oversight a little too hard, so he chose not to gloat. “The important thing is that we're finally starting to get somewhere with this thing. But why in the hell did this witness take so long to come forth? This information surely would have helped a lot more a month ago,” Sam said as he pulled into the K&L Restaurant parking lot.

“Apparently he didn't want to get involved at first, but his conscience eventually got the best of him. So he finally called the police—anonymously, I might add—and Mancuso managed to talk him into coming into the station to talk about it. You know, it never ceases to amaze me how people never want to get involved in a criminal investigation. One of the tenants in Sara Hunt's apartment building also came forward with some pertinent information just recently, as a matter of fact.”

Sam pulled into a parking space and turned off the engine.

“What do you mean? Another late witness?”

Roger nodded. “Better late than never, I reckon. Anyway, Sara Hunt apparently had a nasty habit of turning up her stereo really loud whenever she listened to music, according to this neighbor of hers. On the night she was murdered, it had been cranked up to the max, so this guy, some crotchety old-timer who lived on Sara's floor, started beating on Sara's door and threatened to go tell the super if she didn't turn it down. Sara had had run-ins with him before over her music and it soon became obvious to this guy that she wasn't going to comply

since she never responded and the music kept on blasting. So, he finally informed her through her door that he was going to get the super.

“As it turns out though, the old geezer had just been bluffing. He returned to his apartment instead of blowing the whistle on Sara. A few minutes later, however, someone did finally turn down her stereo.”

“Someone?” Sam said.

“We think it was the murderer who turned it down.”

Sam stared intently at his friend. “What makes you think that?”

Roger opened the car door. “Let’s go in and order some grub, then I’ll tell you. I’m famished.”

Sam nodded. They went inside and chose a table near a window away from the small lunch crowd. After placing their orders, Roger resumed the conversation, keeping his voice low.

“We’ve come up with a theory of what might have happened the night that Sara was murdered,” he said as he lit up another cigarette. “When the neighbor came to Sara’s door complaining about the loud music, we think the murderer just so happened to be in the process of strangling her at that very moment. The music of course probably drowned out any sounds of a struggle. And because of the murderer’s preoccupation with Sara, he was unable to turn down the stereo and avoid a possible confrontation by the super if and when he arrived. Once he had strangled Sara to death, the murderer ran over to the stereo and turned it down, then made a quick exit through the window onto the fire escape; no doubt praying that the neighbor had only been bluffing about calling the super. Once he was fairly certain that the super wasn’t going to show up, he went back inside and wasted little time in taking a few quick shots of Sara’s body before splitting the scene. We’re fairly sure that he fled through Sara’s door, just as he had entered, because the first witness said that he had continued watching the fire escape for at least an hour or so and never saw him again. Gutsy son of a bitch, eh? You’d think her assailant would have tried to make it out by the fire escape instead of risking being seen by the tenants.”

Sam shook his head slowly. “No shit. This bastard is as lucky as he is gutsy. What about the lipstick mark? Do you suppose he was unable to finish his little message on Sara’s body because he started getting a little panicky?”

Roger nodded. “Yup, that’s my guess. Everything sort of all falls into place when you think about it. Up until the moment when the neighbor knocked on Sara’s door complaining about the music, this guy evidently had everything pretty much under control. But once that happened, it threw the murderer’s game plan off and forced him to hurry up the process.”

“So this guy isn’t quite as slick as he must think he is,” Sam declared.

“Not in Sara’s case, at any rate. But don’t forget Marsha Bradley. Not a single slip-up there . . . so far,” Roger reminded Sam.

“That’s true,” Sam agreed.

“But he sure is one scary son of a bitch. What keeps going through my mind is that he had to take pictures of Sara Hunt’s body—like he was going to do it no matter what the risk might be. Couldn’t let it slide . . .”

“I know what you’re saying,” Sam said. “You’d think he wouldn’t have bothered. Apparently, those pictures meant a lot to the sick bastard.”

The waitress came with their drinks. Roger took a gulp of his coffee and said, “The times all match up with our theory, by the way. The man across the alley spotted the murderer on the fire escape at approximately the same time Sara’s neighbor knocked on her door bitching about the music. That’s how we came up with the

theory in the first place. But of course it is only a theory and we're still no closer to catching the perp than we were before. All we really have is a vague description of the guy, and that's pretty damn weak at best. I mean, how many tall white guys with long dark hair and a beard are there in this country, you reckon?"

Sam nodded as he sipped. "I see what you mean."

"So all of this information is for the most part useless, unfortunately. So imagine how Lieutenant Mancuso is going to feel when he learns that Mister Small-Town Cop just may have a suspect in mind."

Sam nearly choked on his coffee. "What?"

The detective grinned smugly. "That's right, Bucko. Like I told you earlier, there's a lot more happening here in tiny Smithtown than there is in The Big City."

Roger Hagstrom certainly had a flair for the dramatic, Sam thought to himself. It was just like him to wait until the last possible moment to divulge the crux of a matter. "What in the hell are you talking about, Rog?"

His friend ceremoniously stubbed out his cigarette and said, "One of my men called me at my hotel room early this morning. It seems that our little Smithtown Class of '70 yearbook investigation has yielded a possible suspect after all."

Sam mentally raced through the senior pictures in the yearbook, wondering who it would be. "Who, Roger?" he asked.

"You ain't gonna believe it, I can tell you that," his friend replied.

"Who is it, goddamn it!" Sam snapped impatiently.

Roger stared directly into his eyes. "Stanley Jenkins."

Sam pictured the horn-rimmed bespectacled geek with the 4.0 average and laughed out loud. "You've got to be kidding! Stanley Jenkins?"

"That's right, buddy. And please, hold off on your understandable skepticism until I've finished. Because even if Stanley ends up not being the man we've been looking for, I'm sure that you will at least be appreciably impressed with his rather interesting and colorful past since graduating Smithtown High."

Just then, the waitress came with their food. Sam waited until she had served them then said, "Let's hear it."

Roger took a gargantuan bite of his hamburger and washed it down with coffee before speaking. "After graduation, Stanley Jenkins enrolled at a little college in Indiana called Fountainhead Institute of Technology. I've never heard of the place before, but apparently it's somewhere near the Ohio border, not far from Dayton. Anyway, as you recall, Stanley was a bona fide egghead and this college has a rather impressive engineering department. So Stanley chose to go there, as engineering was his major."

Roger paused for another bite, then added dryly, "Stanley never made it past his freshman year."

Sam took a half-hearted bite of his BLT. "Go ahead."

"Well, Stanley was anything but a model student at Fountainhead, believe it or not. He apparently turned over a new leaf after high school and decided to go the full hippie route: grew his hair long, discovered psychedelic rock music, and took lots and lots of drugs. Acid seemed to be his drug of choice. Not unlike us, he partied a lot and studied very little—became a regular guy on campus in the early 70's, in other words. That is to say, Stanley tried to become a regular guy, but of course it never really happened. You know that old saying: 'once a nerd, always a nerd.' Stanley Jenkins was really only a hip and cool guy in his own mind but that persona never really came across to anyone else who knew him, if you catch my drift.

“Anyway, Stanley evidently wanted to make up for lost time from his high school days. He started asking out every beautiful chick on campus with hopes of having better luck than he’d had in high school, now that he was suddenly so hip and popular in his own mind. But unfortunately, he got shut down every time—just like high school. There was one girl in particular he had his eyes on. Her name was Cindy Fuller. A real knockout, from what I’ve been told.”

“Wait a minute, Rog,” Sam interjected. “Before you go any further with this fascinating story, do you mind telling me how in the hell you found all of this out?”

“A real stroke of luck, that’s how. Tom Slater—you know him, the rookie who just joined up last year—is the officer I assigned to track down the men in the yearbook. When Tom discovered that Stanley Jenkins had a police record in Epson, Indiana, he nearly flipped out. Coincidentally, Tom’s older brother had gone to Fountainhead the same time Stanley had. Most of this dope, Tom got from his brother. Now, can I continue before I get any further ahead of myself?”

Sam nodded with a laugh. His friend was really on a roll.

“Thank you. So this Cindy Fuller babe was a real fox and Stanley had zeroed-in on her. He asked her out countless times, got turned down just as many times, then apparently became downright obsessed with her. He started stalking her—hanging around her dorm all hours and following her to her classes—that kind of shit. The guy wouldn’t let up on her despite her constant refusals to go out with him. Then, one night, Stanley sort of flipped out.”

Roger paused long enough to gobble down a fistful of fries, then said, “He tried to burn down her fucking dorm!”

“What?”

“Stanley was tripping on acid one night and I guess he figured that if Cindy Fuller wasn’t going to play ball with him that he might as well make her pay for it. So he took a can of gasoline, poured it in under the crack of her door and all through the hall of her dorm, and lit a match. He was caught almost immediately by campus police, who saw the flames and Stanley running like a bat out of hell away from the scene.”

“What happened to Cindy Fuller?”

“Her room was empty when this all happened so nobody got hurt. They had the fire under control within minutes and the whole thing was basically a farce. But it could have been much more serious.”

“So what happened to Stanley?” Sam asked.

“He was charged with aggravated arson and attempted murder. He got himself a good lawyer who pushed for a temporary insanity plea, citing that Stanley was under the influence of a hallucinogen at the time and not in his right mind. A psychiatric evaluation was ordered and that’s when things really started getting ugly for poor Stanley.”

Sam lit up a cigarette. “What happened?”

“They determined that Stanley Jenkins was psychotic and a sociopath, among other things. The judge, who didn’t like Stanley in the first place—I guess Stanley was less than agreeable throughout the proceedings—ordered him to a minimum of one year in the nut house.”

“Whoa!”

“It gets even juicier. Stanley was committed to the Indiana State Hospital and remained there for four fucking years before they finally let him out. That was in ‘75 . . . *May First, 1975*,” Roger added, winking at Sam.

“*May Day!*” Sam exclaimed.

“Interesting, eh? Now get this: there has been only one person as far as we know who has heard from or seen Stanley Jenkins in the last fifteen years, and that would be his mother. And that was in 1980. Since then, it appears as though Stanley Jenkins has dropped off from the face of the earth.”

Sam said, “You’ve already talked to his mother?”

“Briefly,” Roger replied. “Ironically, Slater had already telephoned Stanley’s mother once before when we first started investigating the yearbook pictures. The records had shown that Mrs. Jenkins had moved in with her sister in Cincinnati shortly after her husband passed away back in ‘74 so Tom had called her to inquire about Stanley’s whereabouts. She’d told him that he was living in California and that he was working for a chemical firm there. After a few more questions, Tom was satisfied that Stanley was probably clean and not worth pursuing as a suspect, so he thanked Mrs. Jenkins and scratched him off the list of potential suspects. Then, Stanley’s record suddenly showed up last night—so we naturally had a renewed interest in him. And now Mrs. Jenkins suddenly has a totally different story . . .”

“What did she tell you?”

“When I called her, I immediately got the feeling that she knew we were going to call her again—call it ‘investigative intuition,’ for lack of a better word. Anyway, she hesitantly admitted that she had lied before—that she really didn’t have any idea where Stanley could be now. She told me that the last time she’d heard from him was back in 1976. He’d sent her a postcard from Vegas—she wouldn’t elaborate on what the postcard said. Then she suddenly asked me why I wanted to know and I just told her that we were conducting an investigation, but didn’t give her the specifics. I asked her if she had any idea, even the slightest hunch, where we might be able to locate Stanley and she promptly said ‘no’ and hung up on me.”

“Damn, this is getting weirder by the minute.”

“No shit. When I tried calling Mrs. Jenkins back, surprise of surprises, she didn’t answer the phone. It’s starting to look like she’s hiding something and we just may have to go down to Cincinnati to persuade her to be more cooperative. At any rate, that’s more or less where we stand now.”

Roger Hagstrom sat and stared at Sam expectantly like a victorious general on a battlefield.

When it became apparent that he had no more to say, Sam said, “Is that it?”

His friend’s eyes widened. “*Is that it?*’ Is that all you can say? Hell, you’re almost as bad as that cock-headed doubting Thomas I work for!” Roger snapped in a voice that was too loud.

Roger Hagstrom’s face flushed as he looked around and saw that half the restaurant was now staring at him.

Sam waited a moment for everything to calm down again then said, “Jesus, buddy, I didn’t mean to get you all bent out of shape! I was just wondering if there was more to the story, that’s all.”

Roger collected himself. “That’s cool—I guess I was just a little pissed that your reaction to all of this seemed about the same as Thompson’s. He thinks I’m jumping to conclusions just because I haven’t been able to come up with any concrete leads on this goddamn case yet. But look at the facts! We know that the murderer is pretty damn smart, right? Stanley Jenkins is intelligent, if nothing else. Hell, the bastard was a model student in

high school, for chrissakes! We also know that whoever killed Sara Hunt was tall with long dark hair. Stanley is over six feet tall if he's an inch. Granted, he was a lanky son of a bitch and wore pop bottle eyeglasses back in high school, but people do change considerably in twenty years; he's probably put on weight and wearing contact lenses now. And what about '*May Day*'? Doesn't it seem just a little too coincidental that the murderer left behind those words on Marsha Bradley's body and that May Day just so happens to denote the day of Stanley Jenkin's emancipation from the loony bin?

"But by far, the most incriminating evidence is the marked page in the yearbook and the fact that Stanley knew both women; not to mention his damning psychiatric profile and the fact that he's a psychotic, flipped-out lunatic who spent four years in a mental institution for stalking a beautiful chick and trying to torch her just for refusing his advances. Hell, what more do we need?"

"Evidence," Sam replied flatly. "I'm no lawyer, but I know enough about criminal law to see that all you have is speculation and a bunch of circumstantial evidence in both of these cases. And you can't arrest and convict somebody solely on that shit."

"You're forgetting something, Sherlock," Roger smiled. "We've got the hair and semen samples as evidence. And that's all it would take to convict."

This had slipped Sam's mind. Somewhat embarrassed, he said, "You're right . . . That's why you're a cop and I'm not. And I have to agree that it looks like Stanley Jenkins could possibly be the murderer. But tell me, honestly, Roger. Would you ever in your wildest dreams believe that he is capable of sadistically raping and murdering two women in cold blood? Jesus, he's the last person I'd ever suspect in this case. He was such a fucking . . . *nerd!*"

"No doubt about that," Roger nodded in agreement. "I'd never have guessed him to be the type, either. But by the same token, who would have ever thought that he would grow his hair long, drop acid, and try to set a school dorm on fire? Those are documented facts."

"Good point. I guess my biggest problem with all of this is why? Why would Stanley Jenkins murder Marsha Bradley and Sara Hunt? What was his motive?"

Roger heaved a long sigh. "Hell if I know. But I'm gonna find out, by God. In the meantime, I've got a lot of questions to ask a lot of people once we locate them."

"What people, for instance?" Sam asked.

"The psychiatrist who handled Stanley's case, for one. Plus Stanley's lawyer and Cindy Fuller. And his college roommates, if he had any. Also any friends and acquaintances he might have had while living in Vegas. It's going to take a lot of down and dirty police work, but I'm convinced that there is someone, somewhere who knows Stanley Jenkins and what he's been up to for the last twenty years."

"Sounds like that could take a long time," Sam said.

"It will, no doubt. But it has to be done. We're also working on a computer-enhanced photo of how Stanley might look today to show to little Tommy Bradley. I forgot to mention that the little tyke is finally beginning to snap out of it, from what I've heard. I think Dave is going to give his consent to let us interview him soon, in fact. And if Tommy actually saw his mother's murderer and can give us a positive I.D. on him from the computer photo of Stanley, we'll be in business. Then, maybe the chief will get off my back and eat a little humble pie. Damn, I can't think of anything I'd rather like to see right now!"

"Have you let Mancuso in on any of this?" Sam asked.

“I’d like to wait until I have a little more to go on, but that wouldn’t be right. I’m going to call him as soon as I get back to the station. No sense in fucking around with egos and all that bullshit,” Roger said. He smiled slyly and added, “Still, it would be nice to confirm my theory before I filled him in—just so he’d realize that we’re a little more on the ball than he gives us credit for back here in Small Town, USA.”

“I almost hate to mention this, but isn’t there a possibility that Stanley Jenkins might be dead?” Sam said.

“That has crossed my mind, of course, and we’re checking up on it now, as we speak. I’ll bet he ain’t, though.” Roger finished off his hamburger and said, “Did you have any luck with Sara Hunt, by the way?”

Sam shrugged. “No, I didn’t learn a damn thing. She just didn’t live in Smithtown long enough to make oodles of friends, I reckon. Some of the people I talked to remembered her, but that was about the extent of it. I called Ann as well, but she told me that as far as she knows, Marsha hadn’t kept in touch with Sara since high school.”

“Actually, that’s good to know. Dave Bradley told us the same thing—that he was fairly certain Marsha hadn’t had any correspondence whatsoever with Sara all these years. Which would indicate that whatever connection there may have been between Marsha Bradley and Sara Hunt had been established back when we were all in high school. Mancuso has spoken to Sara’s parents of course, and they, too, have no knowledge of their daughter having been in contact with Marsha Bradley. In fact, they couldn’t even recall ever meeting Marsha Bradley when Sara was living here, so the girls must not have been too awfully close to one another.”

“That’s not surprising. Sara Hunt was always sort of a snobbish bitch, if you ask me. Ann couldn’t stand her, either. Not exactly Miss Popularity, as I recall.”

“Hell, maybe there isn’t any real pertinent connection between the two women; other than the simple fact that they had known each other in high school. We need to get more dope on Stanley Jenkins. That’s all there is to it.”

“I can give you a hand,” Sam offered.

“I’ll let you know on that,” Roger replied tentatively. “For the time being, it’s all pretty much going to be just routine police work. Besides that, you’re better off staying in the background for now. In fact, if Thompson finds out that we’ve had this little chat, he’ll blow a goddamn gasket.”

“I don’t know why he’s so fucking paranoid,” Sam retorted. “Surely he knows that McNary censors practically everything I write, anyway, even if I were stupid enough to try and print anything about this investigation. Where’s the trust?”

“Thompson has a real problem with the press—you know that. And that’s why your boss is such a puppet. He sucks Thompson’s ass.”

Sam grinned. “You know, I’ve always wondered about those two. You don’t suppose they’ve got something going, do you?”

Roger guffawed. “Never gave it much thought. They would make a cute pair though, now that you’ve mentioned it.”

They both laughed as Roger picked up the check, surveyed it, and laid a tip down on the table. “I’ve got to head back to the station,” he said, standing up.

Sam let his friend pay the check and followed him out of the restaurant. When they were inside the Jeep, Roger said, “Where were you when I called, by the way? And don’t tell try and tell me that you were in the sack with some chick!”

Sam started the engine. “Actually, I was.”

Roger gaped at him. “No shit?”

Sam peered over at him and said, “You seem surprised—I’m not a damn monk, you know!”

“You haven’t exactly been Joe Stud, either. So who, may I ask, was this babe? She must really be a fox to be able to get you to break down your self-imposed post-divorce virginity, I’d think.”

Sam backed out of the parking spot and onto the street.

“Ironically, the same fox who got me there in the first place,” he said.

“You’re shitting me! Shelley Hatcher?”

“The one and only,” was Sam’s reply.

“This, I’ve got to hear,” Roger stated with relish.

“Not much to say, really. Shelley dropped by the house last night at around two in the morning and said that she wanted to show me her portfolio. One thing led to another and the next thing I knew, we were rolling around on the floor. That’s about the extent of it.”

“Whoa, I’m stunned!”

“Gotta admit that I’m a little surprised myself. Besides the craziness of the whole thing, I actually enjoyed every minute of it.”

“Hell, who wouldn’t? Shelley Hatcher is a fucking knockout!”

“I didn’t mean it that way,” Sam said. “I meant that I actually don’t have any regrets that it happened. No guilt—you know—Ann and all?”

“What’s there to be guilty about, for chrissakes? You aren’t married to Ann anymore. You’re free as a fucking bird. You shouldn’t feel guilty because you didn’t do anything wrong in the first place, you lucky son of a bitch. There just might be some hope for you yet!”

His friend’s encouragement was infectious. A grin came to his face as Sam said, “Well, I don’t exactly feel like going out and shooting myself, that’s for sure. Shelley Hatcher is actually a pretty decent girl—has a good head on her shoulders for a twenty-year-old living in this fucked up generation. Maybe I feel like I should feel guilty more for what Shelley Hatcher is: the girl who broke up my marriage.”

“Fuck that! That’s all water under the bridge, man!”

“I realize that; but at the same time I’m trying to look at it from Ann’s point of view. She’d shit a golden brick if she ever found out.”

“You worry too much, buddy. First of all, how in the hell could she find out? She’s a hundred miles away! And second of all, how do you know that Ann isn’t playing the field herself nowadays? Hell, maybe she’s actually decided to get on with life instead of living day to day in the past like your sorry ass has been doing. Ever think about that?”

Actually, he hadn’t. Ann had spoken very little about her personal life since moving to Columbus, he now realized. And he hadn’t exactly been pumping her for information in that regard either; probably because he knew that if Ann actually was going out with someone, he wouldn’t particularly want to know about it.

“Okay, you’ve made your point,” he told his friend. “Ann could be fooling around with someone and I no doubt would be the last one in the world to know about it.”

“So there you are. My advice is to quit worrying so goddamn much and stop and smell the coffee once in a while. Go for it! Enjoy yourself for a change!”

“You’re right, and I know you’re right. I guess I just feel a little weirded-out, that’s all.”

“Because you’ve forgotten what it’s like to have a good time.”

“I reckon so,” Sam confessed.

“Is Shelley still at your place?”

“Yeah. Her car’s stuck in a drainage ditch in my driveway. Why?”

“Because if I were you, I’d keep her there for a while, if she’s willing. Get back on the track and leave the past behind while you’ve got the chance. Jesus, Sam! If I had that chick hanging around my doorstep, I sure as hell wouldn’t send her home!”

Sam laughed. “I’ll give your worldly advice some serious consideration, Doctor Hagstrom. In the meantime though, I’m going to run a few errands while I’m in town and think all of this out. Ain’t got a drop of liquor in the house and I’m down to my last egg.”

“Sounds like my place,” Roger said as Sam pulled into the police station parking lot.

“Keep in touch,” Sam said as Roger started to get out. “When are you taking a day off, by the way?”

Roger opened the door and said, “You mean there’s really such a thing as that?”

“At least you’re getting paid scads of overtime.”

“Fuck, they’ll probably screw me out of that, too.”

With that, Roger Hagstrom got out, slammed the door and headed toward the station.

As he drove away, Sam Middleton had a lot on his mind.

* * *

An hour later, as he pulled up beside his house and got out of the Jeep, Sam wondered if Shelley was still in bed asleep. His question was answered when he reached the front door: Shelley was standing just inside the doorway, apparently awaiting him. Her face was white as a sheet.

“What’s wrong, Shelley?” he asked uneasily as he stepped inside and set the groceries on the floor.

She stood rigidly and looked away from him as she spoke. “Ann just called,” she announced dismally.

Sam felt his pulse quicken and his heart skip a beat. “What did she say?” he asked, hoping rather futilely that whatever had been said by his ex-wife had been said to his answering machine, and not to Shelley Hatcher.

Futile, indeed.

Suddenly, Shelley broke down. “You’re going to hate me!” she cried. “I should have never answered the phone!”

Sam felt his blood pressure go up 20 points, but he struggled to keep calm. “What did she say, Shelley?”

Again, Shelley looked away from him. “She asked for you. I told her you weren’t here,” she began slowly. Then she faced him again, tears streaming down her lovely face. “She knew it was me, Sam!”

She threw her arms around him and buried her face in his chest. “I’m so sorry, Sam. It looks like I’ve screwed you up again,” she sobbed.

Sam patted her back halfheartedly. “How do you know that Ann knew it was you?” he asked lamely.

Her muffled reply was, “Because she said, ‘*This is Shelley Hatcher, isn’t it?*’ I froze up, Sam, and couldn’t answer. Then she yelled, ‘*slut!*’ and slammed down the phone.”

Sam was speechless. His anger at Shelley's answering the phone in the first place was offset by his own stupidity for not telling her before he left to let the answering machine field any calls he might have until he returned. But utmost in his mind was the overwhelming guilt he now felt and how incredibly small and fiendish he must now look in Ann's eyes now that she knew he had been with Shelley Hatcher, of all people.

There is no way out of this, he thought. He'd been caught red-handed yet again and Ann was never, ever going to forgive him.

Shelley Hatcher is bad news . . .

Remember telling yourself that, asshole?

Sam's immediate impulse was to run to the phone, call Ann, try to explain. But there wasn't anything to explain.

Jesus Christ! he thought. Was he not the most luckless son of a bitch on earth, or what?

Shelley's incessant sobbing prevented him from flying totally off the handle. Again, just like the first time, she wasn't to blame for this and Sam knew it. He'd given into temptation, again, and now he was going to have to face the consequences . . . again.

And now, in spite of his anger and frustration, and as ironic as it was, he realized that he felt even worse for Shelley Hatcher than he did for himself. He held her tight and felt the odd and impulsive urge to kiss her, which he did. Then he talked to her, gently, and eventually managed to calm her down somewhat. Then he took her by the hand and led her to the bedroom, where they spent the remainder of the afternoon making wild and passionate love.

CHAPTER 13

Sam glanced over at Shelley to make certain that she was asleep, slipped quietly out of bed and tiptoed out of the bedroom. It was dusk and long shafts of sun shone through the window as he made his way to the den and picked up the phone. He dialed Ann's number.

"Hello?" he heard her say.

"Hi, Ann."

There was a moment of silence and Sam guessed that she was deciding whether or not to hang up on him. Finally, she spoke.

"What do you want?" Her tone of voice was undeniably terse.

"Please hear me out, Ann. I know you're pissed at me right now and I don't really blame—"

"Pissed?" she interrupted. "I'm a lot more than just pissed, Sam! How could you? After all the trouble that tramp has caused, you turn around and let her back into your life. I'm so angry at you that I could just scream!"

Before Sam could say anything, she added, “And you sure have had a lot of nerve acting like you were so hurt and torn up over the divorce—what a joke! I’m sorry I ever fell for that load of crap. How long has this been going on? How long have you been screwing that whore, Sam? Huh? How long have you been snowing me with your bullshit?”

Sam was taken aback by Ann’s outrage. He’d known she would be hurt and angry, but he’d never guessed she’d be this hysterical. “I’m sorry, Ann,” he said weakly. “I can see that you need some time to cool off, so I might as well not even try to argue my case now. I just want you to know that I haven’t been ‘snowing’ you, as you put it. I truly have been torn up over our divorce and will always be. This is the first time I’ve seen Shelley since—”

“I don’t even want to hear her name, Sam!” Ann snapped. “Furthermore, I’ve had all day to ‘cool down’ and I’m about as cooled down as I’m ever going to be. Listen, why don’t you do us both a favor and just leave me alone. I have nothing more to say to you. Nothing! You’ve really screwed up but good this time, buster. So just have your fun with your little slut friend and leave me alone!”

She slammed down the phone so hard it hurt.

Sam stared vacantly at the wall with the phone still to his ear. He was not only stunned by his ex-wife’s onslaught, but angry as well. He deserved a little better treatment than this—no matter how much he’d fucked up.

He deserved to be heard, at least.

He pushed the redial button. It rang a dozen or so times before Ann finally answered.

“What?” she hissed.

“You’re being a little unfair about this, don’t you think?”

“Unfair?” she echoed. “I’m being unfair? You’re a regular comedian, Sam.”

“I just want you to take a second here and look at the facts, Ann. We’re divorced, right? That was *your* idea, not mine. But no matter whose fault it was that we split up, the fact remains. We’re free now. Isn’t that what you keep telling me? So I should be free to see whomever I want whether you like that person or not. It just so happens that you despise this particular person, so all of a sudden I’m a bad guy. What if it were someone else? What would your reaction be then? Better yet, try putting the shoe on the other foot. What if you were seeing someone now? Would you want me to get all over your case like you’re getting on mine? Would that be fair?”

“You’re right about one thing, Sam: I do despise that bitch and I probably would react differently if it were someone else. But that’s the point. Why that slut, Sam, of all the people on earth? Can’t you do a little better than that?”

“Shelley is not a slut, Ann, and I wish you’d quit calling her that. She’s a nice girl—you don’t even know her!”

“Excuse me while I throw up!” she said, undaunted. “That’s it, Sam. I’m out of here. I’ve heard about all I care to hear. Have a nice life!”

“Wait!” Sam shouted furiously. “What are you trying to say? Are you telling me that you don’t ever want to see or hear from me again? Is that it? What about my daughter, goddamn it! What’s Amy got to say about all of this? Are you trying to write her out of my life, too? Are you going to tell Amy how terrible her father is and

turn her against me? Well, you'd better think twice if that's what you have in mind. I'll fight you every inch of the way, by God!"

"Shut up, Sam!" Ann shouted. There was a pause, and then she said in a calmer voice, "I am not that petty, Sam, and you know it. I'm not going to tell Amy about this, nor do I have any intentions of ever trying to turn her against you. This is just between you and me. And while we're on the subject, I might as well tell you now that I'm seeing someone too. Now what do you have to say about that?"

Sam was shocked but somehow managed to sound calm. "I think it's wonderful," he lied. "Who's the lucky guy?"

"His name is Jerry. And he's very nice—he respects me."

"And I don't?"

"Apparently not," was Ann's reply.

Sam felt his blood pressure soaring. "Oh, I see. And what else, may I ask, does ol' Jer have that I don't?"

"Well, let me see . . . blonde hair, muscular build, oh, and he knows the difference between a lady and a tramp."

Sam refused to appease her. "Sounds like quite a guy, Ann—a discriminating super-jock. Good going, kiddo!"

"Are we through now?" Ann said, obviously piqued.

"Not quite," Sam said. "I'd like to talk to someone who still loves me. Put Amy on."

"Amy's not here. She's at a friend's house."

"Oh," Sam said, disappointed. "Well, in that case, let me just say one more thing before I let you go."

"Make it quick—I've got things to do," she said curtly.

"This is serious, Ann, so please listen."

He waited a moment to switch gears, then said, "Roger thinks he has a pretty good idea who may have killed Marsha and Sara."

"Who?" Ann asked, her voice suddenly solemn.

"Do you remember Stanley Jenkins from high school?"

"The nerdy guy who always got straight A's?"

"That's the one. That's who they think may have done it."

"No way!" Ann exclaimed.

"My exact reaction, too. But believe it or not, it's starting to look like he's the prime suspect. Stanley apparently went off the deep end after high school and has a police record—arson and attempted murder. Only trouble is, nobody has seen him in fifteen years."

"I just can't believe it! Do they have any proof that he did it?" Ann asked.

"No, but they're working on it. I'm having a hard time buying into this too; but if you knew what all they've dug up on Stanley, it might make you a believer. Anyway, I wanted to let you know."

Ann's tone of voice was nearly normal when she said, "Thanks, Sam, I'm glad you did."

"I'll keep you posted if anything more develops."

"Okay . . . Well, I'd better go," Ann said, her voice returning to an icy edge.

"Big date with Jerry?" Sam quipped dryly, unable to resist the urge to get the last punch in.

"Maybe," Ann sing-songed, "And is the little slut still there with you?" She countered viciously.

Sam realized he should leave well enough alone but hadn't yet recovered from the fact that Ann was seeing another man. And now he resented the way Ann kept dragging Shelley through the slime.

"Yeah, Shelley's still here," he declared.

"Well, I hope you both have a good fuck," Ann spat before slamming down the phone in his ear.

"Touché," he mumbled to the dead line.

Sam sat there for a moment or two before hanging up the phone. Finally, he stood up, went into the kitchen to get a beer, then went out to the back porch to get some fresh air and hopefully, some kind of perspective on where to go from here.

CHAPTER 14

Ann's blood was boiling when she hung up on Sam.

The nerve of him! she thought.

It had been nagging her all day and as hard as she'd tried to blot it out of her mind, she found that her anger only intensified the more she thought about that little bitch answering the phone like she was a permanent fixture at Sam's house. And now, he'd had the audacity to call her and try to smooth everything over. Well, it didn't work that time and sure as hell wasn't going to work this time either. She had enough problems already without having to put up with this bullshit.

Her only saving grace had been the fact that she'd told Sam about Jerry, which she would have never dreamed of doing otherwise. But the temptation to put Sam in his place at the time had been too great, and now she was glad she'd done it. It hurt him, she could tell, stung him like a bee, but he by God deserved it.

Ann went over to the sink and resumed washing the dishes, wishing that Amy would come down to earth once in a while and do a few chores around the house for a change. But she was so wrapped up in her social life that it seemed like there was no one else in her little world besides herself and her friends. Her mother was apparently only here for the purpose of putting a roof over her head, feeding her, and provide whatever other necessities might crop up along the way—like the new dress she had just bought her for the school dance next week.

Ann was just about to drain the dishwasher when the telephone rang. Thinking that it might be Sam calling again, she took her time drying her hands before finally answering it.

"Hello," she spoke curtly into the mouthpiece.

"Ann, it's me. Have I caught you at a bad time? Karen asked.

"Oh, hi, Karen. Sorry, I thought you might be Sam."

"Sounds like you weren't exactly looking forward to his call."

"You wouldn't believe how mad I am at that man! I tried calling you earlier by the way—where were you?" Ann asked.

"Just running errands. So tell me, what did your ex do to get you so angry? And how did the date go last night?" her friend inquired.

Ann heaved a long sigh. "I guess I'd better start at the beginning. The date went very well—I had a great time. We went to Angelino's for dinner then came here for a drink. Jerry's such a nice guy! I wouldn't call it love or anything, but I really did enjoy his company."

“That’s great! So are you going to go out with him again?”

“Yes, I am. In fact, I invited him over for dinner tomorrow.”

“Are you serious? What about Amy?” Karen asked, obviously stunned by Ann’s apparent turnaround.

“Well, you’re probably going to get mad at me for not following your advice but I told Amy about Jerry this afternoon. Now before you tell me that I’ve made a big mistake, let me explain. First of all, as I told you before, I don’t like sneaking around behind Amy’s back. I want to be up front with her all the time. Can you imagine how she’d react if she found out about Jerry and I hadn’t told her about him? She’d never let me live it down! That’s just the way Amy is. So last night I decided that when Jerry called me today I was going to tell him that I only want to be friends with him and nothing more; that I’m not ready to start a relationship with anybody right now. I figured that if he could agree to those terms, then I’d continue going out with him. I think he really likes me, Karen, and I want everything out in the open before this goes any further and somebody gets hurt. Do you know what I mean?”

“Yes, I understand and that makes good sense. So how did Jerry react when you told him?” Karen asked.

“Well, he wasn’t very thrilled, to tell you the truth. He didn’t act like he was disappointed but I could tell he was. I think he was hurt, too, which is all the more reason why it was a good idea to confront him now instead of leading him on. Anyway, he agreed to keep it on a friendly basis and that’s when I elected to ask him over for dinner tomorrow. He’d told me last night that he would really like to meet Amy some time so I told him that he could meet her when he came for dinner, providing that Amy didn’t react negatively to the idea. It was a bold move, I realize now. But it turned out even better than I thought it would.”

“What did Amy say?”

“I caught her at a good time and I think that really helped the situation. She was asked to the homecoming dance last night, so we went shopping for a dress this afternoon. She was all excited about the dance so I took advantage of her upbeat mood and casually mentioned that I had a male friend that I was having over for dinner tomorrow and asked her if she would mind joining us. She was a little put off at first of course, but I think that had more to do with actually making a commitment to dinner than the fact that I’d invited some guy over. Anyway, surprise of surprises, she said it was okay with her as long as she didn’t have to get dressed up for the occasion. Can you believe it?”

“I think that’s wonderful, Ann! These kids today will fool you once in awhile, won’t they?”

“That’s for sure.”

“So now, tell me about Sam,” Karen demanded.

Ann groaned. “Well, I decided to give him a call this morning—I guess because I felt a little guilty about going out with Jerry and all. You know how it is, even though we’re divorced I still feel sort of attached to Sam—I guess out of habit. Anyway, who do you suppose answered his phone when I called? None other than the same bitch I had caught him fooling around with before! Can you believe it? And I felt guilty?”

Karen hissed, “My Lord! I’ll bet you were absolutely livid!”

“I was! Then, to top it all off, he just called me a few minutes ago to try and mellow everything out. Well, I wasn’t very mellow to say the least. In fact, after several un-pleasantries, I let him know that I just happen to be seeing someone myself!”

“How did he take it?”

“Not too well. He tried to blow it off but I could tell he was upset. I’m not usually one to play head games, but I just couldn’t resist. Had he been with anybody else, I wouldn’t have gotten so down and out nasty with him. But that slut? No way!”

“Sounds like you really put him in his place.”

“I think I did. What angers me so much, Karen, is that Sam’s been playing the “mourning role” ever since we split up. Then all of a sudden he turns around and pulls this crap. It’s like a slap in the face!” Ann declared.

“Well, I must admit I’m more than a little surprised,” Karen said. “From what all you’ve told me about Sam, this almost seems out of character for him.”

“I’ve always thought he was different, too. But now he’s shown his true colors—he’s just another typical man like all the rest. Except for Jerry, that is. He genuinely seems to be different; he’s a real gentleman and doesn’t patronize women.”

“Maybe this will go beyond friendship.”

“Hmm, I don’t know about that. All I can say is that right now, I’m not interested in any relationship. I used to think Sam was a gentleman, too. He sure has had me fooled!”

“Well, between you and me, that’s exactly why I have never gotten married again. Things seem to change once a man thinks he has a hold on you. I like to keep Bill guessing—keeps him honest. Not to change the subject, but have you had any more prank calls?”

“Oh, I forgot to tell you! I got one last night when Jerry was here. It was horrifying!”

“What happened?”

Ann told Karen about the call and Jerry’s suggestion to get an unpublished number, which she intended to do Monday.

“That sounds like a good idea, Ann,” Karen said.

“Jerry is so sweet. He told me if I ever needed him for anything to just call him, night or day.”

“He sounds like quite a wonderful guy, Ann. My advice is to keep him around awhile, even if it’s only a platonic relationship.”

“I think I will.”

“Well, I’d better go. Hey, maybe we can double date sometime—go see a movie or go out to dinner. What do you think?” Karen said.

“Maybe,” was Ann’s reply. “Let me see how everything goes tomorrow and we just may do that sometime.”

“Great! Give me a call tomorrow and let me know how dinner went, okay?”

“Okay.”

Ann hung up and returned to the kitchen sink. Karen’s inquiry about the obscene phone calls had suddenly reminded her of the opened window blinds she’d discovered in the bathroom last night and that she had forgotten to ask Amy about it earlier. She then made a mental note to be sure to ask her when she got home later.

After finishing the dishes, Ann decided to take a hot bath. While lying back in the tub, she started thinking about the last phone conversation with Sam. When he had told her that the police thought Stanley Jenkins was the man who had murdered Marsha and Sara Hunt, she’d nearly broke out laughing. It was impossible to imagine the shy national honor student with the horn-rimmed glasses capable of harming a fly, much less raping and murdering two women. It was preposterous!

Granted, she had hardly known the guy back at school—in fact the only time she could recall ever speaking to Stanley at all had been the time he had asked her to Senior Prom. She could still remember the incident quite well; only because of the total shock she'd felt that Stanley Jenkins had actually had the nerve to do it in the first place. Surely, she had thought at the time, he simply had to have known that she would turn him down. Not so much because of the obvious fact that he was a certified nerd and an absolute zero in the popularity column at school (although that certainly should have been enough) but because everyone who was anyone at Smithtown High School had known that she was going steady with John Flinders at the time and that she most certainly would be going to prom with him...

Yet, Stanley Jenkins had nevertheless asked her to prom anyway—the hapless loser.

Ann had been at the state basketball finals the fateful day Stanley had made his ridiculous plunge into no-man's-land. She had been on the sidelines with the other cheerleaders as they witnessed their beloved Trojans being totally smeared by the Upper Arlington Golden Bears. Just after the Golden Bears' point guard had sunk yet another three-pointer, poor old Stanley Jenkins suddenly appeared from out of nowhere. He had taken Ann aside, sweat pouring out of his zit-laden face so bad that his glasses were actually steaming up. Out of the clear blue, Stanley had cleared his throat and abruptly made his pitch: "You want to go to the prom with me?"

Ann was speechless at first. Besides the fact that Senior Prom was the last thing on her mind at that particular moment (the Trojans were definitely out of the running now), Prom was still light years away! And now here was Stanley Jenkins, nerd of the year, who she barely even knew, and never ever socialized with, asking her for a date!

It had been nearly impossible keeping a straight face but she had somehow managed to as she thanked Stanley for asking then informed him that she going to the prom with John Flinders. (*We are going steady, Stanley; even you should know that!*) It was more than obvious that he was quite hurt and embarrassed. Stanley's face had turned beet red but he didn't utter a single word. He simply turned around and sauntered off into the bleachers with his shoulders slumped, like he had just lost his last friend in the world.

Ann had felt really sorry for him and when one of the other cheerleaders asked her what Stanley had wanted, she had fibbed that he had asked about an assignment that their English class was working on. Yes, she had actually felt that bad for poor Stanley.

Leave it to that crazy Roger Hagstrom and the Smithtown P.D. to come up with something as far-fetched as this, Ann thought. She tried to imagine what they might have dug up on Stanley that could possibly point the finger at him of all people. Even Sam had admitted they had no evidence, which didn't surprise her in the least. Her hunch was that they were beginning to grab at straws now because they were too damn inept to find who the true murderer was.

Christ! she thought. Was she ever glad she was out of that stupid, narrow-minded town! You can have it, Sam, with my blessing. And may you and Shelley-the-slut-Hatcher live happily ever after!

Her thoughts suddenly turned to Jerry Rankin. She didn't want to admit it to herself but she already missed him and it had been only twenty-four hours. In a way, she wished that she hadn't come on so strong with the "friendship" rap to him. She realized now that she could have put a swift end to everything had Jerry not been so understanding. Any other guy would have backed off under similar circumstances, not wanting to continue pursuing someone who had just basically confessed having no intentions whatsoever of sleeping with them—

which is what it all really boiled down to. But Jerry Rankin was different—he could see beyond the sexual aspect and respected her enough both as a woman and a person to accept her terms.

If he could be here, right this very moment, she just might have let him have his way with her. She knew she wouldn't feel that way tomorrow or the next day, but at this very moment, yes. She could just picture Sam and the whore together, rolling around in bed, and that image made her want to somehow get even with him. She would allow Jerry to join her in the tub and she would enjoy every wonderful second of it. The mere thought of his trim, muscular body pressed hard against hers made her skin suddenly tingle all over . . .

But Jerry wasn't here. He was meeting with one of his clients. He had offered to call her when he was done, but she had told him not to bother—that she was going to turn in early. She hadn't slept very well the night before and she needed to catch up so she wouldn't be too tired to cook tomorrow.

Ann reached for the soap, lathered her hands and began washing herself. If Jerry were here, right this moment, he could be doing this for her, she thought.

When was the last time she had made love? she wondered. She thought back. It had been in April, with Sam of course. It had been the night before she had caught him with Shelley Hatcher, in fact. It had been wonderful . . .

Damn you, Sam!

CHAPTER 15

It was around 5:30 Monday afternoon when the telephone rang in Sam Middleton's office. Praying it wasn't McNary again, he picked up the phone.

"Sam Middleton."

"I'm glad I caught you before you split," Roger Hagstom said. "How soon can you come down to the station?"

"I was just getting ready to call it a day. What's up?"

"Your presence is being requested here. Pronto, in fact."

Sam was stunned. "Did I hear you say what I think I heard you say?"

"You heard me right, buddy. Hold on a second . . ."

Sam could hear someone speaking in the background.

"Chief Thompson says he hopes there's no hard feelings." Roger said.

"Roger, what in the fuck is going on?" Sam demanded, his sense of humor waning.

The detective laughed. "We hit pay dirt, man! That's what's going on!"

"You caught the murderer?" Sam asked incredulously.

"No, but we now sure as fuck know who he is, without a doubt. Listen, get your ass down here and I'll tell you all about it." Lowering his voice to a near whisper he added, "The chief knows everything."

“Okay, I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

Sam hated suspense and Roger knew it. Swearing under his breath, he quickly put his papers in order and left the office.

When he arrived at the police station, Sam noticed that nearly every police cruiser was parked outside, prompting him to sense that what ever was going on was a big deal. He parked the Cherokee and entered the station, feeling the electricity of activity the moment he stepped up to the desk sergeant.

“Go on in,” Mark O’Brien said, obviously expecting him.

Roger Hagstrom and the chief were standing outside Thompson’s office as Roger spotted him and gestured Sam over.

“Hi Rog, Chief.”

“Hello Sam,” Thompson said, extending his hand. “I’m glad you could make it.”

Sam shook the black man’s hand and glanced over at Roger imploringly.

“Come on in,” the chief said, holding his office door open.

“Thanks,” Sam replied as he followed Roger into the office. Roger showed him a chair across from Thompson’s desk and Sam sat down.

“You like some coffee?” Roger asked, stepping over to the coffee machine.

“Yes, thanks,” Sam replied.

Chief Thompson sat down at his desk and waited until everyone had his coffee before speaking.

“I’m going to be up front with you, Sam. Lieutenant Hagstrom has informed me that you’ve already been shall we say, ‘enlightened’ on the Bradley murder case, so I don’t feel any need to go over the background information. Therefore, we’ll skip directly to the business at hand.”

Sam felt like a school kid being lectured to as he sat across the desk from the chief of police. He’d never particularly liked Frank Thompson but had to admit that he respected the man. He was scathingly blunt and had that kind of authoritarian demeanor that demanded one’s attention whenever caught in his presence.

“Hagstrom tells me that you have a fairly extensive background in photography,” Thompson continued.

Sam nodded. “Yes, I guess you could say that. Photography was my original career choice until I learned that newspaper reporting paid better,” he replied sarcastically.

Chief Thompson held up a transparent plastic bag with a label marked “Evidence” stuck to it. “Then perhaps you could tell me what you make of this.”

He handed the plastic bag over to Sam. Inside the bag he saw a blank Polaroid print.

“David Bradley’s housekeeper found that print this morning in Tommy Bradley’s bedroom,” the chief explained. “It had apparently fallen and wedged itself inside one of Tommy’s toys and out of plain view. At any rate, Hagstrom’s men somehow missed this during their investigation but fortunately for us, the Bradley housekeeper’s eyesight is still in good working order,” he added with a sardonic glance toward Roger.

Sam eyed the Polaroid. “Do you think the murderer dropped this?”

Thompson grinned. “We know that the murderer dropped it. In fact, we now know who the murderer is—again, thanks to the Bradley’s housekeeper.”

Roger Hagstrom took over from there. “Mary Willis, the housekeeper, wisely refrained from touching the print and immediately called Dave Bradley to tell him what she’d found. Dave then called me and I went over to

check it out. And lo and behold, we dusted for prints and actually got some. Our hunch was right, Sam! We compared them against Stanley Jenkins' prints and they're a match."

"Jesus!" Sam exclaimed. "So Stanley really is Marsha's murderer?"

Roger nodded. "Yup. We finally have the hard evidence we need to charge him."

"But how did you get Stanley Jenkins' fingerprints?" Sam asked.

"He's got a police record, remember? The Epsilon, Indiana P.D. had mugged and fingerprinted him when he was booked on the arson charge at the college. We just received his mug sheet from them earlier today."

"Wow, it's still hard to believe . . ."

Thompson declared, "You won't think it's so unbelievable when you've heard what we've got on this guy so far, Sam. I'll let Hagstrom fill you in on that when we get through here. But first of all, I want you to tell me exactly what you see in that evidence bag. And please keep it in the bag, by the way."

Roger added, "Howard Dickson has already looked the print over and all he could tell us was that it's a dud Polaroid. We're hoping you can come up with a little more than that."

Sam winked at Roger as he pictured old Howard Dickson, the semi-retired police photographer who was eighty years old if he was a day with eyes pushing a hundred trying to make sense of an "instant photograph" whose very existence he probably resented in the first place. There were certain limitations to belonging to the old school of photography, Sam felt, which Howard doubtlessly belonged to. Howard still used an old Graflex camera at crime scenes—the same one he'd owned since the Great Depression.

"I'll see what I can do," Sam said as he brought the bagged photograph closer to his eyes to examine it.

At first glance, the Polaroid indeed appeared to be a "dud" as Howard Dickson had reported. The image was basically all white and muddy grey near the bottom of the square image frame where the rollers hadn't evenly distributed the developer as the print passed through them. It was a common occurrence with instant cameras—the rollers got old with age and eventually failed to compress the developer packet enough to disperse the processing chemicals evenly throughout the exposed latent image on the print. The result was a virtually white and/or unevenly developed print with traces of the grayish colored developer fluid appearing near the bottom under the transparent Mylar covering.

"Have you got a magnifying glass handy?" Sam asked Chief Thompson.

Thompson opened one of his desk drawers, brought out a magnifying glass and handed it over to Sam.

Sam held the bagged print up closer to the light and peered through the glass. The first thing he noticed was a series of long, thin scratch marks that extended vertically across the Mylar print window—no doubt caused by tiny burrs in the metal pinch rollers of the camera. Then he noticed a small dark area in the upper left hand corner of the image. He looked closer. The dark area was actually the partial image of a ceiling light fixture—a very unique light fixture. The edge of white that merged with the image was fuzzy. Perhaps "out of focus" would be a more appropriate term. Sam felt a sudden cold chill as the implications behind this poorly executed Polaroid print raced through his mind.

Sam brought the magnifying glass away and stared intently at Chief Frank Thompson. "This isn't a dud, Chief," he declared. "It's an actual exposed photograph taken in Marsha Bradley's kitchen."

The chief's eyes widened. "What?"

"Here, take a look for yourself."

The chief walked around the desk. Sam handed him the magnifying glass and pointed at the faint dark area of the photo.

“See this dark area, Chief? If you look at it under the glass you can just make out the wrought iron trim of the overhead light fixture in Marsha Bradley’s kitchen. You can even see where the frosted glass in the housing butts up against it if you look closely enough.”

The chief looked through the glass a moment and let out a gasp. “I’ll be damned! It *is* a light fixture—no doubt about that. But how do you know it’s the one in Marsha Bradley’s kitchen?”

“I’ve been in the Bradley house and I’ve seen it there, that’s how. It’s pretty damn unique, which is probably why I recall it.”

Thompson eyed Sam approvingly. “Quite a penchant for detail, Sam.”

Sam shrugged. “A photographer has to be observant.”

“Let me see,” Roger said. Thompson handed him the print and magnifying glass. “That does look like the kitchen light fixture, no doubt about it. But what’s all this white shit in the rest of the picture?”

“That ‘white shit’ is most likely the photographer who took the picture, Rog,” Sam stated.

Roger stared at his friend. “What do you mean?”

“I’d like to hear this, too,” Thompson said.

Sam said, “The white area is actually the blown-out image of something. And my guess is that the photographer, who we now know is Stanley Jenkins, was standing directly in front of the camera when it went off. There’s a fuzzy outline along the image of the ceiling light fixture—that’s an out of focus portion of Stanley’s body which is totally over-exposed due to the fact that he was bathed in the light from the camera’s flash. This would make him appear washed out and white in the photo. The tiny image of the ceiling light however is in perfect focus because the lens of the camera was preset for infinity—or at least a distance of fifteen feet or so.”

“I’m confused, Sam,” the chief said. “What makes you so sure that Stanley Jenkins was standing in front of the camera when it went off? Couldn’t it have been something else, or someone else?”

“It’s possible of course, but it’s not in the odds. I have a theory, chief, that’s why I’m pretty sure it’s Stanley in the foreground.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“I’m quite familiar with the kind of Polaroid camera that took this shot. It’s an older model that they no longer make—I own one myself. It is in fact the only model that uses this particular format of film—they do still manufacture the film, by the way. Artists often use this old film format because the emulsion can be manipulated. Anyway, this model of camera can be used with an optional self-timer—you know, so you can get into your own pictures if you can run fast enough to get into the scene before the shutter goes off. We now know that this shot was taken in Marsha Bradley’s kitchen but what we don’t know is why. My theory is that Stanley wanted to take a shot of Marsha Bradley while he was in the act of raping her. Otherwise, why else would he take a picture in the kitchen? Marsha’s body was found in the living room and we can more or less assume that the wacko probably took some “after” shots just as he had with Sara Hunt up in New York. But what about taking some “during” pictures, just for the hell of it? Marsha was raped in the kitchen against the counter; you’ve already determined that. So Stanley decides he wants a shot or two of himself in the act. So what he does is force Marsha to wait helplessly near the kitchen counter while he rigs up his Polaroid camera on a tripod and aims it at

her. Then after everything is composed and in focus, Stanley engages the self-timer button, presses the shutter release button, then runs over and does whatever his sick mind desires to poor Marsha. The camera fires and he has his shot.

“But when he took this particular shot, he forgot to engage the self-timer before pressing the shutter release button. In fact, if memory serves me, this is most likely the first shot he took. Because once you’ve flipped the self-timer button on, it remains on until you flip it off. So once Stanley got everything all set up, he stood in front of the camera, pressed the shutter release button and *CLICK!* He’s got a beautifully blown-out, out-of-focus shot of himself still standing there in the foreground. And in the corner of the shot is the only other element not blocked out by Stanley’s blown-out, out-of-focus body: the crisply rendered light fixture mounted on a white ceiling.”

Thompson scratched his head. “Not a bad theory. Not bad at all.”

“It may also explain why he chose the kitchen to commit the crime,” Sam said. “The kitchen is the only large room in the Bradley house that faces the hillside out back—no one could see the flash going off from the front of the house. Furthermore, Stanley must have discovered that the perspective afforded by shooting through the doorway into the kitchen from the living room was perfect for his ‘artistic intent’.”

“Good point, Sam,” Roger said. “All of the bedrooms upstairs have windows facing the cul-de-sac. Not to mention that they were covered by sheer curtains if I remember correctly.”

“What about the living room?” Thompson asked. “We’re assuming that he photographed Marsha’s body after he strangled her, and those windows face the front of the house as well.”

Roger said, “Yeah, but they were covered by heavy drapes, which were drawn the night of the murder. You know, another thought just occurred to me. We now know that Stanley went back into Tommy’s bedroom after he murdered Marsha since this print was found there. The question that suddenly comes to mind is *why?*”

“Excuse me for asking, but what difference does any of this make?” Sam asked. “You already know that Stanley did it so why the big mystery about this Polaroid?”

Thompson replied, “Let me explain something about police procedure, Sam. Yes, we now know that Stanley committed the murder, or murders, I should say. But we still have to find the sonofabitch and build a case against him. In order to do this, we’ve got to investigate everything we have on hand to establish among other things motive and opportunity as well as try to get an idea where he may have gone from here. This Polaroid is important to the case because we now know, thanks to your expertise, that he owns a particular model of Polaroid camera that uses what I assume would be a relatively uncommon type of film—it surely must be uncommon if they no longer make the camera that uses it. We can now attempt to trace where he bought the film for the camera by checking out any stores that carry that particular type of film and show Stanley’s picture to the store employees in the process. Maybe someone will remember his face. This information could lead to his whereabouts prior to and possibly after the crime was committed. At least we have something to go on now.”

The Chief took a sip of his coffee and added, “It’s been nearly a month since Marsha Bradley’s murder. Jenkins could be anywhere now—hell, Timbuktu for all we know. And he’s already proven to us that he knows how to lay low. He’s somehow managed to disappear completely out of sight for fifteen years, for chrissakes! We now have an APB out on him but that’s not going to be enough. In order to nail the bastard we’re going to have to be smarter than him—piece the puzzle together and determine what his next move is going to be. This

fucker is crafty—sly as a fox—and he’s going to slip away from us for good if we don’t start getting a handle on what in the hell he’s up to here. Are you beginning to catch my drift?”

Sam nodded. Again, he was starkly reminded of the fact that he was a journalist and not a cop. “What about the press?”

Thompson smiled. “I was wondering when you were going to ask that. That’s the other reason why I invited you here.”

Chief Thompson pulled out a document from a manila file folder on the desk and handed it to Sam. “This is a computer enhanced photo composite of what Stanley Jenkins may look like now. Write a follow-up story and put this photo along side it, Sam. We’d like to see it in the paper ASAP. Detective Hagstrom will tell you what you can and cannot divulge in the article. There’s obviously a few things we’d like to keep to ourselves for now, as you can probably imagine.”

Sam looked at the document. It was impressive—effectively depicting what Stanley Jenkins might look like today after having aged twenty or so years. In the top photo, he was shown with long dark hair, glasses and a beard. In the bottom photo, short hair, no glasses and clean-shaven.

Sam said, “I assume you’ve cleared all of this with McNary.”

“Yes, I have. I told him to give you carte blanche, but I’m trusting you not to include whatever Lieutenant Hagstrom orders you to omit.”

“Fair enough,” Sam said. He turned to Roger. “What about New York? Have you talked with Mancuso about these latest developments?”

Roger nodded. “I’ve filled him in. We’re also in the process of issuing a press release to the AP.”

“This is pretty damn big, Sam,” Thompson declared. “There’s a serial killer loose who we know so far has committed two murders in two different states within as many weeks. That pretty much makes this more than just a local problem. And believe it or not, we want media exposure on these cases. It may make Jenkins think twice before striking again anytime soon, and buy us some time to nail him in the meantime.”

He glanced at the wall clock then looked over at Detective Roger Hagstrom. “I’ve got to go out and brief those men now. Why don’t you go over the press release with Sam, quickly I might add, so we can get cracking on this thing.”

Okay, Chief.”

Thompson shook Sam’s hand. “Thanks, Sam. Keep this man in line, okay? He’s a damn good detective when he’s not drowning himself in a bottle of scotch.”

Sam saw Roger scowl out of the corner of his eye. “Don’t worry about Roger, Chief. He’s got things under control.”

Thompson grunted, then turned and left the office.

“He’s a bigger drunk than I am,” Roger quipped as he warmed up his coffee. “Let’s go to my office where we can smoke.”

Sam followed Roger Hagstrom to his office. The two lit up cigarettes and sat down at the desk.

“Damn, I’m beat,” Roger complained. “I got a grand total of three hours’ sleep last night. And that’s the most I’ve had in as many days.”

“Life’s a bitch, eh? But at least you’re getting somewhere on this case.”

Hagstrom nodded. “True. And when it’s finally over I’m going on the biggest drunk you can imagine.”

“I’ve seen your drunks, Rog, and the scary thing is I can imagine!”

“This one may surprise even your sorry ass!”

The detective took a drag and gulped his coffee before slumping back in his chair.

“At any rate, here’s the scoop. I was actually able to contact Stanley’s mother again earlier today—saving me a trip to Cincinnati, thank God—and leaned on her big time before she could start trying to snow job me again like she had during our last conversation. I promptly informed her that withholding information in a murder investigation could get her in serious trouble. She of course was taken aback by the word, ‘murder’ and asked me if Stanley was in some kind of trouble. I told her that he could be and her attitude changed dramatically. She mumbled something like, ‘money is the root of all evil,’ and I asked her what she meant by that. She told me that at one time Stanley was loaded and that ‘all of that money probably went to his head.’ Apparently, when his father died, Stanley cashed in on a small fortune as a result of Mr. Jenkins’ generous life insurance policy. This was not long after Stanley had been released from the state hospital.

“Then, to put it simply, Stanley took the money and ran—left home. He didn’t tell his mother where he was going, only that he was ‘finally going to get himself straightened out.’” For months, his mother never heard a word from Stanley. Until a nearly a year later that is, as I told you before.”

“When she received the postcard from Vegas?”

“Not a postcard after all, but a letter. She had lied to me before about that. It was a letter that came with a cashier’s check for \$25,000 made out to Stanley’s mother. She read the letter to me over the phone. It said something like ‘here’s a little money to help you out, Mom. I struck it big on the tables and I’m heading to L.A. to spend it. Don’t worry about me, I’m fine, but I’ll be even better once I put this money to good use.’”

“Hmm. I wonder what he meant by “putting this money to good use?” Sam said.

“Hell if I know. Maybe he planned on investing it in the stock market—or the drug market, which wouldn’t surprise me. At any rate, we’re going to do some nosing around in Vegas and L.A. to see what we can find out. Surely someone must have come in contact with Stanley at one time or another while he was living in either city. We’re also working on tracking down Cindy Fuller to see if she could enlighten us on Stanley’s possible whereabouts. Who knows, maybe he even took another stab at winning her heart since his release from the nut house after conceding that setting her dorm on fire hadn’t been a happening way to create a strong and lasting relationship. We’re dealing with a loony here, buddy, and you gotta go a little crazy yourself in order to catch a crazy,” Roger declared.

His friend’s statement suddenly registered in Sam’s mind as he realized what he was implying here; that Stanley Jenkins is a certified nut case and totally unpredictable. Without reason, logic and rationale on your side, you’ve got to use “alternative means” in order to make some kind of educated guess at what was on this demented killer’s mind. Those means would be to attempt to try and think like an insane person would think, given his known profile. No small order, indeed, Sam thought. And if nothing else, it certainly left one with some chilling possibilities of what may happen next . . .

“What about the state hospital? Couldn’t you get some help from the doctors there? Maybe get an idea of what was on Stanley’s mind while he was receiving treatment?” Sam asked his friend.

Roger shook his head slowly from side to side. “Already tried that route—no luck. Patient confidentiality has put a quick end to that possibility before it ever got started.”

“You’re kidding! You mean they won’t tell you anything even though it’s all but a fact that Stanley Jenkins is a fucking murderer? I thought you could force doctors to release their records when it involves a murder case!” Sam exclaimed.

“That’s not enough to do it. Only when a patient/suspect has knowingly threatened to murder someone does patient confidentiality go out the door. And that’s not the case we have here. It’s a bitch, I know, but it’s the fucking law.”

Sam couldn’t believe what he was hearing. How could a murder suspect be protected by the law when it was more than apparent that he had murdered someone, for chrissakes? It made absolutely no sense at all, especially considering that the murderer was still at large and most likely would kill again. The information that one of Stanley’s former doctors could offer may well mean the difference between life and death for some innocent, law abiding person.

“And they call that justice?”

“There ya go . . .”

“Well, what about Tommy Bradley, then? Have you shown the computer composite of Stanley to him yet?” Sam wanted to know.

“Glad you asked, before you give yourself a coronary. The kid is apparently in much better shape now and we’ve cleared the way to show him the composite and interview him tomorrow morning. That could well ice this whole thing if he positively ID’s Stanley Jenkins.”

“That’s some good news, at least. But even if you get a positive ID and confirm the murderer, it’s not going to help you catch the sonofabitch. Which reminds me—what’s the dope for the press release? I want to get started on that thing and get Stanley’s mug out for the world to see so we can nail him.”

Roger thumbed through some papers on his desk and handed Sam a document. “Here’s the official statement. As you can see, we’ve pretty much let the cat out of the bag there. You can embellish it to some degree of course—the only thing the chief’s really concerned about is the details of the pending investigation. You now know the specifics, Sam, so be sure not to put in anything that might tip the creep off. That’s all.”

Sam looked the press release over and nodded. “Don’t worry. I’m actually impressed; this is surprisingly honest and straightforward for a change. Finally, the public can be adequately informed of what is really happening in this town.”

“I thought you’d approve.”

Sam stood up. “I’d better get moving. I think I’ll stop by the office and pick up all the shit I need then take it home—we can’t get this out until tomorrow evening’s paper anyway. As excited as I am about writing this article, it would figure that I’m going to have to do it while I’m dead beat.”

Roger Hagstrom grinned. “I don’t suppose Shelley Hatcher has anything to do with that.”

“Let’s just say she hasn’t helped any,” Sam replied as he turned to leave.

“You’re one lucky sonofabitch. Take care, buddy.”

“You, too,” Sam said as he went out the door.

He stopped by the *Observer* and collected all the files and documents pertaining to Marsha Bradley and Sara Hunt’s murder investigations. Before leaving, he ran into the sports writer, Al Clarkson, and briefly told him what he’d just learned at police headquarters. Al’s reaction, as expected, had been that of absolute shock.

The sun was just setting over the western foothills as Sam drove home. It was one of those spectacular late autumn sunsets, the sky bursting with radiant hues of yellow, orange and magenta gradually giving way to a deep shade of cold blue. He reached over and turned on the heater as he felt the chill of the crisp evening air and decided that tonight would be as good a time as any to break in the fireplace. He'd been looking forward to firing it up ever since he'd first laid eyes on it last spring.

He pulled into his driveway and retrieved the mail from his mailbox before continuing on to the house. Once inside, he brewed a pot of coffee and ate a cold chicken sandwich. Afterwards, he went into the den to get a fire started in the fireplace and noticed the tiny light on the answering machine flickering. He played back the message:

“Hi Sam—it’s me. I thought you’d be home from work by now but it looks like you’re not. I just called to thank you for a wonderful weekend—I really had a great time! Hopefully, we can do it again sometime soon. I know you told me you needed some time to think things over and I’m sorry to bother you like this, but I just couldn’t help it. I miss you already! Oops, I shouldn’t have said that, should I have? Oh well, sorry about that. I’ll go now before I make you mad. Feel free to call me if you happen to get the urge, okay? Otherwise, I’ll try calling you later in the week. Love ya, Hon! Bye-bye.”

Sam couldn’t help but smile to himself as he listened to Shelley Hatcher’s message. It hadn’t been twenty-four hours since she’d left to go back to Ashland, KY and already she was pestering him. It was beginning to look like the girl was more hung up on him than he’d ever imagined.

He went back over to the fireplace and finished stuffing in the kindling wood then placed a few medium sized logs on the grating. He struck a match, lit the crumpled newspapers and watched as they caught fire and ignited the kindling. Once the fire was burning steadily, he went over to his desk, sat down and turned on the computer.

Sam sat and stared thoughtfully at the computer screen, recalling the past weekend. Shelley had ended up staying over Saturday and that night proved to be every bit as wild and crazy as the night before had been. The next morning, or rather, afternoon, he had awoken feeling not only severely hung over but surprisingly at ease for a change. Shelley Hatcher and his desire to be with her had somehow prevailed over Ann and everything that went along with his former wife. For the first time since the divorce, he felt content—not so much because of what he’d done with Shelley Hatcher this weekend but more of the fact that he had actually done it in the first place. There was a difference.

In a nutshell, he at last felt free.

Ann had her life; he had his.

Love was no longer a pain, or even an issue. It had become something that had once existed but no longer existed.

After breakfast, he and Shelley had decided to go for a drive in the state forest. They had parked the Jeep and taken a long walk hand in hand—a few kisses now and then but no sex. Fun without sex: something new in his life since the divorce. Then they’d driven back to the house and Sam had pulled Shelley’s car out of the mud, told her what an excellent weekend it had been, then in the same breath told her that he needed some time to think things over. She seemed to understand what he was telling her and kissed him before climbing into her car and heading back to Kentucky.

When Sam had gone to bed later that night, he hadn't been able to get to sleep. He found that he couldn't turn his thinker off. He started thinking about Ann and Amy and realized that although he may have fallen out of love with his ex-wife, he still loved the both of them in a way that simply couldn't be labeled. And he knew that he would always love them in this special way.

Then he had begun thinking of how empty and meaningless his life would be if something bad ever happened to the most important girls in his life, just as he had so many times before. He realized that he would always care for them and that he'd never quit worrying about them. And ever since Marsha Bradley had been murdered, he had acquired an uneasiness that he knew would never go away until Stanley Jenkins was caught and put away.

Then his thoughts had drifted to Shelley Hatcher and how she was like a breath of fresh air amidst all of the malevolence going on. When he was with Shelley, the world suddenly seemed to stop turning. All the bad went away and everything was good again. Ann became a distant memory, the past evaporated and the future was within his grasp.

Then he'd think about the murderer again.

The murderer continued prevailing throughout it all.

Stanley Jenkins had to be stopped.

Sam had finally fallen asleep at around 3:30 in the morning. Then he'd had a nightmare. In the nightmare, he was lying on a beach with Shelley Hatcher. They were alone on the beach, stark naked, making love. Suddenly he'd heard a telephone ring. He'd opened his eyes and reached for the phone lying beside him on the sand. It was the police calling—they told him that Ann and Amy had been found in their home raped and strangled to death. He'd started crying and turned to Shelley to tell her what had happened. She had started laughing hideously . . .

Sam's eyes remained focused on the computer screen.

This murderer has got to be stopped . . .

He opened up MS Word for Mac and began typing: *Suspect Sought In Bradley Murder* . . .

CHAPTER 16

On Wednesday morning, Ann Middleton had a smug grin on her face when Karen Walker strode over to her desk.

“What are you grinning about?” she asked Ann.

Ann replied, "That was Sam I was just talking to. He apparently tried calling me last night and got a recording that my telephone number had been changed to an unpublished number. He was madder than hell—he had actually thought I'd changed my number because of him!"

Karen chuckled. "Did you tell him the real reason you did it?"

"It was tempting not to, but of course I told him the truth. Then he got all upset at me because not only had I refrained from letting him know about the unpublished number, which honestly had slipped my mind, but I hadn't told him about the obscene phone calls either. He's been really worried about the murder case anyway and now he's all paranoid that Stanley Jenkins made the obscene calls and is out to get me."

"You shouldn't come down on Sam for that, Ann. He's only looking out for you and Amy, which is understandable."

Ann sighed. "I'm not criticizing him for that, Karen. I know he means well and I'd be lying if I told you that I don't appreciate his concern. It's just sort of fun seeing him all bent out of shape over nothing. That's a terrible thing to say, I know, but I guess this Shelley Hatcher thing has sort of gone to my head and I'm still having trouble dealing with it."

"Aren't you being a little flippant about this Stanley Jenkins character, Ann?" Karen asked. "I mean—you act as though there isn't even the slightest chance that he might come after you."

"Well, of course there's a slim chance, I suppose. But you've read the article in the Dispatch—why should I feel any more threatened by him than anyone else? Hell, you're just as much at risk as I am."

Karen shook her head. "Not true. The article said that he seems to prefer beautiful women, remember. That definitely puts me out of contention as a potential victim."

"You're talking nonsense, now. And I think that Bill will agree with me on that," Ann declared to her friend.

"Bullshit!" Karen exclaimed good-naturedly. "Have you told Sam about the prowler, yet?"

"I was going to until I saw how upset he was about the phone calls. Then I decided not to. I mean, why get him uptight over a false alarm, anyway? Ever since I learned from Amy that she had indeed come home to change clothes last Friday I have quit worrying about it. It's been quite awhile since that incident in the backyard and I'm not even sure it was a prowler I heard that night."

"Speaking of Amy, does she still seem to be okay with Jerry?" Karen asked.

"Yes, so far. I still can't believe how well everything went with dinner Sunday night and I was especially proud of my little girl. She was well-mannered all evening and at one point actually modeled the dress she's wearing to the homecoming dance for Jerry."

Karen laughed. "So they got along pretty well, it sounds. Do you think she might actually like Jerry?"

"Well, I don't know if I'd go that far. But she at least seems to be tolerant of him, which is about as much as I can hope for at this stage."

"Are you seeing him again?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. We're going to see a movie."

"Sounds like Jerry is becoming habit-forming." Karen declared with a sly grin.

"I have to admit it, Karen, I really like being with him. He helps make me forget all of the lousy things that have been happening lately, like Marsha's death and now Sam's latest little stunt with that woman. I'm having fun for a change instead of just sitting around brooding over everything."

“Well, it’s sure good to see you so cheerful. In the short time I’ve known you, I’ve never seen you so upbeat and together as you’ve been since you met Jerry. I think he’s really good for you, Ann.”

“I do, too,” Ann replied. “I just hope he can continue playing by the rules though. I’m afraid he’s starting to break down a little already.”

Karen Walker’s eyes narrowed. “What did he do?”

“Nothing, really. I think it’s more a matter of what he’d like to do.”

“What do you mean?”

Ann’s eyes looked away for a moment then returned to Karen. “Well, we were at the dinner table and I caught him staring at me . . . At my boobs, to be more specific. I was wearing a sort of low-cut sweater that evening. That probably doesn’t sound like any big deal but it was the way he was staring that made me feel a little uncomfortable. Then, when he realized that I’d caught him, he quickly looked away and his face got redder than a beet. Thankfully, I don’t think Amy witnessed any of this.”

Karen laughed out loud. “Good Lord, Ann, aren’t you being a little paranoid? He’s only human, after all. I catch men staring at my breasts all the time—they seem to have a natural affinity to them—but I don’t get all worked up about it. And now here’s poor Jerry trying to be a perfect angel for you but he lets his guard down and dares to stare at you in a manner that isn’t quite god-like, so you act as though it’s a federal offense. Give the poor man a break, dear!”

Ann fidgeted with a pencil lying on her desk. “I guess I may be over-reacting a little. It’s just that I want this to work out so much, Karen, and I’m afraid that it won’t because Jerry’s going to start wanting more than a friendship out of it.”

“Could it be possible that you don’t trust yourself, either?” Karen said.

“Karen!”

“I’m serious, Ann. My instincts are telling me that you wouldn’t necessarily cringe at the opportunity of getting intimate with Jerry, but you don’t want to admit it to yourself. Listen, Hon. I’ve been through the very same thing myself. After I got divorced, I had cold feet about sex, too. It’s a natural defense mechanism. You tell yourself that you’ve just gotten over an ugly relationship and that you aren’t going to make the same mistake twice, so you hold out for Mr. Right to come along. Let me tell you something I know from experience—you’re just wasting your time waiting for Mr. Right because he doesn’t exist! And in the process of waiting for this imaginary character, you let golden opportunities slip by—like Jerry Rankin, for instance. He may well be as close as you ever get to Mr. Right, so I wouldn’t let him slip through your fingers too quickly if I were you. Capiche?”

Ann remained silent a moment then said, “Alright, Karen. As usual, there might be some truth to what you’re saying. Why do you have to be so damn psychic all the time? You always seem to know what I’m thinking!”

Karen smiled. “Age, my dear, that’s all it is. There’s wisdom in getting older and that’s about all I can see in it.”

Ann took a sip of her coffee. “Well, I’m still going to ‘hold out,’ as you put it. At least for a while. After all, I just met Jerry—I hardly know the man! There’s nothing wrong with getting to know somebody before you go to bed with them, is there? Or am I just being old fashioned?” she added with a trace of sarcasm.

Karen shook her head. “No, you’re just being cautious, and there’s certainly nothing wrong with that. Especially nowadays with all the crazies out there. The point I’m trying to make is that you should watch that you don’t get overly cautious to the point that you scare Jerry off, that’s all. Give him a little slack, anyway. You’re asking an awful lot of him and you can’t expect him not to slip up on occasion. I’ll be frank, Ann. You are an absolutely gorgeous woman and I’m sure that Jerry is quite aware of that. That, no doubt, makes the temptation to slip up even greater.”

Ann made the same surprised face she always made whenever somebody complimented her looks. “Okay, Karen. I’ll keep that in mind. I might as well tell you now why I’m so nervous about all of this. Jerry wants to take me to his country retreat this weekend and I haven’t given him my answer yet. I have told him, though, that if I do decide to go that I have no intention of spending the night with him. He was quite understanding of that and he says that he just wants to visit the place before the weather starts getting nasty. What do you think I should do?”

“Go ahead and go with him! There’s nothing wrong with that—especially since you’ve already informed him that you aren’t spending the night.”

“I think I will. It sounds simply wonderful. He apparently owns an A-frame house nestled in the woods somewhere in Hocking County. The way Jerry describes it, it’s nothing short of Paradise.”

“This guy must be loaded, is all I can say.”

“He seems to be doing quite well with his real estate business.” Ann said.

“God, how I envy you, Ann! This guy almost sounds too good to be true. Hang on to him, gal!”

“I intend to do just that as long as things keep going as well as they are.”

Karen snatched up one of the travel brochures from Ann’s desk and started to leave. “I’ll chat with you later—I’ve got a client waiting for an itinerary. You go, girl!”

Ann laughed and realized that she was in an exceptional mood all of a sudden. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt this happy and she likened the experience to those rare magical moments she used to have when she was a teenager in high school. Like when she would find out that some gorgeous guy she had had her eyes on for weeks was going to actually ask her out on a date, stuff like that.

She realized that for the first time since her breakup with Sam that things were finally beginning to look up a bit. Nothing had really changed, granted, except for her fledgling relationship with Jerry Rankin. And maybe that was why she was suddenly seeing things in a more optimistic light.

Jerry is good for you. That’s what Karen had told her. And she was right. Ann thought about Jerry’s country retreat and decided that not only was she going to accept his offer but that she was actually looking forward to it. It would be nice to get out of town and take a long drive through the country and enjoy the fall foliage. Most likely they would leave early Saturday and return that same evening. Amy would be fine in the meantime—she could either stay at home or go out with her friends. No doubt she would be tired from the Homecoming Dance on Friday, anyway.

Suddenly it dawned on Ann that she had forgotten to tell Sam about Amy’s dance and wondered now if she should call and inform him. Then she remembered that she’d seen a letter in Amy’s purse addressed to Sam earlier that morning and that Amy no doubt would have mentioned the dance to him in the letter. Ann hadn’t been surprised to see the letter—Amy hadn’t talked to her father in a while and she had been into writing letters lately for some unknown reason—and her only concern now was that Amy didn’t mention Jerry to Sam in the

letter. At least not in any sort of negative way. The last thing she needed now was for Sam to somehow turn Amy against Jerry and ruin things before they even had a chance to get off the ground. Then she recalled Shelley Hatcher and a smile came to Ann's face. Sam was certainly in no position to criticize who she went out with!

Just then, the telephone rang and Ann picked it up.

"This is Ann Middleton, how may I help you?"

CHAPTER 17

Dusk had fallen as Sam pulled up beside the mailbox and retrieved his mail. Thumbing through the four or five pieces, he saw a letter from Amy, tossed the stack onto the passenger seat, and resumed up the long driveway to his home. Once inside, he went into the kitchen and opened up the letter from his daughter, thankful that she had finally gotten around to making contact with him. He hadn't talked to her in over three weeks for one reason or another and he silently cursed Ann again for not informing him of her recent number change.

The first thing he saw when he unfolded the contents was a picture of Amy wearing a lovely blue formal dress. Sam stared at the photo momentarily, in awe of how beautiful his little girl was and how much older and mature she looked dressed in the formal attire. He then laid the picture aside and began reading:

Dear Dad,

It seems like ages since we last talked so I decided to drop you a line. Mom told me that you've been trying to reach me but I never seem to be at home when you call. I've just been so busy lately with school and everything—you know how that goes!

I'm finally starting to like it a little better here now that I've been here a while. Columbus is so big compared to Smithtown and sometimes it's a little scary when you think about all of the crime and everything else that's going on here. I'm sure glad we don't live on the East Side—all you ever hear about on the news are all the drug-related murders that always seem to be going on. Woodcrest is a pretty small suburb—sorta like Smithtown in a way—and I'm glad we live here. It feels safer and the kids are pretty nice. I think I'm finally adjusting to school. I've made a few friends that I really like and most of the kids are pretty cool. I'm trying to get better grades, too, Dad. I guess you can't ask for miracles to happen overnight, though! (So please keep this in mind when you see my grades for this nine weeks!)

I don't know if Mom told you but I'm going to the Homecoming Dance this Friday. I'm going with a really nice guy who I think you would like if you ever met him. His name is Jason and he is adorable! I sent you a picture of me in the dress I'm going to wear to the dance. Isn't it cute?

I overheard Mom talking to her friend, Karen, and she was telling her about you dating some woman who I could tell Mom doesn't like. Dad, I really do wish you guys would get back together but I know it may not ever happen so I want you to know that I'm not mad at you or anything. You have your own life now and I guess if you want to go out with a lady other than Mom, it's your business.

Mom will probably kill me if she ever finds out I told you what I'm about to say. She's actually going out with some guy! She tells me that they're just friends but I'm not a fool—I know there's probably more going on than that! I met him the other day when he came over for dinner. His name is Jerry Rankin or something like that and I can tell you right now, Dad, that I don't like him. So you don't have to worry about any competition with Mom. He's pretty nice looking, I guess, but he's a real dweeb!(I think you'd call him a square.) He tries to act real cool, like he knows all about teenagers and everything, but I think it's all just a big act to impress Mom. Anyway, I'm telling you this so if Mom keeps going out with this guy and tells you about him, you'll know that he's not even in your league and that I'll never like him, so don't worry about that.

Well, I'd better go now. I love you, Daddy, very, very much. And I miss you very much, too. Write to me or call me and let me know when we're getting together again, OK?

Love,

Amy

Sam smiled to himself as he folded the letter and placed it back in the envelope. It was more than obvious that his daughter had better taste in men than her mother did. This Jerry character sounded like a real prize—probably some fucking muscle-bound yuppie that spends most of his free time working out at the local health spa and the rest of the time with his nose buried in the *Wall Street Journal*.

Sam examined the picture of Amy again and felt a pang of apprehension as he considered how much his little girl had grown up in the last year. She was a beautiful young woman now—no longer the cute little girl in pigtails she used to be. She resembled Ann even more than ever—the same long, thick auburn hair, the same fair skin and now, the same flawlessly proportioned body.

He could only pray that she remained a virgin for at least another half dozen years . . .

Sam carried the snapshot with him into the den and stood it up on the mantle, near the antique kerosene lamp he'd recently picked up at a flea market. He then went over to the phone, checked the time—it was only 6:15—and doubted if Amy had left for the dance yet. He began dialing Ann's number and stopped himself midway, recalling that she had a new number now. Swearing under his breath, he dug into his wallet and found the slip of paper where he had jotted down the new unpublished telephone number.

Amy answered on the second ring. "Hello?"

"Hi, kiddo! I just got done reading your letter—when are you leaving for the big dance?"

"Hi, Dad! Well, the game starts at 7:30 and Jason's picking me up at around 7:15," his daughter replied excitedly.

"He's old enough to drive?" Sam said, beginning to smell a rat.

"Uh, yeah—isn't that cool?"

"Yeah, I guess it is. So I assume that Jason is a sophomore?" Sam asked guardedly.

A brief pause, then, "Well, no. He's sort of a junior."

Christ, Sam thought. Does Ann know this?

"I see," he said. "Has your mother met Jason yet?"

"No, but she will soon . . ."

Sam felt his pulse quickening more by the second as he tried to digest all of this. Here was his little 14-year-old-girl going out with a guy two years older who no doubt would love nothing better than to take advantage of her naive innocence. Had Ann lost her mind?

Struggling to keep his composure, he said, "This Jason fellow doesn't drink, does he, Amy?" No, of course not, he thought to himself—and bears don't shit in the woods, either.

"Oh no, Daddy! He's on the soccer team—Jason's an *athlete!*"

There's your answer . . . "And is he a safe driver?"

Amy chuckled. "He drives like an old lady! I know, because he's brought me home from school a few times. Quit worrying, Dad! I'll be fine!"

"Well, just be a good girl, sweetie—that's all I ask. And have a good time. Is your mother around?"

"She's in the bathroom right now," she replied. Amy lowered her voice to a near-whisper. "She's getting ready for a big date with Mr. Rankin."

Sam's blood pressure went up another notch. "Oh, is that so?"

"Yeah," was the whispered reply. "And he's taking her to his country hideaway tomorrow."

Sam was stunned. It was one thing for Ann to be dating some yuppie asshole, but to be openly shacking up with him under his daughter's nose was an absolute outrage.

"And where might this little hideaway be, sweetie?" he asked in a conspiratorial whisper.

"I don't know for sure—somewhere in Hocking County—don't tell her I told you!"

"I won't, Honey. I would like to talk to her, though. Why don't you see if she can come to the phone now, okay?"

"You're gonna tell her, aren't you? Please, Dad, swear you won't!"

"I am not going to tell her—I promise. I want to talk to her about something else."

"Okay. I'll see if she's out of the tub yet," Amy said and set the phone down.

A moment later, Amy returned. "She'll be here in a minute. I guess I'd better get off—I need to start getting ready."

"Have a great time tonight, kiddo."

"Thanks, Daddy. And don't worry about me—I'll be fine! Bye!"

Amy dropped the phone and a few seconds later Ann got on. "Hello Sam, what's up?" she said.

"I'd like to know what you're doing letting my daughter go out with a fucking *man* is what's up!" Sam lashed out.

"Settle down, Sam!" Ann exclaimed. "First of all, Jason's not a man—he's only seventeen years old! And second of all, I don't think you realize just how much this dance means to Amy. She's been moodier than hell lately and hasn't exactly been an angel with her chores or schoolwork, either. But ever since she's been asked to this dance, she's been cheerful and happy for a change and I'm not about to ruin it for her. Besides that, it's only a dance, Sam, not an orgy! I've told her that there is to be no drinking and that she is to be home no later than eleven-thirty. Plus, I've asked around about this Jason boy and from what I've heard, he's a nice young man. Now, do you have any more criticism as to how I should be raising my child?"

Ann always had a knack for making him feel like a turd. “No, Ann, I don’t,” he managed to say. “I’m just concerned about her, that’s all. It would have been nice, though, if you would have at least discussed this with me beforehand.”

“You’re right about that and I apologize,” was all she said.

Sam wanted to put in a few cents more but decided against it. He had argued with Ann enough lately and simply wasn’t in the mood to argue any more. Besides that, he had to get on the road as soon as possible. “Well, I’ll let you go then,” he said. “Do you know if Amy will be there tomorrow evening?”

“Probably not until late—that’s a Saturday night. Why?” Ann said.

“I was thinking about calling her to see how the dance went, that’s all. I’m getting ready to go out of town on an assignment and I won’t be back until some time tomorrow evening.”

“Well, I should be home by ten at the latest, so one of us will be here anyway. You know how Amy is—she doesn’t make any plans until the last minute.”

“All right, I’ll try calling when I get back, then. By the way, the latest on Stanley Jenkins is that the girl whose dorm he torched in college died in a car wreck in Colorado a couple of months ago.”

There was a brief moment of silence before Ann said, “That seems a little odd, doesn’t it?”

“Roger and I both thought so. But apparently there weren’t any signs of foul play according to the Colorado State Police. The car she was driving went over a cliff in the mountains while she was going around a curve that is notorious for causing fatalities so they ruled it an accident.”

“Sounds like it was just coincidence, then,” Ann said.

“Well, if you ask me, there’s been too many coincidences in this whole damn case. First Marsha, then Sara Hunt, and now this. There has to be a connection of some kind.”

“If anyone can figure it out it will be you and that alcoholic cop friend of yours,” she declared sarcastically.

“Sometimes, Ann...”

“I was just kidding, Sam! I like Roger and you know it.”

“I’m beginning to worry more about you than Roger.”

“And what is that supposed to mean?”

“Your attitude, Ann. I think your newfound independence is going to your head. The world isn’t by any means any safer than it used to be, but you seem to think it is.”

“What in the hell are you talking about, Sam?”

“Think about it. I’ve got to go now.”

“Fine, so do I.”

“Take care, Ann.”

Click.

Sam breathed a long hard sigh after replacing the receiver in an effort to compose himself. That same old familiar wave of alienation swept over him like a dark cloud and only served to fuel the anger he was feeling at the moment.

He never did like being this out of touch with his family even before the divorce. But it really wasn’t until this moment that he realized just how little influence, if any, he had over his ex-wife and the upbringing of his only child. Until now, it hadn’t seemed quite so significant.

Ann had always been a conservative, levelheaded woman—but she seemed different now. She appeared to be almost apathetic in regard to disciplining Amy—like she was willing to roll over and play dead while Amy did whatever she damn well pleased. And as for Ann’s new boyfriend—this Rankin creep—he sounded like the type of yuppie asshole he had always resented, and the type he had always thought Ann resented as well.

At least she wasn’t shacking up with him over the weekend, as he had feared. His little ploy to find out if Ann was planning on doing so had worked flawlessly—Ann hadn’t even suspected why he asked about Amy’s plans for the following night. He knew that Ann would never leave Amy alone at the house overnight if she’d intended on staying over with Rankin. At least she hadn’t gone that far off the rocker . . . not yet, anyway.

But what was bothering him the most in the back of his mind was the mere presence of this Jerry Rankin character in the overall picture. Sam already felt threatened by him for some reason and it went beyond petty jealousy. Something about him just didn’t seem right. He wasn’t sure if it was the way Ann had seemed to change practically overnight ever since she’d first mentioned that she was seeing him or if it was something else. At any rate, Sam was at least content in knowing that Amy didn’t like this guy—and had she indicated that she did like him, well, he wasn’t sure how he’d react to it. He wouldn’t have been thrilled, that’s for sure.

Shrugging his shoulders, Sam left the den and went into his bedroom to pack. He checked the time and realized that he was going to have to hurry if he was going to make it to Ironton in time for the big political bullshit debate he’d gotten roped into covering. Why hadn’t the candidates for the statehouse chosen Smithtown to bore the pants off of instead of Ironton? And who gave a flying fuck which one of these assholes won the election anyway—they were both a pair of hillbilly dimwits.

At least he had something to look forward to after the debate. Since Ashland, Kentucky was directly across the Ohio River from Ironton he couldn’t find any reason not to take Shelley up on her invitation to spend the night at her place as opposed to driving all the way back to Smithtown at night. In fact, the prospect of throwing back a few beers and devouring her sweet little body afterwards almost made the prospect of the debate worth suffering through.

In another five minutes, Sam was packed and out the door. As he pulled away from his house, he started wondering how Roger was doing in L.A. and whether or not he’d been able to find out anything on Stanley Jenkins. The detective had been there for two days now and Sam had only heard from him once—when he’d called yesterday to let him know that California girls were everything they were cracked up to be and more . . . Typical Roger Hagstrom banter.

It had become more and more apparent that apprehending Stanley Jenkins was not going to be easy. He had covered his tracks meticulously so far, which no doubt helped justify the Smithtown P.D. paying for Roger’s trip to L.A. to investigate further. Even with Stanley Jenkins’ mug shot plastered all over creation and after all of the media attention on the case, there hadn’t been one single confirmed sighting of the suspect yet. It was as though Stanley Jenkins had never existed. Since L.A. was believed to be the only confirmed place in the past twenty years that Stanley had lived for any length of time, Roger was hoping that there might be some kind of trail to pursue there.

Ironically, the long awaited interview with Tommy Bradley had turned up very little of anything new in the case but had lent insight into the absolute cold heartedness of his mother’s murderer. During the interrogation, the youngster had told Roger that a man had come into his bedroom with his mother the night she’d been murdered and had ordered Marsha to lock her son in the closet. The room was dark and the only description

Tommy could give of the man was that he was tall and had dark hair. When Roger had shown the police composite to Tommy for identification the boy stated that he couldn't be sure but he didn't think the murderer looked like the composite of Jenkins, reiterating that it had been awfully dark in his room and it was hard to see clearly.

While locked in the closet, Tommy said that he had been unable to hear anything going on downstairs except for intermittent high-pitched beeping sounds that he heard about fifteen minutes after the murderer had forced his mother out of his bedroom. Sam had later offered his theory that the sounds were possibly the Polaroid camera in self-timer mode, which clicks off the seconds with a tone while the photographer is scrambling to become part of the scene being photographed.

Tommy told his interviewer that he had been in the closet for around a half hour or so before the murderer had returned to his room. He had stepped over to the closet door and asked Tommy if he was okay through the door. Then he had told the boy that his mother was dead and had gone to heaven. Tommy had started crying and asked the killer why his mother was dead. The killer had made no reply. Then Marsha Bradley's murderer left the room and little Tommy had remained in the closet until Dave arrived home and found him there.

Sam felt a chill run down his spine every time he tried to imagine little Tommy Bradley locked in a closet all that time after being told by a total stranger that he had just murdered his mother. Was it any wonder why the kid had been so traumatized? And was it not more than obvious that Stanley Jenkins was not only a demented, perverse murderer but a sadistic son of a bitch as well?

Sam had opted to spare Ann the unsettling details of the Tommy Bradley interrogation as well as the tidbit of information one of Roger's men had managed to gather after tracking down Stanley Jenkins' former college roommate. The man who used to share a room with Stanley during his brief but illustrious college stint told the police that Stanley had made an interesting remark one night while he was drunk and tripping on acid. Stanley told his roomie that he had the hots for some chick back home and that one day he was going to "track her down and jump on her bones whether she is a willing participant or not." The roommate hadn't taken Stanley's remark seriously at the time but he admitted that the incident was so bizarre that he hadn't been able to forget it in all these years.

So some questions were raised as a result of this tidbit of info: was Marsha Bradley the girl Stanley had been referring to? Or had it been Sara Hunt? And if it had been either one or the other, why would he rape and murder them both? And twenty-some years later, no less?

Again, no rational connection could be established between the two murders. The only optimistic aspect of this new information was the remote possibility that perhaps Stanley Jenkins had murdered all he was going to murder—if indeed he'd been referring to either Marsha or Sara in his conversation with his roommate. At least it seemed now that Ann was more or less safe—Sam knew for a fact that she had never so much as spoken a word to Stanley Jenkins back in high school or she would certainly have mentioned it to him by now.

As he reached the outskirts of Smithtown, Sam had to force himself to get his mind off the murder investigation and on to something less troubling, like Shelley Hatcher. He didn't want to think about Stanley Jenkins or Ann or anything else negative in his life right now. All he wanted to do was focus on Shelley and the great time he was going to have with her once this fucking debate thing was over.

It wasn't very easy to do.

CHAPTER 18

Six weeks earlier, Stanley Jenkins stood beside a tree and gazed down at Cindy Fuller's sprawling split-level home. The hillside afforded an excellent vantage point; a virtually unobstructed view of the entire southeast area of her house including the two-car garage, which was perhaps only seventy-five yards away from where Stanley was standing now. The nearest neighbor's house was dangerously close by—not over fifty feet to the east—but the house was all but obscured from view by the dense stand of Douglas fir running along the boundary between the two homes.

He checked his watch again. It was 8:06. In another ten minutes Cindy would pull into her driveway, engage the garage door opener and pull inside. Then she would get out of her car and head for the door that led into her kitchen, pausing only long enough to press the garage door button mounted on the wall beside the door before entering her impressive home.

Once inside, she would head straight for the kitchen pantry where she kept her copious stock of liquor and take out a brand new bottle of Johnny Walker Red. (She'd just finished off the rest of the old bottle the night before.) Then she would proceed to fix herself her usual drink: two ice cubes, a few ounces of scotch and a splash of soda water. Next, she would take the drink along with her into the den, turn on the television and sit down on the sofa while she nursed her drink, thinking much of the time of how relieved she was that her mother had taken the kids for the night. It was Wednesday again, and that meant another romp in the hay with the mayor, whom she would be meeting at his rented chateau on Buena Vista Lane in another hour.

Tonight, however, Cindy was going to miss her appointment with the mayor. And it was a downright sacrilege that the mayor's wife would most likely never find out that he had been having a torrid affair with the city prosecutor for God only knew how long.

A smug grin came to Stanley's face as he stared down at the dimly lit oval-shaped pool in the back of Cindy's home. He could still picture her on that hot sticky August night, swimming laps, naked, and totally unaware that she was being observed. He remembered thinking to himself how well Cindy's body had held up over the last twenty years. Back in college, he'd only seen her naked once, and that had been one hell of a major undertaking in itself. He had managed to shimmy up a tree outside of her dorm in the wee hours of the morning and caught her (by sheer luck, really) when she'd gotten out of bed to take a piss. He had a hunch that she always slept in the raw (she just seemed like the type) and he knew for a fact that she almost always had to get up some time in the middle of the night to relieve herself. This he had learned by watching her dorm room for the past week or two and seeing a light go on for a couple of minutes on any given night and then go off. Fortunately for Stanley, not only had he been right about her sleeping in the buff, he'd even had a halfway decent vantage point at the critical moment and been able to get a pretty good look at her.

God, had he ever been stiff and sore after waiting in that awkward position thirty feet above the ground for nearly three hours! And just to get a glimpse of Cindy Fuller nude! But it had been well worth it, really, even if it had been for only a fleeting moment . . .

He'd come a long way since those days, in more ways than one. One of his greatest accomplishments had been the simple realization that people were predictable as hell. They were all creatures of habit to a degree and had their little routines that they performed day in and day out. The challenging part was getting close enough to

them without getting caught so that you could observe those routines. And that took more than mere stealth, he'd eventually learned. It took brains, too. Intelligence, patience and careful planning: that was the key to success. And once you had all of these elements working together there wasn't a thing you couldn't achieve.

Locating Cindy Fuller's whereabouts had been a fucking cinch, for example. All he'd needed was a computer, internet access and knowing all the ropes of using search engines to the max. The abundance of information one could acquire about someone was staggering. Hell, you could practically access their entire life history as long as you knew what to input and where to input it! In a matter of a few minutes he had learned, among other things, that Cindy Fuller presently lived in Portnoy, Colorado, that she was recently divorced from Gregory Martin, was mother to two kids, made over 95K a year, and was leasing a red Mercedes coupe.

Stanley shook his head slowly from side to side, wondering how far he could have possibly gotten in this life if it weren't for computers. How else could he have become the man he was now if it weren't for those little beige boxes of power? It was truly mind-blowing!

If only his mother could see him now, he thought. She would be proud of him. And she would realize that he had been right all along—that getting good grades and studying all the time just wasn't enough to get by in this world. How many times had he told her that girls don't want to go out with a fucking egghead—that they want to be with someone who is fucking cool—one who wears the right clothes, knows the words to all the latest hits on the radio and knows all the right things to say at the right time.

Jesus! he thought. She wouldn't even let him ditch those ugly horn-rimmed glasses that he'd hated so much! Why couldn't she ever get it through her thick skull that it was bad enough to be intelligent and on the straight-A honor roll all the time but to be ugly in the process made it fucking impossible to get any chicks! It was almost as if she'd wanted him to strike out all the time by making him wear those hideous dorky clothes she kept buying for him, always insisting that he keep his hair short and neatly parted on the left side by slapping a ton of Brylcreem on it! And where in the holy horse fuck was the old man all this time? Why, he was sitting there in his Lazy Boy recliner, smoking his pipe and reading his fucking newspaper and telling him to mind his mother—that's where. Thanks for coming to my defense, Pop, you pussy-whipped, hen-tied shitfuck!

His parents had never been able to understand him. That was because they'd been too nearsighted to see past his 165+ I.Q. Their son was a genius, they figured, so let's push him to excel in school so he can leave the rest of the students in the rear of the class eating his dust. It was all they had ever cared about: straight A's and scholarships. They had no idea what it was like to be walking down the hall and having everyone laughing at you behind your back. Or to be in class and have the teacher always calling on you to give him the right answer to a question that no one else could answer. Or to have all the guys in gym class flip you on the ass with a wet towel and facetiously ask how many girls you'd screwed over the past weekend.

But the girls were the worst by far. There they were, in their mini skirts hiked up to their crotches and those skin tight sweaters with their tits screaming to get out and not a fucking one of the halfway decent ones would even give him the time of day. They all looked down their noses at him as if he were a fucking leper or something! How many times did he get shot down, all tolled, anyway? A hundred? A fucking *thousand*? And how many girls had ever gone out with him in all the time he'd been in high school? One. One fucking girl, and he was using the word loosely. Loretta Hodges: the ugliest fucking hag in the entire school.

And what had happened on his one and only date with the ugliest girl in school? He'd taken her to a movie and had dared to put a hand on her breast. And what had she done? She had fucking decked him, that's what

she'd done. And if that weren't enough, she'd started screaming bloody murder in the theatre as she stormed out, accusing him of being a pervert!

That had been the last straw. He had figured from there on out that if he was to ever score with a chick, it was going to be a fucking beauty next time—none of this lowering himself to the likes of Loretta Hodges' abysmal level.

He had decided to focus on one babe in particular instead of spreading himself thin. She was to become his main focus of attention—the one who was finally going to give him what he wanted. And in the meantime, whenever he was alone in his bedroom, he would think of her while he was jerking off instead of pulling out one of those dog-eared *Playboys* from under the mattress yet again. No more bullshit—she was going to be the one he ate, drank and slept with in his dreams. He would follow her home after school, find out all of her likes and dislikes, and basically view her from afar until he finally felt it was time to make his move. Then one day, when the time was just right, he would approach this beauty and tell her how many things he knew about her and she would be so impressed that he knew all of those intimate details that she wouldn't be able to resist letting him take her out on a date. She would be the one to suddenly realize that Stanley Jenkins wasn't the nerd everyone thought him to be but instead a pretty damn suave and cool guy, after all—sort of like a young James Bond.

But he had never followed through with his plan. He'd chosen the beautiful chick, all right, but when he had finally approached her, he hadn't had the nerve to tell her that he'd been following her all over creation for the past several months or that he knew, for example, that she liked to take long hot baths and never failed to soak in the tub for a good twenty minutes before she ever got around to actually washing herself.

Nope, he had choked instead, in fact. And had made a complete fool of himself. All because he'd made the mistake of not being patient instead of letting someone con him into thinking that he was ready to make the big score. That fucking bitch had ruined nearly a whole year of *intense sleuthing!*

She was going to pay for it, though—they both were. Just as Cindy Fuller was going to pay for being such a total disappointment and getting him shut up in the nut house.

And once he had Cindy all squared away he was going to track down the other ones and make them regret that they had ever made Stanley Jenkins the laughing stock at school. Then he was at last going to get his second chance in life. He would finally be free to play it by the book and find out what he'd been missing out on all his fucking life.

He suddenly saw a car's headlights out of the corner of his eye. He turned and peered at Cindy Fuller's red Mercedes as it approached the house and pulled into the driveway. It was too dark to see inside the car but he could visualize her groping for the garage door opener lying on the console and pressing the button. Stanley saw the door open as Cindy slowed down her speed somewhat until she was in the garage. A moment later, he heard the slam of a car door and in another, the electric clatter of the garage door closing.

He saw the kitchen light come on and waited another five minutes before making his way down the hill to the fringe of the side yard. As expected, Cindy hadn't turned on the outdoor flood lights which would have lit up the grounds surrounding her house like a Christmas tree—he had since learned that she only turned them on whenever she planned on being out of town for more than a day at a time. Stanley began slinking diagonally across the lawn in the direction of the back door situated at the far corner of the house near the spacious patio, just beyond the swimming pool. As he passed furtively by the kitchen window, Stanley peered inside just long

enough to spot the freshly opened bottle of Johnny Walker Red sitting on the counter near the sink, then resumed moving nimbly around the pool, onto the patio and up the steps leading to the back door.

Stanley reached inside his coat pocket and took out a key, then silently stuck it into the keyhole and turned. The dead bolt slid free with a crisp click that he knew would be inaudible in the den. He took out a pair of latex examination gloves from his pocket and pulled them on before turning the brass doorknob, silently pushing the door open with his other hand. Once inside, he inched the door closed, locked it, and waited for his eyes to adjust to the weak light in the room before advancing any further.

Jenkins strode across the room to the hallway and turned right, passing the study and a spare bedroom along the way. When he reached the dining room, he crept slowly through it and around the corner to the doorway leading into the den. He froze for a moment just outside the den and could hear the television set—it sounded like Cindy was watching a rerun of Roseanne. In another moment he could hear the clinking of ice cubes in a glass as Cindy Fuller took a long sip from her drink. Little did she know, he thought, that it was to be her last.

He entered the den and stood for a moment, staring at her. She was sitting on the sofa directly across the room from him. She was still wearing the same outfit he had seen her put on that morning—a matching navy blue skirt and jacket and white blouse: standard fare for the professional woman of the nineties. Cindy's eyes were glued to the T.V. screen and she held her drink lovingly in both hands with her feet propped up on the coffee table. She suddenly started laughing at one of Darlene Connor's one-liners and in the process happened to see Stanley standing there. At first she merely froze and her jaw dropped, unable to utter a word. Then he saw all the color drain out of her face as he started walking slowly and methodically toward her.

"Hello, Cindy—long time no see," he said cheerfully as he strode across the room.

Cindy instinctively bolted up from the sofa, spilling her drink. "Who are you? And what are you doing in my house?" she sputtered, terrified.

Stanley continued pacing steadily toward her. He was only a dozen feet away from her now. "Why Cindy, I'm disappointed in you. Don't you recognize me?"

"No, I don't!" she uttered. Stanley watched the drink that was swashing back and forth in her violently trembling hand with delight as she spoke.

He continued his steady gait across the room until he was directly across the coffee table from her.

"Let me give you a few clues," he said, the crooked smile never leaving his face. "The last time you saw me was about twenty years ago at Fountainhead Tech. I was the guy you absolutely refused to go out with because you thought you were too good for me. I got angry with you since you rebuffed me, so I set fire to your dorm room, hoping to put an end to your unyielding existence. But unfortunately for me, you weren't in your room at the time like you were supposed to be and I ended up bungling the whole mission. But, my dear, sweet Cindy, it was in a way unfortunate for you as well. Because I think you would have much rather exited this world that way than the way I have planned for you now."

Cindy Fuller was by now absolutely mortified with fear as she stood there frozen like a statue, an expression of incredulous horror on her face. Stanley continued standing where he was, only the breadth of the coffee table between the two, his smile never waning for a moment.

"No!" she cried as she tried to make a run for it. In an instant, Stanley turned to his left, grabbed her arm and threw her onto the sofa.

“I see now that your memory has returned,” he said in calm, controlled voice as he stared down at her. “And if you try to pull another stunt like that, I’m not going to be responsible for what I might do to you. Am I making myself clear?”

Cindy nodded slowly, tears welling up in her eyes.

“That’s better.” He leaned down and stroked her blonde hair. “Please don’t cry, Cindy—you’re messing up your makeup,”

Stanley sat down on the edge of the coffee table and stared into her eyes as he ran his gloved fingers through her shoulder-length hair. His expression was pensive.

“You still look wonderful, Cindy, if you don’t mind my saying so. You’ve aged quite nicely, in fact. Same thick, golden hair, same gorgeous blue eyes, and from what I’ve seen—practically the same sweet body you had back in the old college days. It almost seems like a shame to let such a lovely creature go to waste.”

He paused a moment, then said, “So here’s what I’m going to do. I’m going to give you another chance. That’s right, Cindy, I’m going to afford you the opportunity of deciding once again if you’re too good for me. In other words, are you going to be a willing participant or am I going to have to beat you into absolute submission to have my way with you? The decision is yours.”

Cindy began convulsing violently as Stanley sat there, continually stroking her hair. She literally could not find her voice. He then placed both of his hands on her shoulders as a token gesture of comfort and stared expectantly into her eyes.

“Well Cindy, what’s it going to be?”

She looked away a moment then back at him. “What are you going to do to me, Stanley?”

He smiled at her, his eyes cold as steel. “It’s what I may not do to you that you should be concerned with, darling.”

Cindy Fuller’s expression became imploring.

“Please don’t kill me! I have two small children! I’ll do anything you ask—but please don’t kill me!” she cried.

Stanley chuckled triumphantly. “That’s both a very prudent and inviting offer, Cindy, but you haven’t yet answered my question. Do you still think that you’re too good for Stanley Jenkins? Or are you beginning to see him in a different light? Tell me Cindy. Are you impressed with what you see now?”

She nodded slowly. “Yes, Stanley. I am.”

“Say it, Cindy! Tell me you regret ever being such a bitch to me back at Fountainhead! That you now realize what a stupid mistake you made!”

Cindy was hysterical. “I’m sorry, Stanley!” she cried desperately. “I should have gone out with you but I didn’t because I’m a bitch and I’m really sorry that I didn’t do it now!”

A huge smirk came to Stanley’s face. “Excellent! You know, Cindy, I almost believe you actually mean what you just said, but my better judgment tells me that you’re only speaking out of fear and desperation. I need to be convinced that you’re really sincere. I want you to show me that you’ve truly learned your lesson.”

His hand went to her breast for a moment, then he withdrew it. Cindy flinched and a look of dread and revulsion showed in her eyes.

Stanley chuckled, “I’m beginning to sense that your heart isn’t really in this, Cindy. Perhaps I should just kill you instead of wasting my time.”

She grabbed his sleeve. “No, Stanley, please!”

He stared at her expectantly. She said, “What do you want me to do?”

His expression softened and he smiled. “The county doesn’t pay you \$95,000 a year to be stupid, I see.”

He stood up and declared. “I want you to perform for me, Cindy. That’s all.”

Cindy looked up into his eyes questioningly. “What do you mean?”

He replied, “I want you to just sit there where you are for a moment or two and then I’ll tell you what I want you to do. And I may as well caution you right now not to try anything foolish like running away. I’m in peak physical condition and can run ten miles a day without breaking a sweat. You got it?”

Cindy nodded, her face white as a sheet.

Stanley winked at her then turned and strode over to the television and switched it off. He went to the other end of the room near the doorway and faced her again. He removed the nylon bag slung over his shoulder and opened up a compartment, took out a Polaroid camera and tripod, then tossed the bag aside. After pulling out the legs of the tripod as far as they would go and tightening them, he attached the camera to the base and adjusted the height by means of the crank arm until the camera was up as high as his chin. He looked through the viewfinder at Cindy sitting on the sofa and moved the tripod in closer toward her until he was satisfied with the composition. Then he stepped back and looked over the room to ensure himself that he’d picked the best angle of view attainable, then breathed a long sigh of satisfaction.

“Stand up, Cindy,” he commanded.

Cindy had to grasp the arm of the sofa to steady herself as she arose to her feet.

“Now come around to the other side of the coffee table and stand there.”

Cindy’s eyes were on the plush carpeting as she stepped out from behind the coffee table, went around to the front and stood there as still as she possibly could.

“Raise your head and look at me,” Stanley ordered, peering through the viewfinder.

Cindy raised her head and looked toward him.

“Will you quit fucking crying for chrissakes!” he snapped. “Your makeup is running!”

Agitated, Stanley reached into his coat pocket, took out a Kleenex, then went over and began dabbing Cindy’s face in an effort to clean off her mascara-streaked eyes and cheeks. Her head bobbed and quivered each time he touched her and the rest of her body trembled violently.

“I wish you would relax, Cindy. There’s nothing to be afraid of. Don’t you want to look good for the camera?”

“I . . . I’m trying,” she moaned, avoiding his eyes.

“There now, that’s better,” he said, standing back and looking her over.

Stanley returned to the camera and looked through the viewfinder. After making a slight adjustment, he said, “Now, Cindy, remove your clothes . . . slowly.”

“*What?*”

“I said to take off your clothes.”

Stanley continued to watch Cindy through the viewfinder as she stared at the wall and began fidgeting with her jacket. Then she suddenly threw her hands up in the air and peered over at him.

“I can’t do it!”

Stanley jumped back from the camera. “Yes, you can, Cindy, and you fucking *will* do it, by God!”

With that, he stormed over and raised his hand as if to strike her then stopped himself. His rage abated and his expression grew calm again.

“Listen, Cindy. We don’t have all night so I want you to listen closely to what I have to say. If you want to live to see your kids again I suggest that you do exactly as I say. I just don’t understand you gorgeous fucking women! Here you are, with your beautiful bodies and all the things you put yourselves through to keep yourselves that way. Then a man comes along and asks you to show him what you have and you suddenly clam up on him! Now does that make any sense? I’ve seen you in various stages of undress already, so what’s the big problem here? Ha! You didn’t even know that, did you? That’s because I’m good—really good. You haven’t even had an inkling that I’ve been observing you for the past two weeks have you? Well, I have. I’ve seen you in your bathroom taking a bath, in your bedroom getting dressed in the morning, and even in your pool skinny-dipping in the middle of the fucking night. And guess what—I’ve seen you screwing the mayor, too! Bet you thought that was some kind of big secret, didn’t you? I can tell by your expression right now that you’re shocked by all of these revelations, but like I said, I’m good. So I already know what you got there, Cindy, and I want to see it again. *Now!* So are you going to start taking off those clothes for me or am I going to have to fucking do it for you?”

Cindy was absolutely dumbstruck. She wanted to protest but realized it was useless. She looked around the room for a moment, as if to suddenly discover a miraculous way out of this situation, which she knew didn’t exist. She then looked at Stanley Jenkins in utter defeat and nodded her head slowly.

“Excellent!”

Stanley returned to the camera. He peered through the viewfinder once again and stared as Cindy Fuller removed her jacket. Her eyes avoided the camera when she let the jacket drop to the floor and began unbuttoning her blouse.

“Slowly,” Stanley commanded.

Cindy shot him a pained glance and with trembling hands mechanically undid her blouse, allowing it to fall off her shoulders to the floor. After pulling down her skirt and removing her pantyhose, she stopped and stared at him with pleading eyes.

“The rest, Cindy. Take off the rest,” he insisted, his voice guttural as he continued to peer through the viewfinder.

Cindy sighed in helpless exasperation and undid her bra. She tossed it aside, and with tears streaming out of her eyes, removed her panties.

“Excellent!” Stanley exclaimed. “Say ‘cheese!’”

An instant later, the camera fired—causing Cindy to flinch from the glare of the flash. The camera promptly coughed out a print with a whirring whine and Stanley pulled it the rest of the way out and stuck it into his pocket.

“How about a smile, Cindy?” he coaxed. “And take your hands away from your tits!”

He gaped at her as she hesitantly withdrew her hands from her breasts and let her arms fall limply to her sides. She was sobbing in fear and humiliation as she forced a weak smile that lasted only a second.

“Come on, Cindy, look alive! You know you’re enjoying this just as much as I am. Here I am, admiring that gorgeous bod of yours and it’s making me a very happy camper . . . You’re fucking pleasing me, Cindy! So give me a show—let’s see your stuff!”

At that moment, Cindy Fuller totally broke down. She started crying hysterically and slumped to the floor, no longer able to deny the pent up terror inside of her.

“Fuck!” Stanley shouted, running over to where Cindy lay writhing on the floor. He thrust his hands in under her arms and tried to force her up to her feet but she was like a dead weight. He let go of her and smacked her face hard with the back of his hand.

“Okay, Cindy. No more Mister Nice Guy. Get up on your feet or I’m going to kick the living shit out of you!”

Cindy remained motionless.

“Last chance!”

Cindy didn’t move.

Stanley brought his arm in under her chin and applied pressure, causing Cindy to choke violently. He held her in a vise-like grip for several moments, then relaxed his hold. Cindy coughed agonizingly and struggled to catch her breath.

“Are you ready to cooperate, Cindy? Or would you like me to finish you off now?”

She shook her head dismally. Stanley lifted her up to her feet and held her until she finished coughing. Then he said, “You’ve really pissed me off Cindy, you know, and I’m beginning to wonder just how much you care about your precious kids. Are you going to start playing ball with me or are you conceding the game?”

She forced herself to say in a broken hoarseness, “Okay, you win.”

Stanley Jenkins grinned victoriously. “Wait here. I’ll be back.”

He returned to the camera and looked through the viewfinder. “Turn around, Cindy. I want your sweet ass to face the camera.”

Cindy turned around.

“Now stay there and don’t move a muscle.”

He stood back and flipped the switch for the self-timer, removed his coat, his eyes never for a moment leaving Cindy’s backside. Then he quickly pulled off his sweat pants, pressed the shutter release button, and ran over to where she was standing.

“Bend over, bitch!” he commanded, then shoved himself into her just as the timer beeped out the final seconds and the camera fired.

Cindy let out an agonizing scream and struggled to break away just as Stanley grabbed her hips in his hands and forced her down onto her knees, continuing to thrust himself into her. Moments later, he withdrew and spun Cindy around, pinning her down flat on her back. He plunged himself into her as Cindy tried desperately to push him off. But she was no match for him as she kicked her feet wildly and clawed him in the back with her fingernails.

“You’re not being a very willing participant,” he panted, staring at her with insatiable lust and malice. “I’m beginning to think that you truly don’t like me one iota!”

He suddenly grasped her breasts in both hands and squeezed them as if checking cantaloupes for ripeness.

“Don’t tell me this doesn’t feel good, bitch. Now are you beginning to see what you missed when you turned down Stanley Jenkins all those years ago? All I ever wanted was this—to fuck your brains out. But you were too good for me, weren’t you, Cindy? Didn’t think I’d be able to give you so much damn pleasure. Thought I was a fucking loser! But now you know. And now I know that you’re a fucking slut, just like all the rest. Big

fucking teasing sluts who think they're shit doesn't stink. And to think that the only reason I was ever interested in you was because you resembled her so much. But you're nothing like her—she has class. You are just a cheap imitation of the real thing, you bitch!”

In a sudden fit of uncontrollable rage, Stanley hammered her in the jaw with his fist, sending Cindy's head reeling to the side. An instant later, he struck her again, this time nearly knocking her unconscious. Cindy moaned incoherently as Stanley sprung up onto his feet and ran over to where the nylon bag was lying on the floor. He reached inside and took out a three-foot length of lamp cord and raced back over to where Cindy lay half conscious on the floor. Her eyes were frozen in terror as he walked around her, forced her up into a sitting position, then drew the lamp cord around her neck from behind.

“Sorry it had to end this way, Cindy,” he declared as he tightened the cord around her neck. “But in spite of the great time I've had on our little date, I'm afraid that I'm still going to have to kill you.”

She let out a bloodcurdling screech as Stanley Jenkins pulled the lamp cord taut, causing it to cut into the soft flesh of her neck. Cindy started choking and gasping for breath as he pulled tighter and tighter until she became totally motionless. He let go and watched as her body slumped down to the floor.

Stanley stood up and checked the time—it was almost 9:00. He ran over and quickly removed the camera from the tripod and carried it back over to where Cindy's body lay. Switching off the self-timer, he aimed and took a quick shot of her. Then he laid the camera aside and stood over Cindy for a moment, staring at her as an interior decorator would while assessing a room's decor for the first time. Then he began rearranging her body position meticulously until it finally suited him. After retrieving the camera, he experimented with a few angles before snapping three or four shots of Cindy laying flat on her back, her legs spread eagle.

After putting on his sweat pants and coat, Stanley broke down the tripod and placed it into the nylon bag along with the camera and the lamp cord. He scoured the room for any evidence of his ever being there then carried Cindy's glass into the kitchen and placed it in the sink. He didn't disturb the bottle of scotch or anything else there, knowing full well that Cindy wouldn't have bothered with any of it until the next morning.

Just as he was about to return to the den, the phone rang and he felt his heart skip a beat. Stanley stood frozen in his tracks and listened as it rang a total of five times, then ceased. The mayor, he thought to himself with a grin. Most likely checking to see if Cindy had left yet to make their secret rendezvous.

Stanley hastily returned to the den and began putting Cindy's clothing back on her body. This undertaking proved to be more difficult than he had anticipated and nearly ten minutes passed before he had everything back in place. He picked up Cindy's body and cradled it in his arms as he made his way out of the den.

When he reached the door leading to the garage, he stopped long enough to catch his breath then opened the door and carried Cindy's limp body over to where the Mercedes was parked. Stanley swore under his breath when he realized that the passenger door was locked, so he carried her around to the driver's side and managed to open the door far enough to heave her increasingly cumbersome body onto the seat. With a huff, Stanley turned and went back inside to the kitchen where he found Cindy's purse and car keys laying on the counter. Returning to the garage, he unlocked the passenger door and opened it, then transferred Cindy's body over from the driver's side. He pulled her lower body down as far as he could toward the floorboard until she was out of view from the outside. Sweating profusely from the exertion, Stanley went back inside, made a final look over of the den, turned off the lamp beside the sofa, grabbed up the nylon bag and returned to the garage.

He got into the Mercedes, inserted the key and fired up the engine. Stanley stared at the tachometer. The idle speed, even with the choke engaged, was only about 800 rpm. That certainly won't do, he thought. After fishing a screwdriver out of the nylon bag, Stanley pulled the hood release button and got out of the car. After raising the hood and locating the idle adjustment screw, he turned it clockwise until the engine was purring along at cruising speed. He then closed the hood and returned to the driver's seat. He estimated that the rpms would be somewhere around three grand once the car was all warmed up. That should do it.

He depressed the button on the remote garage door opener and waited until the door was fully open before shifting into reverse. The car lurched back with a reverberating squeal and he contemplated lowering the idle a bit but thought against it. Better safe than sorry, he thought; and who gave a tinker's dam if he had just all but trashed the transmission? It wouldn't make any difference in a few minutes, anyway.

Halfway down the lengthy driveway, Stanley pressed the garage door button again, just as Cindy would have done. A moment later he pulled away from the house, hoping no one heard the squeal of the patch he'd just laid at the foot of her driveway.

Stanley had learned through his extensive internet research that Portnoy was a small but sprawling Colorado suburb inhabited mostly by affluent residents who conducted most of their business in nearby Denver. The chateau that the mayor used for his liaisons with Cindy was less than a two-mile drive from her home. To get there, she would have merely driven down her street to Ridgemont Road, taken a left hand turn, then descended the steep, winding two lane road until it intersected with Pinecrest Lane. There she would get onto Pinecrest and drive back up the mountain for a half mile or so then pull onto a little unmarked road which was all but obscured from view by the lush, towering pines growing on either side of it. Once on this road, she would drive another quarter of a mile or so until she reached the chateau that was tucked away in the middle of nowhere. The view of the majestic Rockies at their obscure little love nest, Stanley had to admit, was absolutely breathtaking.

Located just before the intersection of Ridgemont and Pinecrest was a sharp, hairpin curve that couldn't be safely negotiated at any speed in excess of fifteen miles per hour. Along this perilous curve was a short strip of grassy roadside, about thirty feet wide, and beyond that a cliff with a sudden drop-off of perhaps 1500 feet or so. The only barrier standing between the roadside and the cliff was, amazingly, a pathetic guardrail constructed only of treated pine posts and a pair of wooden beams. Stanley had been elated the first time he'd laid eyes on this engineering faux pas as he noted that this would be a primo site for some less-than-responsible motorist to lose control of his car and go plummeting over a cliff with a vertical drop-off of nearly half a mile.

And tonight Cindy Fuller, he thought with relish, was going to be that luckless motorist.

It was a chilly night and the air smelled of an impending snowstorm. He turned on the car's heater and zipped quickly along the steep mountain road just as Cindy would have done en route to her rendezvous with the mayor. He'd discovered in the last couple of weeks that she was a reckless and incompetent driver to say the least, often exceeding the speed limit and rarely wearing a seat belt. She had been quite a wild lady in general, as a matter of fact, considering her age and her lofty position in the community.

Stanley would never forget the night he had first followed her to the road that led to the mayor's private getaway, clueless as to what she could possibly be up to. He recalled getting out of his car and following her on foot from that point on, knowing that she couldn't be going much further, considering the geography of the area. He had followed her for about fifty yards or so before he came upon a steel gate that blocked the entire breadth

of the road. It was secured by a thick chain and a heavy padlock that Cindy evidently had a key to. He had scaled the six-foot fence adjacent to the gate and proceeded along the road until he'd finally reached the edge of the grounds surrounding a small stone house that reminded him of a miniature French manor.

The grounds had been well lit by floodlights and it was no small feat circling the grounds in the thick foliage until he found an area where he could approach the chateau unnoticed. Once he'd made it however, the rest of his mission had been easy. The place was like a fish bowl—more windows than anything else—particularly in the rear of the structure where the patio and hot tub were located as well as a spectacular view of the Rockies.

Stanley had stood hidden behind a tree and watched as the mayor, who had to be sixty if he were a day, lowered his fat naked body into the hot tub and waited for Cindy to join him. She was still inside and Stanley watched her as she stripped off her clothes, retrieved a drink the mayor had apparently prepared for her beforehand, then slinked out onto the patio wearing nothing but a smile. When she reached the hot tub, she leaned over in front of the mayor and let her gorgeous tits dangle before his admiring eyes. Then she had sat down on the edge of the tub with her legs spread wide open and allowed the mayor to stick his fat face in between them and start nibbling . . .

Stanley's teeth were clenched as he recalled that night. Why in the fuck would a beautiful bitch like Cindy Fuller screw around with an obese, ugly slob like that? And to think that she had once thought of himself as no more than a turd floating in a toilet bowl . . .

Why in the fuck hadn't he ever been able to score with this chick for chrissakes! he wondered feebly as he had watched the mayor work on her with relish.

A smug grin came to Stanley Jenkin's face and he shot a glance over toward Cindy's body slouched down in the passenger's seat. He had finally scored with her after all. It may have taken twenty years and a lot of bullshit but at least he'd finally done her. He'd nailed Cindy Fuller and nailed her but good. He had in fact fucked her to death!

She had loved it, too. He swore he could almost see it in her eyes as he was putting it to her earlier that night. He could imagine her thinking to herself, *"Jesus, I never knew Stanley was so damned cool! And what a great fuck he is!"*

Too late now, Cin, he thought. You should've thought about that twenty years ago.

He was approaching the last turn before the hairpin and he slowed down his speed. As expected, he hadn't seen a single car out on the road yet. There were only a handful of people who lived around this area and those few were all most likely watching the pre-season football game between the Broncos and Chiefs on TV.

The incline of the road descended sharply after he made the turn, making it necessary for him to brake hard to keep the car under control against the fast idle speed. Ahead of him, about a hundred yards or so, he could see the hairpin curve. He drove another fifty yards and slowed down to a complete stop. Time was critical now, he knew, so he was going to have to work fast.

There was no berm to speak of where he had stopped the car—just two lanes of asphalt heading straight for the curve with a drainage ditch on either side. He shifted into neutral and checked the tachometer—the car was idling just under 3,000 rpm, as he had estimated it would. He sat for another moment as he considered the engine's idling speed and the distance to the guardrail and beyond. Then, figuring in the steepness of the road, he felt confident that the car would indeed have enough gusto to break through the guardrail and continue on to the

cliff. This debate was all academic at this stage anyway—he certainly couldn't risk the extra time it would take to make another idle adjustment anyway.

Stanley threw the gearshift lever back into drive and set the parking brake, praying the engine wouldn't die. It didn't, but the car was lunging forward in a fury and felt like it would die any moment. He got out and quickly ran over to the passenger side, opened the door, and gathered up Cindy's body into his arms. Her skin was already cool to the touch and he nearly vomited as he carried her around to the driver's side. He stuffed her into the seat and arranged her feet in an approximate driving position. Suddenly the engine missed, sputtered and bogged down to an anemic, sort of choked, purring sound. *Holy fuck, it is going to die on me!* he thought. Then all of a sudden the engine regained momentum and was back up to three grand again. Stanley felt a bead of sweat run into his eye that stung like a bee.

With a cautious gasp of relief, Stanley quickly hopped out and ran to the front of the car, checking to see that the wheels were heading straight forward. Satisfied, he ran back to the driver's side long enough to place Cindy's upper body against the steering wheel to help keep the wheels on course.

Sweat was now literally pouring down Stanley's face as he glanced up and down the road to be sure there weren't any oncoming motorists. It was black as pitch in either direction. He again considered with some regret that there would be no skid marks left behind on either the pavement or the berm to indicate that Cindy had hit the brakes before plummeting over the cliff and he was certain that the police would question that. He also knew that they would be speculating a hell of a lot of other things while investigating Cindy Fuller's fatal car accident, seeing as she was such an important personage in the community. But none of this really bothered him and the reason was quite simple: they would never in a million years be able to pin her death on Stanley Jenkins no matter how extensive their investigation may be.

Because Stanley Jenkins no longer existed.

The smug grin returned to his face as he grasped the top edge of the door with his left hand, leaned inside and took hold of the parking brake lever in his right hand. Taking a deep breath and a final glimpse of Cindy Fuller's pale but still beautiful face, he released the parking brake and jumped back from the car like a cat.

The Mercedes shot forward like a sprinter from the starting line, the engine roaring and whining in the dark quiet of the mountains. Stanley barely had enough time to run after it and slam the door shut in a sudden panic-stricken afterthought as the car hurtled along toward its destination. By the time the car was half way to the hairpin curve it was doing a good 35 mph. Stanley stood and stared in utter fascination as the phantom runaway car grew smaller in the distance with increasing velocity. Then suddenly the car began veering hard to the right and Stanley held his breath. It was going to plow into the drainage ditch! he thought. With a sickening feeling in the pit of his gut, he realized that he had fucked up royally by not starting this whole death car plot into motion closer to the curve than he had.

Christ!

Then miraculously, the car began straightening itself out as it tore onto the grassy area. Stanley crossed his fingers and looked on, praying that the car stayed on course. Only thirty feet to go until impact.

Twenty feet. The car had to be doing forty-five.

Just ten feet to go. It was really booking now!

Smash! The Mercedes crashed through the guardrail like it was made of matchsticks and kept right on going. *Just like the Energizer bunny!* Stanley smiled.

A few seconds later, the car dipped out of sight. He heard the engine race to a throaty whine as the wheels left the ground and became airborne. A few moments later, an eerie deathlike silence fell over the mountain as the car continued to sail through the air and out of hearing range.

Then he suddenly heard a tree-crunching thud, followed by a rustling sound like a wild bear on a rampage. Finally, the entire Rocky Mountain sky was lit up like the Fourth of July as the Mercedes exploded and caught fire somewhere down near the base of the mountain.

What a Rocky Mountain High! he thought.

“Time to book,” Stanley breathed to himself.

The temptation to run over and look down at the scene was nearly overwhelming but he knew he couldn’t afford himself that luxury. It wouldn’t be long before the whole county would be up here investigating.

He reached inside his coat pocket and took out a flashlight, switched it on then began searching for the path. He spotted it about twenty yards back up the road to the left and hastened toward it. The path was narrow and overgrown but he knew that it was accessible and where it led. He entered the path and began scaling the hillside at a brisk gait. He had only gone forty yards or so when he heard the sirens.

The path ascended a steep hill for several hundred feet before terminating onto a dirt road. When he reached the road, Stanley stopped long enough to gaze down through a clearing in the trees at the scene below. He wasn’t able to actually spot any of the emergency vehicles but he could see the flashing red and blue lights reflecting off the sides of the mountain, their eerie staccato flashes slicing into the yellow-orange glow of Cindy’s burning Mercedes. He was pleased with himself—he hadn’t been able to foretell whether the car would actually catch fire when it hit and this had been one of the few calculated risks he’d taken on this mission. He had debated on whether or not to install an explosive device that would have ensured that Cindy’s body would end up in cinders but had decided not to take any unnecessary risk. The authorities might well find the device during their investigation and that would have bungled the whole thing. Some details simply had to be left to fate.

Stanley turned and began jogging east on the road. He felt good; in fact he felt excellent. His body was in peak physical condition and at one with the road, the air was crisp and the adrenalin was pumping. Right this moment, he felt like he could take on the whole fucking world and win. In a sense, he was doing just that. With each mission he undertook, the world was getting much closer to discovering the truth: that Stanley Jenkins was not going to be pushed around any more. He was a force to be reckoned with—not the innocuous egghead that everyone thought him to be. Nope, he was a fucking cool dude—just like James Bond. And just like his idol, Stanley Jenkins was leaving behind droves of gorgeous babes in his wake as he encountered his missions—every one of them with broken hearts filled with regret that they hadn’t known sooner that Stanley was not only a cool dude and a master spy, but a super stud as well.

But even James Bond had to retire some day. Bond had in fact retired the day that Ian Fleming, his creator, had died. The reincarnations of Bond since then had only been cheap imitations of the real thing. Sort of the same way that Cindy Fuller had been a cheap imitation of the real thing . . .

The image of her, the real thing, as a teenage girl flashed through Stanley’s mind for a fleeting moment and he felt his pulse quicken even more. The prospect of returning to his roots and settling down with her in the not too far future heightened his euphoria. She was going to be his light at the end of the tunnel, the one who would appreciate everything he had accomplished. She would be able to see what Stanley Jenkins was all about without

having to be told or shown. Because this babe had class; always had and always would. That's what set her apart from all the rest. He'd known it from the very first time he'd followed her home from school and saw the way she'd strutted her sweet little ass ever so gracefully—with confidence and poise. She didn't have to flaunt her obvious attributes; they were just there. She knew it and the rest of the world knew it.

But the rest of the world would never know her as Stanley Jenkins did. He knew her intimately—her likes and dislikes, her habits, her routines. He'd watched her many times as she lay in bed at night, her homework swept off to the side, staring at the ceiling and fantasizing about the man of her dreams suddenly coming along and sweeping her off her feet. He had read her diary once, and she'd written that someday she would meet someone who truly understood her and knew all the things to do and say that made her happy. And once she found him, she would do anything in the world for him and never let him go.

Little had she known that she would have to wait this long to realize her dreams. But how could she have known back then that he had already been there for her? It hadn't been her fault.

It had been his own.

He'd not waited patiently for just the right moment to tell her—

He'd let that fucking bimbo blow the whole operation.

Stanley Jenkins' blood began to boil and it took everything he had to compose himself. Patience, he thought. In the not so distant future, there would be no one left to stand in his way.

He spotted the rental car up ahead and a smile returned to his face. We reached the car, unlocked the door and got in, flung the nylon bag of the passenger seat and started the engine. In ten minutes he'd be on the main road and in another fifteen minutes would be on the interstate heading north to Denver. After a late supper and a couple of drinks, he'd crash out at his hotel and be up early the next morning to drive to the airport to catch his flight. By the time he landed at New York's La Guardia Airport, he would have a good four or five hours to spend sightseeing and taking in all those wonderful things that made New York City such a hip city. That would be his little treat to himself, by God. On the following day, it would be time to get back to work.

Locating and casing out Sara Hunt's apartment would be a cinch, but it was going to take a *master spy* to devise a way of making a date with her that she would truly never be able to forget for the rest of her little life ...

CHAPTER 19

As Ann slipped on her shoes, she could still hear Sam's self-righteous remark: *"I think your newfound independence is going to your head. The world isn't by any means any safer that it used to be but you seem to think it is."*

She tried to ignore it, but it wouldn't go away. Who the hell did he think he was anyway—implying that she had suddenly become some sort of irresponsible, wild woman and didn't know how to look out for herself?

And he was pissed off because it was finally beginning to sink in that he's not around anymore to call the shots and that was a big blow to his male ego. Not to mention the fact that she was seeing another man. She could already sense that Sam was insanely jealous of Jerry Rankin and wished he didn't exist in her life.

That's the breaks Sam, she thought to herself with a smug grin. You should have thought about all this before you started fooling around with Shelley The Slut. I have no sympathy for you whatsoever. You've brought this all upon yourself.

Ann went over to the mirror to look herself over again. For once, her hair was doing what it was supposed to do. Her makeup didn't look half bad, either. She eyed her outfit and wondered if perhaps she had gone a little too overboard. She'd boldly chosen to go with the olive green skin tight knit top that she'd purchased at the mall on her way home from the office along with a pair of faded Lee jeans that clung to her legs and hips as if they were painted on. A little too casual for Jerry's tastes? she wondered. She noticed how the shape of her ample breasts were clearly visible beneath the thin fabric and debated whether or not to put on a bra then promptly decided against it. What the hell, she thought. Even Karen had once told her, *if you've got it, flaunt it*, and she was in just the right kind of mood tonight to do just that.

She was not sure why she felt so lousy all of a sudden, but she did. Maybe it was because Amy was going out of her first real date with a boy tonight and it seemed like only yesterday that she was reading her bedtime stories until she drifted off to sleep. Or maybe it was the fact that Sam was now going out with a woman half his age and it bothered her now just as much as it had the first time she'd caught him red handed screwing around with the bitch. Whatever the case, the feeling was there and the cold reality of her age was beginning to catch up with her. Here she was, nearly 40 years old, divorced, and getting older and less attractive by the day. It wouldn't be long before she'd lose her figure and no longer be desirable to men. She had never really given it much thought until now, and the reason for that was simple. Until now she had been married and hadn't had to give a big shit about how she looked to other men.

Ann looked herself over again decided that Jerry would most likely approve of her attire. In fact, his eyes would probably pop out of their sockets when he saw her, she mused. And the funny thing was that she didn't care if he gawked at her tonight—she was tired of dressing conservatively all of the time just because she was afraid Jerry might get all worked up and start putting the moves on her. Karen was right; she really was being sort of a prude. She had the post divorce jitters and the more she thought about it, the more she realized that Karen had probably been right about something else. If she kept stalling and putting things off for too long, she might well let Jerry Rankin slip right through her fingers.

His suggestion to go bowling tonight had thrown Ann for a loop but she had to admit she was looking forward to it. She still felt a little apprehensive about his being here to see Amy and her date off to the dance, though. When she had informed Amy that Jerry would be here at the house before her date arrived, the expression on her face had told Ann that her daughter wasn't too crazy about the idea at all. But surprise of surprises, she hadn't objected. Ann realized that this was probably because Amy was excited about the dance and hadn't wanted to put a damper on anything by getting into an argument with her mother.

Ann checked the time—it was almost 6:30. Jerry would be here any minute. She knew that Amy was still in the bathroom and wondered if she realized how late it was getting. She decided to go downstairs to let her know.

Just as Ann turned around and started for the door, she heard a scuffle and voices out in the backyard. She ran over to the bedroom window and peered down. It was too dark to see anything because she hadn't yet turned on the backyard lights. Then she realized that she had indeed turned on the lights. She had done it just after getting off the phone from Sam. So why were they off now?

She heard voices again. It sounded like two men arguing, and one of the voices sounded like Jerry's. In an instant, she ran out of the bedroom and fled down the stairs. She stopped and glanced out of the living room window and saw Jerry's car parked in the driveway. She ran through the kitchen and laundry room to the back door. There was a knock at the front door just as she started to open the back door.

Ann ran back into the living room and peaked through the curtains. She saw Jerry Rankin and another man standing on the porch. The other man's back was to her. Ann couldn't see very clearly, but it looked as though Jerry was holding the other man's arm—as if to keep him from escaping. Ann opened the door and let out a gasp.

There stood Jerry Rankin gripping the arm of a young man who looked to be around the same age as Amy. The boy had a welt over his right eye and there was a trickle of blood oozing out from a cut on his lower lip.

"Jerry! What happened?" Ann exclaimed.

Jerry's expression was a mixture of concern and rage. "I caught this little bastard peeping through your bathroom window!"

Amy! Ann thought. She's been taking a shower! Ann's blood pressure shot up.

Jerry shoved the boy forward through the doorway pinning his arm behind his back as he did so. He stood just inside the doorway and explained. "When I pulled into the driveway, I noticed that the light in the backyard suddenly went off. I thought it was peculiar so I ran back to the fence to be sure that everything was all right. I spotted this little twerp peaking in the bathroom window so I jumped the fence and headed toward him. He saw me and started running the other way, but I caught him. Then he resisted and tried to get away from me, so I slapped him around a couple of times."

Ann watched Jerry as he forced the boy over to the center of the living room and glared at him reproachfully. Ann was practically in hysterics at the moment and wasn't sure what to do or say. She could see the boy more clearly now and she looked him over. He appeared to be about fifteen or sixteen with a peach fuzz baby face and short brown hair. His expression was absolutely forlorn as he stared down at the floor. In spite of the allegation against him, Ann felt the slightest pang of pity for him for some odd reason and it was more than obvious that he was absolutely terrified of Jerry Rankin.

"His lip is bleeding—I'll go get a damp cloth," Ann suddenly said.

Jerry shot her a scornful look. "You should let him bleed to death!"

Ann ignored his remark and went into the kitchen. Her hands were trembling as she held a dishcloth under the tap and struggled to compose herself. It wasn't until she was half way back to the living room that it finally hit her: the boy she was feeling sorry for only a moment ago was not only a peeping Tom that had trespassed on her property but most likely the same pervert who had been making those obscene phone calls! Ann clenched her teeth with great determination as she returned to the living room and handed the dishtowel to the boy.

"What's your name?" she demanded.

The boy brought the towel to his injured lip and replied slowly. "Larry Underwood."

"And what exactly were you doing in my backyard, Larry?"

The boy blinked his eyes a couple of times and turned away from Ann. “Looking into the window.”

“Why, may I ask?”

Larry Underwood continued looking away from her. “I was trying to see Amy.”

Ann got right up in his face. “So you know my daughter—is that correct?”

The boy nodded slowly.

“And do you attend Woodcrest High?”

Larry nodded again.

“And is this the first time you’ve snooped around my house or have you done it before?”

“The first time—I swear!”

“Tell Mrs. Middleton the truth, you little pervert!” Jerry glared. “That’s not what you told me outside.”

Larry Underwood’s eyes went from Jerry Rankin to the floor. “Maybe a couple of times before.”

Ann then said, “And have you been making obscene phone calls to this house?”

The boy faced Ann and replied, “No! I haven’t done that and I’m really telling you the truth now!”

Ann looked over at Jerry, who had the boy in an arm lock. “He denied making the calls to me, too. I don’t know whether to believe him or not.”

“I swear, Mrs. Middleton. I have never called your house. I’ll admit that I’ve snooped around a couple of times, but that’s all—you gotta believe me!” he pleaded.

“What’s going on?”

All three turned at the same time and saw Amy standing in the hallway. She was wearing her bathrobe and her expression went from bewildered to absolute shock when she recognized Larry Underwood.

“What are you doing here, Larry? What happened?”

No one answered right away, so Jerry Rankin took over. “Go ahead Larry. Tell Amy what you’re doing here.”

Larry gave Ann a pained look of desperation as if to say “please don’t make me tell her.” Ann decided to remain silent to see if Larry Underwood would have the guts to confess his crimes. Amy, in the meantime, was staring at her mother for a clue as to what was going on.

Finally, when it became apparent that Larry wasn’t going to speak, Ann said, “Larry was peaking in the bathroom window at you, honey.”

Amy’s face turned beet red. Her eyes went from her mother to Larry to Rankin before she turned around bolted up the stairs to her bedroom, sobbing as she ran.

Ann ran after Amy. When she reached the upstairs landing, she saw that her daughter’s bedroom door was closed. She knocked on it softly.

“Can I come in, sweetie?”

Moments later, Amy replied, “I don’t care.”

Ann entered the room and found Amy lying in the bed crying. She sat down on the bed and began stroking Amy’s damp hair comfortingly.

“I’m sorry, honey. I know how you must feel right now. Has this Larry boy been bothering you at school?”

Amy sat up and determinedly struggled to get herself under control. “I hardly know the jerk,” she replied, wiping the tears from her eyes. Her expression suddenly changed when she glanced over at the clock and saw the time.

“Jason will be here in half an hour, Mom! You have to get Larry out of here!”

“But we have to call police, honey. He was trespassing and—”

“The police! No, Mom, please! Just let him go—I don’t want him arrested. It’ll be all over school!”

“But—”

Amy grabbed Ann’s arm and stared at her pleadingly. “Please, Mom, listen. Jason is picking me up in a few minutes, I’m not even dressed yet, and if you call the police it’s going to ruin everything! Please just let Larry go—I’m sure he has already learned his lesson by the looks of his face. Did Mr. Rankin do that to him?”

“Yes, he did,” Ann replied hesitantly.

“That’s just great! Now everybody is going to be talking about how my mother’s boyfriend beat up a minor. Jesus, I can’t believe this! My life is ruined!”

Ann was speechless. She couldn’t believe Amy was obviously more worried about her social standing at school than the fact that a prowler had just watched her while she was taking a shower.

“But the boy needs to be punished, Amy! I can’t just let him get away with this like it never happened. He’s dangerous! And for all we know, he’s the same person who’s been making all of those obscene phone calls!”

Amy appeared to be unfazed by this.

“I really doubt that, Mom. Larry may be a little strange but I don’t think he’d go that far—he’s too much of a nerd! Please just let him go. If Jason sees him here, he’ll probably want to kick the shit out of him. Is that what you want to happen?”

Ann seriously doubted Amy’s last statement and realized that she most likely was making it up just to drive her point home.

She thought for a moment and then said, “All right, Amy, you win. But I’m going to call his parents. Then they can decide how to punish their son.”

Amy shrugged. “Whatever. But hurry, Mom, before Jason gets here. I have to get dressed!”

Ann heaved a sigh then stood up and left the room. As she descended the stairs, she suddenly wished that Sam were there to take care of this matter instead of her having to handle it herself. She never had been very good at this sort of thing.

When she entered the living room, Jerry was still standing in the same spot as when she’d left.

“Is Amy all right?” Jerry asked.

“She’ll be O.K.,” Ann replied.

“We should make him apologize to her,” Jerry declared, glaring at Larry.

“I don’t think she wants an apology as much as she wants to just go to the dance and have a good time.”

She faced Larry. “You’re very lucky that my daughter doesn’t want me to press charges against you, Larry. If this dance didn’t mean so much to her, I’d be calling the police right this minute. I am going to call your parents, though—what is your telephone number?”

Larry cringed. “Please, Mrs. Middleton, don’t call my folks! They’ll kill me!”

Jerry peered angrily at the boy. “Well buddy, you should have thought about that before you decided to be a peeping Tom. Now tell Mrs. Middleton your phone number before I beat it out of you!”

“Jerry!” Ann cried.

Jerry stared at her and his expression softened. "I'm sorry, Ann. It's just that this whole thing has made me really angry. This young man is a sicko and I don't have much patience for his kind. If Amy were my child, I'd force him to apologize to her, then call the police and have them book the little bastard."

"Well she's not your child. And furthermore, I don't like the use of violence in any size, shape or form. There's been enough of that already." Her agitation with Jerry's poor handling of this matter was just now beginning to sink in.

Jerry went over and placed his hand on her shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Ann. It just hasn't been a very good day."

Ann shrugged. "It's all right Jerry, I know that you mean well. But I'm in between a rock and a hard spot now and I just want to get this matter resolved as soon as possible. This dance means so much to Amy—I really don't want this to ruin it for her."

Jerry nodded and turned to Larry. "Give us your phone number, Larry."

Knowing he had no choice, Larry recited his telephone number. Ann went into the kitchen and dialed the number. When Larry's mother answered, Ann identified herself and explained to her what had happened. His mother had been defensive at first, apparently refusing to believe that her son was capable of doing such a thing. But Ann could also sense that Mrs. Underwood knew her son wasn't quite above it either.

She asked to speak to her son and Ann put him on. Ann stood by and could tell by the expression on his face and the gist of his dialogue that Larry Underwood was getting a royal tongue-lashing.

Moments later, Larry handed the phone back to Ann and his mother informed Ann that she didn't drive but she had told Larry to come straight home. And if he hadn't arrived home in 10 minutes, she would call his father at his job and have him go out and track him down. This, Larry's mother assured Ann, was the last thing Larry wanted to happen. Ann thanked her—perhaps a little too curtly—and hung up the phone.

"All right, Larry. You can go on now," Ann said as she led him back to living room.

Jerry was standing by the door and opened it for him. "We don't want to see you around this house ever again, Larry. Is that clear?"

"Yes sir."

Before leaving, Larry turned to Ann and said, "I'm sorry Mrs. Middleton."

Ann replied, "You should be."

Larry turned and went out the door. Ann and Jerry both stood and watched Larry Underwood as he sauntered down the driveway to the street. His gait was slow and Ann had a feeling that he wasn't looking forward to arriving home and facing the wrath of his mother and father.

"I hope his parents ream him out good," Jerry declared. "That's one sick kid."

Ann waited until Larry was out of sight then closed the door. "Jesus, what an ordeal," she sighed, leaning back against the wall. She looked at Jerry. "Do you think he was the same one who has been making the obscene phone calls?"

"Who knows? I wouldn't put it past the little hoodlum."

Ann smiled. "Thanks, Jerry. I'm sure glad you came around when you did."

Jerry returned the smile. "As I told you before, that's what I'm here for."

"I'd better go see how Amy's doing."

"Do you think she'd mind if I take some pictures?" Jerry asked. "My camera is out in the car."

Ann shook her head. “I don’t think so—she sure hammed it up for you last weekend.”

“Great—I’ll go get it.” Jerry said and headed for the front door.

Ann glanced at the clock on the mantle and hoped that Amy was almost ready—Jason would be arriving any minute now. She ran up the stairs and found her daughter sitting at the vanity putting the finishing touches on her makeup.

“You look beautiful, sweetie!” Ann exclaimed as she walked over to her. She could tell by Amy’s reflection in the mirror that she was really starting to get nervous about the big dance.

“I’m glad you’re here, Mom. Can you put this necklace on for me?”

“Certainly, honey.”

Amy reached for the diamond necklace that Ann had recently bought for her and handed it over. Ann stood behind her daughter, placed the necklace around her neck and fastened the clasp.

“There you go. Is everything all right, honey?”

Ann shrugged her shoulders and continued applying her lip gloss. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Nervous?”

“A little.”

“Are you over the little episode that just happened?”

Amy paused a moment, then nodded. “Yeah. I take it you called Larry’s parents?”

Ann nodded. “Yes, and his mother wasn’t pleased with him at all. Larry has now gone home to face the music.”

“Thanks, Mom, for not calling the cops,” she said sincerely.

“You’re welcome, sweetie. I just want you to go out and have a great time tonight, okay?”

“I will, Mom.”

Amy stood up and fiddled with her hair a little then turned around and faced her mother. “What do you think?”

“You look simply wonderful, honey. Jason is very lucky to be taking the most beautiful girl at Woodcrest High to the dance!”

“Right, Mom,” Amy replied, rolling her eyes.

“Mr. Rankin would like to take some pictures, if that’s all right with you.”

Amy cast her mother a pained look. “Oh, I guess so. As long as he makes it really quick.”

Just then the doorbell rang and Amy’s face lit up.

“He’s here!” My God, I hope I look all right! Oh, look at this hair—Mom, go down and stall Jason for a few minutes, okay?”

“Your hair looks fine, Amy. Relax!” Ann chuckled.

“Please, Mom!”

“All right. I’ll go stall him for you.”

Ann went back downstairs and opened the door. Jason Walborn stood there with a sheepish grin on his face.

“Hello, you must be Jason,” Ann smiled, holding the door for him to enter.

“Yes. How are you Mrs. Middleton?”

“Just fine.” Ann shook his hand and glanced at Jerry. “This is Mr. Rankin, Jason. A, er, friend of mine.”

“Nice to meet you, Jason,” Jerry said as he shook his hand.

Jason Walborn was as tall if not taller than Jerry Rankin with sandy hair cropped short, angular jawbones, and deep set blue eyes. He was dressed semi-formally in a sport jacket, shirt and tie, and a pair of khaki Dockers.

Ann led the two men into the living room. “Would you like to sit down, Jason? Amy should be down shortly.”

“Sure,” he replied, sitting down on the sofa.

“Amy tells me that you’re a soccer player.”

Jason nodded. “Yeah, we won the division championship last year.”

“I didn’t know that. That’s wonderful!”

“Yeah, we had a really awesome team last year.”

There was an uncomfortable silence for a moment before Jerry said, “What kind of car are you driving?”

“A Honda Prelude.”

“You must have a job then, I assume.”

“Nah. My parents bought the car for me.”

“I see,” Jerry replied, his sudden distaste for the obviously spoiled young man apparent on his face.

Moments later, Amy came down the stairs and entered the room. “Hi, Jason!”

Jason stood up and strode over to her. “Hi. You look totally awesome!”

Amy blushed. “And so do you! Will you go get the flowers, Mom?”

“Sure, honey,” Ann replied.

Ann went into the kitchen to fetch Jason’s boutonniere and Amy’s corsage from the fridge. The two kids managed to attach their flowers to one another as Jerry looked on, brandishing his camera.

“Just a couple of shots?” he said.

Both Amy and Jason sighed and allowed Jerry to pose them in front of the mantle.

“Here we go,” he said encouragingly to the young couple. “Let’s see a smile!”

Amy and her date grinned nervously as Jerry Rankin snapped a shot.

“That was great! Just one more! Get a little closer,” he commanded.

Jason and Amy stared at one another and smirked. Jason put his arm around Amy and smiled confidently. Jerry snapped the shot and placed both prints on the coffee table.

“These are looking great,” he said as the images began to appear. “Take a look at how cute you two look together.”

Amy and Jason joined Ann and glanced at the photos.

“Yeah, we really look cool, Mr. Rankin,” Amy commented less than enthusiastically, “Can we go now?”

“I’ll go get your jacket for you,” Ann told Amy. She fetched Amy’s coat and helped her on with it, kissing her daughter’s cheek afterwards. “Have a wonderful time, honey!”

“Thanks Mom.”

“And drive carefully,” she added to Jason.

“I will, Mrs. Middleton,” he assured her.

Amy stepped out on the porch, Jason following behind.

“Bye mom,” she said as she led her date away from the house.

“Don’t be late!” Ann called after the departing couple.

Ann and Jerry stood inside the doorway and watched as the two got into Jason's Prelude. After they had backed out of the driveway, Ann closed the door and sighed.

"I hope Amy watches out for herself. That Jason boy is much too old for her."

"She'll be all right, Ann. Amy seems to have a pretty good head on her shoulders from what I've seen."

Ann said, "Yes, I suppose you're right. That is, as long as she stays sober. Come to think of it, I could stand a drink about right now. Do we have enough time?"

Jerry smiled. "Of course. The lanes are open until midnight."

"Let's have a drink, then. I really need one after all of this!" Ann exclaimed.

"Lead the way—I'm right behind you," Jerry said cheerfully.

CHAPTER 20

One month earlier, Stanley Jenkins quietly swung the door open, stepped onto the roof and closed the door behind him. It was even darker on top of the ten-story apartment building than he thought it would be and for a moment he considered using a flashlight before abruptly dismissing the idea. He waited a couple of minutes for his eyes to adjust before making his way toward the corner of the roof.

There was just enough available light for him to see where he was going without being seen by any of the tenants in the neighboring apartment buildings. It hadn't been particularly easy locating a building with both easy access to its roof plus an unobstructed view of Sara Hunt's apartment. But as usual, Stanley's patience and perseverance had paid off. He thought of how much easier it had been entering her apartment unnoticed the other night and the irony in it that made him grin. New York City, in spite of its immense population, wasn't any safer from Stanley Jenkins than Bum-Fuck, Iowa.

Had he known before that Sara Hunt's apartment was going to be so laughably accessible, Stanley would have devised a much simpler game plan for this mission and thereby made things much easier on himself. He would have simply chosen a night when Sara's roommate wasn't there with her, unlocked her apartment door with the copy of the key he'd made, then gone in and taken care of business. But that would have been too easy (and not nearly as much fun) so he'd opted to stick with his original plan of getting to know Sara a bit better before murdering her. He always enjoyed a challenge and what secret agent worth his oats didn't? Bond had never once done things the easy way and that's what made 007 the legend that he was.

Stanley's eyes were trained on Sara's apartment building as he silently approached the corner of the roof. When he stopped at the two-foot ceramic masonry wall skirting the roof, he leaned over and peered down at the

view below. He could see the traffic moving south toward Spring Street and hear the occasional horn honking echoing up off the walls of the surrounding buildings. His eyes returned to Sara's building—an ancient, ugly brownstone flanked in the foreground by two other nondescript buildings standing directly across the street from where he now stood. Sara's apartment was on the seventh floor—two windows to the right—and even at this distance Stanley could see the lone figure of someone moving about inside the apartment. That figure, he already knew, would be Sara Hunt and Sara would be alone tonight until at least midnight since her roommate would be waiting tables at the Stardust Diner until 11:30.

Stanley unzipped the nylon backpack, took out a powerful telescope and set it aside. He removed the tripod, extended its legs, positioned it on the roof and secured the telescope to it. Peering through the eyepiece, he deliberately swung the telescope around and downward until Sara's apartment building came into view. He carefully panned from side to side until he had a bead on her well-lit living room window. After fine-tuning the focusing knob, Stanley smiled to himself when he saw the crystal clear image come into view.

Sara Hunt was doing her nightly aerobic exercises and apparently felt secure in the fact that no one could possibly be watching—she was wearing nothing but her panties. Stanley felt his pulse quicken and his mouth salivate as he stared at her gorgeous body, reveling in the notion that she was performing *For His Eyes Only*. At the moment, Sara was standing a few feet from the window, her left side facing toward him, her arms extended straight up into the air. Stanley observed her as she did twenty-five reps of this exercise then stopped and turned to face the window.

Sara paused for a few moments and merely stood there motionless, as if awaiting a cue of some kind. Then she suddenly began a totally different exercise. Stanley surmised that she was exercising to music and that she had just paused to wait for the beginning of the next song. As Stanley watched Sara grind her hips from side to side, his breath came in gasps. Her copious breasts were heaving and undulating to the rhythm of the music that he was unable to hear, yet could almost feel. He was all but certain that it was the Rolling Stones she was grinding to—most likely one of their more danceable tunes . . . *Honky Tonk Woman*, perhaps?

He had discovered that Sara Hunt was quite possibly the most devoted Stones fan still living judging by the extensive collection of their CDs and vinyl LP's she had in her possession. He had never seen so many records by any one artist before in a single collective bunch, short of those found in a record store.

But Sara's love for the Stones was just one of many things Stanley had learned about her as a result of his surveillance over the past couple of weeks. He knew that she was an actress, but not a very successful one, and that acting was by far the most important thing in her life. Her apartment was littered with dozens of copies of *Backstage*, *The Village Voice*, and other publications advertising casting calls and screen tests in the NYC theater forum, and when she wasn't waiting tables at a Greek diner in the Village, Sara was auditioning for parts in every conceivable type of acting job available: soaps, films, commercials, Broadway and off-Broadway productions—even the occasional porno film, he had been surprised to discover. Stanley still couldn't forget his absolute shock at finding a suspicious looking videocassette entitled *Josie Loves Dick* stuffed behind a stack of old magazines on a back shelf. His curiosity aroused, he had taken the time to play a quick run-through of the film on Sara's VCR and sure enough, there was Ms. Sara Hunt portraying the gifted Josie Jobber sucking some big old stud's prick! Watching her perform her artistry on the man had done nothing but disgust Stanley and only bolstered his desire to kill the slut all that much more.

He had wondered what Sara's parents back in Pennsylvania would have thought of their daughter's stellar performance when he suddenly come across several dozen letters, all unopened and apparently from her parents. Stanley had decided (perhaps without thinking, he had to admit now) to risk opening up one of the letters and reading it. The letter had been from her father, begging her to forgive him for all of the pain and suffering he'd caused her as a child. He had gone on to tell her that he'd only done what he had done to her because he loved her and begged her to please come home and give him a second chance. Stanley had read the rest of the letter and it didn't take a genius to figure out by reading between the lines that not only had her father sexually abused Sara but that he was in fact the very reason she was in NYC now acting out other people's lives in an effort to try and forget her own fucked up past as an abused child.

Stanley had also learned that Sara Hunt was very methodical and faithfully kept a journal of her everyday activities, which she logged into each night before she went to bed. He had quickly skimmed through it and learned that she had recently broken up with her boyfriend and that she now felt "lonely and directionless." His name was Jonathan Baker and Stanley had later found a photograph of Jon-boy in her photo album. On the back of the picture Sara had written: *Jonathan, before he shaved off his beard. I miss that beautiful beard!*

Based on what he'd learned in the process of investigating her apartment, Stanley had eventually come to a conclusion: Sara Hunt was a mess. She was insecure, naive, and lonely, had had a terrible childhood full of abuse, and was probably about as vulnerable now as she had ever been in her life since having recently lost her boyfriend of the last three years. Stanley was glad for all of this—the bitch certainly fucking deserved it.

As much as Stanley despised Sara Hunt (and everything that she stood for) he had to admit that she still had one beautiful fucking body. He felt the almost overwhelming urge to masturbate right now as he watched her half nude body gyrating to the music he couldn't hear. The expression on her face was intense and provocative as she lip-synced the lyrics to whatever song she was grooving to. His hand went down to his crotch for a brief moment and he could feel his rock-hard erection pulsating with the nagging need for release. But he suddenly took his hand away with resigned determination. Tomorrow, Stanley thought, he would have the real thing. He would slice that bitch from both sides and have her screaming for more . . .

Perspiration had formed on his brow as he continued peering at Sara through the telescope. She was really getting into it now, her hands cupping her luscious tits and her eyes closed tight in ecstasy. He could almost sense that she knew he was watching her and that she was regretful for having ever double-crossed Stanley Jenkins all those years ago at high school. She wanted to make it up to him now by giving him something that would really please him and hopefully make him forget how angry he was with her. She was treating him to his own little private audition and she was going to make it one of her most unforgettable performances yet . . .

Sara suddenly stopped and froze for a moment. Stanley could tell by the annoyed expression on her face that something had distracted her, possibly the ringing of her telephone. He watched as she turned and headed toward the door, just visible at the far end of the living room. She stood by the door for a moment as if listening to what someone on the other side was saying then suddenly shrugged her shoulders. She said something then moved out of Stanley's sight. When she returned a moment later and resumed her exercises, it was only for a minute for so. Sara then left the room in a huff.

It started registering with Stanley what may have just happened. A neighbor had knocked on her door and complained about the music so Sara had turned it down before resuming her aerobics. But the lower volume evidently wasn't to her liking so she had decided to give it up for the night.

Stanley continued peering through the telescope until he saw Sara reappear several moments later. She was carrying a glass of water as she made her way across the living room. She flipped off the light switch before continuing toward the other side of her apartment. This would be her bedroom, Stanley knew, and both of her bedroom windows unfortunately faced the front of the building, out of Stanley's field of view.

Stanley breathed a long sigh before removing the telescope from the tripod. He now had his plan solidly formulated in his mind and tomorrow he would carry it out.

He retracted the legs of the tripod and stashed away the telescope with a smug grin on his face. He loved the feeling of exhilaration he was experiencing right this moment—that adrenalin-induced high he always felt just before the completion of a mission. By this time tomorrow, he will have succeeded in accomplishing what he had set out to do and be on his way back home.

Did he really want to give all of this up and retire? he wondered. It was all so challenging, so gratifying. Would he truly be happy settling down with a wife and family? Maybe he would only semi-retire, on second thought. She would be able to understand that he was absolutely driven to go out on these missions and how important they were to him, wouldn't she?

His heart suddenly sank for a moment as it dawned on him that there would no longer be the motivation that had been driving him all along once he settled down. He will have completed his master plan and no longer feel the compulsion to murder again . . .

Or would he?

Stanley had read somewhere that murder was just like an addictive drug and he was beginning to see what they meant by that. The experience felt so awesome and the high was better than any of the acid he'd dropped in college. And what better way was there to get a point across to some fucking slut than putting a sudden end to her existence? To relieve the world of yet another ungrateful bitch that thought she was so above everyone that her shit didn't stink? They needed to be taught a lesson, by God! And who better to teach them that lesson than Stanley Jenkins, who had been shit upon his whole goddamn life?

His teeth were now clenched in total extreme rage and Stanley realized that he had just smashed his fist into the concrete wall. He brought his bloodied hand to his mouth and licked at the blood on his knuckles, savoring the salty iron aftertaste. He smiled to himself as he recalled what the shrinks had kept telling him while he was in the nuthouse: "You have got to get a handle on that temper of yours, Stanley, or someone besides yourself might get hurt someday." He had always hated the way the doctor and entire staff seemed to be talking down to him, as if he were some kind of sick person or total moron. Like, did they really think that he wasn't already quite aware of his temper? Or that he didn't know exactly why he had been committed to the institution in the first place? They of course thought he was nuts, but Stanley knew better. He had been sent to the institution because he'd fucked up and that was basically the whole ball of wax. There wasn't any more to it.

Stanley had played their game though, only because he knew that he'd be in there forever if he couldn't prove to them that he was "safe to return to society." It had been a breeze, actually, because he had known just the right things to do and say to the shrinks to win them over and eventually convince them that they weren't dealing with some lunatic asshole here, but a perfectly sane and intelligent young man who had fooled around and gotten himself just a little too stoned one night at college then pulled a little harmless prank on someone.

He soon realized that the only reason they had kept him in as long as they had was because they had grown fond of him and didn't want to let him go. Especially that faggot, Doctor Flagg. Christ, were his consultations

ever a humdrum! The way he would always try to psychoanalyze him with all that Freudian bullshit about mother-son relationships, latent homosexuality tendencies, insecurity and lack of self-respect. It was all x-amount of bullshit and the good doctor knew it, too. But finally the doctor's true colors started to show and the game suddenly took on an entirely new twist. Hell, if Stanley had known that all he had to do was let the doctor give him an occasional blowjob, he would have been out of that hellhole one fuck of a lot sooner!

But that was then, and this is now, Stanley thought. No sense in crying over spilt milk, ha-ha.

In retrospect, it was probably to his advantage to have been locked up in the nuthouse as long as he'd been. It had given him plenty of time to read, research and figure out what he was going to do with himself once he was released. Had he gotten out sooner, he probably would have done something rash, with his temper and all, and ended up getting thrown right back in there.

But instead, he'd hung tight and devised his master plan. And when he finally had gotten released on that glorious May morning, he knew that he had the added plus of his father's life insurance settlement to help make his plans materialize.

Rest in peace Pop, you wimpy little son of a bitch!

Stanley glanced over at Sara Hunt's faintly lit window and felt a renewed surge of excitement. He was really going to enjoy making her pay for what she had done. By the time he was through with her she was indeed going to wish that she'd never shit upon Stanley Jenkins all those years ago. And unlike Cindy Fuller, Sara was going to suffer some before he did her in. He'd knock her around a bit, make her feel some real pain in her fucked up life before she bought the farm. After all, that bitch had purposely screwed over Stanley Jenkins. Hell, it was not only premeditated but down right cold-blooded what she had done to him! Cindy Fuller had been an innocent casualty, in a sense; and for that reason Stanley had gone easy on her.

But Sara was an entirely different case. And this time the whole world was going to know who brought her to justice. No covering his tracks as he'd done with Cindy. The whole fucking world was going to learn that you don't fuck around with Stanley Jenkins and get away with it. And finally, after all these years, he would get the respect that he by God deserved! These gorgeous two-faced sluts weren't going to push Stanley Jenkins around anymore!

He glimpsed at the luminous dial on his wristwatch. It was 11:40. Time to split. He wanted to get a good night's sleep for the big day tomorrow.

He went over his plans one more time in his head. He would get up early tomorrow morning—no later than 6:30—eat a light breakfast before taking his shower. Then he'd get dressed: white polo shirt, gray sport jacket, faded blue jeans and a pair of loafers. Then he'd pack up his belongings, leave his hotel key on the dresser, then take the stairs down to the lobby and slink out of the hotel.

He would take a cab over to Penn Station and place all his belongings into the locker he'd rented except for the clipboard and Rolling Stones CD he'd just purchased. Then he'd hail another cab to Bleecker Street in Greenwich Village and get out a few blocks from the coffee shop where Sara worked. It would be around 8:00 by then and much of the breakfast crowd will have already cleared out.

He would enter the coffee shop and sit down at one of Sara's tables. When she came over to take his order she would notice the Stones CD laying there on the table as well as the clipboard with the made up script he'd created, which he would be pretending to read.

Sara's interest would of course be aroused when she spotted the Stones CD, not just because the Stones were her favorite rock and roll band in the world but also because she didn't own this particular CD. It was an extremely rare bootleg copy of a concert they'd played at the Fillmore East back in 1966 (which he had been able to procure with the help of the internet and a few hundred bucks). It was something that Sara Hunt no doubt would die for and if luck was on his side, she would promptly initiate the conversation while salivating over this rarity: "*My god! I don't believe it! I've been trying to find that recording for years!*"

But he realized that luck may not be on his side and instead of her getting all excited about seeing the CD, Sara may simply ignore it and ask what he wanted for breakfast.

That's when the clipboard with the mock screenplay would come into play. If Sara didn't happen to notice it the first time around while taking his order, he'd make damn sure that she did when she returned with his coffee. And once she saw what was written on the cover page, Sara Hunt would unlikely be able to remain passive any longer:

The Rolling Stones: The Myth Behind the Legend
A Three Star Pictures Production
Screenplay by Hugh Quincy
Directed by Hugh Quincy

The questions Sara Hunt would suddenly be dying to ask him would overwhelm her and why shouldn't they? Here she was, a struggling actress waiting tables at a coffee shop, and there he was, a director/writer sitting there at her table with a screenplay for an upcoming movie documentary about her most favorite rock and roll band in the whole fucking world! Could any aspiring actress as desperate and downtrodden as Sara Hunt be able to contain herself after this sudden quirk of fate? Especially after taking into account the fact that this writer/director was not only in possession of a rare CD that she would die for, but was also sporting quite a decent looking beard that looked a lot like the one her ex-boyfriend used to wear.

All of this would no doubt be making her heart do flip-flops. He could almost hear her now: "Excuse me sir, but I couldn't help but notice the movie script that you're reading there and I just wanted to let you know that I'm an actress—just in case by some chance you're looking for a cast for your movie. I'm even willing to be an extra if you need . . ."

At this point Stanley would smile, introduce himself and offhandedly tell her that as a matter of fact he was in need of a few more players for his movie and that one of those roles actually had a speaking part. He would go on to explain that he'd flown in from L.A. the day before to do some background research for a scene he would be filming and hadn't yet found a competent actress who could effectively play the role of an over-enthusiastic groupie who ends up going to bed with Mick Jagger after a concert during their first American tour.

Sara Hunt would then go absolutely bonkers. "Oh please, Mr. Quincy, please give me an audition for that part!"

At this point, Sara Hunt would be putty in his hands.

Stanley would be sure not to act overly zealous about auditioning Sara (in true Hollywood big shot style) and mention to her that he unfortunately didn't have a great deal of time to spend in New York—he had to return to L.A. the following morning. Then he would rather hesitantly offer to fit her in later that evening if she was

going to be free, after which Sara would of course assure him that she would indeed be available. At that juncture, Stanley would appear to warm up to her suddenly.

“You know, Sara,” he would announce with a winning smile, “The more I think about it, the more convinced I am that you just might be perfect for that part. I don’t suppose by any chance you can dance as well?”

Sara Hunt’s eyes would bug out of their sockets. “Are you kidding? I dance to the Rolling Stones all the time!”

Stanley would reply, “That’s wonderful, because there’s a scene where the character in the movie gyrates all over the place while she’s in the audience at a Stones concert. Mick notices her and struts over to the edge of the stage and whispers in her ear, (Here, he would suddenly evoke his finest English accent with just the right Mick Jagger inflection) ‘*Meet me backstage after the show, luv?*’ Mick then hands her a backstage pass. And of course that’s how Mick ends up taking her to bed.”

Sara would nearly faint after hearing all of this. “I don’t believe it! Oh Mr. Quincy, you have simply *got* to give me that part!”

“Please Sara—call me Hugh,” he would demand warmly. “I’ll tell you what. If you can prove to me that you can dance—and I mean really dance—then I’d say you’re as good as in.”

“Oh Hugh, that’s terrific!” Sara would gush.

Then his expression would become somewhat grave. “There’s only one problem, though. In this particular scene, the character dances to *Honky Tonk Woman* while engaged in dialogue with Mick. I would prefer everything to be as realistic as possible but I’m afraid I don’t have enough time to set up a soundstage on such short notice—”

“I’ve got it, Hugh! Why don’t you just come to my apartment and audition me there? If it wouldn’t be too much bother, that is.”

His eyes would suddenly light up just enough. “That’s a wonderful idea, Sara...”

Then they would set up a time for this impromptu audition—no doubt early evening after Sara got off work and had time to clean up for the big moment. Stanley would copy down her address and phone number, finish his breakfast, leave her a fat tip, and give her a reassuring wink just before he left the coffee shop.

Stanley smiled sardonically as he visualized the whole scenario. There was no doubt in his mind that the plan would work, especially when taking into account Sara Hunt’s more than apparent weaknesses and overall naiveté. The only shaky part would be the risk of his being seen by nosey neighbors either while entering or exiting her apartment building. The building had a total of 48 units and the odds of this happening were of course considerably high. But the odds of any of the neighbors seeing him actually enter her flat were much less likely and the reason for this was simple: the building’s front door lock was broken and had been ever since he’d first gotten into town. This would give him the opportunity to enter the building at his leisure without having to be buzzed in by Sara.

The other potential risk would be Sara’s roommate, Tonya Spellman. Stanley already knew that Tonya was scheduled to work tomorrow evening and shouldn’t pose any real threat but there was always a slim possibility that she may skip work for some reason or another. If this were the case, the mission would have to be nixed and another one implemented. Stanley however had his doubts that Tonya would stay at the apartment even if she decided to skip work. It was fairly evident that Sara Hunt and her roommate lived pretty much independently of

one another and it was his hunch that if Sara anticipated that Tonya might be planning on being at the apartment tomorrow evening she would most likely tell her roommate that she was expecting some company and would prefer that she not be around. Tonya would most likely oblige her wishes.

Stanley felt his pulse quicken as he turned and began making his way through the darkness toward the door. The anticipation of tomorrow's mission nearly overwhelmed him as he pictured Sara Hunt dancing nude to *Honky Tonk Woman* as he snapped off a few quick shots of her with his camera. She would give him the best show she'd ever given anyone, all full of enthusiasm and trying her damndest to please him so she could have the part that would launch her into movie stardom. He would wait until the song was over, applaud her animated performance and beautiful body, and then let her know that she had made Stanley Jenkins one happy camper.

Then, before Sara had the chance to get over the shock of what a complete naive fool she'd been, Stanley would proceed to fuck the living daylights out of her and make her regret the day that she had shit all over Stanley Jenkins all those years ago.

Then he would make her suffer for a while.

And then he would finally murder her.

CHAPTER 21

Sam eased up on the accelerator when he glanced at the speedometer and saw that he was doing almost seventy-five mph. All he needed now was to get pulled over for speeding by one of southern Ohio's notoriously efficient highway patrolmen to add to the mounting anxiety he was now experiencing. He watched the needle and waited until the Jeep had coasted down to an even sixty as he continued his journey west on Route 52.

It was a crisp sunny Saturday afternoon and he couldn't help but gaze at the vibrant fall colors of the foothills skirting the Ohio River from time to time as he made his way west back to Smithtown. For a moment he wished that he was still with Shelley—it would have been a perfect day to get out into the woods somewhere and take in the beautiful autumn foliage. By next weekend, he knew that the all too brief majesty of fall in southern Ohio would be history—the trees would be all but bare and what few leaves remained would have turned from brilliant red, orange or yellow to a withered dull brown.

The urge to turn around and go back to Shelley's apartment entered his mind again for the umpteenth time but he knew he couldn't do it no matter how tempting it was. He'd learned long ago that once something started nagging at him as much as this was that he wouldn't be able to function at all until he had the matter resolved. Shelley Hatcher was just going to have to be put on hold for now.

He wasn't sure now exactly when it had first hit him. It was one of those lingering thoughts in the back of your mind that begins eating at you and won't let up until you finally acknowledge its presence. Sam realized now that it started to bug him at the debate last night, but at the time he'd been too busy jotting down the questionable highlights of the damn thing to give it any real thought.

When the debate was finally over and he had snapped a few quick shots of the candidates, he had hastily headed for the Jeep and drove across the Ohio River to Kentucky—bound for Ashland in heavy anticipation of a stiff drink and Shelley Hatcher's companionship for the rest of the night. Throughout the fifteen-minute drive, the nagging thought was still there, but had apparently been overshadowed by his desire to be with Shelley, his attempt to forget the boring debate he'd just endured, and the rift he'd had with Ann earlier that evening.

Once he'd finally arrived at Shelley's small but cozy and clean apartment, he had immediately proceeded to dive head first into the booze. As they drank, they watched a video that Shelley had rented—a "B" movie thriller that he still couldn't even remember the name of. Then they had gotten naked and rolled around for a while until they both passed out in her bed. They slept until noon and Shelley had fixed a nice breakfast that had helped ward off the relentless hangover he'd been experiencing.

All of this time, the nagging thought continued lingering somewhere in his mind as he'd downed several cups of mega strong coffee.

And then it suddenly came to him.

Amy's letter—

Something about the letter Amy had written. There was something wrong about it.

Something in the letter Amy had just sent him was either out of kilter or just plain didn't make sense. The problem was, he had absolutely no idea what it was. He just knew it was there.

Sam had mulled it over in his head for while, trying to recall what all his daughter had written, but eventually realized that the only way he was going to know for sure was to get back to Smithtown and read it again.

So he had announced to Shelley that he had to leave, apologized, gave her a quick peck on the cheek, then hopped into the Cherokee and made a beeline for the highway. Shelley was hurt—he could tell by the look in her eyes. But she had been understanding and hadn't prodded him as to why he had to leave so abruptly.

Sam reached the east side of Smithtown then swore at every red light he had to stop at as he proceeded through the center of town. When he at last reached the outskirts and the open road again he gunned the engine and did sixty-five all the way to his driveway.

Once inside, he found the letter lying on his desk, whisked it up and began reading. When he reached the end, he stared blankly at it for a moment then read it again, this time more carefully. He finished reading and threw the letter aside in utter frustration before plopping down in his easy chair.

A false alarm? he wondered as he ran his hands through his long, unkempt hair. He had found nothing in the letter that seemed particularly unusual. Had he driven all the way back here like a maniac all for naught?

No, he persisted. Something was wrong here—he just hadn't caught it yet.

Sam grabbed up the letter again and reread it. Then, when he reached the part where Amy mentioned the photo she had enclosed, Sam bolted out of the chair as if shot from a cannon.

The picture!

Sam ran over to the mantel where the picture was still propped up against the wall, snatched it up and examined it closely. It was a Polaroid instant print, which wasn't particularly unusual. What was unusual however, was that this print was the same type that his old Polaroid SX-70 camera used. And that type of film was rare as hell since Polaroid had quit manufacturing the only camera that used it nearly fifteen years ago. And he still had that camera in his camera bag along with his Nikon—he was certain of that. He certainly wasn't going to give that beloved old classic to Ann after the divorce.

So who had taken this picture, if not Ann?

Jerry Rankin. That's who had to have taken this picture. He must have taken it while he'd been over at Ann's last weekend. That was the same weekend Amy had gotten the new dress. Amy probably hadn't mentioned that her mother's boyfriend had taken the picture because she figured that her dad would have gotten pissed or jealous about that—God love her.

So what? Sam thought. So what if Ann's lover boy had taken this picture? It annoyed him a little of course, but it didn't—

Then it hit him.

Like a ton of shit.

Stanley Jenkins had used the exact same type of Polaroid film!

And didn't it seem more than a little coincidental that Jerry Rankin had the same type of Polaroid camera that Stanley Jenkins had used when he'd raped and murdered Marsha Bradley?

Sam felt his pulse quicken. He stared at the photo again. He looked down at the bottom edge of the image and noticed the small mottled area where the picture hadn't fully developed—where the pinch rollers in the transport mechanism of the camera had failed to evenly compress the developer pod as the print passed through it . . .

Just like the print he'd seen down at the Police Department!

His heart now racing, Sam brought the print closer as he examined the thin scratch marks running vertically along the image window, approximately a half inch from the left hand border. The scratch marks had no doubt been caused by a burr in the metal of the pinch roller of the camera and was in the same general area of the print as the one left by Stanley Jenkins at Marsha Bradley's house!

Mere coincidence?

“Jesus Christ!” he swore out loud. That would be just one coincidence too much.

He had to be sure, though, that this Polaroid print came from the same camera that had taken the Polaroid found at the Bradley house before he jumped to any conclusions.

Sam needed to compare both prints, one beside the other. The scratch marks were in essence like fingerprints: no two sets could be exactly alike unless they were produced by the same set of pinch rollers having the same burr of metal in the exact same area, which would produce identical scratch marks with regard to the size of the scratch, the relative position of the scratch on the print, and the intermittent pattern of the scratch—where it began and ended as it cut into the Mylar window of the print . . .

He had to get to the police station and take a closer look at Exhibit A!

Sam ran around the desk and picked up the phone. He started dialing the number then stopped himself cold.

What in the hell am I doing here? he thought. Am I trying to tell myself that Jerry Rankin might actually be Stanley Jenkins? That's absurd! Ann certainly knows what Stanley Jenkins looks like or would look like today. Jerry Rankin obviously doesn't resemble Stanley in the least—otherwise Ann sure as fuck wouldn't be going out on dates with him! She's not that dizzy.

A disguise? he thought. Was it possible that Stanley had somehow transformed himself into a totally different looking person? So goddamn different that no one could even suspect that he was one in the same person?

How could he? It would be impossible!

Wouldn't it?

What about Michael Jackson? Sam thought. He'd had so many plastic surgeries that he no longer resembled his former self.

Plastic surgery.

What if somebody wanted to drastically alter his appearance through plastic surgery? A person who had access to a large sum of money and an agenda that warranted such a drastic change? A person who could go even further and work out in a gym, pump himself up, color his hair, etc. etc.

Certainly not impossible . . .

One thing at a time.

Sam began dialing the number for the station again when he noticed the blinking light on his answering machine. He nervously pressed the button for playback as he continued dialing.

"Yo, buddy," Roger Hagstrom's voice blared out. "I'm back in town. The trail in L.A. was cold as ice so I came back here. I miss those California babes already! Found out some damn interesting shit about our man, though. Call me at the station if you get home before six; otherwise call me at home."

The desk sergeant came over the phone.

"Detective Hagstrom," Sam said.

Sam tapped his fingers nervously as he waited for his friend to get on the line.

"Hagstrom."

"Have you got the Polaroid they found at the Bradley house handy?"

"Yeah, it's around here somewhere. What's up?"

"Find that print and I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

"Wait, Bucko! You mind telling me what you're up to?"

"I'll tell you when I get there. All I can say is if I'm right about this, and I hope to hell that I'm not, we've got to get our asses into gear!"

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Roger said.

"Just find that Polaroid, Rog. I'll see you in a few."

He hung up and dialed Ann's number.

"This is a recording. The number you have dialed . . ."

Fuck!

Sam reached into his back pocket, took out his wallet and located his ex-wife's new unpublished phone number. He dialed the number and let it ring a dozen times before slamming down the receiver.

She's in the country with Rankin! he suddenly recalled.

Or should he say, with Stanley Jenkins?

Amy was most likely at a friend's house, he could only pray.

Feeling like he was moving in slow motion, Sam grabbed the Polaroid and sprinted toward the front door before stopping himself halfway—

Fingerprints!

Although the Polaroid no doubt was already peppered with his own prints and Amy's as well, there was still the slim chance that Rankin's prints would still be distinguishable. Sam grasped the print by the edges, went into the kitchen and found a Ziploc bag. He carefully dropped the print into the bag, sealed it and made his way out of the house.

As he tore out of his driveway, Sam could feel his heart pounding in his chest. As much as he prayed that he was wrong about all of this, he had the unsettling feeling that he wasn't and there was good reason for it. If Jerry Rankin were indeed Stanley Jenkins, it would explain a lot of things—the most obvious being why the son of a bitch hadn't been identified by a single solitary soul in all of this time. Because Stanley Jenkins no longer looked at all like Stanley Jenkins! He had somehow managed to transform himself into an entirely different person—that person being Jerry Rankin.

The same bastard who had just happened to magically show up in Ann's life at around the same time that Marsha Bradley had been murdered. His disguise was apparently so flawless that Ann didn't have the slightest suspicion that Rankin could be Jenkins!

But the \$50,000 question was why? Why was Rankin/Jenkins dating his ex-wife? What could be the reason for it? If he wanted to murder her, why would he go through all of this rigmarole instead of simply doing as he had with Marsha Bradley and Sara Hunt?

Sam had no idea. It made no sense whatsoever. In fact, it made even less sense the more he thought about it.

He pulled out onto the highway and floored the accelerator. Within a mile he was doing over seventy-five and didn't give a shit. One solitary thought played over and over in his mind as he sped toward Smithtown:

Ann is alone in the country with a murderer and the bastard is going to kill her . . .

CHAPTER 22

Ann couldn't help but smile to herself as she caught Jerry glancing down at her legs yet again. A week ago this would have made her feel uncomfortable or perhaps even paranoid. But she realized now how absolutely puritanical it had been of her to get upset over something so trivial and she knew that Karen, as usual, had been

right all along. Men are going to stare at you from time to time and it's certainly nothing to get all up in arms over. Besides the fact that Jerry Rankin was a gentleman and someone she could trust, she'd also discovered that she actually enjoyed teasing him just a little bit. It was nice having a man admire her every once in awhile—it made her feel younger and more appreciated.

The white knit mini dress she was wearing could easily have fit into the fashion scene twenty years ago, in fact, she could recall having one much like it back when she was in high school. Jerry had gone bonkers when he had come by to pick her up and first saw her in it and she realized now that although jeans and a sweater may have been more appropriate for a drive through the country on a chilly fall day, she liked the way the dress made her feel almost like she was a schoolgirl again.

“Are you warm enough?” Jerry asked. “I can crank up the heat a bit if you'd like.”

Ann looked over at him. “No, I'm fine. The scenery sure is gorgeous, isn't it?”

Jerry glanced out the driver's side window and replied, “It certainly is. It starts getting much hillier the closer we get to Hocking County. It will be even more breathtaking there.”

“How much longer until then?”

“About twenty minutes or so.”

Ann stared out the window and sighed to herself. She hadn't felt this content in a long while and she knew she had Jerry Rankin to thank for it. After the incident the night before with Larry Underwood, she'd since wondered how she would ever have handled it if Jerry hadn't been there. If it weren't for him, in fact, the Underwood boy would never have been caught in the first place and God only knew what else could have happened.

But her greatest relief was just knowing that she and Amy were safe now—no more worrying about strange noises out in the yard or obscene phone calls in the middle of the night. She had already convinced herself that Larry Underwood had also been the obscene phone caller even though he had denied it. After all, it was just a little too coincidental that the calls started at around the same time that she had thought she'd heard him prowling around in the backyard. She also felt that the calls had seemed to be directed at Amy and not herself, because whenever she had answered the phone, the caller had hung up on her once he realized it wasn't Amy on the other end. With the exception of the night Jerry had been over when he had called, that is. And that, Ann believed, had been a fluke—most likely because Larry had mistaken her voice for her daughter's.

What a scary young man, she thought to herself with a shiver.

She was very proud of Amy right now—she had managed somehow to still have a great time at the dance in spite of last night's nightmarish incident. Plus, she had come home on time—well, only a half hour late—and it appeared that she had behaved herself as well. She had been intoxicated in a sense, but not from alcohol or drugs. Instead, she appeared to be on a natural emotional high from the apparent good time she'd had with Jason on her very first real date. As it turned out, Jason ended up being a very nice, responsible young man and Ann was certainly thankful for that.

It was amazing, she thought, how everything seemed to be turning around for the better ever since she'd met Jerry Rankin. He was always there for her, it seemed, when she really needed someone around. And he knew all the right buttons to push to make her feel appreciated and whole again. Jerry not only respected her but also seemed to know all the right things that made her tick—her likes and dislikes, her innermost feelings about certain things, even obscure little things. Like his suggestion that they go bowling last night. Although Ann

hadn't bowled in over twenty years, Jerry somehow seemed to know that she would enjoy it. It was almost as though he'd known her for years, and yet they'd only just met a few weeks ago!

But what really amazed Ann was the uncanny parallel between the story line of the romantic novel she had just finished reading and her relationship with Jerry. The heroine in the novel had been so much like herself—forty-ish, recently divorced with a teenage daughter to raise on her own. The heroine had moved to a new town to start over again and had just happened to run into a tall stranger and began dating him. The heroine had been hesitant at first in pursuing a new relationship, just as she had with Jerry, but things started happening quickly and before long she'd discovered that she was falling in love with him. In all that time, they had remained platonic until the heroine finally realized that she had put it off long enough.

And where, of all the places, had they finally ended up making love to each other? None other than the stranger's country retreat!

Talk about coincidences!

This didn't mean that she had any intentions whatsoever of going to bed with Jerry Rankin today—she was still a very long way from even considering sex with him at this stage of the game. But wasn't it amazing how similar the book had been to her own experiences? She had been so fascinated by the outcome of the book that she was tempted to ask Jerry if he'd ever read it before. But Ann wisely elected not to. She would only have embarrassed him. After all, men don't read romance novels!

"Look, Ann!" Jerry exclaimed, suddenly slowing down the car.

Ann looked at where he was pointing off to the side of the road. A deer and her two fawns were scuttling off though the woods.

"Wow, aren't they beautiful?" Ann breathed. They sat and watched as the deer bounded out of sight.

"That's the second time I've seen deer since we left. The other time was the one I saw lying dead in the road a few miles back," Jerry said.

"That's so sad."

The car sped up again as Jerry floored the accelerator. "It's a shame that the poor beasts are so ignorant. When they see a car coming at them, they panic and get quite confused. But if they had just an ounce of intelligence, they'd be able to quickly assess the situation and get the hell out of the way before they got plastered."

"Jerry! What a horrible thing to say!"

He looked over at her and pouted like a child who had just been scolded. "I'm sorry Ann—I didn't mean to upset you. I was just being truthful—wild animals basically are ignorant."

"Well, I disagree. I think the problem is *us*. If we didn't build these highways and cars that go so fast, the animals wouldn't be in such danger. They're only trying to survive and we've made it that much more difficult for them."

Jerry shrugged. "Okay, I have to agree with you there. I'm actually sorry I ever said anything in the first place!"

Ann didn't want the afternoon to be ruined over a petty argument. "I'm sorry too, Jerry. I shouldn't have lashed out at you like that. I realize now what you were saying . . . I think."

She forced a smile, turned and looked out the window again. She realized now that it wasn't so much what Jerry had said but the way in which he said it that had irked her. Almost godlike. Something about that troubled her for some reason; it just didn't seem like something Jerry Rankin would say . . .

She felt his hand touch her arm and she turned to face him.

"I truly am sorry, Ann. Will you forgive me?"

His eyes were pleading with her. Ann smiled and replied, "I forgive you Jerry. It's no big deal!"

"Thanks. How about some music?"

Ann nodded and began skimming through the CD's in the console. She saw a half-dozen titles—all '60s classics. She selected *The Mamas and Papa's Greatest Hits* and handed it to Jerry.

"I really like them," she said.

"Me, too," Jerry said, inserting the disk into the player.

As *California Dreaming* oozed out of the speakers, Ann sat back and stared out the window, enjoying the autumnal scenery of southeastern Ohio. She noted that the terrain had become hillier and when they entered Hocking County, the highway wound up and down the foothills. The leaves on the trees were at their peak of color and it reminded her a lot of the hills surrounding Smithtown. Hocking county was in fact mid-distance between Columbus and Smithtown but further to the east and she wondered if perhaps these hills were part of the same range that made up the State forest in Smithtown.

Before long, Jerry pulled onto a blacktop road that entered the forest region. The scenery along the road was truly spectacular as they meandered through the foothills. The woods were thick with oak, maple and elm trees, their leaves strikingly rich in color as the slanting shafts of afternoon sun radiated through the branches here and there, showcasing their delicate beauty. Ann and Jerry spoke very little, both content to sit back and enjoy the serene majesty of the wilderness. They had been in the forest for nearly fifteen minutes when Jerry slowed down as they approached an unmarked dirt road that forked off to the left. He pulled onto the road and drove a little way until they came up on a heavy gate blocking the road. Jerry threw the gearshift into park and got out.

"Is this your driveway?" Ann asked.

He glanced over and smiled. "Guess you could say that. I own this road as well as much of the land beyond."

But I thought that this was state property."

"Not anymore. We just passed the forest boundary line a quarter mile or so back."

Ann watched as Jerry stepped over to the gate, took a key from his pocket and unlocked the padlock. He swung the gate open and returned to the car.

"I'm impressed already!" Ann exclaimed as Jerry threw the car into gear and drove a few yards past the gate.

"You ain't seen nothin' yet!" he grinned slyly before he got out again and locked the gate.

"How long have you owned this?"

"About six months. There are advantages to being in real estate—I got this place for a steal!"

They pulled away and drove along the road for a couple of minutes until they approached a clearing. When they emerged from the tree lined road, Ann gasped.

The first thing she saw was an enormous field of recently mowed grass. The field was flanked by lush stands of timber and near the center and to the right was a huge pond, complete with lily pads and a working fountain. Beyond the pond stood a good-sized A-frame house in the distance on top of a knoll.

“My Lord! This is wonderful, Jerry!”

“Thank you. I thought you’d be impressed.”

Ann stared out the window in awe as they drove toward the house, unable to believe the beauty and remoteness of Jerry Rankin’s country estate. When he had first mentioned it to her, he never let on that it was any way near as enchanting and expansive as this and Ann suddenly had the feeling he’d done this on purpose—just to ensure that she would be absolutely floored once she actually saw it. His ploy had worked like a charm.

Driving along the pond, Jerry said, “It’s fully stocked with bass, catfish and blue gill. I don’t suppose you like to fish, do you?”

Ann grinned. “I used to love fishing when I was a little girl! I sort of grew out of it though, I guess.”

“Maybe you’d like to try it again and see if you still enjoy it,” he suggested, eyeing her expectantly.

Ann flashed back to the times when she used to go fishing with her father as a child and a warm wave of nostalgia swept over her.

“I just may want to do that,” she replied with a smile.

In another minute they rounded a curve in the road and pulled up beside the house.

“Here we are,” he proclaimed.

Ann stepped out and stood for a moment, surveying the surroundings. The A-frame house looked even larger than she’d imagined it to be.

“I never dreamt it would be so gorgeous. You’ve created your own little island here!”

“I’m glad you like it. Well, let’s go inside and I’ll show you around.”

Ann followed him onto the deck and through the front door. The first thing that caught her eye was the sunken living room that nearly took up the entire east side of the first floor. Straight ahead from her was a large kitchen and to the right the dining area as well as sliding glass doors opening to a solarium, complete with a Jacuzzi. To her immediate right was raw space with the exception of a couple of oil paintings hanging on the wall and a spiral staircase leading upstairs. There wasn’t a single wall separating any of the interior rooms and that feature lent a light and airy atmosphere to the space.

“Well, what do you think so far?” Jerry asked.

“Awesome,” was all Ann could say.

“C’mon,” he said, taking her by the hand and leading the way into the solarium. After showing her the hot tub, he led her to the staircase. Ann stopped and paused to look at the paintings, surprised to see that they were signed by Jerry Rankin.

“You didn’t tell me that you were an artist!” she exclaimed as she studied one of the paintings.

“I’ve dabbled a bit,” he replied modestly.

“Dabbled? These are really good, Jerry!”

“Thank you. I’m still trying to develop my own style—believe me it isn’t easy. My instructors all thought that I was a little too fond of Picasso.”

“Who cares? How long have you been painting?”

“I took it up while I was in Europe. I used to sketch all the time when I was a kid and my parents were anything but encouraging—so I decided to take it more seriously and studied for a few years in Paris.”

He started moving toward the staircase and Ann followed behind.

“Let me show you the upstairs.”

Jerry waited until Ann reached the landing and said. “This used to be just like the first floor—void of any walls dividing up the rooms. But I decided to break it up into separate rooms to make it a bit more functional.”

Ann nodded and followed him down the hall to the first door on the left, which was the master bedroom. It was good sized, tastefully furnished and offered a nice panorama of the hills through the enormous plate glass window. Off to the side was a full bath that was shared with the adjacent room. Jerry led her through the bathroom into the next room, which was smaller and totally empty.

“One of the two spare bedrooms” he explained as they walked back out into the hallway.

They crossed the hall to another room. Jerry opened the door and Ann let out a gasp. Inside was a miniature equivalent to a fully equipped gym with every kind of exercise machine and weight lifting apparatus imaginable.

“I like to keep fit,” Jerry smiled.

“I’ll say,” Ann replied.

Jerry closed the door and led Ann to the last room. “This is my study, you might say,”

The room was every bit as large as the master bedroom and looked like it could be the control room for NASA, with numerous computers and peripherals arranged in clusters on the long counters running along the length of the walls. At the far end, against the window, sat another counter with what appeared to be a ham radio along with a vast array of sophisticated looking diagnostic equipment.

“Good God, Jerry! What is all of this?” Ann asked.

“Toys,” Jerry replied simply. “Just a bunch of toys that I like to tinker around with.”

Ann stood over to one of the computers and looked it over. Although she wasn’t very familiar with computer hardware, she could tell that this was serious, ultra-expensive equipment.

“What on earth do you use all of this for?”

Jerry came over and stood beside her. “I like to keep in touch with what’s going on in the world. It’s almost like having the entire world at your fingertips.”

“That’s pretty apparent. But why in a country retreat?”

He looked at her peculiarly. “Why not?”

Ann suddenly felt stupid for asking the question and smiled nervously. “Well, I’m certainly impressed. I didn’t realize you had so many hobbies, Jerry. I’m surprised you find the time to sell real estate!”

He said quickly, “It’s not as though I’m here that often, but it’s nice to come here whenever I can and get away from it all. Isn’t that what getting away is all about? Relax and do the things you most enjoy doing?”

He had a point and she had to agree. But she also wondered what was left to furnish his home in Dublin. Jerry Rankin’s “retreat” looked more like permanent residence than a place to just drop in from time to time.

When they returned to the hall, Jerry walked over to the staircase and pointed up to where it dead-ended into a hatch-like door set into the ceiling.

“My studio loft is up there. I’m in the process of renovating it; I’m afraid I’ll have to show it to you some other time.”

“That’s a shame,” Ann said. “I’d love to see it.”

“Perhaps next time,” he said flatly before descending the stairs.

Ann glanced upward and wondered what renovations Jerry could possibly be doing to his studio that would prevent her from at least getting quick peek at it. Perhaps he was just sensitive of her seeing his paintings in progress? Possibly . . .

She began descending the stairs and was half way down when she realized to her horror that Jerry was standing at the bottom staring straight up her skirt! Her faced turned red and Jerry quickly turned away and began making his way to the kitchen. The incident made Ann very nervous and she wondered if he had been staring at her on purpose or if he’d done it inadvertently. Something told her that the former was the case but she hoped that she was wrong. Surely, she decided, Jerry wouldn’t purposely do something that childish—

When she joined him in the kitchen, Jerry smiled and said, “How about a little stroll through the grounds—if you’re not too tired, that is.”

Ann thought about it a moment. “Sure, why not?”

“Wonderful! And when we get back, I’ll prepare us some dinner. Do you by any chance like lobster?”

“Love it!” Ann said.

“I’m glad to hear that because I picked up a pair of fresh ones at the market yesterday along with a bottle of dry white wine. I toss a pretty mean salad, too.”

“Sounds scrumptious.”

Ann followed Jerry out the front door and zipped up her jacket when the chilly air greeted her. They began walking down the road toward the pond and by time they had reached it, Jerry had taken hold of her hand.

For the next half hour or so they sauntered leisurely around the grounds talking and taking in the quiet beauty of the autumn foliage. Jerry did most of the talking, telling Ann how much he loved it in the country and how he could just pack everything in and stay there forever. Ann could almost sense by his subtle hints that he was trying to sell her on the place, as if he wouldn’t mind it if she could someday join him and live happily ever after here in the middle of nowhere. She remained politely aloof, flattered by his little innuendoes and wondering at the same time how he could so easily forget that his wife had only recently passed away and how he could already be so fervent to start all over again with someone else.

By the time they headed back to this house, Ann found herself puzzled and a little taken aback by Jerry’s gradual change in demeanor. In the span of just thirty minutes, he had somehow become less a casual acquaintance and more like a man with a mission—a suitor trying to win her heart.

She wasn’t sure how to respond to all of this and she sensed that at some point Jerry Rankin was going to put her in a compromising position. He seemed to have suddenly forgotten their prior agreement—that she had no intentions of establishing a romantic relationship with him and that they were only seeing each other on a no-strings basis. Admittedly, she had come to like Jerry Rankin a great deal as a person and no doubt felt physically attracted to his suave good looks. But she didn’t love him and knew in the back of her mind that she never would. Jerry Rankin was simply a pleasant diversion from her otherwise unsettled life since breaking up with Sam, she now acknowledged, and she wondered how on earth she had let things go this far. How had she let herself go against her better judgment and encourage Jerry as she had?

Karen Whaley. She was one of the reasons. Karen had been Ms. Encouragement from day one, coercing her to get on with her life and have some fun. “Don’t let him slip through your fingers,” she had told her in her typical know-it-all tone of voice.

And then there was Shelley Hatcher. Wasn’t that really why she’d started going out with Jerry on a regular basis? Because Sam had started fooling around with Shelley again and she wanted to somehow get back at her ex-husband?

Just as they approached the house, another thought occurred to Ann: the romance novel that she had been reading. This was yet another reason why she had gone so far with this. She had let a silly romance story transform her into some kind of giddy schoolgirl! She quickly glanced down at her white mini skirt and funky Reeboks. *Appropriate attire for a forty-year-old woman? Come on, Ann!* She wanted to laugh out loud as she realized that she had not only let her waning youth get the best of her but she had been in a sense living vicariously thorough the heroine of that stupid romance novel all this time. Middle aged woman gets married, gives birth to child, gets divorced, moves away with child, meets tall, handsome stranger, has her doubts about “love on the rebound” but nevertheless gives it a shot, and eventually allows stranger to seduce her to his country retreat . . .

Jerry suddenly gave her hand a squeeze as they approached the porch.

“Feeling hungry?” he asked.

“Famished,” she heard herself reply with a forced smile.

Ann felt a pang of guilt as they walked up to the door. Jerry was probably the most considerate man she had ever met and the last thing she wanted to do was to hurt him. He had done more for her in the relatively short period of time she had know him than she cared to admit to herself. Not only had he made her feel like a whole person again, but he had been there for her when she needed a man around the house and a shoulder to cry on. Plus he had helped to get her mind off of Marsha, if only for a little while at a time.

As Ann recalled her lifelong friend she felt a wave of sadness sweep throughout her entire body. She suddenly realized that Jerry had in a sense helped to fill that void left after Marsha’s death by merely entering her life and giving her something optimistic to look forward to. And, as selfish as it seemed, she’d found herself feeling much better after having learned that he too had recently lost a loved one—his wife. This discovery had all of a sudden made her feel less alone in the world and no doubt had helped establish a sort of common denominator between herself and Jerry.

Could Jerry Rankin have come along at a better time? she thought.

And had he not come along when he had, where would she be now? How could she have dealt with all of this turmoil without him?

She felt him let go of her hand as he opened the door and held it open for her. As she stepped inside, she realized that she owed Jerry a lot. And although she knew that she was going to have to end it between them soon before either of them got into this any deeper, she vowed to herself that she would let him down very gently and very gradually. It was the least she could do.

“Have a seat,” Jerry said when they entered the kitchen. “Would you like something to drink?”

Ann strode over and sat down on one of the stools at the mahogany bar that divided the kitchen from the dining area. “A glass of water, if you don’t mind.”

“Coming right up!” he replied jovially. Jerry went over to the one of the cabinets to get a glass, added ice and filled it with Evian. He handed it to Ann.

“Thanks,” she said.

They made small talk as Ann watched Jerry prepare a gourmet lobster dinner. An hour and two glasses of wine later, Ann caught herself staring at Jerry’s paintings on the wall again. There was something about them, the composition, the subjects themselves, something, that drew her curiosity. She knew that Jerry had noticed her staring over at them more than once but it was fairly evident that he didn’t wish to discuss them, or he would have said something. Ann wanted to ask him about two of the paintings in particular—although they were obviously abstract in nature, it appeared as though the women in both paintings were being observed by the viewer through an opening—a window in the first canvas and through a jagged hole of some kind in the second one. Both of these ‘objects’ constituted the foreground of the paintings creating the illusion that the women were in the distance beyond the respective openings. The impassive expression on their faces and the manner in which they were looking off to the side suggested that the women were totally unaware that the *Observer* was watching them—as though they were being peeped at. *Voyeurism?* Ann thought. Was that what Jerry was implying in the paintings?

“I have a surprise for you,” Jerry suddenly announced.

Ann flinched. She peered across the table at him.

“A surprise?”

He nodded. “But before I give it to you, you have to promise me that you’ll use it . . . tonight.”

Ann tried to imagine what it could be. What could he possibly give her that she could use tonight? she wondered.

“OK, I promise,” she said, playing along.

Jerry stood up, smiled at her peculiarly then went over to the kitchen pantry and opened the door. A moment later he was back, carrying a gift-wrapped box. Before he handed it to her, he said, “Remember, you promised me that you’d use it tonight.”

“I know,” Ann said. “But you really shouldn’t have, Jerry.”

He smiled and handed her the box. Ann felt a little embarrassed and uncomfortable as she removed the ribbon and tore off the gift-wrap. She cast him a sidelong glance when she opened the box and saw what was inside: a lavender bikini swimsuit.

“Jerry! You tricked me! How on earth can I possibly use this tonight?”

He cocked his head in the direction of the Jacuzzi. “Right out there.”

“But Jerry . . .” Ann protested.

“You promised, remember?”

“Yes, but, I never dreamed—”

He placed a hand on her shoulder as his expression became serious.

“Listen, Ann. You don’t have to if you don’t want to, of course. I’m not really trying to put you on the spot. I honestly thought that you may want to try out the tub tonight, so I bought you the swimsuit as sort of an afterthought.” He snickered. “I knew you wouldn’t do it if you had nothing to wear! Anyway, it’s up to you. I’d just like to add that you’re not going to believe how relaxing it is out there with that soothing hot water loosening up those taut muscles. It’s like heaven.”

Ann smiled. “You don’t have to give me the hard sell, Jerry. I’ve been in a hot tub before.”

“Then you know how absolutely marvelous it is!”

Ann began fidgeting with the swimsuit, still in the box. “I’d love to, Jerry, but it’s getting late. I told Amy that I’d be home by ten o’clock and she may need me to pick her up at her friend’s house if she doesn’t decide to spend the night there.”

Jerry glanced at the wall clock and said, “It’s only seven now. We can hit the tub and have plenty of time to get you home by ten.”

Ann thought it over a moment. “All right, you win.”

She took out the swimsuit and looked it over. “It’s lovely, Jerry. I hope it fits. Where can I change?”

Jerry smiled broadly. “Up in the bedroom if you’d like. You won’t regret this—I promise! I’ll just change down here and get the tub ready in the meantime.”

Ann couldn’t help but smile to herself at Jerry’s boyish enthusiasm. He was acting like a little kid who had just gotten that baseball glove he’d wanted so much for his birthday.

“Okay, I’ll be back in a few minutes,” she said, getting up from the table.

Once inside Jerry’s bedroom, Ann took the swimsuit into the master bath and began removing her clothes. She didn’t know if it was the two glasses of wine or her not wanting to disappoint Jerry that prompted her to agree to this rather odd idea. But the more she thought about it, the more she realized that she was actually looking forward to it. It was all quite harmless, really, and besides, she had always been crazy about hot tubs. In fact, she and Sam had owned one and she used to literally spend hours soaking in it whenever she felt tense or just plain wanted to relax and read a good book. Ann suddenly realized just how much she had missed it in all this time since they had sold the house.

Ann laid her clothes in a neat pile on the floor and slipped into the suit. It fit perfectly. As she looked in the mirror at her lily-white skin, she suddenly wished she had known she was going to be wearing a bathing suit in October and she would have paid a visit to the tanning salon. Oh well, she thought. At least the suit did her body justice in the way it clung perfectly. She marveled at Jerry’s taste in choosing the suit. Not only was she fond of lavender, her favorite color, but the suit fit as if it had been custom tailored for her.

Ann straightened up her hair a little and started to leave but stopped herself, realizing that she was going to feel a bit odd going back downstairs to face Jerry practically naked. She grabbed a bath towel off the rack and draped it over her shoulders.

On the way out of the bedroom, something caught her eye and Ann froze in her tracks. There was a small portion of clothing sticking out from between the sliding closet doors that looked familiar. She went over, slid open the door and saw the sleeve of the very same jacket Jerry had worn the night before. It was hanging up along with an entire wardrobe of clothing; a wardrobe that seemed just a little too extensive to be stowed away at one’s weekend retreat. She quickly rifled through the clothes and recognized two of the shirts she’d seen Jerry wear since she’d first met him. Something now puzzled her: why had he spent last night here instead of at his home in Dublin? The jacket all but proved that he had.

She slid the door closed. Either Jerry was merely leading her to believe that he spent little time in this fully stocked, fully furnished country hideaway or he was flat out lying to her. This place not only had that same lived in feeling that any other full time residence emanated but no one in this right mind would store their entire wardrobe at a location that was over an hour and a half drive from where they lived and worked.

Did Jerry Rankin even own a home in Dublin?

She had never once driven by to see his house in all this time – she had never felt any reason to . . .

A thought suddenly occurred to her and she began feeling foolish. She had phoned Jerry twice and both times he had answered the phone. The number she'd dialed had been the local number he had listed on his business card. Placing a call out here in God's country would most certainly have been a long distance call, if he even had a phone here. Ann couldn't recall seeing a phone during her grand tour.

A cell phone . . . That would explain some of this.

She shrugged. Why was she suddenly being so suspicious of Jerry Rankin? This is ridiculous! she thought. And what difference did it make if he had spent the night here last night? It wasn't any of her business, anyway.

Ann turned and left the bedroom. When she reached the first floor, she saw Jerry out in the solarium kneeling down and fiddling with the controls for the hot tub. He was wearing a pair of jockey-style bathing trunks. She slid the door open and stepped out into the solarium.

Jerry glanced over at her expectantly. "How do you like the suit? Let me see it!"

Ann smiled bashfully before removing the bath towel from her shoulders.

"It looks *wonderful!*" Jerry exclaimed, eying her from head to toe. "Lord, Ann, you sure have one gorgeous body!"

Ann wasn't sure why she blushed, but she did.

"Thanks," she replied.

She suddenly felt stark naked as she noticed Jerry's eyes scrutinizing her body—something he did without reserve or hesitation. Ann felt the impulse to cover herself up but managed to stifle it. Jerry shut the door panel and walked over to her. When she saw how tanned and muscular Jerry looked in his brief bathing suit, Ann began feeling a little less self-conscious about her own near nakedness but at the same time wished to Christ her skin wasn't so damn bone-white.

Jerry reached down and skimmed his hand over the water.

"Ah, just right! I brought out our wine as well—just in case we get thirsty."

Ann glanced over at the wine bottle and decided that a little more wine might get her a little more in the mood for this.

"It's a little chilly in here," she declared, pouring herself a glass.

Jerry followed suit. "Normally it isn't this cool in here during the day. But once that sun goes down, it does get a bit nippy this time of year. The water is good and warm, though!"

Ann smiled, took a sip and looked around. It was dark as pitch outside now but the solarium was bathed in a warm glow from the tiny track lights mounted strategically along the perimeter of the structure. There was a cozy, almost surreal atmosphere created by the dim lights, the potted tropical plants and the steady low hum of the motor as it churned the chlorinated water around in the tub. She took another sip and soon felt her longing to soak in the hot tub return.

She set her glass down resolutely and eyed Jerry. "Let's go in!"

Jerry nodded and made a gesture for Ann to get in first, which she did. The water was just right as she waded over to one of the seats and eased herself down into the hot, swirling water.

"It feels wonderful!" she gushed.

Jerry plopped down beside her. "Absolute heaven!"

“This was a great idea, Jerry,” Ann declared, leaning her head back and staring up at the night sky through the glass ceiling.

“I had a feeling you would approve.”

Ann closed her eyes, feeling the warm pulsating jets of water rushing against her body. She had always enjoyed long baths for as long as she could remember—so soothing and relaxing at times that she would sometimes actually allow herself to drift off to sleep. She recalled a particular evening while she was in high school that she had actually fallen asleep for a full hour before a noise outside the bathroom window had suddenly awoken her. She had been grateful for the “wake-up call” because she’d had a final to take the following morning and hadn’t yet begun studying for it.

She heard Jerry stand up and opened her eyes. “I’m getting my wine—would you like yours?”

“Yes, please,” she replied, watching the rivulets of water rolling down Jerry’s shaved, muscular chest.

He winked at her and stepped out. Ann heard the clinking of glasses as he poured some more wine.

“Here,” he said, handing her glass to her.

“Thanks,” she said, taking a sip.

Jerry suddenly placed his hands on her shoulders and faced her. “Are you having a good time?”

She gazed into his smoldering green eyes, which were staring at her imploringly from his handsomely chiseled face.

“Very nice,” she replied.

He leaned down and pecked her on the cheek. “I’m very happy to hear that.”

For a fleeting moment Ann thought that he was going to embrace and kiss her again and she almost wished he had. But instead, he removed his hands, smiled and eased himself down into the tub. She looked on as he fully submerged himself underwater for a moment, stood up and ran his hands through his thick blonde hair and sat down beside her. Leaning back, he closed his eyes for a moment and opened them again, staring pensively at the ceiling. Ann could sense that he wanted to tell her something but hadn’t yet gotten the nerve up to follow through with it. She didn’t know why she had this feeling—maybe it was because of the way he had looked at her a moment ago. He had seemed nervous, tentative, as though he wanted to pour out his heart but had decided that the moment wasn’t yet quite right.

The dread she had felt earlier during their stroll of the grounds now returned and she reminded herself not to do anything that might encourage him. Otherwise, she would find herself in an embarrassing and awkward position. She didn’t love Jerry Rankin and never would, in spite of her impulsive urge to be held in his arms a moment ago. This was a physical thing, she told herself, not an emotional one. Jerry wanted more than that—she was almost certain of it now.

She leaned her head back and closed her eyes, tuning in on the low hum of the motor and gushing jets of water pulsating against her body. Perhaps, she thought, she was making a mountain out of a molehill. Maybe Jerry wasn’t quite as head over heels as she thought he was. Maybe she was reading more into this than there actually was. Whatever the case, she decided it would be best to tell Jerry it was time to head back soon; she needed some time to think all of this through.

She suddenly felt his hands on her shoulders, jerking her from her thoughts. She opened her eyes and saw Jerry standing over her, his expression intense, almost frightening. His eyes were fixed on hers.

“You startled me,” she said nervously.

Jerry smiled, but not in a friendly manner. His lips were twisted in a sort of uncomfortable smirk, conveying a forced self-confidence. His grip on her was a little too firm.

“Let’s do it, Ann,” he declared.

“Do what?” she replied suspiciously.

“Get naked.”

His voice seemed different somehow. Not quite as articulate and with a slight hillbilly twang.

“No, Jerry! What’s wrong with you?” Ann sputtered, her heart racing in her chest.

The intensity in his face waned somewhat. He blinked a couple of times as if to force himself to maintain his composure.

“There’s nothing wrong with me, Ann. I just want to make love to you.”

Ann felt his grip on her tighten as he spoke. “You’re hurting me, Jerry!”

She grasped his arms and tried to push him away. He didn’t budge.

“*Let go of me!*” Ann cried.

“I can’t, Ann. Not now.”

Ann was almost as angry as she was terrified.

“Jerry, I don’t know what your problem is but I want you to let go of me and take me home now! Do you hear me?”

He bent down and tried to kiss her. Ann pulled away.

“*No!*”

“Please, Ann,” Jerry pleaded. “Don’t turn me down—I don’t want to have to hurt you.”

Ann gaped at him in utter shock. “Are you threatening me, Jerry?”

His eyes were now as cold as steel. “Let’s just say that I’m giving you an alternative. We either do it by the book or we do it another way . . .”

Ann struggled to free herself but was powerless against Jerry’s strength. The room suddenly seemed to be closing in on her as the cold hard fact sunk in that Jerry Rankin was going to rape her, right there and now. It was like a nightmare but too real to be a nightmare. How in God’s name was this happening?

Jerry wrapped his sinewy arms around her and started unfastening her bikini top. His face wore a cool, calculating reserve as he spoke.

“Don’t fight it, Ann. You will enjoy this.”

Ann squirmed and managed to slip through his arms. Her head went underwater and in seconds she surfaced on the other side of the hot tub. In a flash, Rankin waded over in two strides and grabbed her by the ankle as she attempted to climb out.

“Please, Ann! Don’t try anything like that again. Do you understand?” he snapped, his face taut with rage.

Before Ann could respond, he said, “I don’t understand you women. I’m especially disappointed in you, Ann. Why are you fighting it? Take a look at me, Ann. Take a good look! I’m not some ugly asshole with shit for brains, now am I? I’m a hunk, for chrissakes! And a hunk with brains, no less! We are supposed to be fucking right now and you’re going to fucking enjoy it! And afterwards, you’re going to gaze lovingly into my eyes and tell me that you want to spend the rest of your life with me because I’m everything that you’ve ever dreamed of. The book, Ann! You’re not following the goddamn script! Get with the program—we’ve made it this far—don’t fucking let me down now!”

Ann was utterly speechless. Her head was spinning wildly. She couldn't feel anything for a moment—she was absolutely numb and thunderstruck at the same time.

“What are you talking about, Jerry?” she finally managed to say.

He let out a laugh—a sinister guffaw. “That stupid fucking romance novel you’ve been reading for the past three weeks! *A Second Chance for Madeline*. I planted it in your house. I knew that you’d read it of course—my only concern was whether or not you would question where it came from and how it got there. A calculated risk, you might say. But my hunch was right. You assumed that it was Amy’s book and you never even asked her about it. Another good hunch on my part. You can’t even communicate with your own daughter because you’re afraid of upsetting the spoiled brat! You’re just as stupid and naive as every other wench in this world, Ann. Had me fooled, I can sure tell you that! And to think of all I’ve done for you, just to win your heart and jump your bones. Jesus, what does it take for a guy to get laid in this life?”

Ann’s heart was palpitating as she stood there facing him, her wrists being nearly crushed by his vise-like grip. Her body trembled in the chilly air of the solarium as she attempted to rationalize what Jerry Rankin was saying.

He had planted that book. She had assumed that it was Amy’s book. She had read the book and related so well with the character in the story and had been amazed at how similar the story line followed her relationship with Jerry Rankin . . .

He had planted that book, knowing somehow that she would read it . . . Then he had proceeded to play her like a fiddle—right into his trap!

But why? Just so he could rape her? But he hadn’t wanted to rape her at first. He had wanted to simply make love to her—to have her willingly and consensually make love to him. ‘By the book,’ as he’d put it.

Or, the alternative . . .

In fact he had wanted everything to be *by the book*. And it had been just that so far.

Until now.

Jesus! she thought in horror as it suddenly sunk in: Jerry Rankin had set her up from the very beginning! The ‘chance meeting’ at the supermarket hadn’t been a chance meeting at all. Instead, it had been carefully planned out and meticulously executed . . .

He’d left a six-pack of Coke at the checkout counter knowing full well that she was going to rush out into the parking lot to give it to him! Or, he had at least taken a ‘calculated hunch’ that she would.

“You know, I can read your mind, Ann,” he said, interrupting her thoughts. “Right now, you’re trying to sort out everything and you’re slowly but surely discovering that you’ve more or less been had. And right now, you’re no doubt probably wondering how I could possibly know so much about you. Like, how did I know that you would pick up that book and start reading it, for example? I’ll be modest and admit that I didn’t know for sure that you would. But had you not chosen to read that steamy little romance novel, I would have merely executed an alternate plan instead. You see, there’s always a back-up plan, Ann. It’s absolutely vital in this business. It can make the difference between life and death, in fact.

“The irony of all of this is that it didn’t have to end this way. We could have moved on to greener pastures by now instead of standing here freezing in this goddamn hot tub, which, by the way, I installed solely for your enjoyment. We could be submerged in this wonderful hot water right now humping away. But I’m no fool, Ann. I’ve finally come to grips with reality. You’ve already told yourself quite some time ago that you don’t want me.

I wasn't sure of it until today, though. You've eluded yourself into thinking that you're too goddamn good for me, just as all the others have. I thought you'd understand me, Ann, but you don't. You, like all the others, wouldn't know a good thing if it bit you on the ass."

He let go of Ann's wrists and stood back from her, flexing his muscles and taking on a bodybuilding pose.

"Look at me, Ann. Check out this bod. Not an ounce of fat, just pure muscle of steel. It's taken me fifteen years to get my body in this shape! Fifteen years of working out tirelessly, methodically, and sticking to a proper diet. What woman wouldn't dream of being screwed by a man with a powerful body like mine? Not too many is my guess."

Jerry stepped forward and brought his face a few inches from Ann's. "And this mug, Ann. Check it out! A pretty damn handsome bloke, eh? Forty years old and hardly a wrinkle! A great head of hair, too. What bitch could possibly resist me, once they've examined the merchandise? *What the fuck more could they want?*

"But there you stand, plain as day, telling me that I'm not quite up to your specs. Are you trying to convince me that Sam Middleton is some kind of prize? Ha! That skinny twerp sure ain't getting any offers from Chippendale's, now is he? Yet you still want the son of a bitch, don't you? You miss the motherfucker; I can tell by the way you talk to your buddy Karen on the phone all the time. Judas Priest, Ann, you're fucking blind as a bat!"

The mention of Sam's name made Ann tense up even more as something suddenly dawned on her.

"You've never even seen my ex-husband before—how do you know what Sam looks like? And how... How the hell do you know what I've spoken to Karen about?"

Rankin chuckled vacantly. "There's a lot about me that you don't know, Ann. I'm pretty amazing, though, aren't I? Christ, I know more about you than you know about yourself! Makes me almost godlike, doesn't it? Are you sure you don't want to reconsider?"

Ann's mind was a whirr as she thought back. Had she ever shown a picture of Sam to Jerry? No, she had not. The only photo she had was the family portrait in her bedroom. Had Jerry been up there? No, he most certainly had not.

And what about Karen? He had never met her—he doesn't know her from the man in the moon. Yet ...

"Think, Ann! *Think!* How could I know so much about you when I've only just met you a few weeks ago? Could it be that the man you're seeing isn't quite who he appears to be? Could it be that perhaps Jerry Rankin, real estate broker, is really somebody else? A master of surveillance—a master spy? And could it possibly be that he went into your house while you were away, gathering vital information and tapping your phone, listening in on your conversations? And spying on you through your windows while you were innocently going about your business? I mean, how else could I have known all the juicy things that you and your buddy Karen have chatted about? Including yours truly, of course. And how about that tart, Shelley Hatcher, whose been fucking your beloved Sam blind? You'd still choose him over me even after he's been screwing around with someone else—even after he never learned his lesson the first time around. I just can't figure you women out!"

Ann felt as though she was going to faint.

All of a sudden, Jerry grabbed her and began shaking her mercilessly, his face contorted in a maniacal fit of rage.

"I went to all of this time and trouble for you, you bitch! And what do I get in return? Another turndown! You're a big fucking disappointment, Ann!"

Ann cried out in agony as she felt his hands digging into her flesh.

“Please, Jerry . . .”

“Please fucking what? Please let go of me? Please take me home? Why, bitch? Why should I do anything else for you? What have you done for me to deserve any mercy? I’ve done everything for you—all of this—but you haven’t given me one goddamn thing in return!”

He ceased shaking her and looked away for a moment. Then he stared at Ann, his expression softer, feigning compassion. “I’m sorry, Ann. I really need to get a handle on this temper of mine. I get a bit irrational when I get angry and then I start making mistakes. That’s not acceptable. Especially in the spy gig. Do forgive me, please.”

Ann was trembling. She forgot the excruciating pain in her shoulders while she struggled to figure out how she was going to get away from this raging lunatic. She realized that she was totally at his mercy, no matter what, and that her only chance for survival, if only for a few minutes, was to keep silent and do whatever he demanded. She simply had no choice.

He brought his hands down and clasped onto hers, smiled like a lover getting ready to propose. “Why, you’re freezing cold, Ann. Let’s get in the water,” he said gently.

Ann forced a nod, lowered herself down into the steaming, churning water along with Jerry. The warmth seeped into her skin and had a graciously sobering effect.

“There now, that’s better,” he breathed softly. Gazing into her eyes, he said, “Do you know how many times I’ve longed for this moment, Ann? To be with you like this, holding your hands? Countless. It means a lot more to me than you could ever imagine. A long time ago, I dreamt of a moment just like this, to be with a beautiful woman, intimately, enjoying her beauty, the softness of her skin and knowing that she wanted me as much as I wanted her. Do you know what I mean?”

Ann nodded.

“But I never had much luck making that dream materialize. Women have never been able to understand me for some reason. But you, Ann, you seemed different ever since the first time I ever laid eyes on you. Yes, I admit it now. I lied about my once having a wife. I was trying to make you feel sorry for me. Do you forgive me?”

Ann nodded again.

“A guy gets lonely sometimes. He needs a release, a break from all of the frustration. That’s what this is all about, Ann. I need a release. A little female accompaniment that’s not forced—voluntary. I really don’t want to hurt you. I just want you to play along—to let me realize that dream. If only for just a few moments. Do you think you could do that for me, Ann?”

Although her head was reeling, Ann managed to appear relatively calm. What was her alternative, she thought, if she didn’t play along?

She stared into his eyes and pretended that Jerry Rankin was still the tall, dark stranger she had thought him to be.

“Yes, I can,” she replied.

His eyes lit up. He looked like an adolescent who had just gotten the go-ahead to kiss his first girl ever. He let go of her hands and reached around her back. Ann clenched her teeth as she felt him unfasten her top then watched hopelessly as it fell into the swirling water.

He smiled nervously again, like a schoolboy who had just scored his first adolescent victory. Ann was immediately reminded of the first and only awkward kiss he had given her on their date that Friday night.

He brought his hands around and gingerly cupped her breasts. Even in the weak light, Ann could see the tiny beads of sweat forming on his brow as he merely stood there for a full minute, fondling. Ann had the impulse to run but thought better of it. She would have to wait.

“God, they’re so soft! And firm!” he gasped, nearly choking on his own words. “Please stand up, Ann. I want to see them.”

It was difficult to compose herself as she stood up. Jerry removed his hands from her breasts and stared at them in utter fascination—as if he’d never seen a woman’s breasts before. Ann was so taken aback by his childish behavior that she nearly broke out laughing. He was like a little kid in a candy shop.

Ann ever so subtly began inching her way slowly toward the other side of the tub, praying that he wouldn’t notice. He grasped her breasts again, brought his head down and kissed one of her nipples, as one would approach a spoonful of hot soup.

“I’m getting really excited here, Ann,” he murmured gutturally. “I never knew it could be this good.”

Ann took a gamble. “Are you ready to make love to me, Jerry?”

He paused and thought for a moment.

“God, I don’t know! I don’t know if I can wait any longer. It’s so different—you’re so different! I’m so used to women whining at me, ‘Don’t do that to me, please!’ And fighting me off. Jesus, Ann, I don’t know how much more of this I can take! I think I’m going to pop my fucking cork! We’re fucking made for each other, don’t you think?”

Jerry had grasped her breasts again and hadn’t noticed that Ann had ever so gradually led them to the other side of the tub. Ann stared down at him, in awe and contempt, Jerry Rankin’s eyes gaping at her boobs as if he were examining a rare archaeological find.

He suddenly whisked one of his hands away and crammed it down into his trunks. He was playing with himself! He glimpsed at Ann with a hideous, apologetic smirk just as Ann snatched up the wine glass and smacked it into his cheek with all the force she could muster.

For a split second, Jerry Rankin merely stared at her dumbfounded, not certain of what had just happened. Blood gushed out from a deep gash near his temple and streamed down his right cheek. Ann sprang up and out of the water. She instantly realized in horror that her only escape was back through the house—there were no exits to the outside.

“Come back here, you fucking bitch!” she heard him scream as she bounded across the solarium to the door and bolted into the house. She spotted the front door and made a beeline for it, the living room carpet feeling soft and warm beneath her bare feet. When she reached the door she turned the knob and pulled but the door wouldn’t budge. In a hysterical panic, she fumbled with the latch, unlocked it and pulled again. The door refused to move. Ann could hear Jerry cursing at her and the sound of splashing water as he climbed out of the tub just as she spotted the keyhole for the deadbolt. He had locked the door from the inside and taken the key!

She was trapped inside the house—there were no other doors!

Jerry bolted into the living room and sprinted toward her. Ann darted over to the spiral staircase and stubbed her toe as she scampered up the wrought iron stairs toward the second floor. She glanced down in terror as she eyed Rankin, racing up toward her holding a bloody towel against the side of his head.

Ann stood frozen on the landing, uncertain of what to do next. Rankin was halfway up the stairway by now, a sinister grin on his face and eyes that meant murder. Ann glanced further up the staircase at the hatch leading to the loft and knew she had no choice but to ascend the stairs further and pray she could get through the hatch before Jerry Rankin caught up with her.

Ann bounded up the stairs taking two at a time, reached the top and then pushed with all her might on the hatch door using both hands and her shoulder. The door was incredibly heavy but finally gave way with a creaking twang of springs. Ann suddenly felt a hand snatch her by the ankle. She glanced down at Rankin and saw that he had reached through the stairs and grabbed her. She screamed and jerked her ankle away from his clasped hand as a sudden jolt of adrenaline kicked in then managed to climb up the rest of the way into the loft—

It was pitch dark . . .

She grabbed the edge of the hatch door and slammed it shut just as Rankin reached the top. Ann could see the faint outline of the door where light shone through the edges and hopped onto it, praying that Rankin would be unable to force it open. As she felt the door pressing upward against her weight, Ann groped around in the darkness for a latch of some kind to secure the door.

“Open this fucking door, bitch!” Rankin screamed in rage.

His voice sounded different for some reason—so different that Ann actually wondered it were really Jerry Rankin on the other side of the door.

With her heart nearly bursting out of her chest, Ann scraped along the edge of the door with her fingers like a blind person who had just dropped his last penny on the floor. Suddenly she felt something cold and hard. She traced her fingers along it. A latch! She grasped the nub of the bolt and slid it home, tearing a pair of her fingernails in the process.

She was safe!

At least for the moment.

She heard Jerry’s muffled profanities through the thick door as he pounded on it repeatedly with his fists. Ann could smell the pungent odors of paint thinner and linseed oil as she stood up and looked around the dark room. Her eyes eventually adjusted to the weak light somewhat as she noticed several rectangular shapes silhouetted against a large window.

His paintings, she thought.

She could just make out the vaulted ceiling as she recalled seeing a small balcony jut out from the third floor of the A-frame during their tour. Maybe that could be her ticket to escape.

She felt totally disoriented in her panicked state in the darkness.

She needed some light.

Once she could see, she would head for the balcony and pray that she could get away from Jerry Rankin.

Ann realized she was trembling from head to toe as she began inching her way toward the window, her hands swatting in the darkness before her. She came upon an object and touched it gingerly. It was a huge canvas board mounted on an easel. She sidestepped the painting and continued. In another few steps she bumped into a heavy object—a table. She groped around on the tabletop and could feel tubes of oil paint, a tin can and the base of what felt like a table lamp. Jerry was screaming at her unintelligibly and still pounding on the door as she ran her hand up the lamp until she felt the gooseneck that terminated at a light fixture. She felt the bulb inside the housing and ran her finger along the housing until it hit home. With a grateful sigh she pressed the button.

The room became bathed in light. The first thing she saw was the table and all of the scattered paint tubes and brushes upon it.

The next thing she saw caused her to scream and made the hair on her neck stand on end—

An enormous oil painting on an easel.

And unlike the rest of Jerry Rankin's paintings, this was no abstract study.

Instead, it was a traditional rendering of three nude women, lying side by side, flat on their backs in identical positions. All three were evidently dead and had "May Day" inscribed across their breasts in what appeared to be bright red lipstick. Ann gasped in horror when she spotted the vial of lipstick shoved up into the vagina of the middle woman's spread eagle legs.

A woman who bore a stunning resemblance to Marsha Bradley!

Ann stood with her eyes transfixed and mouth agape, oblivious to the fact that Jerry Rankin was no longer screaming and beating on the door. She felt her stomach muscles tighten as she studied the image of the woman lying to the left of Marsha. Although she hadn't seen her in over twenty years, Ann was almost certain that the woman was Sara Hunt. And when she looked at the woman on the right, Ann began to shiver. The woman bore an uncanny resemblance to herself, only with blonde hair!

And then she spotted something else, placed on the lip of the easel. Three Polaroid prints lined up in a row

...

Shots of the nude bodies of Marsha Bradley, Sara Hunt and the blonde woman who resembled herself.

Jesus Christ! she thought as bile rose in her throat . . .

Stanley Jenkins!

Jerry Rankin was Stanley Jenkins!

But how could he be? It was impossible!

Suddenly, she heard a whooshing noise coming from her left. Her eyes shot past the half dozen or so paintings to the sliding doors that led to the balcony just as Jerry Rankin was entering the loft.

"You're going to die!" he hissed, springing toward her. Ann let out a shriek and ran for the hatch door. But Jerry Rankin was too quick. He caught her before she even had a chance to open the latch.

He was so enraged that he punched Ann hard in the face and forced her to the floor, jumping on top of her and pinning her down.

"I should kill you now," he spat, his face only inches away from hers. "But not quite yet."

Ann screamed hysterically and wrestled with him, but to no avail. He doubled up in laughter. "Don't even try it, Ann. You're no match for me!"

His voice had taken on the hillbilly twang again.

"Who are you?"

He glanced over at the painting then back at her and Ann could see his face clearly now. His left eye was green, but his right eye was brown.

Apparently, his other green contact lens had fallen out into the Jacuzzi when she'd slashed him with her wine glass.

Stanley Jenkins, she vaguely recalled, had brown eyes.

A hideous grin came to his face and instead of replying, he merely eyed her body for a moment and then stared at her expectantly, as if waiting for her to answer her own question.

Ann already knew the answer, despite the utter inconceivability of it. Her mind flashed back twenty years to the last time she could recall ever seeing or hearing Stanley Jenkins. She recalled his voice, a sort of whiney, nasal twang—just the sort of voice one would expect to hear from a nerdy egghead . . .

“Well, Ann? Who am I?”

Ann felt her heart bursting out of her rib cage. Stanley Jenkins had found her. Stanley Jenkins was going to kill her. Just as he had killed Marsha and the others. . .

She turned her head away from him.

“Stanley Jenkins?”

He grasped her chin in his free hand and jerked her head back around. He was leering at her as he said to her in a confidential tone of voice: “It didn’t have to end this way, Ann. I told you that this room was off limits. But you just had to come up here anyway, didn’t you? And now you’ve discovered my little secret.”

“Why did you kill my friend? And the others?”

“Your *friend*?” he retorted with a smirk. “Marsha wasn’t your friend, Ann! She deceived you! She went behind your back and played a trick on you. She and that deplorable Sara Hunt bitch!”

Ann’s eyes widened in absolute shock. “What in the world are you talking about?”

Stanley loosened his hold on her and shook his head. “You don’t get it, do you? You have absolutely no idea what happened, do you? I’m very disappointed, Ann. Hell, you’re every bit as naive as these other stupid women! Now you’re probably going to disappoint me even more and tell me that you don’t remember my asking you out to the Prom our senior year. Please, Ann! Don’t let me down. Tell me that you at least remember that; or was it so fucking insignificant that it has slipped your mind after all of these years?”

“I—I remember,” she stammered.

“I’m impressed! You were at a basketball game, cheering the team on in that cute little mini skirt that showed your ass so nicely. I was watching you from the bleachers, doing your splits and getting tossed in the air so high that I could see the crotch of your red panties as clear as day! I never got tired of watching you, Ann. You were so beautiful, so damn classy! I never failed to get excited whenever I watched you—it didn’t make any difference what you were doing—studying, watching television, taking a bath—it never failed to give me a hard-on! It didn’t take too long to realize that I wanted you more than anything else in the world. You became my only reason to exist for quite a while, in fact. I dreamt about you every night, after I went to bed, I dreamt of someday having you all for myself. To hold you and touch you and have wild, kinky sex with you. God, you were all I could ever think about! And I made a vow to myself that someday I would have you.”

Ann stared up at him as he spoke, as intrigued as mortified by these disturbing revelations. He paused just long enough to climb off of her and re-situate himself, kneeling as she remained lying flat on her back.

“I had it all figured out, Ann. My plan was to put you under surveillance and learn all I could about you without your ever knowing it. I started following you home from school and at night, hanging around your house and spying on you. Your house was perfect—lots of windows and neat places to hide without being seen by any of the neighbors. You lived alone with your mother and she went out a lot, too, which really helped. Anyway, I did this for practically our entire senior year, and in that time I’d discovered a lot of interesting things about you. Besides the obvious fact that you had the most luscious body I’d ever seen, that is.”

He winked and grinned impudently at her when he said this, sending a cold chill down Ann’s spine. She looked away from him and found that what he was telling her was simply too hard to believe.

"I never had much luck with girls at school, as you no doubt recall. They all thought that I was some kind of nerdy do-gooder and even I know they thought I was uglier than sin. I couldn't change my looks any—mother wouldn't let me—so I figured that if I could somehow attract you in a spiritual way, I might have a chance. My plan was to show you how well I knew you and that I understood what made you tick, Ann. I thought you'd be impressed and would go out with me, because you were different from the others. You had a heart. I snuck into your house once and read your diary. I discovered by reading it that you had compassion for others less fortunate than yourself. You felt sorry for your mother because your father had died when you were so young. You felt sorry for your friends for various reasons: one got knocked up by her boyfriend, another one got jilted by hers, and so on and so on. But you never felt sorry for yourself. You cared for others more than you cared for yourself—you were a true "giver." I thought that was so classy! I had myself convinced that if I played my cards right and approached you at just the right time to ask you out on a date that you'd do it. And you probably would have, if it hadn't been for your so-called friend, Marsha Stillner.

"That bitch fucked me up at that basketball game, Ann. She and Sara Hunt were sitting together and called me over to them. I asked them what they wanted and your dear friend Marsha told me that you wanted me to ask you to the prom. I didn't believe her at first, of course, but Marsha was such a great actress! She kept a straight face and insisted that she was telling the truth. Sara Hunt then gave an Oscar winning performance as best supporting actress. She looked at me right in the eye and said, 'Ann knows that you have the hots for her, Stanley, and she thinks you're really cute. She's been waiting for months for you to ask her out, but she's afraid you won't have the nerve to do it.'

"I flipped out when she told me this. All of a sudden I started thinking that maybe you knew I'd been spying on you all this time and that you were letting me watch you through the window because you enjoyed entertaining me! Like, you were being coy with me. I got all excited, thinking that this was turning out even better than I'd dreamed it would and I thanked Marsha and Sara for the tip. I went down near the sideline and watched you a little longer, trying to get my nerve up. Then, just to be on the safe side, I quickly looked up at where Marsha and Sara were sitting, half expecting to see them doubled up in laughter over their little joke. But they weren't laughing at all. In fact, they were watching the game and seemed oblivious to anything else.

"That convinced me that they were on the up-an-up. So, I mustered up all of my courage and walked over to you. Then I asked you out.

"The rest, as they say, is history."

Stanley stood up walked over to the balcony door and examined the wound on his face in the reflection. Ann was frozen where she lay, overwhelmed by what he had just told her. She considered making a run for it but knew that it would be futile. She wanted to lash out at him, tell him that what Marsha had done over twenty years ago didn't justify his murdering her. But she remained silent. Stanley Jenkins was clearly off his rocker, schizoid. There was no sense in trying to rationalize anything with him. He was also a cold-blooded killer, and she realized that it was just a matter of moments before he murdered her as well.

She was not in any hurry to die, though.

Stanley turned around and strode over to her, dabbing at his wound with a towel. He had tears in his eyes. He stood over her and forced a weak smile.

“You might as well have killed me that day, Ann. I was shattered by your refusal and really angry that I’d fallen for your friends’ little scheme. Now, maybe you can understand why I got great satisfaction killing them. They fucked me up royally and deserved to die.”

His tone of voice sharpened, his self-confidence returned. “I went into seclusion after that incident at the basketball game. I still wanted you in spite of what happened but I knew there was little I could do about it at the time. After graduation, my parents all but forced me to go away to college so I started taking courses that summer. In a way, I didn’t care—I just wanted to get away from Smithtown. I did drugs, a lot of drugs, and I didn’t give a flying fuck about my grades or my parents. I had hit the skids and just wanted to try to have fun for a change.

“Then I laid eyes on Cindy Fuller for the first time at a party one night. She reminded me so much of you! I started following her around and spying on her, all the time pretending that she was you. Then I made the same mistake yet again—I asked her out and she refused me. I got really angry and wanted to kill her. Sam has already told you all about the fire and all of that, so I won’t bore you with it.”

Ann flinched at the mention of Sam. If only she had listened to him—

“While I was in the nut-house,” he continued, “I made a vow to myself. When I got out, I was going to change myself, make myself a better person. Not long after I finally got released, I received a rather tidy life insurance settlement, thanks to my recently departed father. I went to Vegas and studied the tables then figured out how to beat the system. I got fucking rich, all in the matter of a few months. I took all of my winnings to L.A. and began devising my master plan.”

Stanley paused a moment and stared thoughtfully at Ann. “You can get up, Ann. You’re uncomfortable. Don’t worry, I’m not going to harm you.”

Ann knew this was a lie but stood up nonetheless. He winked at her then strode over to a stool near the window and gestured toward it.

“Why don’t you sit here?” he said. It was more of a command than a suggestion.

She nodded and went over to the stool, sat down. The wood was cold and hard against her damp swimsuit as she tried futilely to quit shivering. It was becoming increasingly apparent that Stanley had a dual personality—a sort of Jekyll and Hyde persona. And at the moment, he was assuming a sort of unsettling combination of both characters.

Jenkins sauntered over to the painting of the nude women and studied it for a moment, then turned around and faced Ann.

“I kept totally to myself while living in L.A. In fact, I was virtually incognito. I rented a beach side villa under a fictitious name and spent the next year there making dozens of overseas calls to Europe and fooling around with personal computers, which were just beginning to appear in the consumer market. I was absolutely fascinated by computers, so I started writing my own programs and finding ways of patching into, at that time, the relatively infantile internet as well as various data bases.

“My plan was simple, but time-consuming to execute. I had three objectives: One was to locate a plastic surgeon out of the country who was not only really good, but who could also be bribed. Secrecy is the key, Ann. As they say, ‘loose lips sink ships.’ It was my intention to have reconstructive surgery performed on my entire face. In other words, turn my ugly face into a handsome one. It was not my intention, though, for anyone to find out about it. Thus, who ever performed this transition was going to have to keep silent as well.

“My second objective was to assume an entirely new identify. Ironically, that was probably the easiest of all to execute—just a matter of checking out court records and locating the right name of the right person, then obtaining a birth certificate.

“My third objective, having gotten my new face and name, was to actually make myself *become* this new person. This was not easy, to say the least, but I was quite determined. I stayed in Europe after the surgery because I realized that the most effective way to dramatically change my speech, mannerisms and personality was to get saturated in a totally different environment other than the one I’d been accustomed to. Europe is so wonderful, Ann—so different from the States. The people there have a lot of class and impeccable manners for the most part, unlike we Americans. I assumed a sort of aristocratic demeanor, a rich American who knew how to live the good life. I traveled extensively around the continent, carefully observing the people and absorbing their more appealing qualities and making them my own. I got pretty good at it, as you already know.

“By now, you’re probably asking yourself why I did all of this. What was the purpose? The answer is simple. Besides the fact that I hated being Stanley Jenkins and wanted to eliminate him, I also wanted something else. Or more precisely, *someone* else. I still wanted *you*, Ann. I figured that if I change myself that you would accept me and that I could finally realize my dreams.”

Jenkins stared at Ann expectantly, studied her reaction. Ann squirmed on the stool and looked away.

“I had heard that you’d married Sam not long after graduation and I almost hated you for that. But I didn’t. I decided that I’d follow through with my plan and let fate take its course. I am a fatalist, you see. I came back to the States in January and did some surveillance, discovered that you were still with Sam Middleton and had a daughter. So I decided to buy this place and ride out the tide. Then fate entered the picture this spring. You and Sam got divorced. I sat around and waited to see what you were going to do, and to my surprise and delight you moved to Columbus. My course was suddenly set: I would eliminate everyone who had ever stood in my way of getting to you. Then, I’d make my ultimate move.”

Ann started sobbing hysterically. Jenkins walked over and gently placed his hand on her shoulder, causing her to flinch.

“Don’t cry, Ann. It’s only going to make things worse.”

He stroked her hair, still damp from the hot tub, and said, “I truly am sorry that it had to turn out this way, Ann. But I half suspected it would and as a result am going to have to resort to my backup plan. I should have known better than to think you were any different than the others anyway, and it only goes to show that I am not infallible. But all is not lost, by any means. I’ll be able to say goodbye to Stanley Jenkins for good after tonight. And believe me, that will be quite a weight off my shoulders.”

He stepped back and looked her over, then said, “I’m afraid I’m going to have to kill you, Ann. I’ll have a plane to catch in a few hours and I’ve already wasted enough time telling you my life story. But I felt you had a right to know what I’ve just told you, and besides that, I’ve not been particularly looking forward to putting an end to your existence. But life goes on, Ann. I have no choice in the matter. Unfortunately, I can’t let you live and still walk out of here a free man. I do hope you understand.”

His directness caught Ann off guard and sobered her thoughts. Suddenly, her will for survival superseded everything else.

She had to get away. At least stall him somehow for now. At least give him a goddamn fight!

“Please let me live, Stanley. I promise that . . .”

“The name is Jerry Rankin, Ann, remember? We’re through with Stanley now.”

“I beg you, Jerry,” Ann pleaded. “Please don’t kill me. I promise that I won’t tell a soul any of this. You can leave the country, or go wherever you’re going, and I’ll pretend that this never happened!”

He laughed heartily and Ann knew that she’d said the wrong thing. “It’s not going to work, Ann. You’re going to have to give me a better offer than that.”

Ann knew what he was implying. “I’ll do anything, Jerry! Please, just let me go—Amy needs me!”

He grinned, then replied, “You should have thought of that before, Ann. You had your chance but you blew it.”

He removed the bloodied towel and looked at it, tossed it to the floor and stared directly into Ann’s eyes. “And look at what you did to me! Cut my fucking face with that wine glass! Yet here you are, standing there half naked and all blurry eyed, begging me to spare your fucking life. After you fucking cut me? Do you know how many goddamn stitches it’s going to take to fix my face? Christ, Ann. Sorry to say it but you’re not in a very good negotiating position right now.”

Suddenly, Dr. Jekyll turned into Mr. Hyde.

He grabbed her by the arm, flung her down on the floor and was on top of her in a flash. He started yanking down her swimsuit bottoms as Ann pummeled his chest with her fists, her legs thrashing wildly.

“No more time to negotiate, Ann. I’m going to fuck you, then I’m going to kill you.”

Ann fought back fiercely. She managed to rake her fingernails over the fresh wound on his face, causing him to let out a blood-curdling howl. He stopped dead for a second, stared at her with eyes that wanted to kill, and ripped off her bathing suit in one quick, effortless motion. Ann screamed in terror and struck him in the face again. He gaped at her maniacally, as though he couldn’t believe what had just happened, then brought back his hand to strike her—

They both heard the voices at the same time. They were coming from downstairs—muffled and unintelligible, but getting louder. A look of absolute horror came over Stanley’s face as he froze in his tracks and cocked his head, listening, covering Ann’s mouth in his hand. Ann could hear her heart beating wildly and watched as drops of blood ran down Stanley’s cheeks and plopped onto one of her breasts.

The loft floor vibrated from where the steel staircase was attached to it as someone climbed up and apparently stopped on the second floor.

Ann tried to scream but all that came out was a muffled whimper into Stanley Jenkin’s hand. His face was chalk white as he glanced first at the hatch, then over to the balcony door, apparently trying to decide what to do next. All of a sudden, the floor started vibrating again and they heard footsteps coming closer. Stanley flinched as his eyes darted all around the room. Total panic.

The footsteps ceased and they heard someone shove hard against the door. Stanley leered at Ann threateningly, tightening his grip over her mouth, daring her to utter a sound. Someone banged on the door a couple of times and tried to force it open.

There was a moment of silence, then the sound of more footsteps coming up the stairs.

“This is the sheriff’s department, Rankin. We know you’re in there—open this door immediately!” a muffled voice commanded.

Ann felt a huge wave of relief sweep over her. She tried to scream again but Stanley's hand stifled her. He glared at her defiantly. Jenkins eyes darted over toward the balcony again and he made a gesture for Ann to stand up.

"We're on to you, Stanley, so give yourself up," another voice said. Ann immediately recognized that distinctive voice—it was Roger Hagstrom!

"We've got your entire house surrounded, so I suggest you open this door and let us do our job. We don't want anyone to get hurt." Roger said.

What little color Stanley's face had drained away. He was kneeling now with one hand over Ann's mouth and the other over his wound. His eyes frantically surveyed the room in a desperate effort to figure out his next move.

They both heard the sound of more footsteps scurrying up the staircase.

"Ann, are you in there?"

It was Sam!

On impulse, Ann grabbed Stanley's wrist and wrenched his hand away from her mouth. "Sam!" she cried.

In a flash, Jenkins slapped her hard on the cheek and Ann slumped to the floor, reeling from the blow.

"Ann!" Sam shouted. "Are you alright?"

Jenkins suddenly snatched up a coil of picture hanging wire from the table and forced Ann up to a sitting position. He knelt behind her and wrapped a length of the wire around her neck.

"No!" she cried.

Ann felt the wire cut into her flesh and screamed hysterically.

"Your wife's life is quite literally in my hands, Sam," Jenkins shouted. "If you want her alive, then I suggest that you, your sidekick and the rest of this lynch mob back off now!"

There was an unintelligible mumbling of voices for a moment, then Ann heard Roger Hagstrom say, "Don't harm her, Stanley. We'll do whatever you say,"

Stanley chuckled nervously. "That's very prudent of you, Roger. I'll tell you my demands in a moment, but first I've got to know something. How in the fuck did you find me out? I purposely left a couple of little clues for you to ponder over but that was only to incriminate Stanley Jenkins, certainly not his alias."

"The picture, Stanley," Sam said. You took a Polaroid of my daughter and she sent it to me. Your prints were all over it."

Stanley contemplated this for a moment and said. "I'll buy that Sam, but what prompted you to check out the prints in the first place?"

"You should have sprung for a new camera, Stanley. Your pinch rollers on that old relic are about shot. You might say that they left an incriminating trail."

"*Fuck!*" Jenkins gasped, realizing his folly. And with that, Stanley Jenkins snapped.

Ann felt the wire tighten around her neck and at the same time heard a rustling come from behind her. A shot rang out and Stanley immediately released his grip.

Ann spun around just as a young officer sprinted across the room from the balcony. He placed the barrel of his service revolver against Jenkin's temple.

"Release her, Jenkins, or the next one is for you."

Ann watched as Stanley shut his eyes. "Please don't shoot me!" he whined. "I give up!"

“Stand up and put your hands behind your back,” the officer commanded.

After Jenkins complied, the officer handcuffed him.

“Got him, sir!” he hollered in the direction of the door. “Are you all right, Ma’m?” he asked Ann. The officer picked up a sheet draped over a chair and sheepishly handed it to Ann.

“Yes, thank-you,” Ann replied gratefully. She covered herself up with the sheet and got up onto her feet.

“Open the door, Griggs,” someone demanded from the other side of the door.

Keeping his pistol trained on Jenkins, Officer Griggs went over and opened the hatch door. Sam was the first man inside. He ran over and threw his arms around Ann as he glanced at Stanley Jenkins and did a double take when he saw the notorious Jerry Rankin for the first time.

“God Sam, I’m so glad to see you!” Ann cried as Sam held her tight.

“Me too, honey,” he replied.

Roger entered along with the officers from the Hocking County Sheriff’s department. Ann saw the astonished look on Roger’s face when he saw Stanley Jenkins, alias Jerry Rankin.

“Jesus Christ, Stanley! It looks like you got a bit more than just a little nip and tuck from your plastic surgeon!” he exclaimed.

Stanley frowned and looked away.

Roger stepped over to Ann and gave her a quick hug, winked at Sam and turned to face Jenkins.

“Stanley Jenkins, you are under arrest for the murder of Marsha Bradley. You have the right to remain silent . . .”

Epilogue

A week later, Sam was sitting at his desk when the telephone rang. He finished the sentence he was typing, located the phone underneath the pile of wadded up papers and picked up the receiver.

“Hello?”

“Have I caught you at a bad time?” Ann asked.

“No, not at all. How are you doing?”

“Okay,” she replied, not sounding very convincing.

“You’re lying,” Sam said. “What’s wrong?”

There was a moment of silence before Ann replied, “That kid of ours is going to put me into an early grave.”

“What did she do now?”

“It’s what she *didn’t do*! I reminded her three times to clean up her room before she left to go out with Amanda, so I go to the grocery store and come back and what do I find? Her room hasn’t been touched! What in the world is wrong with her, Sam? Why won’t she ever mind me?”

Sam breathed a silent sigh of relief. He was afraid that it was going to be a little more serious than this.

“Well, Ann. Do you want my honest opinion?”

“Yes, please.”

“She needs to be disciplined a bit more convincingly. You are way too easy on her!”

“But—”

“Let me finish before you get all defensive, okay? Although I think you’re being too easy on her there’s such a thing as being too hard on her and that could be even worse. My advice is to do as you’ve been doing, but with a little more edge behind it. She’s a good kid, Ann. And she’s got a good mom who loves her. She’ll be okay.”

“She’s got a good dad, too,” Ann declared.

“True.”

“She misses her dad and I miss him, too.”

“That could be fixed, you know,” Sam challenged.

Ann sighed. “I know, Sam. And don’t think I haven’t been giving that a lot of thought lately.”

There was an uncomfortable pause and Sam resumed typing, cradling the phone.

“Why are you working at home on a Saturday afternoon?” Ann asked, breaking the silence.

“I’m not working. Exactly . . .”

“I can hear your typewriter—wait a minute! What are you doing using the typewriter? Sam, are you actually working on your manuscript?” she asked excitedly.

“Well, not exactly. I’m working on a new one.”

“Sam, that’s wonderful! What are you writing about?”

“A deranged murderer.”

“You mean Stanley, don’t you?”

“Sort of. A first I thought of doing a true crime thing and writing a documentary of what happened but I changed my mind. I mean, I spend day in and day out writing about real things in the real world and I want to do something different for a change. Something that I’ll enjoy doing. So, I decided to make it a novel instead—based loosely on Stanley Jenkins. I figured who in the hell would believe the truth anyway? It’s rather ironic, in a sense.”

“I think that’s great, Sam! And I’ll be frank—I don’t think I’d want you to write about it. I was such a fool, Sam. I can’t believe I let myself get sucked in by him!”

Sam stopped typing. “Don’t be too hard on yourself, Ann. Stanley Jenkins was a master manipulator. A genius in his own demented way, when you really think about it. He was cold and calculating, and knew how to play on people’s fears and emotions. Had it down to an art, in fact. Just be thankful that you’re still around to talk about it.”

“Did he confess to killing Cindy Fuller, too?” Ann asked.

“Oh yeah, he was more than obliging to the police. He confessed everything. He gave Roger the whole low-down right down to the very last detail to all three murders. Roger said that Stanley was quite proud of his accomplishments. That man is one sick son of a bitch, that’s for sure.”

“I still can’t get over how stupid I was! If only I’d driven by his alleged home in Dublin, or at least checked to see if he really was a member of that neighborhood church. Then I would’ve known that something was wrong and—”

Sam cut her off.

“Ann, dear, listen to me. Don’t blame yourself for what you could have done. Remember that first of all, you had no reason to suspect Jerry Rankin of anything. He was just some good looking guy who happened to meet you at the supermarket and then one thing led to another until you eventually went out with him. Stanley knew that the church story and his falsified residence in Dublin was a gamble, but he was banking on the hunch that you wouldn’t check up on him in the time it would take him to accomplish what he’d set out to do.”

Ann sighed. “I guess you’re right. But how come I never once noticed that he’d been in the house, or that he’d bugged the phones? How in the hell could he get away with all of that and neither Amy nor I notice anything?”

Sam lit up a cigarette and replied, “The guy was a master sleuth—that’s all I can say. Roger learned that Stanley had always been a spy freak—read every secret agent book he could get his hands on when he was a kid. Used to read them late at night while his parents were asleep. His parents are yet another story altogether, by the way. It’s little wonder why Stanley ended up being so psychotic and fucked up. Anyway, James Bond was his hero and by the time Stanley was thirteen or so, he’d become obsessed with agent 007 and started fantasizing about being a spy. He used to sneak out of his house at night and go peep-tomming all over town. Got pretty good at it apparently; he never once got caught. Had he gotten caught, his mother probably would have murdered him. He spent a great deal of time casing you out back then, by the way.”

“I know, he told me,” Ann moaned.

“Anyway, he told Roger that this Larry Underwood kid peeping at Amy just about blew his cover. Apparently, Stanley had been in the back of the house one night screwing around with the telephone wires when he heard the Underwood kid climbing over the fence. Stanley ran around the side of the house just in time and hid in the bushes. Then he watched the kid as he proceeded to peep into the bathroom window presumably at Amy as she showered. Stanley realized that the boy could eventually pose a problem for his own agenda but he wasn’t quite sure how to deal with him. He couldn’t bust the kid, not then, anyway, because the kid would most likely wonder what in the hell Stanley was doing there in the backyard. So Stanley started keeping a keen eye on the Underwood kid as he spied on Amy over the next couple of weeks, trying to determine his routine. Then, once Rankin had ‘accidentally’ met you and became a legitimate presence in your life, he struck. He had a hunch that Larry Underwood would come around on the night of Amy’s homecoming dance so when he did, Stanley was ready for him. Roger said that Stanley had wanted to, quote, ‘murder the fucking amateur,’ but opted instead to merely rough the boy up a bit.”

“This is incredible!” Ann shuddered, imagining two different deranged nut cases invading her property.

“Scary, isn’t it? The Underwood kid may become another Stanley Jenkins some day, for all we know. I’d be sure to tell Amy to keep a very close eye on that one!”

“God, Sam. What is the world coming to?”

“Damned if I don’t know. I’m beginning to think that the parents are to blame for a lot of the insanity that goes on anymore. Like I was saying before, parents can push their kids too far and you end up with a case like Stanley Jenkins. His parents, particularly his mother, apparently never gave him any breathing room. They demanded too much of him and wouldn’t let him have any kind of normal social life. Stanley retaliated, became a total sociopath lost in his own little world of perverse espionage. And the older he got, the more dangerous he became.”

“What’s to become of him, you think?”

“Roger thinks he’ll plead insanity. Probably spend the rest of his life in an institution. He’s got to face charges in New York and Colorado as well, keep in mind. They’ll put him away for good, one way or another, you can rest assured.”

“No chance of the death penalty?”

“Nope, I don’t think so. The guy’s a nut and they won’t hang a nut.”

“God help us all if he escapes!” Ann exclaimed.

“Tell me about it.”

“One thing has really been bothering me,” Ann said. “And that’s why Marsha never told me about her and Sara’s little scheme at the basketball game. I remember telling her about Stanley asking me out at the time and she just chuckled and never said any more about it. That wasn’t like her, to keep something from me like that.”

Sam heaved a sigh. “Do you suppose that Sara Hunt may have had something to do with that? I mean, you and Sara never got along and Marsha was hanging out with Sara around that time. Maybe Marsha felt a little ashamed at herself having been a part of the scheme and was simply too embarrassed to fess up to it.”

“You may be right, come to think about it. I can see Marsha reacting that way.”

“At any rate, it was a deadly mistake on her part in retrospect,” Sam added grimly.

“I know.”

“I have a confession to make,” Sam announced. “I wasn’t going to tell you this, but I’ve just decided to tell you after all. It might make you feel a little better.”

“What is it?” Ann asked suspiciously.

“You weren’t the only one suckered by Stanley Jenkins. I was, too.”

“What do you mean?”

“The night that Shelley Hatcher came to see me was the first time I’d seen her since our divorce. It was really late at night—about 2:00 A.M.—and I wondered at the time why in the hell she’d come out of the clear blue like that after all of this time. When I asked her about it, she told me that she wanted me to see her photo portfolio so I could give her my assessment of it. It had been pouring rain to beat the band that night and she had traveled all the way from Kentucky just to show me her fucking portfolio? Well, I was skeptical, to say the least.

“Anyway, I looked it over—it was okay but not that great—and I started thinking that she had really come over to get some romantic thing going. Well, one thing led to another and we ended up sleeping together that night. Of course, I figured that my hunch was right—“

“Why are you telling me this, Sam?” Ann interrupted, angry and hurt.

“Hold on, sweetie—there’s more.”

“I don’t want to hear it!”

“Yes, you do. Hear me out, okay? I promise you that you’ll want to hear this.”

“Okay, if you insist,” Ann replied irritably.

“It turns out that Shelley *had* truly come to show me her portfolio. Earlier that day, she had been at a McDonald’s having lunch—she works at a jewelry store in Ashland—and she just so happened to have taken her portfolio with her. A man sitting at her table saw her looking through her pictures and asked if he could take a look at them. Shelley consented and the guy checked out her photos. When he was through, he told her that they were excellent, adding that he of course wasn’t a photo critic by any stretch of the imagination.

“He then asked Shelley if she had shown her portfolio to someone in the business recently—to get an honest professional opinion. She mentioned that the only pro she could think of offhand was her old mentor at the newspaper where she used to work, which of course happens to be yours truly. The stranger insisted that she should look me up as soon as possible; that perhaps I could line her up with some work. This got her wheels turning once the seed had been planted. Now, would you like to take a stab at who this stranger was?”

“Stanley?” Ann replied, incredulous.

“Right, it was our boy.”

“But why?”

“Don’t you get it? Stanley wanted to assure his success with you so he was determined to do anything to achieve that goal. He knew that if he could get Shelley and I back together, even if it was only for a chat, there would be a chance it would get back to you. That would of course create dissension between us and result in your falling for him that much likelier.”

“Jesus!” Ann cried. “He was certainly methodical! How did you find all of this out?”

“Shelley called me last week and told me the whole story after she’d seen Stanley’s photo in the paper. She feels horrible because she now realizes what she had done. But there’s no way that she, or any of us, could have guessed that Jerry Rankin was actually Stanley Jenkins. Roger in fact thinks Stanley would never have been caught if it hadn’t been for that Polaroid Amy sent me. We can thank our daughter for solving this case!”

“Our daughter and her father,” Ann corrected.

“Well, yeah, I guess you could say that,” Sam said humbly.

A short pause, then Ann said, “Sam?”

“Yeah, babe.”

“Do you really think it’s over between you and Shelley Hatcher? I mean, totally over?”

“Definitely,” Sam replied flatly.

“You sure?”

“Sure I’m sure. Beyond a shadow of doubt,” Sam emphasized, wondering what this line of questioning was leading up to.

“Are your parents still flying up for Thanksgiving?”

“Yup. They’ll be here on the 22nd. Why?”

“I was just thinking, why don’t we all have Thanksgiving together—as a family? Just like we did last year.”

“Are you serious?” Sam asked, not believing his ears.

“Yes, I’m serious. I don’t want to be alone anymore, Sam. I miss you and I miss the three of us being a family. Amy does, too. And the mere thought of going through the Holidays without you is unbearable. In fact, I don’t think I could do it.”

“Does this mean?”

“Yes, Sam. I’m ready to come home. God, am I ready!”

Sam nearly leaped out of his chair.

“You don’t know how happy I am to hear that, honey! It’s been a living hell not having you and Amy around. I miss you two so much, I—”

“Let me say it first,” Ann interjected. “I love you, Sam Middleton. Always have, always will. For better, or for worse, I love you!”

“I love you too, honey!” Sam said as a thought suddenly came to mind. “But what about Amy and school?”

“I’ve already spoken to Amy and the school’s principal about it. She’ll have to finish this semester but then she can transfer her credits to Smithtown High. Amy’s all for it and can’t wait to see her old friends again.”

“That’s great! When does the semester end?”

Christmas break, December 20, I believe.”

“Think we can wait until then?”

“We’ll have to, unfortunately, but we’ve always got the weekends in the meantime.”

“I guess that will have to do.”

“Do you have a stove in that bungalow of yours, Sam? For a turkey?”

“Uh, yeah. It’s not too big but it should be able to accommodate a fair sized bird.”

“That’s good,” Ann said, a trace of disappointment in her voice.

Sam knew what was eating her: the reality of the three of them living in this tiny house in the boondocks. He already had an answer for that.

“By the way, I almost forgot to tell you,” he said. “I was at the bank a few days ago and ran into Paul Malone. It seems that he’s getting transferred to Columbus at the beginning of the year.”

“You’re kidding!” Ann cried. “So he’s moving his family up here?”

“Yup.”

“And the house?”

“Putting it up for sale next week.”

“Oh God, Sam. I don’t believe it! Is there any way—”

“That we could get our old house back? That shouldn’t be a problem if that’s what you want to do.”

“Oh Sam, yes! Let’s do it!”

“Consider it done.”

“Wait until Amy hears this! She’s almost missed that house as much as I have. She bitches about this place all the time. God Sam, you’re wonderful! I love you so much!”

“That goes for me, too. And tell that kid of mine the same, okay?”

“I will. I’d better go now. I think I’ll take a walk and try to come back down to earth. I’m so excited now, I’m almost sick!”

“I’ll call you tomorrow, honey. We’ve got a lot of planning to do.”

“Okay. Love you, dear!”

“Love you, too.”

Sam was grinning ear to ear as he hung up the phone. He breathed a deep sigh, slid a fresh sheet of paper into the carrier and hit the keys with a flourish:

CHAPTER 1

The little town of Foxburg, Ohio was in shock the day that...