

BLOOD BLOSSOM

**BLOOD
BLOSSOM**

DARYL HAJEK

PRIME TYPE, LLC
Los Angeles, California

Copyright © 2014 by Daryl Hajek
Published by Prime Type, LLC
Los Angeles, CA

Blood Blossom is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. If you purchase this book without a cover, you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and destroyed" to the publisher, and neither the author nor the publisher received any payment for this "stripped book."

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, no part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, stored in a retrieval system, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. Piracy of copyrighted materials is a violation of the author's rights.

The publisher makes no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this book and specifically disclaim any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. Neither the publisher nor author shall be liable for any loss of profit or any commercial damages.

Cover photos by inigocia/shutterstock.com, SoumenNath/shutterstock.com,
and www.gettyimages.com

Graphic Designer, Alan M. Pranke, www.amp13.com

Cover Art Direction/Design by Matt O'Leary, www.fastpencil.com

Edited by Lorraine Fico-White, Magnifico Manuscripts, LLC,
www.magnificomanuscripts.com

Page Design/Layout by Prime Type, LLC

First edition by CreateSpace/Amazon.

ISBN-13: 978-1499796278

BISAC: Fiction / General

Library of Congress Control Number 2014911227

Printed in the United States of America

First and foremost, I thank Jesus Christ, my personal Lord and Savior, who helped to make my dream a reality.

Thank you, Kent and Gil, for your invaluable input.

Dedicated to the memory of my beloved grandmother.

Miss you much . . .

P R O L O G U E

She sat in the driver's seat of her shiny, candy-apple red, 2014 Mazda Miata convertible with the top down.

The car had been parked on the southbound shoulder of Colfax Avenue, north of Ventura Boulevard near the feet of the hills of Studio City. The Los Angeles River dribbled by a few yards to her right. Directly across the street from where she sat were several charming, two-level, storybook-style houses with large, ornate windows and a chimney on each rooftop. The Miata's engine purred idly and all four orange-yellow hazard lights blinked.

The sun warmed the top of her head and highlighted her golden strands of blond hair, which had been cropped below her earlobes. Sporadic cars passed by her along the quiet, narrow, two-lane street. A crow cawed as it flew overhead.

She looked through a pair of binoculars at a large, white two-story house perched on the side of the hill above, south of Ventura Boulevard. The house looked north with a 180° panoramic view of the San Fernando Valley. She surmised it must have an expansive view. Her intense, steely blue eyes focused their dire attention on only the white house. She pointedly disregarded the rolling, sloping, grassy terrain around it. Instead, she noticed the trees, the brush and shrubs, and

the well-maintained grounds laid out with colorful flower gardens around the perimeter of the estate.

She drove up the hill to a higher elevation where could see the entire property below. More flowers graced the back of the house near a swimming pool and around a gazebo beyond the pool. Two marble statues of a Greco-Roman man and woman in differing poses flanked either side of the veranda, and a few small porcelain knick-knacks were strewn in between. A large outdoor water fountain stood in the middle of the semi-circular drive at the front of the house, and some terracotta pottery with five-foot-tall topiaries sat on either side of the front door.

“So, that’s *her* story,” she said to herself. Her lips formed a frightful sneer. She adjusted her position in the driver’s seat to make herself more comfortable. “Ain’t that nice? Well, we’ll see about *that*, won’t we?”

A light breeze wafted by and tousled several strands of her hair. A small brown bird chirped from a nearby tree, then flew away.

She wondered about the wretched wench who’d lived in that beautiful home on the side of the hill all those years.

Twenty-two years of my sorry-assed life, she thought. Just ticks me off. Really makes my blood boil. Tears welled in her eyes. Now, don’t start feeling sorry for yourself again, damn it! She continued to stare at the house. *Just watch. Everything’ll change. From now on, it’s my story.*

She sat for a few more moments, her eyes locked at the view of the house as she ardently scrutinized it. She abruptly hurled the binoculars into the passenger’s seat with a huff. They bounced off the seat, bumped against the closed door of the glove compartment, then fell to the charcoal-gray carpeted floor with a soft thump.

She put the convertible in gear, slammed her foot on the pedal, and tore away from the curb.

CHAPTER 1

Vivian Hutchins, a slender woman with shoulder-length, light-brown hair, hazel eyes, and a creamy complexion, stood and gazed at Forest Lawn Memorial Park, a cemetery located in Glendale, about eight miles east of her residence.

Her grandmother, Desirée Hutchins, her father, Charles Hutchins, and her husband, Rob Peterson, were all buried in the Whispering Pines section of the sprawling cemetery. A fourth relative also lay in the ground there, but that individual's grave happened to be fifty yards away from the others. Vivian didn't want to think about this particular person. Instead, she thought about her younger brother and baby sister.

Twenty-two years is a long time, she thought. I should've looked for them after I had come back seven years ago. Instead, I feel as if I've wasted all those years waiting for them, hoping for word from either of them. I'm forty-four and before I know it, I'll be fifty, then sixty, then . . .

Vivian felt melancholic as she stood on the flagstone veranda alongside a patio table with its hunter-green parasol closed. She breathed in the cool, mid-morning spring air with its sweet aroma of freshly-cut grass and a tinge of night-blooming jasmine which still lingered from the evening before. A gentle breeze made her

shiver, and she pulled her yellow-and-white cardigan tighter. She momentarily closed her eyes, then looked in the direction of the cemetery once again.

It's nothing but a constant reminder of. . .

She couldn't finish the sentence. She'd thought it many times before and now wondered, *Why think such thoughts again?* It only made her feel worse. She had previously said that she would not think about what had happened, when the unfortunate events had occurred. But, perversely, she continued to dwell on it time and again. When she would catch these thoughts invading her mind, she'd try to quash them—sometimes with success, sometimes without.

Just don't think about it again, she thought. Be grateful for what you have had these past several years. Be grateful for what you have now.

Many times, Vivian admitted to herself that she had always appreciated the things she had, including this house that commanded a panoramic view from the Santa Monica Mountains. The mountains act as a barrier between the San Fernando Valley to the north and the greater Los Angeles Basin to the south.

It would have helped to know where they had gone, Vivian thought.

She sipped hot chamomile tea and briefly turned from looking at the cemetery. She wiped a tear from her eye. Then she glanced again at the well-manicured green hills of Forest Lawn, with the white colonial-style building near its entrance. She inhaled the bittersweet air and let out a weary sigh.



Shortly after a light lunch, Vivian went upstairs to the master suite on the second floor. She walked over to a trio of large, floor-to-ceiling, sliding closet doors, and crouched on her haunches and opened the middle section.

I shouldn't have done without it for so long, she thought. After all, busy hands are happy hands and idle hands are the devil's workshop.

She withdrew from the semi-dark confines of the closet an ivory-colored embroidery bag with large wooden loop handles at the top. She pushed aside spools of colored thread and skeins of yarn plus packages of various needles for sewing, cross-stitching, and needlepoint. There were several pre-printed canvases, one of which had two oversized long-stemmed roses, its petals with shades of reds and pinks, and its long stems and leaves with hues of greens highlighted with soft tinges of yellow. A pre-printed inscription above the roses, to be stitched in black, read *Bless This House*.

“Where is that . . . thing?” Vivian said as she looked in the bag.

It should've been in here, along with everything else, she thought. Well, guess it's my payback for neglecting my needlepoint work for so long.

She looked deeper in the closet and pushed aside boxes. She stood and looked at the shelf above the rack of hangers where her clothes hung. There was nothing, but more timeworn cardboard boxes of various sizes and shapes.

She grabbed her sewing kit at one end of the shelf. Something fell and slapped the wooden surface of the shelf. She glanced in the direction from where the sound came and shrugged her shoulders. Giving her undivided attention to the sewing kit, she opened it and glanced inside.

“No, that’s not it,” Vivian said to herself.

She lifted the sewing kit, and before setting it back on the shelf, saw the thing she had been looking for—a thick, ten-inch wooden hoop. She pulled it off the shelf and while putting it in the bag, fleetingly thought, *I wonder what fell up there?*

As she went to put the sewing kit back on the shelf, she noticed the edge of a black, wooden picture frame.

So, that’s what fell, she thought.

She used her fingertips to grasp the picture frame and slide it toward the edge of the shelf. She brought it down to eye level and gazed at the portrait which stared back at her.

An eight-by-ten black-and-white glossy of a beautiful, twenty-year-old woman looked back at Vivian. The woman in the picture had a Betty Grable type of look, sweet and cherubic, with a subtle smile. Her hair was light blond and styled from the 1960s era. Light, shadow, and makeup were exquisite. An autograph had been written in cursive script with a black felt-tip marker in the lower right-hand corner: *Rose Hutchins, 1966.*

CHAPTER 2

Mrs. Julia S. Windom relaxed in a vintage claw-foot bathtub. She savored the warm water and the sweet aroma of the bath oils. Sudsy bubbles modestly covered her nakedness. Several cream-colored, unscented candles of various heights and girths adorned the edge of the tub along the tiled wall. Each flame fluttered and undulated in a leisurely manner.

All this unnecessary anxiety is beginning to get unbearable, Julia thought as she lathered her hands and fingers with a bar of moisturizing soap. *The sooner I can get some things out of the way and over with, the better. I just want to get to Belize as soon as possible.*

“Iris!” she said. The bathroom door had been ajar and she heard her personal assistant/secretary skitter down the hall.

“Yes, Mrs. Windom?” Iris said as she stood outside the doorframe. She pushed open the door a little. Julia’s back was to the door. She wore a white terry-cloth towel neatly wrapped around her head in a twist and scrubbed her long treacherous-looking deep-red fingernails.

“*Nails of death,*” Julia’s husband, Jack Windom, once had called them. How she had hated it when he’d said that. Likewise when he’d snippily remarked about her middle initial S for “selfishness.”

“Have the reservations been made yet?” Julia asked.

“Yes, Mrs. Windom,” Iris said. “We report to the ticket counter first thing tomorrow morning at six o’clock. Our flight from Paris to Belize leaves Charles de Gaulle Airport at approximately eight o’clock our time. I have the necessary information down for you, flight number and all.”

“Good enough. Where is Jack, by the way?”

“He’s still at the meeting with Mr. Reginald. He said he’d be here some time later.”

“Be sure to let Peter and Dolph know. You may go now.” Julia dismissed Iris with a flippant wave of her hand.

It appeared Julia to know that this would be her final night in Paris. She told herself she would never return to Paris for any reason, whether it be business or pleasure.

Better yet, she thought, make that I shall never return to this wretched place again. That is a promise. Thank goodness for Belize . . . and Antigua. As for Jack, he is not worth the powder to blow him up. After all, I am worth more than my weight in gold. All in all, the bottom line is, it is going to be the end of him.

She picked up a white loofah and gently scrubbed her shoulder as she worked her way down to her forearm.



At the Paris branch of World Ecological Corporation, ten-foot-high windows along the length of the entire office took in the views of the city at night, which glittered and sparkled like gems. Black walls with shades of gray and streaks of silver defined the large conference room on the twentieth floor. Thin squiggly lines of white and gold accented the walls, which gave it a futuristic appearance. Voices of two businessmen who spoke in hushed tones under dim recessed lighting intermingled with the hum of the air conditioning.

“As CEO and financier for World Ecological Corporation,” Jack Windom said to Mr. Reginald, “I can see why the likes of my wife wallow in greed and strive for more material wealth. It’s very apparent why she married me all those years ago.” Jack paced quietly on the black-and-white lacquered marble floor.

“You’ve talked about this before, Jack,” Mr. Reginald said. “Why are you bringing this up again?” He sat comfortably in a black leather executive chair and leaned back from the buffed, glass-topped conference table. He crossed his legs and clasped his hands together.

“Well, I’m merely suggesting that I know what my wife may be up to this time,” Jack said. “She’s a grabby-assy, money-hungry, power mongrel who doesn’t

know when to quit. I intend to put a stop to this nonsense before it goes any further, and I would need your help.”

“How do you propose, sir?”

Jack walked over to a wall with an ornate built-in bar, which had tempered glass shelves and overhead lighting. “Well, for one, you’ve got the law on your side,” he said as he pulled a bottle of cognac from the shelf and poured some into a brandy glass. “Being my corporate attorney and right-hand man, you know the loops, the ins and outs. I’m looking to create some business and financial setbacks for her.”

“You’re looking for a way out from under her.”

“Very perceptive, aren’t you?” Jack gulped the cognac and refilled the glass. “She knows a lot of people and then some. She has a little too much of everything: money, properties, stocks, bonds, hedge funds, CDs, an IRA, jewels, residuals from the films she’s made, and so forth. I’m afraid she’s become more affluent than me. All in all, I want what’s rightfully mine. I know a divorce won’t do. Somehow, I’ll figure out a way to make sure she’s completely out . . . of the picture.”

He poured himself another glass of cognac and downed it.

CHAPTER 3

The Miata rounded the semi-circular driveway and stopped by the front door. The glove compartment popped open and a .38 caliber gun was retrieved. The silver barrel gleamed in the sunlight. The chamber was flipped open, then snapped shut. The gun was placed in a small, black, beaded handbag.

“You had better be home,” the woman said. “I’m gonna get ya good, ya wretched wench. See if I don’t.”

She stepped out of the car and stood for a moment as she glanced at the house’s exterior through a pair of shades. One hand shielded her eyes from the sun’s glare. She closed the door with force and walked to the front door. She pressed the doorbell and heard chimes from within. Faint footsteps approached the door and the deadbolt clicked open.

It delighted the woman to see the surprised look on Vivian’s face when she opened the door.

How could anyone not be surprised? the woman thought as she suppressed a smile. She knew the advantages of being young, as well as being sinfully slender. She had always known it helped to be attractive with her blond hair, blue eyes and perfect, unblemished complexion. She inwardly enjoyed the fact that the cool pair of shades perched on the bridge of her well-chiseled nose gave her features

some character. She wore a tight, one-piece, black outfit that made her feel more sexy and alluring than she normally did. The long shoulder strap connected to her handbag gave her appearance a finishing touch.

“Yes?” Vivian said.

“Oh,” the woman said. She paused a moment while she curiously eyed Vivian up and down. “Uh, you wouldn’t be Rose Hutchins, by any chance, would you?”

Vivian immediately became suspicious. “Who wants to know?” she asked.

“I do.”

“And you are . . . ?”

“Looking for Rose Hutchins.”

“This is getting nowhere,” Vivian said.

The woman opened her mouth to speak when Vivian interjected with a raised hand.

“I don’t have the time or talent to play games. Please leave or I’ll call the police and have you escorted off the premises.”

“Well, if Rose Hutchins isn’t here,” the woman said, “then where is she? Apparently, you know something about her, otherwise you wouldn’t be standing here for this long.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t help you if you won’t tell me who you are or what your business with her is.”

“I thought you couldn’t have been her. After all, you do look awfully young to be ol’ Rose Hutchins. But then again, I wouldn’t be surprised if you were Rose Hutchins. There are such things as collagen injections and face-lifts, you know.”

“Well,” Vivian said, “I’m forty-four years old, even if that’s none of your business, and for whatever reason you’re here, whatever the nature of your business or relationship with her is, I can honestly tell you she hasn’t been here for quite some time. You’d do well to find her at Forest Lawn, which is about eight or nine miles east of here. You can find information online and a map will set you in the right direction.”

“Oh,” the woman said, “I see. Well, then, you must be Vivian Hutchins.”

“And just who are you?”

“I’m Christine. Christine Hutchins . . . your baby sister.”

CHAPTER 4

Vivian's heart skipped a beat. She blinked in disbelief and placed a hand to her chest.

"Christine?" she said.

"Yeah," Christine said.

"Oh, wow." Vivian shook her head, awed. "This is . . . Wow, this is all so sudden. Please come in."

Vivian opened the door wider, and Christine stepped into the parqueted foyer.

"First of all," Vivian said as she closed the door, "I want to apologize for my behavior just now. I may be a little tough at times, but I'm normally not rude or disrespectful to anyone."

"Oh, no prob. I understand," Christine said. She flashed a small, tepid smile.

"After all these years . . ." Vivian said. "I had so looked forward to this moment. I had *dreamed* of this moment a million times, expecting to feel as if you and I had known each other a lifetime, yet . . . I feel as if we're total strangers."

"Well, it has been twenty-two years. After all, I *am* twenty-two years old."

"True. Very true. Come here and give your big ol' sis a hug."

Vivian tightly embraced Christine, who winced with discomfort and barely returned the gesture, as she lightly patted Vivian on the back. Vivian noticed this

and perceived that Christine may have felt as if a total stranger had embraced her.

“Let’s go into the living room,” Vivian said as she led the way. After they entered the living room, she picked up the needlepoint canvas from the sofa. “Let me put this aside,” she said as she placed it on the wooden coffee table. “I began working on it when you rang. I had neglected it for a while. Please have a seat.”

Christine seated herself on the sofa a few feet away from Vivian. Christine glanced at the needlepoint canvas and did a double-take. The cheerful colors and stylish design of the two oversized roses drew her attention for a moment.

“Oh,” Christine said, totally disinterested. “Looks nice. Why would you want to work on something like that?”

“What do you mean?” Vivian asked.

“*Roses?* Isn’t that a reminder of . . . you-know-who?”

“Yeah, well, I try not to think about it. It’s nothing but a simple picture of a couple of roses, not humans. It doesn’t matter really, because there are roses everywhere I go and in everything I see, even in magazines and movies and on TV. I have plenty of ’em out in the back on the veranda, by the pool, and around the gazebo.”

“Well, if you ask me,” Christine said, “I would have opted for something like a pair of daisies being romanced by a bee, or a beige puppy playing with a large rainbow-colored beach ball, or a white kitty chasing a blue bird . . . and then eating it.” She let out a wicked chuckle, which surprised Vivian. “Just kidding.”

“Quite the imaginative, colorful artist, aren’t you?” Vivian said.

“Oh, I’m an artist, all right. I’m a very successful model and an aspiring actress. I’d like to try writing a book one day, also.”

“And maybe you shall,” Vivian said. “Anyway, this certainly is a surprise. I can’t begin to tell you how thrilled I am to have you here. As a matter of fact, I hadn’t been expecting anyone, much less you, and visitors are rare around here. I’ve more or less prided myself as being sort of a recluse, usually keeping to myself, especially since . . .” Her voice trailed off.

“Since what?” Christine asked.

“Well, that’s going to take some explaining, but we’ll get to that soon enough. Would you like something to drink? Anything I can get you?”

“No, I’m all right. Thanks.”

Vivian continued to eye her younger sister in wonder. She felt as if she had stepped into *The Twilight Zone*.

“Hey, come to think of it, where’s Blaine?” Vivian asked. “Isn’t he with you?”

“No,” Christine said. “He’s back home in Jersey.”

“I see. Sure you don’t want anything to drink or have a little bite of something?”

“I’m positive. Please don’t concern yourself about me. I appreciate you trying

to be a good hostess. But, thanks anyway.”

“All right,” Vivian said.

Vivian closely studied Christine for a moment as she took in the attractive young woman’s facial features and admired her beauty. She could see that Christine had the shape of their mother’s facial bone structure, particularly the jaw line, and the eyes.

A bit unnerving, I’ll admit, Vivian thought.

Why are you staring at me? Christine thought as she looked away momentarily.

“I’m sorry,” Vivian said with a chuckle. “I didn’t mean to stare. It’s just that, well, many a time I had rehearsed the words, the questions, and many other things I had thought of saying, if and when the time had come that you and I would be together again, and here it is. You’re here, you’re *really* here. I can honestly tell you that I’m at a loss for words. I’m literally speechless, double entendre unintended.” She laughed. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to ramble.”

“No problem,” Christine said. “Let me begin by saying that our brother, Blaine, and I had been living in New Jersey. According to Blaine, that’s where he and I ended up after all that had happened twenty-two years ago. I only know bits and pieces because Blaine always had been rather reluctant to talk about it. However, he made sure that I knew about you.

“Anyway, he had gotten a small place for us and found a part-time job. He had saved up some money and paid his way through law school. To make a long story short, he eventually had gotten a job at a law firm in New York that specialized in corporate law. Later, he met and married a paralegal named Mary Beth, who now practices personal injury law. I had lived with him until I was old enough to get a place of my own, with roommates, of course. Female roommates, mind you.” Christine flashed a small smile.

“Well, anyway,” Christine continued, “Blaine had made sure I had done well in school, then I got into modeling, and more recently, acting. Well, now that I’m here, Viv, it’s really very nice to be with you again after all this time. Who would have imagined?”

“But, how did you find out where I lived? How could you have known?” Vivian asked. “Did Blaine tell you?”

“Yeah,” Christine said. “He had always remembered the address, even though he had tried erasing it from his memory, even erasing it from his heart. But, I’ll tell you he had very sternly warned me against coming here. He *never* even kept a telephone number. For obvious reasons, I guess.”

“I never had his, either. He never kept in touch with me since I last saw him that fateful day twenty-two years ago. For obvious reasons, also. Though, plenty of times, it made me feel as if I were to blame for what had happened which is

silly, of course. I was as much a victim as you and Blaine were. Would you happen to have his number with you, by any chance? I'd like to get in touch with him. The sooner, the better."

"Yeah," Christine said, "I have the number somewhere. I don't remember what I took with me when I left. But, if I were you, I'd wait a while before calling him. You see, he doesn't know I actually came out here just to see Rose and to confront her about what happened twenty-two years ago. It would be a shock and infuriate the hell out of him."

"Oh, I can understand," Vivian said. "Who'd blame him?"

"He knows I'm in LA to do some modeling, take acting workshops, and go on auditions for TV commercials and walk-on parts in film."

"We can wait a little while before getting in touch with him."

"Yeah. That would be a good idea."

"You could've written to me all those years ago when you were old enough to write."

"Blaine discouraged me from writing you. First of all, he hadn't known where you had gone, and secondly, he had always been deathly afraid of you-know-who."

"Yes," Vivian said, "I know." She pursed her lips and nodded. "I thought that might have been the case. Well, you could've sent a letter to let me know you were coming to LA."

"I had been uncertain about coming here and I didn't know what to expect. The prospect of *her* still being around only made me more . . . I don't know . . . I just took my chances, Viv."

"Well, fortunately, you did the right thing. Coming here, I mean."

CHAPTER 5

Vivian and Christine sat at a small, indoor bistro table made of white Carrara marble. Beautiful gray veining contrasted a classic cast steel-and-aluminum base, hand-finished to a soft antiqued patina.

They sat by the sliding glass doors in the sunroom near the back of the house. The doors were opened, but the screen doors were shut to keep out the bugs. The early-afternoon sunlight streamed through tree leaves outside and the trees' branches gently swayed in the breeze. They heard birds chirp as they sipped on a glass of raspberry-flavored iced tea and nibbled on butter crackers and vanilla wafers.

"So, where did you go?" Christine asked. "What did you do? Where were you between the time we were booted outta here until you came back seven years ago?"

"Rob, my husband at the time, and I went to his parents' place."

"Winston and Cynthia Peterson, right?"

"Yes."

"Blaine mentioned them from time to time," Christine said.

"Rob and I stayed with them for a while," Vivian said, "until we got an apartment of our own. We wanted to start a family and I eventually got pregnant."

Unfortunately, Rob was killed in a car accident while on his way home from work one evening and the shock of that caused me to miscarry. That's why I don't have any children. Anyway, not too long after that, I eventually got a job working at an antique store in Burbank. Then I got a place of my own."

"Still working at the antique store?" Christine asked.

"Not any more," Vivian said. "After Winston and Cynthia passed on, they left me enough to live on. I will never have to worry about anything."

"Didn't Winston and Cynthia have any other offspring?"

"Rob had been their only one."

"Did you keep your married name or go back to your maiden name?"

"I alternate, depending on whom I'm talking to or doing business with. With some people, I'm Vivian Hutchins, and with others, I'm Vivian Peterson, and with others I'm Vivian Hutchins-Peterson. Makes no difference to me, really."

"I see," Christine said. "Well, that's rather generous of Winston and Cynthia to give you enough to be set for life, so to speak. Hmph, must be nice. Though working is good; it's healthy and it helps to keep you busy and take your mind off some things."

"Yeah, well, these days it seems people are malcontents," Vivian said. "I've dealt with more than enough of them. My biggest peeve is that a lot of people are gossips, troublemakers, and don't even care about their jobs. I don't have the patience to put up with personality clashes, either, and I don't like bosses who abuse their authority."

Vivian paused momentarily. She waited to hear what Christine thought.

"Yeah, well," Christine said, "this kind of attitude is rampant, I guess. I notice a lot of people have quite an attitude, especially here. It seems like it's so much more prevalent here than anywhere else."

"That's stodgy ol' LA for you."

"And, I thought it was far worse in New York City where I've done some modeling every now and then. So, what do you do to keep busy?"

"I always find things to do around the house. There's cleaning, cooking, and organizing. I read books and magazines. I sew, cross-stitch, and recently got back to doing some needlepoint work after not having done it for a while. I've got a nice stereo system with a CD player, a large flat-screen TV, and a bunch of DVDs which I have yet to watch. I go out from time to time, whether it be window shopping, buying something for the house or for myself, eating out, taking a walk around the block, riding a bike at the park and feeding the ducks at the local pond, or taking a drive to the beach. There are lots of things to do."

"Uh-huh," Christine said. "I can see why they say LA's the place to be. So, has there been anyone else since Rob?"

“Uh, actually, no,” Vivian said. “I haven’t been with anyone since him. I’ve dated some guys over the years but none of them were interesting enough for me to see them on a regular basis. They didn’t appeal to me like Rob.”

“Awww.”

“It’s okay, it’s okay. Really. It’s not as bad as you think. After all, I’ve learned to appreciate my own company. Frankly, I’m content with the way things are and I couldn’t ask for more now that you’re here.”

“Well, that’s good to hear.”

“Other than that, there has been a swarm of small earthquakes lately. Another shaker occurred just the other day. I guess a bigger one is on the way.” Vivian let out a nervous chuckle and sipped some tea.

“Viv, I gotta admit, I’ve been stalling, so I’m going to come right out and be honest. Another reason for coming out here was to talk about what had happened back then—”

“I figured as much,” Vivian quickly interjected.

“—since I really don’t know all that much. You see, over the years while growing up with an older brother, which hadn’t been easy at times, he had told me a little. After a while, I pieced it all together and it snowballed from there.

“I had often wondered why Blaine remained mum about this for so long,” Christine said. “Now, I know. I can see it had been very painful to talk about.” She paused a beat. “I don’t know,” she said with a shrug of indifference. “You see, you need to understand that I felt cheated, that I had been cheated out of a lot.”

“You weren’t the only one, Christine. We were *all* cheated. All of us.”

“I know I shouldn’t complain. But naturally, I looked around and saw basically happy kids with basically happy parents and basically happy homes. Friends, family, and relatives. Birthdays, Christmases, and so forth. I admit that I am selfish and I will say that *I* had been robbed of the finer things in life, thanks to you-know-who. I refer to you-know-who the way I do because I absolutely refuse to utter that ol’ dame’s name.

“At any rate,” Christine continued, “the only family I really ever had was our brother, Blaine. He had been the only one with whom I had shared birthdays and Christmases.

“When I heard about *her* being a model, then an actress, I decided I just had to do one better. Call it a game of one-upmanship. I eventually became a successful model. Of course, it has its advantages as well as disadvantages. I figured if *she* could have *her* face and body seen on film, so could I. I also figured that, with the man she had married and the money and the home she had, *I* could have the same, if not more. I knew, with her affluence, she’d met a lot of people and seen the world. As selfish as I am, *I* wanted the same and even more,

oh so much more! I wanted to outdo her in every which way possible and I didn't even *know* the old crow!

"Sure, I've seen some of her movies. Naturally, I hated them all. In fact, I've seen tapestry with more personality than that leg-strutting, hip-swishing, lip-flapping thing on film. Anyway, if she were still alive and had all this—" Christine gestured the room with a sweep of her arm, "—I would've gladly avenged the past by taking over her domain—property, money, and all—and literally throwing *her* out on her flaccid, wrinkled ol' ass! I wanted to take everything from her, since I figured what had once been *hers* is now rightfully *mine*.

"I find it so difficult to fathom that she'd been dead all this time. How could she throw us out, then all of a sudden drop dead? I don't understand. I tell you, I can't even bear the thought of knowing that she is at . . . Forest Lawn, did you say? And, you say it's a mere hop, skip, and a jump east of here? Ugh! Way too close for comfort, if you ask me."

"Yeah," Vivian said. "Well, all that's past now."

"Is it? Sometimes I wonder." Christine nibbled on a vanilla wafer, pensive.

"Christine," Vivian said as she reached across the table and took her sister's hands in her own. "When things had gone so badly back then, I didn't care if I lived to see another sunrise or sunset. But, guess what? I eventually got over it after having been distraught for so long. I'm okay now and I'm all the stronger, too. It hurts sometimes, but I'm able to talk about it when the subject arises."

"Well, I need some fresh air." Christine immediately stood up. "I think I'll drive around for a little bit, familiarize myself with the area, and do some shopping. Be back in a while."

"But you just got here," Vivian said, surprised.

"I know." Christine made her way into the living room while Vivian followed behind. "This is all a bit overwhelming for me. I would just like to go out and get some fresh air for a little bit."

"Hey, I'd be happy to go with you, if you'd like."

"No, but thanks anyway. I want to go alone. I want some time to myself."

Christine groped for her handbag from the coffee table and it fell on the carpeted floor by her feet.

"Whoops," Christine said.

Vivian noticed the barrel of a gun which protruded from the mouth of the handbag.

"What's that?" Vivian asked, her brows furrowed.

"Oh, it's nothing." Christine quickly scrambled to put it back in the handbag.

"Let me see it." Vivian put forth her hand, palm up.

“It’s nothing, all right?” Christine regained her balance and stood. She exhaled a sigh and pulled the shoulder strap, which closed the mouth of the handbag.

“No, it isn’t all right, Christine. Now, let me have it.”

“It’s protection, okay? Self-defense.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Well, I’m going shopping.” Christine briskly walked to the foyer.

“Not just yet,” Vivian said. She stopped Christine by blocking her before she reached the front door. “I won’t tolerate a gun in this house.”

“Oh, don’t worry. The old putz is dead, anyway, or so you say. Can’t kill an already *dead* person, can I?”

“I see,” Vivian said. “You actually came here just to settle the score with *her*, not knowing that she’d been dead in the first place.”

“I plead the Fifth,” Christine said.

“Possessing a concealed weapon in California is illegal. It’s also a blatant show of cowardice.”

“Well, thank you for today’s lesson, Sis. I’ll be sure to remember that when the next quiz comes up. Hope I get an ‘A.’ Class dismissed. *Ciao*.”

“Christine, this isn’t funny. Now where did you get it?”

“I got the damn thing, all right! What are you, the Gestapo?”

“Christine—”

“The hell with you! I’m outta here!”

Christine forcefully bypassed Vivian and yanked open the front door. She turned around to face Vivian. “I’m sorry I ever came here in the first place,” Christine said. She then stormed out the door and stomped down the flower-lined path. She turned around to face Vivian once more.

“All right, all right, all right,” Christine said. “You win.”

She walked up to Vivian, withdrew the gun from her handbag, and slammed it into Vivian’s outstretched palm.

“I can’t believe you would come out all this way, just to do something like this,” Vivian said, angry. “From now on, I’m keeping this.”

“Hey, no prob,” Christine said. “By all means, keep it. I can always get another one. What a bitch you turned out to be.”

Vivian felt as if she’d been slapped across her face. She couldn’t believe what was happening and how things were unfolding at such a rapid pace. “You know, I don’t appreciate that,” Vivian said as she drew closer to Christine. “In the first place, I was kind and considerate enough to let you in. The next time you walk in here with something like this, I’ll make sure you won’t be able to use it . . . with either hand.”

DARYL HAJEK

“Oooooohh, a threat? I love a coward whose only means of machismo is threatening those she considers inferior.”

“Indeed, you are.”

“Welp,” Christine said, “toodle-oo!”

CHAPTER 6

What the hell just happened? Christine thought as she drove down the hill with its winding roads. *It shouldn't have happened like that. Not the way I had imagined.*

She could imagine Vivian sitting there alone, baffled. She fretted that Vivian now knew there had been more to her supposed reasons for coming to Los Angeles other than to reestablish family ties with Vivian.

The convertible turned right and cruised east on Ventura Boulevard. Christine occasionally glanced at shop windows while she continued to ponder.



Christine returned to the house about an hour later.

“Well, Viv,” Christine said as she stood outside the front door with two fingers surreptitiously crossed behind her back. “I’ll admit that my actions were inexcusable and reprehensible. I guess I’d been blindly irrational about everything. It is my fault for letting my emotions get the best of me. I’m sorry I blew my top the way I did. I really didn’t mean to create a scene like that. Maybe I shouldn’t have brought a gun with me. I didn’t mean to upset you and I am sorry I called you a bitch.”

“What do you have behind your back?” Vivian asked with suspicion. “Another gun?”

Christine shook her head and held out her arm with a pair of long-stemmed red roses in her hand.



Vivian and Christine prepared finger sandwiches and cold cuts for lunch. Earlier, Vivian had accepted Christine’s apology, forgiven her, and put the incident out of her mind.

“Would you like a grand tour of the estate?” Vivian asked Christine. She halved gherkin pickles with a paring knife.

“That would be cool,” Christine said with a nod. She cut a thin slice of cheddar cheese and placed it onto a serving plate.

After they ate, Vivian showed Christine every room in the house, except the sealed room on the second floor in the west wing.

“It contains some of Rose’s personal belongings,” Vivian said. “Believe me, it isn’t worth setting foot in.”

This piqued Christine’s curiosity. She decided she’d wait a while before pressing on. They went down the hall to Vivian’s master bedroom.

“Oh, how lovely,” Christine said. “This is really nice, Viv. I don’t know how you did it, but . . .”

“Well, it hadn’t been easy, I’ll tell ya,” Vivian said. “But time heals, as they say. Keeping busy helps a lot, too.”

They stepped out of the bedroom and into the hall. Christine glanced at a spot on the polished hardwood floor in the hall. She noticed something glimmer for a second and took two steps forward to get a closer look.

“Hmm . . .” she said, her brows furrowed. She reached out, gingerly picked it up, and cautiously turned it over. “Looks like a piece of glass. How did this get there?”

“I was rummaging through the closet in that room earlier before you came,” Vivian said. “I was looking for the wooden hoop with the canvas for my needlepoint project and I came across this framed portrait of . . . you-know-who. I got choked up and impulsively threw it on the floor and the glass broke. I guess this piece bounced out into the hall.”

Christine slyly peered down the hall to the other end and eyed the closed door to the sealed room.

“I’d sure like to see that picture,” Christine said.

“Well, it’s been put away.”

“Which reminds me, I’d also like to see that room. After all, you’ve piqued my curiosity.”

CHAPTER 7

“I had hoped I wouldn’t have to stand here again,” Vivian said. She turned the key in its slot and unlocked the deadbolt. “Yet, you insisted.”

Christine shrugged insolently. Vivian inserted another key into the doorknob below the deadbolt, turned it, and opened the door.

Vivian flipped the light switch. A lone bulb in its socket on the ceiling revealed a barren room except for several boxes and some furniture covered with transparent dust covers. Windows had been permanently painted shut and the shutters drawn. Vivian stood at the doorway and glanced around the room, then stepped aside to let Christine through. Christine wrinkled her nose at the musty smell.

“The picture is in that closet over there on the top shelf,” Vivian said. She pointed at the closet on one wall. “I don’t see what good it would do you.”

Why I even bother to keep it anywhere in this house is beyond my comprehension, she added as an afterthought.

“It would give me a sense of satisfaction,” Christine said.

“Well, let me know when you’re through. I’ll be downstairs working on my needlepoint project.” Vivian stepped away and went downstairs.

The eerie feeling of the room’s lack of inhabitation overwhelmed Christine.

She could see the yellowed walls hadn't been painted in years. She walked over to a large sofa and with her forefinger and thumb, delicately lifted the dust cover to sneak a peek underneath.

"Yech!" she said in disgust. "What an ugly piece of crap." She let go of the dust cover and walked around the room. She went to the closet and opened the door, stood on her toes, and felt around the shelf for the portrait.

Unbeknownst to her, within the dark confines of the corner, her gun lay two feet away from the portrait. Her fingertips groped within the dark until they felt the edge of the picture frame. She pushed it around while she tried to get a good grasp of it, thus unwittingly pushed the gun farther aside an inch or two. She finally gripped the frame and dragged it off the shelf. The portrait no longer had glass in front of it and parts of the frame were busted. She held it before her and narrowly scrutinized every facial detail of the woman in the picture. Christine brushed her thumb over the woman's autograph. A maelstrom of emotions rapidly boiled within her. Before she could stop herself, she excreted a large wad of saliva onto the face of the woman before her.

"Bitch!" Christine said. Her eyes burned with fury and hatred. She shoved the portrait back onto the shelf, closed the closet door with excessive force, left the room, and slammed the door behind her.

"Thanks, Viv," Christine said as she came down the stairs. "I didn't mean to slam the door. Sorry about that."

Vivian nodded, put down the needlepoint canvas, and went up the stairs, keys in hand. Christine sat on the sofa, sipped some raspberry-flavored iced tea, and waited for Vivian to return.

"Well?" Vivian asked when she returned. She sat across from Christine.

"Well what?" Christine said. "I'm not gonna say that *she* was pretty. After all, *I'm* the pretty one, especially since I'm younger. Better yet, *I'm* as gorgeous as can be and it's true. Hell, everyone knows it, even *me*." Christine flashed a cold smile. "As far as I'm concerned, that ancient so-called work of art looks like a grotesquely disfigured doll, as if it had been held over a candle flame. If she were to smile, she'd appear as if she were *terrrrrrribly* constipated. Oh, incidentally, with that mouth of hers, and it's apparent she's had one too many face-lifts, it's a wonder she had been able to crack a smile in the first place, let alone her ass."

"Have you always been this narcissistic?" Vivian asked. "This insolent?"

"Sure. Why not?" Christine said. "I love me, very much so, I might add. I have a tendency to apply 'me,' 'my,' and 'mine' to just about everything I see with my own eyes, and I'm not ashamed to admit it."

"Oh, and would you say that everything—" Vivian gestured about the living room with a sweep of her arm, "—you see here with your own eyes is yours? The

whole house for that matter?”

“Not yet, but it will be.”

“And, what about me, hmm? What happens to me?” Vivian shook her head. “You’re impossible.”

“I want what’s rightfully mine.”

“And what’s that?”

Christine’s mind momentarily froze.

How do I answer that? Christine thought. What do I say? Now, that is a question I hadn’t been prepared to answer. Just exactly what is rightfully mine?

In an attempt to answer Vivian, Christine felt as if a serious case of writer’s block had come over her and she hated that feeling.

“What’s the matter?” Vivian asked.

Christine gazed at Vivian.

“Cat got your tongue?” Vivian asked.

“No,” Christine said.

“Well, I’d be glad to share all this with you, but it’s not rightfully yours and neither is it mine, either. It had been *hers*, just as she had left it all those years ago. It’s never been claimed and it’s been paid for.”

“I imagine she continues to pay property tax from her grave.”

“You truly are warped.” Vivian shook her head again with a quiet sigh.

“What? You want me to show the dead old thing an ounce of respect? She’ll *never* get from me. *Never*. Why don’t you tell me about how you came back and got the house? That ought to be interesting to hear.”

“It’s kind of long, but I’ll try to make it short,” Vivian said. “I decided one day to confront the old woman and get it off my chest once and for all. I had even asked Rob’s parents to come with me. Naturally, they didn’t want to.”

“How long ago was this?”

“Oh, about eleven or twelve years ago. I’ve only been here for about seven years now.”

“Why did you wait so long to come back?”

“I don’t know,” Vivian said with a shrug of indifference. She picked up the needlepoint canvas and laid it on her lap. “Time, I guess.” She worked on her needlepoint project as she reiterated about the day she came to confront Rose.

When Vivian had come to the house eleven or twelve years ago, there had been no one around. Vivian did what would have been expected of her. She knocked on the door, rang the bell, and called out Rose’s name. She even went around the side to the back.

To her surprise, when she pulled on the sliding glass door to the sunroom, it was unlocked. She entered and was even more surprised to see that the premises had been vacated and everything was covered with dust. As for how long the place had been vacant, she didn't know. At first, she wondered what had happened and where Rose had gone, but, as time went by, she no longer cared because she had decided, since the old woman was no longer around, it might as well have been Vivian's. Apparently, Rose had given it up.

"As a result," Vivian said, "you can see that the entire property has been renovated. The house's exterior used to be slate-gray with white trim. Now, it's all white. The carpeting used to be dark cobalt-blue or something. This carpet here—" Vivian pointed to an area near her feet "—is very nice. I've always been partial to taupe.

"I also had new hardwood floors put in the dining room as well as a new backsplash in the kitchen and floor tiles in the bathrooms. Even all the windows have been taken out and replaced with new ones which have a more modern style that I like. Out with the old and in with the new."

"Weren't you afraid of her coming back?" Christine asked.

"Believe me, the thought occurred to me many times, long before I even dared move in."

"Suppose she had come back and found you here?"

"I couldn't begin to tell you. I wouldn't know how I would've reacted back then."

"What about her death?" Christine asked. "How did you find out about that?"

"I had asked around," Vivian said. "In fact, the first day I came here, I asked the Weavers next door. It surprised me that they were still around after all this time. They're still here, believe it or not. Anyway, it's kind of an interesting story."

According to the Weavers, some time after midnight, a shrill scream pierced the halls of the Hutchins's residence. The Weavers said it sounded like it came from Rose. Paramedics had been called and the ambulance came.

Charles Hutchins, the father of Vivian, Blaine and Christine, had been found lifeless at the foot of the stairs. The autopsy results showed that he had been drinking heavily. In addition

to a broken neck, he had died of massive head and internal injuries. Rose had said she did not see anything; she had said she heard what sounded like someone falling down the stairs, then a thud. She came out of the master bedroom, saw Charles at the bottom of the stairs, and screamed. Presumably, in his drunkenness he had lost his footing. He had since been buried near Desirée Hutchins's grave in the Whispering Pines section at Forest Lawn Memorial Park.

Sometime after that, Rose disposed of most of her belongings. The Weavers saw a large moving truck and several movers who loaded Rose's furniture and many other paraphernalia into it. Rose told the Weavers that she would be in Europe for a while and didn't know if or when she would return. She kept in touch with them but not often. Her last letter to them had said that she would be flying with a business associate from London to New York and that she would send them a postcard from New York. Yet, the plane she had been on never made it out of Heathrow.

Mrs. Weaver heard on the news that it had been cold that morning and one of the plane's landing gears became inoperable during takeoff. Somehow it jammed while being elevated into its compartment and the plane had been forced to land. It skidded off the runway and slammed into a nearby shed. The plane exploded, but there were some survivors. Rose was not one of them.

Mrs. Weaver called and spoke with an airline representative regarding the accident, but had been advised that airline policy did not give out information to individuals who were not immediate family members of the victims. A similar scenario took place when she called a few local hospitals in London and spoke with several medical staff.

A few days after the accident, Mrs. Weaver had listened to a status report on the news. Rose Hutchins, 46, of Los Angeles, California, had been listed as one of the deceased.

"It's all on record," Vivian said now. "The information can be found at the local library. Just ask the librarian at the reference desk for the *Los Angeles Daily*

Bulletin dated October 12, 1992.”

“Oh, so her body is not in the grave?” Christine asked.

“No. Just a gravestone marker with her name. It’s a commemorative thing. Symbolic, you know.”

“I would like to see it, though.”

“Oh, speaking of which,” Vivian said, “that’s the one person in particular I was thinking of earlier when I stood out on the veranda having my morning tea. I did all I could not to think of her.”

“You were thinking about her?” Christine asked. “As in *willfully* thinking about her?”

Vivian shook her head. “She invades my thoughts from time to time, no matter how much I try to quash it.”

“I see. You said Grandma Desirée, and our father, Charles, and your husband, Rob, are buried at Forest Lawn in the Whispering Pines section, right?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“And . . . is *her* gravestone marker in the same section?”

“No.”

“Where is it then?”

“Slumberland.”

“Ooohh, I like the sound of that.”

“Naturally.”



Rose Hutchins’s three-foot-wide and two-foot-long gravestone marker lay before Christine. The patinaed bronze gleamed in the warm sun. Embossed on the face of the marker were the deceased’s name plus her birth and death dates.

Christine gazed at it while her anger and unbridled hatred fumed within. She looked about the cemetery’s grassy terrain and saw no one around. She squatted on her haunches, opened her handbag, and withdrew a tube of lipstick.

With her task completed, she casually walked away without a backward glance.

An angry inscription crudely scrawled in uppercase letters read:

HERE LIES A BITCH

As afterthoughts, Christine had added several other phrases replete with expletives.

CHAPTER 8

Shortly after leaving Paris, Julia, Iris, Peter, and Dolph flew to Belize where they stayed for two days.

Afterward, they flew to San Diego. From the San Diego International Airport, they went to Julia's main residence in La Jolla, California, a beautiful and affluent seaside community in the northern region of San Diego, a twenty-minute drive north from the airport.

Later, Julia had Peter chauffeur her to the local bank where she withdrew massive amounts from Jack's personal and business accounts in New York and Switzerland. The funds were deposited into her private account at another bank, one unbeknownst to Jack. At one point, the bank official complimented Julia's appearance.

"You look very nice today," he said.

Julia wore a white turban with a two-inch gold pin and a pearl affixed in the center. A white blouse with a gold-and-pearl brooch, matching slacks, and low-heeled pumps complemented her outfit. However, business at hand took priority over her attire.

"Thank you," Julia said with a tepid smile.

After the paperwork had been finalized, Julia went back to her residence. She

called her stockbroker in New York and purchased many shares of several stocks that had performed poorly the last few months. Jack was sure to lose millions of dollars in toxic investments.



Mr. Reginald had returned to New York City earlier in the morning to resume business at the World Ecological Corporation headquarters.

In the meantime, Jack had flown to Switzerland. At a Swiss bank, he withdrew massive amounts from Julia's personal account as well as their joint account, then stashed them into his safe deposit box, where some of her jewels and precious gems had been stored.

Later, he would catch the red-eye to New York.



Early the next morning, Julia had Peter drive her and Dolph to Los Angeles. Julia wanted to check on a particular property in the San Fernando Valley.

"Let us leave no stone unturned," she said to Peter and Dolph.

Sometime before lunch, Peter drove Julia and Dolph to LA's exclusive Westside. At the prestigious Century Plaza Towers on Century Park East, Dolph accompanied Julia to a real estate law firm called Papillo & Associates while Peter waited in the limo.

Harriet L. Weiss, one of the attorneys, assisted Julia with a form that she needed.

"I would like documentation for an ownership of property—a deed, if you will," Julia said. "The form is for a property which I own as well as it is to certify that it has been paid for."

Peter then drove Julia and Dolph to the Superior Court of California, Los Angeles County, where Julia filed for a thirty-day unconditional termination notice.



CHAPTER

Vivian stepped from the master bedroom into the hall and closed the door. She walked down the short length to the head of the stairs, stopped to look in her purse, and withdrew a set of keys.

“Hey, Christine,” Vivian said as she descended the stairs. “I’m going to get a few things from the local market. Want me to get you anything, anything at all?”

“No, that’s okay,” Christine said. “Thanks, anyway.”

Christine closed and locked the front door after Vivian stepped out. She turned around and stopped in mid-thought.

“Ah, just the thing I need to do,” she said to herself.

Christine nosed around the living room as she looked under sofa cushions, behind oversized pillows, in desk drawers, and in the magazine rack. She went to the wet bar and looked through everything. Sunlight streamed through the sliding glass door and gave off enough light for her to see into the liquor cabinet clearly. She tried to pry it open without success.

She worked the kitchen next and opened anything on hinges, then closed them. Her frustration grew. She bit her lower lip in thought. She tried the garage.

Nothing.

“Damn,” she said as she stomped her foot once, her fists clenched. “The

bedroom. It's gotta be in the master bedroom." She quickly trotted up the stairs.

Open, close. Yank, slam. Lift, drop.

Christine lifted the mattress, looked behind pillows, peeked behind some framed pictures which hung on the walls, opened all the dresser drawers and the bathroom drawers, the wall-mounted medicine chest, and the built-in cabinets beneath the sink.

"Damn it!" she said. "Where the hell did she hide my gun?"

She walked to the threshold between the master bedroom and the hall, where she stood and eyed the closed door to the sealed room in the west wing.

"Oh, man," she said with a groan. "You can't be serious. You did not hide the gun in there." She walked up to the door. "Somehow, I've gotta get the keys."

She went back into Vivian's room and snooped around some more. She hoped she would somehow come across the keys to the sealed room.

It's wishful thinking, she thought.

Christine sat on the edge of the bed and sighed. She rested her feet for a few minutes, then went to the window which overlooked the veranda and the backyard. She could see the veranda with the patio set, the Greco-Roman statues, the rosebushes and flower gardens, the large pool, and the gazebo.

She saw movement out of the corner of her eye. It looked like someone's leg. She caught a glimpse of the back of a head with a mop of blond hair. Seen for a second, then gone.

She peered through dense bushes and trees. Any movement she detected came across as vague and hardly discernible. She decided to get a closer look.

She went downstairs, went out on the veranda, walked toward the pool, and looked beyond the gazebo.

Nothing.

She went back inside and closed the sliding glass door. When she turned around with her back to it, a blond-haired man appeared at the far end of the pool. He walked from one side to the other and disappeared behind shrubs.

Christine looked out the kitchen window.

Nothing.

After she turned away from the window, the man's head glided by it outside.

She had walked halfway up the stairs when she heard a car door close and the ignition started.

"Vivian?" Christine called out, loudly enough so that she could be heard at the driveway. "Is that you, Viv?"

She ran down the stairs and bolted out the front door.

By the time Christine reached the end of the driveway and looked down the quiet residential street in both directions, she glimpsed the rear of a dark-blue,

two-door sedan as it made a right turn onto another street. She discerned that the driver's head was distinctively masculine with light-colored hair.



“Hi, I’m back,” Vivian said as she stepped in and closed the front door. She carried some plastic grocery bags and walked into the living room where she laid her purse and set of keys on the wet bar. “How are things, Christine?” Vivian asked as she went into the kitchen with the groceries.

“Oh, okay, I guess,” Christine said. She thought about what she might have seen out in the back beyond the swimming pool and the dark-blue car she saw as it turned right onto a street and rounded a corner at the intersection. “Interesting,” she added as an afterthought.

“That’s good,” Vivian said. “I’ll be right out in a minute. Give me a couple minutes to put this stuff away.”

“Sure. Take your time.”

Christine sat on the sofa. She glanced and sneered at Vivian’s needlepoint canvas on the coffee table. She hated looking at the image of the two roses and the fact that it made her think of that heinous hussy.

“Bitch,” Christine said under her breath, her face a nasty scowl.

Christine could hear Vivian in the kitchen as cupboard doors were opened and closed. She could also hear the refrigerator door open and close, as well.

In the interim, she stared at the pre-printed canvas, drawn to it as if hypnotized. She envisioned moist droplets of blood slowly bubble up from a few rose petals and swell to fullness until they were heavy enough to drop off. She imagined blood form on more petals and fall off at the edges.

“Bleeding bi—”

“Care to join me?” Vivian asked as she came out of the kitchen. She carried a white serving tray with two tall drinking glasses and a clear pitcher of iced water with sliced lemon wedges that floated on top.

“Naw,” Christine said. “I’m gonna kick back and read a magazine, if you don’t mind.”

“Sure.” Vivian went out to the veranda and set the serving tray on the patio table.

Christine slyly watched Vivian settle into her seat at the table and pour water into a glass. Christine immediately went to work on getting the keys to the sealed room. She glanced at the keys lying on top of the wet bar, then turned to see Vivian get up from the chair and walk back into the house, which caught Christine off guard.

“I thought you were going to read a magazine,” Vivian said.

“Me, too,” Christine said, “but I’ll be shooting a TV commercial in a few weeks and I just can’t remember when it is. I’ll have to check my appointment book.”

“Okay.”

Christine turned and slowly walked toward the guest room. She glanced back at Vivian who went to the coffee table in the living room, picked up the needlepoint canvas, and went back out on the veranda.

Christine purposefully slowed her pace as she sneaked furtive glances behind her. With quiet stealth, she approached the wet bar, swiftly grabbed the keys, and immediately stuffed them in the front pocket of her jeans.

“Uh, listen, Viv,” Christine said as she stepped out on the veranda. “I’ve decided I’m gonna go for a drive. I’m feeling a little restless. I’ll be back in a while.”

“All right. See you when you get back.”

Christine found a nearby locksmith and had the keys duplicated, then aimlessly drove around parts of the Valley for about an hour to kill time.



“Christine, have you seen my set of keys?” Vivian asked when Christine returned.

“Excuse me?” Christine asked.

“They were on the bar. I know I put them there next to my purse when I came back from the market because that’s where I always put them.”

“Oh, man. You got a poltergeist or something?” Christine asked. “I hate when it turns out to be one of those weird, inexplicable things that you can’t explain, you know.”

“I know I didn’t misplace them,” Vivian said. “I couldn’t possibly have.”

“Well, I’d be happy to help you look for them.”

“Thanks. I would appreciate it. Oh, on second thought, I hope I didn’t leave them at the market.”

“Gee, I would hope not,” Christine said.

As Vivian went into the kitchen, Christine immediately withdrew Vivian’s keys from her pocket and quickly inserted them into the garbage disposal in the small stainless steel sink. Her tongue poked out one corner of her lips as she feigned searching for the keys.

“I found them!” Christine said.

“Oh, good,” Vivian said with a sigh of relief. “Where did you find them?”

“You’d never guess. In the garbage disposal.”

“What? How . . .?”

“Beats me,” Christine said with a shrug of indifference. “I stuck my hand down there and took a chance. I remember putting my handbag on the bar. I have a tendency to count my money before going out. You know, the bar’s so cluttered, I most likely pushed the keys away by accident to make room for my wallet and the money”

“But, wouldn’t you have heard the keys fall?”

“If I did, I didn’t think anything of it. I was busy counting, okay?”

“But that still doesn’t answer how these keys ended up there,” Vivian said.

“Look, these things happen,” Christine said. “As I said a moment ago, the bar is such a cluttered mess, it’s a miracle this hasn’t happened before. Why don’t you do something about it, huh? Anyway, I’m gonna go read. If you need me, I’ll be in the guest room.”

10

CHAPTER

Julia stepped out of the en suite bathroom into the expansive master bedroom clad in a thick, white terry cloth bath robe with a matching towel swaddled around her head.

She sat on the bed and placed a call to Mr. and Mrs. Bill Holcomb in Antigua, an older couple who were overseeing the sale of the private resort that Julia owned. They were also her house sitters.

“Have there been any prospective buyers, yet?” Julia asked.

“No, but as soon as there is one, we’ll let you know,” Mr. Holcomb said.

Julia hung up and left the bedroom. As she went downstairs, Iris suddenly bumped into her while going upstairs.

“Oh! I’m so sorry,” Iris said. “Please pardon me, Mrs. Windom.”

“Oh, never mind that. Why are you running? What is your hurry?”

“I wanted to let you know right away that Mr. Windom’s here. He’s in the study.”

Julia grimaced at the news.

“I also came up to ask if you would like a glass of orange juice and a bran muffin to go with your breakfast,” Iris said.

“No. Knowing that Jack is here is cause for my loss of appetite.”

Julia went to the study. She cringed and winced at the unsightly scene before her.

Jack was asleep on the oversized brown leather couch, fully attired with his suit jacket draped over his head. She wrinkled her nose at the stench of alcohol which emanated from his pores.

“So, you have come back, have you not, Jack?”

He groaned, then turned over and stretched his arms and legs. He pulled the suit jacket from his head and peered at her through bleary eyes.

“Oh . . . Julia,” Jack said.

“Oh, it is so good to see you, too,” Julia said. “Since you have been in Paris and New York on business for more than a month, you have a ton of mail waiting to be opened. How long are you here for this time? When do you fly out again? You are disgusting.”

“Lay off, woman.”

“I am going out. In the meantime, when I return, you had best be gone or else . . .”

CHAPTER

“Christine!” Vivian said as she hefted a large bowl of garden salad from the kitchen counter and carried it to the dining room table. “Dinner’s ready!”

“Okay! I’ll be down in a minute,” Christine said from the hall on the second floor. “I’m looking for something. I can’t find it.”

“You can look for it after dinner, whatever it is.”

“Be right down in a second.”

“I can help you with that after dinner, okay?”

“No, that won’t be necessary. I’ll find it, though. Thanks, anyway. I’ll be down before you know it.”

“Come down *now*.”

Christine stood a few feet from the head of the stairs and looked down into the dining room. She watched Vivian dig a large serving spoon into a bowl of mashed potatoes and plop it on her dinner plate, then sit down to eat.

Stealthily and quietly, Christine tiptoed down the hall to the west end of the wing and stood before the door to the sealed room. She fumbled with the duplicate keys and hurriedly tried a few before one of them unlocked the bolt lock. She turned from the door and quickly scooted down the hall to the head of the stairs.

“Hey, Viv! I found it. Let me just put it away and I’ll be right down in a sec.”

“Come on, Christine, dinner’s getting cold,” Vivian said. She jabbed a fork into a piece of broccoli smothered with melted cheese and popped it into her mouth.

Christine unlocked the door and quickly slunk into the room. She went to the closet and felt around the shelf for the gun.

“I should’ve thought to look on the shelf when I was here last time,” she said to herself as she pulled the gun off the shelf, placed it in the waistband at the back of her jeans, and covered it with the loose blouse she wore. She closed the door, turned around, and saw Vivian standing at the threshold with her arms crossed, her face an angry scowl.



“I knew I didn’t misplace my keys after all,” Vivian said as she followed Christine down the stairs. “If you wanted it so badly, I would’ve gladly given the gun back to you, if only you had asked. As long as you have it, however, you cannot stay here.”

“Fine,” Christine said. “I’ll rent a room then.”

They sulked without speaking until they entered the dining room. Vivian broke the silence after a few moments.

“Why are you always causing so much trouble?” Vivian said as she seated herself at the dining table and sipped iced water from her glass.

Christine shrugged. She picked up a fork and toyed with her salad.

“You know,” Vivian said, “you should consider yourself lucky, since I’ve been more than generous to you. It’s time you grow up. After all, you’re twenty-two. Where’s your sense of respect and appreciation?”

“Oh, shut up.”

“Where would you go?”

“What do you care?”

“I care, Christine. I care about you. You’re my sister. You and Blaine are all I have. Does that mean anything to you?”

“*She* never cared about me.”

“I know. But that’s all water under the bridge.”

“Is it?”

“Put it behind you.”

Christine glared at Vivian.

“You’re welcome to stay as long as you want,” Vivian said, “however, I won’t tolerate anyone having a gun in this house. Not now, not ever. If you insist on

keeping it, then you're going to have to leave and that's final."

"Okay, okay. I get the picture. Here, take the damn thing."

Christine withdrew the gun from her waistband and plopped it on the table with a loud clatter. Then she crossed her arms in a huff.

"I can always get another one," Christine said. "Better yet, soon as I can get a room, I'm outta here. It's so *stifling* here. But, I want that gun back. If not, hey, man, no prob. I've got friends."

"Really, Christine? Where? You haven't been here in twenty-two years and you've been here about a week. So, what are you implying?"

"Well, I have friends in New York, Florida, and parts of Europe, and I'm not implying anything. All I'm saying is I have friends and they have friends. People I can stay with."

"Regardless, what concerns me most is the fact that you obviously came here with intent to harm, to commit murder, to kill someone you didn't even know had been dead in the first place."

"Look, damn it, it's *not* what you think. I'm sorry I gave you that impression. I've had that gun for a while now. Just leave it alone, all right?"

"No, I won't leave it alone and it's not all right. I can't leave it alone. I don't like guns and I don't want one in this house, plus I don't like the fact that . . . that it may be your only reason for coming here. It disturbs me."

"Well, like I said before, it's for protection."

"There's mace, pepper spray, karate. There are other things, *legal* things you could use to protect yourself."

Vivian picked at her food in silence. Christine sat in her chair, arms still crossed.

"I have an idea," Vivian said. "Why don't you tell me a little bit about your friends?"

"There isn't much to tell, really. There's Jimmy, a very good, close friend of mine in New York."

"Oh? A boyfriend?"

"No, he's just a friend, strictly platonic, and then there's Dougie and his wife, Tawny, my best friends in Florida. They're the three closest friends I have."

"That's good. I'm glad you have some friends. Now, let's finish our dinner."

12

CHAPTER

The last vestiges of twilight slowly faded as the sun sank below the horizon.

Jack Windom went to the bank to withdraw some cash from his personal checking account and, to his surprise, discovered that he had insufficient funds.

“What the . . . ?” he said.

He stood before the ATM and reinserted his debit card into the slot. He keyed in his PIN again and received the same message. He then inserted Julia’s card, which he had stolen without her knowledge, and keyed in her PIN. Her personal checking account showed that there hadn’t been much activity, neither in increments nor decrements. He checked their joint account and noticed less cash. Not by the hundreds but by the hundreds of thousands.

Well, if it isn’t going into my wife’s personal checking account, then where is it going? Jack thought.

He checked his savings and business accounts as well. Both showed less cash.

“What the hell is going on?” Jack asked.

He keyed in her savings account number and, to his surprise, the error message on the screen informed him that either he had inadvertently miskeyed the PIN or that the account did not exist. He tried again.

Same message.

He knew he couldn't have made a mistake; he had memorized the number. He wondered if she had closed the account.

"What's the old broad up to?"



Upon arriving home, Jack immediately went into the study and checked his mail. He saw that most of them were past-due notices, which included an indignant letter from one bank where he had been overdrawn for more than thirty days; a message taken by Iris from someone at a brokerage firm regarding money lost from bad investments; letters from clubs and organizations, which informed him that his membership with each had been revoked, cancelled, or terminated; and notes which let him know that he had exceeded his credit limit, therefore his credit had been discontinued.

Frantic, Jack called Mr. Reginald at the World Ecological Corporation headquarters in New York.

"Something has come up, Mr. Reginald" Jack said, "and I need to have it taken care of right away."

"Uh, sir?"

"Yes? What is it?"

"I'm loath to be the bearer of bad news, but, as a friend, I thought I'd let you know in advance that your position here as CEO and financier has been terminated. Something about breaching the company policy. Embezzlement and insider trading are what they're saying. In fact, we are being investigated by the FBI, SEC, and FTC. Many clients have filed lawsuits against you and the company."

Jack dropped the phone. It landed on the desk with a loud clunk. With all the strength he could muster, he shoved everything off the desk. Papers fluttered and flew, the banker's lamp careened to one wall and broke upon impact with fractured pieces that clattered on the hardwood floor, pens and pencils rolled in every direction, and his daily blotter hit the floor with a dull smack.

Jack groaned in anger and frustration as he pulled his gray hair at the sides of his head. He vigorously rubbed his face with the palms of his hands, momentarily distorting his facial features. Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead. He picked up the phone and called his airline account manager.

"I would like a reservation for one adult to Geneva, Switzerland, round-trip," Jack said. "I would like the next available flight, if possible."



Julia sat on the couch in the living room and read a financial magazine when her cell phone rang. The name and corresponding number showed an incoming call from Mr. Reginald.

“Yes, Mr. Reginald,” Julia said.

“Jack called a while ago. He’s been informed of his termination and the pending investigations by the FBI, SEC, and FTC, as per your instructions. In the meantime, Jack’s so-called letter of resignation has been submitted, just as you instructed me. Other than that letter, I also doctored a letter of confession with Jack’s forged signature and I took care of your business in Switzerland, as well. With what you have generously rewarded me, I shall retire and see the world, just as you have.”

“Better yet, let the world see you.”



Jack looked up a number in the list of contacts on his cell phone for Mr. and Mrs. Bill Holcomb in Antigua.

“Hi, Bill. This is Jack. I’m calling to let you know that I’ll be coming out there sometime next week. Just some business I need to take care of.”

“Well, it would be awfully wonderful to see you again, sir,” Mr. Holcomb said, “but Mrs. Windom’s private resort has been sold recently and it’s currently in escrow. We are in the middle of vacating the premises.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“Just as I said. The property has been sold. I’m surprised you didn’t know. My apologies, sir.”

“That bitch!” Jack said as he hung up the phone. “I knew she had something to do with it. I’ll get her and I’ll get her good!”



Julia sent Dolph to LA on an overnight assignment.

“Call me in the morning and give me an update,” she said to Dolph.

She then checked her messages. “Hello, Mrs. Windom, this is Bill Holcomb. Jack just called and told me he would be coming out here next week. In response, I told him exactly what you had instructed me to say. We are happy to oblige with your favors. If you need anything else, please do not hesitate to call.”

Julia smiled and softly patted the back of her turbaned head.

13

CHAPTER

After disembarking from the jumbo jet at Zurich Airport, Jack took a taxi to the Swiss bank.

When he looked inside the safe deposit box, his face paled. He stared ahead with a blank expression. The box was empty. Jack turned around and slowly walked away. A wave of nausea hit him. He hailed a cab and went back to the airport.



As soon as Jack returned to La Jolla, he inserted his key into the front door. For a moment, he wondered if Julia might have changed the locks. The key turned and the door opened with ease.

He immediately exhaled a sigh of relief, then went inside, turned off the alarm, and closed the door. As quietly as possible, he went upstairs to the master suite. Julia was asleep.

Jack went back downstairs, crossed the dark kitchen and went through a door into the unlit garage. He turned on the fluorescent light underneath a wall-mounted tool cabinet and retrieved two red canisters. He went into the living

room and poured flammable fluid on the carpet, furniture, drapes, walls, tiled floor, and along the stairwell on his way up.

At the head of the stairs, he worked his way down the hall to the master bedroom where Julia was sleeping. He slowly opened the door and squatted on his knees while he carefully held the canister close to the floor and tipped it. The fluid spilled forth without a sound. He worked his way around the bed, and upon completion, left the bedroom without closing the door.

He returned to the garage and placed the first canister on the floor in front of the passenger seat of his silver-gray BMW. Once back inside the house, he poured the flammable liquid over other parts of the living room. In the study, he took several pages of an old newspaper and rolled them up into five makeshift torches.

Upstairs, he poured more liquid in the hall, on the floor, and on both sides of the walls that led to the master bedroom. He went back to the garage and placed the second canister alongside the first.

Moments later, he stood outside the master bedroom. He lit the first torch with a lighter and tossed it into the room. Flames instantly erupted. He lit the second torch and dropped it on the floor in the hall. The heat itself nearly seared the flesh off his face and hands, and smoke rose to the ceiling. Jack quickly backed away and ran downstairs. At the bottom of the stairs, he turned around, lit a third and tossed it on the steps.

A high-pitched shrill startled him. He realized the smoke alarm in the hall had gone off, as did the one in the master bedroom. He jumped in surprise since he had not considered the smoke alarms. If he had thought ahead, he would've removed the batteries from them prior to torching the master bedroom and hall.

He glanced behind him and saw more flames spreading along the second-floor hall. Black smoke billowed everywhere. He heard hissing and crackling from the blaze and winced at the heat that enveloped him. Still standing at the bottom of the stairs, he lit the fourth torch, then turned around and froze. Peter had come out of his room.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Peter asked.

Peter's unexpected presence caused Jack to lose his grip on the torch in his hand. It dropped to the ground at his feet. Fire immediately flared upward and licked his expensive, patent leather shoes and the hems of his designer slacks. Jack yelped in fright as he waved his arms and slapped at the flames on his legs. He futilely kicked at the hot air filled with thick smoke that burned his eyes, and seared his sinus cavity and throat. In the midst of all this, he heard Julia scream.

"Iris! Peter!" Julia said. *"Oh, my! Oh, my!"*

"Mrs. Windom!" Iris said from her room, located two doors down the hall from the master bedroom.

"Help! Help me!" Jack said as he flailed his arms. He spun one way then the other, which made him dizzy. He tripped over his own feet and fell. Flames reached out and made contact with the hair on his head and the back of his suit jacket. He yelled at the top of his lungs as he rolled back and forth to snuff out the flames. As he did so, his sleeves caught on fire.

Peter circumvented the flames in the living room, jumped over some hot spots, and ran to the top of the stairs. He turned to look down at the burning body of the man responsible for this mayhem. The intense heat and heavy smoke knocked Peter aside. Fiery tendrils reached out like fingers ready to grab him. He dropped to the ground and lay on his stomach for a few seconds before he bounded to his feet and dodged the fire in the hall, which singed the hairs on his arm.

Iris dialed 911 and sobbed with fright. She could hear Julia's screams. Peter ran into the guest bathroom adjacent to Iris's room, grabbed some towels, and doused them with cold water. He beat the heavy, wet towel on the carpeting in the hall and exerted all his energy into extinguishing the flames in order to make his way to Julia's room.

"I'm coming!" Peter said. The din of the roaring flames made it difficult for him to hear himself. *"Hang on, I'm coming!"*

Peter pressed his back against the wall and swiped at the flames with the towel as he slowly, cautiously inched his way to the door that led to Julia's room. He put the towel on the threshold between the hall and the bedroom and hopped over it. He saw Julia on her knees near the bathroom.

"Get down on your stomach!" Peter said. He quickly crawled across the floor and grabbed her by the waist with one arm and dragged her into the bathroom. *"Help me with the towels!"* He pulled towels from the nearest wall-mounted rack and doused them in cold water in the sink. "Where is Dolph? Why isn't he here?"

"I sent him to Los Angeles on an overnight assignment," Julia said. "Oh, my house!" She bawled into her hands.

"Here," Peter said as he forcibly handed the wet towel to her. "C'mon, lady! Let's move!"

Julia shook her head. Frozen by fear, she couldn't move.

"C'mon!" Peter said. *"We have to get to Iris and get outta here!"*

He wrapped the large, wet towel around Julia, then grasped her hand and pulled her behind him.

Iris knelt on the floor next to a window in her room. She coughed and cried as she slowly rose to her feet with outstretched arms and yanked the drapes to one side. She picked up an expensive, white, porcelain table lamp from a night table nearby. With all her might and strength, she tossed it through the pane

of glass. The window shattered and the lamp disintegrated upon impact on the roof below. Shards of porcelain slid off and fell to the ground and shattered into smaller pieces as they hit the concrete.

Iris hurriedly went to the bed, yanked the comforter off the mattress, and ripped the sheets off. She rolled one end of it into a small ball and brushed the remnants of broken glass from the window sill with some trepidation for fear of getting cut or lacerated.

Iris screamed as Peter burst through the door to her room with Julia at his side. They tumbled to the floor. Iris ran to them and helped Peter lift Julia to her feet. They went to the window where Peter put his right leg through. Unable to see in the darkness, and without thinking, he stepped on some shards of glass.

“Ow!” Peter said.

Pain coursed through the sole of his foot. He lifted it and saw a few beads of blood. He stood on his good foot with the other raised and beckoned Iris with his hand for her to toss him the rolled-up bed sheet. He carefully swept away the shards of glass and brushed them off the roof, then threw the sheet over the side. He crawled on all fours back to the window. When he reached it, he hobbled on his good foot and suddenly slipped. He grabbed the window’s exterior sill to steady himself.

Julia, Peter, and Iris could hear sirens and see red-and-white strobes flash in the night. The sight of a fire engine, an EMT truck, and an ambulance filled them with relief.

Peter and Iris flailed their arms and shouted, “*Here! Over here!*”

Curious onlookers and nervous neighbors in their pajamas and night robes came out from their homes.

Firemen cordoned off the area and immediately set to work. Hoses gushed forth water and a ladder was hoisted, which made its way to the second-floor window.

“We’ll get you down soon enough,” the battalion chief said. “How many are there?”

“Three up here,” Peter said. He held up three fingers and coughed. “There’s another one downstairs in the living room at the bottom of the stairs, but I don’t think he made it.”

The top of the ladder reached the ledge of the second-story window. Two firefighters climbed up the ladder and stepped onto the roof. They cautiously made their way toward the window. They helped Julia get on the ladder and slowly guided her backward until she was safe on the ground. Iris was next on the ladder.

“Oh, careful! Be careful!” Iris said. “Please, be careful . . .” She slowly worked

her way down with the assistance of a fireman.

At one point, her foot slipped from one rung and she screamed. She then caught herself with the help of the fireman, who supported her with a firm grip. She tightly held on the rung with both hands, her knuckles white.

“Careful now, slowly,” the fireman said.

When she was on the ground, Iris went to Julia to comfort her, as well as to receive comfort, as they cried together.

“Do you have any idea of what may have happened, ma’am?” the battalion chief asked Iris.

Iris shivered from fright as she wiped tears from her eyes.

“I was asleep,” Iris said, “and the next thing I knew, smoke alarms were going off.”

“How about you?” the battalion chief asked Julia who coughed and gasped for air. She waved him away with agitation.

Peter made it to the ground safely, though he hobbled on one foot.

“You okay, sir?” the battalion chief asked Peter.

“Yeah, just a little smoke inhalation,” Peter said. “I got some minor burns and I stepped on some glass up there, but I’ll be all right.”

“Okay,” the battalion chief said. “Come with me and we’ll get someone to help take care of you.”

The battalion chief walked with Peter to the EMT truck nearby where he received oxygen, and treatment for minor burns on his arms and lacerations on his right foot.

When prompted by the battalion chief, Peter reiterated how the whole thing may have happened.

Julia, Iris, and Peter were taken to the emergency room where Peter’s injured foot had been treated with gauze bandages and antiseptics. All three were discharged about two hours later. They checked into a nearby hotel, where Julia brainstormed as to what to do next.



Two days later, Julia, Iris, Peter, and Dolph flew to Julia’s private resort in Antigua. Julia explained the circumstances to the Holcombs.

“I assure you,” Mr. Holcomb said to Julia, “it won’t be a problem to have you here with us. In fact, my wife and I are actually glad to have you back since it has been lonely and quiet without you. We look forward to assisting you, Iris, Peter, and Dolph any way we can.”

“As I have said,” Julia said to Iris one evening as she relaxed on the recliner in

the drawing room and sipped herbal tea, “I am going to have this resort taken off the market. So, we will be here indefinitely. In the meantime, I will soon inform the Holcombs that since the Spanish villa in Belize is no longer of any interest to me, they can have it if they so wish. As far as I am concerned, it is theirs now and they are welcome to it, free of charge, of course. I will personally handle the paperwork.

“Now, in a few days,” Julia continued, “I will be renting a small single-family house in Los Angeles, where I will have Dolph stay and keep tabs on some property. It is the same property that Peter, Dolph, and I checked out a few weeks ago.” Julia raised her cup. “To perfect plans,” she said more to herself than to Iris.

14

CHAPTER

A chill hung over Los Angeles early one morning the following week. Dew gave grass and plants its nourishment. People woke up to get ready for another day at school or work. Nervous dogs barked, skittish cats yowled, and fidgety birds flew off from trees and utility pole wires.

Somewhere within the San Fernando Valley, nine and a half miles beneath the earth's surface, tectonic plates struggled for space as they pressed and pushed against one another. At exactly 6:11 a.m., a violent shift occurred along a strike-slip fault. A sharp jolt ensued and intense, vertical vibrations of incomprehensible energy grew in momentum by the second. The disturbed ground rumbled audibly and vibrated with incredible intensity as shock waves pulsed and rippled outward in concentric circles. The ground then gave way to a strong, rolling motion.



The walls of the white two-story house shook. Doors swung, windows rattled, and cabinet doors flew open with force. Dishes fell out as if shoved by unseen hands. They crashed and shattered on the kitchen counter, in the stainless-steel sink, and on the floor. Macramés swung, as did the crystal chandelier in the

foyer. Several wall pictures ended up awry and askew as they jiggled, bounced, and clattered against the walls. Some fell to the floor with a clamor. Table lamps of various sizes, styles, shapes, and colors wobbled then keeled over and crashed to the floor and splintered to pieces upon impact. Shards of glass, ceramic, and porcelain wiggled as the ground shook.

The loud rumbling of the earth preceded the creaking and cracking of the foundation as it continued to shake.

Colognes, perfume bottles, toiletries, and other bathroom accessories fell from the medicine cabinet into the sink and onto the floor, then burst upon impact. Bottles of shampoo and hair conditioner moved precariously from their respective places and fell in the bathtub.

Vivian scrambled out of bed and crawled on all fours. She screamed in fright when objects fell around her. Most of the items were small, such as plastic bottles of hand lotions, facial creams, headache medicine, and chewable vitamins.

“W-what the h-hell?” Christine said. She hid under the bed in the guest room and observed the wild, insane movements in the room as walls moved in ways she had never seen before. The bedroom door swung to and fro, the vanity table shook, and the dresser bureau wobbled. A crystal lamp fell over the nightstand and missed her head by inches. Airborne pieces of broken glass nearly scratched her face.

“*Vivian!*” Christine screamed.

“*Christine! Just stay where you are!*”

Flowers in Vivian’s garden fluttered, waves lapped in the pool and sloshed over the edge, and one of the gazebo’s porticoes cracked in the middle, giving its cupola a slanted angle. The two Greco-Roman statues teetered. One fell over while the other rocked and swayed. Terracotta pots overturned. The large fountain in the semi-circular drive tumbled and stagnant water spilled onto the lawn.

Part of the ceiling in the sealed room caved in and a huge brown object fell through the hole in the ceiling. A tremendous thud boomed when a corner of the object punctured the hardwood floor. Debris scattered and dust drifted everywhere.



The small house which Julia had rented for Dolph swayed. He stood at the threshold between the bedroom and the hallway as the ground shook. A picture window shattered. Chimney cinderblocks broke apart and disintegrated into smaller pieces when they struck the ground.



The quake was felt in La Jolla, located approximately 120 miles south of Los Angeles. Energy waves, which had been felt all the way down to Tijuana and Ensenada, traversed through the town.

Julia lay still on her bed as she listened to walls and floors creak at her main residence. Iris stood in the doorway between her room and the bathroom. Peter squatted on his haunches in one corner in his room, away from windows.



The ground's movements eventually slowed to a standstill.

15

CHAPTER

“Christine! Are you all right?” Vivian asked as she hurriedly put on her shoes and ran downstairs.

Christine bolted from the guest room barefoot and nearly collided into Vivian at the bottom of the stairs.

“You all right?” Vivian asked.

“Y-y-yeah, Viv,” Christine said. “Just sh-sh-shaken up pretty g-g-good.”

They held hands tightly and embraced. This time, Christine welcomed the hug.

“You sure?” Vivian said.

Christine shook her head. “No, b-b-but I’ll be all right, Viv. It’s a f-f-first for me, that’s all.”

Christine held out her shaking hands.

Vivian looked down and noticed Christine was barefoot.

“You need to put your shoes on,” Vivian said, “so that you won’t step on broken glass.”

Christine went to the guest room and quickly put on her shoes, then returned to where Vivian stood. They looked around the living room with foreboding disquietude.

“The power is most likely out,” Vivian said, “and the phones may be down for a while. I’m going to check around, shut off the gas, and make sure everything is okay. Be prepared for aftershocks.”

“I’m going with you,” Christine said. “I don’t want to be alone.”

“I don’t blame you. We need to get in touch with Blaine as soon as possible and let him know we’re okay. I’m sure he’ll hear about the earthquake.”

The house vibrated again with slightly less intensity as windows rattled, walls shook, and other objects moved.

Christine screamed.

“Oh, no,” Vivian said with a gasp. “Here we go again.”



Throughout the day, Vivian and Christine listened to radio reports.

“A little while ago, there was a magnitude five-point-three aftershock that rolled through the San Fernando Valley,” a reporter said. “Cal-Tech says the preliminary reading of the main shock was at least magnitude six-point-eight. That one struck at 6:11 a.m. and lasted for thirty-seven seconds. There are no reports of casualties or injuries at this time. We are receiving reports of extensive damage, most of which is centered in the San Fernando Valley and surrounding areas. There is damage at the beaches, too. Beach homes were shaken off foundations. Some damage has been reported in Orange County. Though at this time, seismologists are still trying to pinpoint the epicenter and from which fault the quake occurred . . .”

16

CHAPTER

Iris, Peter, and the Holcombs maintained business at the private resort in Antigua as Julia mulled over all that had happened before and after the fire.

Apparently, Jack did not want me to inherit anything from him upon his death, Julia thought. He had me cut out of the will quite a while back, long before the house went up in smoke. The money originally had been intended to be bequeathed to Jack's favorite charities such as Greenpeace, Nature Conservancy, and Oceana Foundation. When Mr. Reginald informed me of this, I was absolutely livid! To spite Jack, I had Mr. Reginald handle the will for me without Jack's knowledge, of course. Since the poor dolt had entrusted the will to Mr. Reginald, I had Mr. Reginald do a simple cut-and-paste job and print a revised copy of the will in which I'd been reinstated. All mention of Jack's favorite charities had been removed. Therefore, I would inherit the World Ecological Corporation. Since I had never been interested in owning or running the business, I sold it to some major international banking institute in New York and subsequently gained more profits in the process.

Julia softly patted the back of her head.

Iris picked up a sterling-silver serving tray replete with an antique silver-plated tea pot, matching tea cups, sugar bowl and creamer, plus two halves of buttered toast, a sliced onion bagel with cream cheese, and a small glass of orange juice,

and set the tray on the coffee table.

“I heard on the radio that the earthquake was centered somewhere in Los Angeles,” Iris said to Julia as she nervously wrung her hands.

“I know,” Julia said. She sat on the couch with an investment magazine on her lap. Iris poured tea into a cup and handed it to Julia, who took it and sipped it, then set the cup on her lap on top of the magazine. “Dolph called a moment ago. He was fortunate to get through to me, what with the phone lines being down. He said the earthquake was pretty strong and that there is a lot of damage. It looks like we may have to wait a few days for things to settle a little before we fly to Los Angeles.” Julia closed her eyes for a moment. “My ‘trump card.’” She opened her eyes. “It is most important that I make sure my ‘trump card’ is okay, therefore I am going to have to go to Los Angeles sooner than I thought. When I am ready to go, you and Peter will come with me.”

“Yes, Mrs. Windom.”

17

CHAPTER

Christine entered the kitchen from the living room as Vivian swept broken dishes, cups, and drinking glasses into a pile on the kitchen floor.

“Do me a favor, would you, please?” Vivian said. “Get the brush and dustpan from that little utility closet next to the drop-down ironing board over there and sweep that little bit up for me.”

“Okay,” Christine said.

“By the way, I shut off the gas.”

“That’s good,” Christine said. She swept broken scraps into the dustpan.

“I counted three broken windows,” Vivian said, “but I haven’t checked all of them. I’ll look at the others right now.”

Christine nodded as she dumped the fragmented contents into the trash bin nearby.

Vivian left the kitchen to check the rest of the windows.

“Well,” Vivian said when she returned, “more than half of the windows are either cracked or broken and there are some cosmetic cracks on some of the walls, but that’s about it. Those things are easily fixed, anyway.”

“You know,” Christine said, “when I really think about it, it seems I could’ve sworn I heard a very loud thud of some sort coming from above the guest room.”

“You mean the room above yours in the west wing?”

“Yeah, and I’m directly beneath it. It was *loud*. It scared me because I literally felt the impact. I don’t know what to make of it. Even fragments of plaster fell from the ceiling.”

“Hmm . . . I can’t imagine what that could’ve been.”

Christine shrugged. “Only one way to find out.”

18

CHAPTER

Vivian and Christine stood before the door to the sealed room.

“I hate going back into this room,” Vivian said with a discontented sigh. She inserted the key into the deadbolt and turned it. It wouldn’t turn. She jiggled and twisted the key repeatedly until it broke off. “Oh, crap,” she said. “Let’s kick this thing down.”

Vivian and Christine each hefted a leg and rammed a foot at the door, which burst open on the third try.

Once inside the room, Vivian and Christine noticed some crevices on the walls and a window riddled with spider-web cracks. One shutter lay on the floor while the other hanged lopsided. The closet door stood open which revealed a slanted shelf. Boxes and other items lay scattered on the floor.

The ceiling had a cavernous black hole with jagged edges around it. A large object lay below it. One corner was imbedded in the hardwood floor. The front of the object had two padlocks.

“What is it?” Vivian asked.

“Looks like some type of old-fashioned storage trunk to me,” Christine said.

“That thing must weigh a ton. Where did it come from?”

“Well, that’s apparent, isn’t it? Since you’d never known anything like this had

been up there all this time, *how* was it put up there in the first place?”

“I don’t know,” Vivian said as she shook her head. “For now, I want to know what *this*—” she jabbed a thumb in the direction of the hole in the ceiling “—architectural layout is. One certainly can’t see the attic from here.”

Vivian stood directly beneath the gaping maw. She tilted her head back and squinted into the blackness.

“I’d wager it’s some sort of mezzanine,” Christine said.

“Apparently,” Vivian said. “I don’t ever recall such a thing being there when you, Blaine, and I were here all those years ago. The only thing beyond the mezzanine is the attic, and I know the attic like the back of my hand.”

19

CHAPTER

“On second thought,” Julia said to Iris, “I have decided we are going to Los Angeles this evening.

“I do not care what they say,” Julia continued, “I just do not have the patience to wait a few days. The news with its pathetic reports is more than enough incentive to give me a reason to go. Being that the Los Angeles International Airport has shut down for the time being, we will have to fly to San Diego where I will rent two rooms at a hotel—one for you and me, and one for Peter. From there, I will have Peter drive us to Los Angeles. My ‘trump card’ is the most important thing to me, more important than anything else. I would not want anything to happen to it. Get Peter to help me with the packing. I will need your help, as well.”

“Yes, Mrs. Windom.”

20

CHAPTER

“Before we go ahead, I need to go to the bathroom,” Vivian said. “I’m going to use the one downstairs since the toilet in the bathroom down the hall has cracks in it.”

In the interim, Christine went to the closet and felt around the slanted shelf for her gun. The shelf came loose and fell with a clatter. Christine cringed for a moment. She expected Vivian to show up at the doorway with her arms crossed, wearing a frown. Christine crouched and felt around the floor.

“Damn it!” she said. “I should’ve known the gun wouldn’t be there.”



Vivian returned moments later with a paper clip.

“I remember having read some information online about padlocks a few months back,” Vivian said, “and came across an instructional video which showed how to open a padlock in five seconds with a simple paper clip.”

Vivian got on her knees and picked one padlock, then the other.

“I’m thinking maybe we shouldn’t intrude on another person’s property,” Vivian said.

“Oh, hell, Viv, whatever for?” Christine said. “Why not, huh? Don’t be such a pansy-assed alarmist.”

“Well, you gotta admit the contents in the trunk are private, you know.”

“After what she did to us, who gives a damn? Hey, ain’t nothing the old hag can do now, can she? She ain’t looking down at us from Heaven. Of that, I’m pretty sure. All that *remains*—pun intended—is a dead, decomposed, coagulated hell cat, who has long been gone . . . but not long enough for the likes of me.”

“True,” Vivian said. She opened the lid. “Oh, my gosh!” She looked as if she’d been hypnotized. Unbelievable, she thought.

“Wow,” Christine said. “Incredible.”

Christine was deliriously ecstatic. Her eyes sparkled in sync with what she saw before her.

Vivian can keep the damn gun after all, Christine thought, which is absolutely nothing compared to this.

Iridescent gems of various colors, sizes, and forms glistened inside the trunk. Diamonds, emeralds, and sapphires; rubies, pearls, and onyx; gold rings, necklaces, and bracelets. Jewelry included earrings studded with gems. Bars of gold and bundles of dollar bills bound by strips of paper. Many photo albums lay open. Legal documents, negotiable bearer bonds, photocopies of certificates of deposits, and several leather-bound books were strewn about.

Christine picked up one of the books and turned it over in her hand. She noticed a leather strap with one end stitched to the back cover and the other end attached to a brass latch on the front cover.

“Looks like a diary,” Christine said.

“Let me see,” Vivian said.

Christine handed the diary to Vivian, who turned it over and felt the rich leather texture with the palm of her hand.

Christine kneeled before the trunk, dug her hands deep into the mound of gems, and inspected them. She lifted a handful of shiny rocks to eye level, some of which spilled from her cupped hands as she brought them to her face. She rubbed them against her cheek and cooed with pleasure. She picked up a bundle of dollar bills and fanned one end with her thumb.

“Wow,” Christine said. “There’s gotta be millions. Far out.”

“I don’t understand all this,” Vivian said. “What was she saving all this for? I guess I can see why she hid it the way she did, although that’s going over the top.”

“Simply greed, Viv. It’s as simple and as ugly as that.”

Vivian nodded in agreement.

“It could also have been her means of financial security,” Christine said. “Would this be why she had us all thrown out?”

"Maybe," Vivian said. "It's apparent she didn't want anyone to know."

"Well, guess what?" Christine said. "It's ours now. Actually, it's *mine* now."

Vivian raised one eyebrow but said nothing.



Since Vivian and Christine had been caught up in the day's events, they hadn't had a chance to hear updates with regards to this morning's temblor. Vivian turned on the stereo in the living room and listened to live reports.

"The aftershocks keep rocking and rolling," said one field reporter. "We are cautioned to expect some strong ones throughout the day and later this evening, as well. Once again, as a reminder since some of you may not be aware of this fact, aftershocks can do more damage than the main shock because of buildings weakened by the first quake."

"The rubble behind me," said another field reporter, "is indicative of the extensive and widespread damage caused by this morning's strong quake."

"This morning's rude wake-up call is yet another reminder in earthquake preparedness," said a third field reporter. "Survivors have described what it was like to protect themselves during the shaking, each recounting their experiences and telling of how they saw buildings sway and pavements roll like waves."

"Dr. Eileen Schell is a noted psychologist," said the host of a talk radio show. "She's here in the studio at KFST 103 FM to give parents some advice on how their children can deal with the trauma of such a frightening episode in their lives."

"With each passing hour," said a seismologist at Cal-Tech, "chances of a second quake lessen by five to ten percent. Right now, I'd say chances for the next one would be forty-five percent. I might describe that as possible, but not probable."

"Seismologists have determined the unknown fault to be a new one," said a news anchorman. "They will continue to conduct studies until further information is available. The statistics are as follows: sixty-two people are reported dead, four from heart attacks; the number of injuries stands at forty-one hundred; and nineteen people are reported missing. At this point, cost of damages and loss of property are estimated at fifteen billion dollars. Both the death toll and total cost of damages are expected to rise in the days to follow. We will have continuing coverage throughout the day."

21

CHAPTER

It had been a tiring overnight flight from Antigua to San Diego with one stop in Miami to change planes.

Julia, Iris, and Peter checked into a hotel where Julia requested an executive suite for herself and Iris, and a separate room for Peter and Dolph.

“Can I get you something, Mrs. Windom?” Iris asked.

“No. I just want to get a good night’s rest. That will be all for now.” She dismissed Iris with a flippant wave of her hand, then pulled her cell phone from her purse and called Dolph.

“We are in San Diego,” Julia said to Dolph, “and we will be in Los Angeles early tomorrow morning, around eight or nine. First thing, I am going to call the owner of the house where you have been staying and give notice that you will not be there after tomorrow. Therefore, payment of rent is no longer a concern. I will say your reason for leaving is due to family business that you need to take care of because of the earthquake. From now on, you will be sharing a room with Peter at a hotel on a temporary basis. In the meantime, get your things together. We will be moving to a new place soon.”

22

CHAPTER

“Let’s open the diaries and read them,” Christine said. “After all, the withered old wuss hasn’t been around all these years.”

“Since seeing those diaries among other stuff in that trunk,” Vivian said, “I’ve been turning over in my head whether to crack open one of them or not. I think we’d be better off not knowing what’s in them.”

“Oh, pooh. Someone’s bound to find out sooner or later, one way or another. The truth has to come out sometime.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“Of course I am.”

Vivian held one diary in her hand and cut the strap that bound it. “Let’s be careful with them,” she said. “I wouldn’t want those pages torn. There might be something of value in them.” She handed the diary to Christine, who grabbed it with hungry fingers.

Christine perused excerpts throughout the book and read about Rose’s Hollywood heyday in the 1960s and her affairs with various writers, directors, producers, and actors. It shocked Christine to read that Rose had admitted to having Albert Fontaine, a producer, killed. Rose had her personal handyman “fix” the brakes on his car while she and Albert dined at a restaurant.

“Our so-called flesh-and-blood is a murderer!” Christine said.

It was my revenge, Rose had written, for not getting the role of a lifetime that I had desperately wanted. According to Alfred, he didn’t think the role was right for me. I had believed in my heart that this particular role could have garnered me more (and better) roles and possibly an Academy Award for Best Actress.

I also blacklisted Jeff Burgio, one of Hollywood’s top screenwriters, by ruining his professional reputation and personal life. He had tailored a script especially for me and wanted only my love in return—on a permanent basis. But how could I, since I was married? All my extramarital affairs were intended to be brief, and each lovesick fool was to be used only as a stepping-stone to my pending success in my career.

Eventually, thanks to me, Jeff ended up committing suicide. No need to know the manner by which he offed himself.

“It’s hard to believe that a married woman like her had many affairs,” Christine said. “Here’s another one with whom she had a fling, an actor named Otto Goldschmidt, ‘an Adonis direct from Germany,’ as she put it. She said the relationship itself was based solely on lust, purely sexual.”

“Did she kill him or have him kill himself?” Vivian asked with sarcasm.

“It says here when she tried to terminate the relationship, the actor would not give in. So, as a last resort, she had him deported to Germany. She added as an afterthought, ‘Ah, the power of power itself.’ Unbelievable!”

“I’ll say. Check this out. She wrote where she had started out as a model and was eventually discovered by a Hollywood agent. She goes on to say how she hated the other models, hated competition, and hated every damned thing and every damned person around her, especially her Bible-thumping, Jesus-loving, God-fearing parent, Desirée Hutchins. What was this woman’s problem? What did anyone ever do to her to deserve this kind of hatred?”

Christine shrugged noncommittally.

Vivian continued to read.

I’ve never gotten over such a frivolous French name as Desirée Lemaire, her maiden name. What a laugh. At any rate, there is nothing more I wish for than to have the old crow dead. Only

I wish she had departed long ago, shortly after I was born, by about two minutes.

I am only too glad to have grown up without another authority figure—a father, Guillaume Lemaire by name. He was killed in action during WWII. All the better for me.

“She also alludes to not giving a damn about our grandparents either,” Vivian said, “and she saw them as inconvenient nuisances, as were her aunts, uncles, cousins, and ‘every other cursed relative,’ the way she put it.”

The world was one rosy place, growing up as an only child. I did not have to deal with siblings nor sibling rivalry. If they had me to contend with, they would have been dead and buried long ago.

“The magnitude of this woman’s hatred is incredible,” Vivian said as she shook her head. Tears welled in her eyes. “I can’t believe someone can be this cruel.” Vivian turned the page and noticed some pages had been censored and others were missing. “She even blacked out and torn out some pages.”

“Apparently, she’s hiding some things,” Christine said. “Goes to show what a friggin’ coward she is.”

Vivian nodded, then continued to read.

In addition to Desirée (I’m loathe to address her as “my mother,” that’s why I wrote “parent” instead), I also despised my first husband, Charles Hutchins. The same applies to my second husband, Jack Windom. I merely married the sad oaf for his affluence. Eventually, all that will change, if my plans go accordingly. That is, if nothing stands in my way! Even my own determination surprises me every now and then. Within time, somehow, somewhere along the line, I will eventually get rid of Jack. It seems as if it were only yesterday when I had gotten rid of Charles.

“I’m getting the sick feeling that she may have killed our father,” Vivian said, “and plans to kill her second husband, if she hasn’t killed him already.”

“What do you mean?” Christine asked.

“Just wait till you read this.”

As for Winston and Cynthia Peterson—oh, how I shudder at the mere thought of such disgusting persons. All it takes is one fleeting thought, and I am instantly nauseous. Vivian is a commoner since she married one.

Vivian wanted to stop but the next page caught her attention.

. . . and because Vivian married Rob, I had been determined the waif would suffer. I had been adamantly against Vivian's marriage and refused to put up with this sort of arrangement or have anything to do with their useless, wretched brats, should they have had any (Heaven forbid!). They would have only been spawns of the Devil, as Desirée had said of someone else's children. What a Jesus freak she had been.

Determined to put an end to all this nonsense, I had Rob taken care of, which compounded in having Vivian taken care of, also. She would be miserable in every way. Whatever had happened to Rob can be considered, on my part, a preventive tactic to Vivian's possibly getting pregnant, so that I would not have grandchildren to contend with.

I hired my personal handyman to do whatever it took to get rid of Rob and to make it look like an accident, even if it meant fixing the brakes on his car just like the brakes on Albert Fontaine's car had been fixed years before.

"From what I can gather here," Vivian said, "since the way it is written seems cryptic, she had her personal handyman follow my husband home from work. Rob was driving on the freeway when a car intentionally cut in front of him, causing him to swerve and lose control. His car veered off the shoulder and crashed on the street below, exploding upon impact."

Right after that, Rose had written, Rob is now out of the picture . . .

Vivian paled at this shocking revelation. A sick, sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach overcame her. Horror quickly replaced shock. Her spirit became void of energy. This left her speechless. Her vision blurred and she did what she could to prevent from fainting.

"She even had my husband killed!" Vivian said as she began to sob. "The love of my life!"

Vivian distinctly remembered the day when two police officers knocked on the door and informed her that her husband had been in a fatal auto accident. She remembered how serious and apologetic they were.

“If she hated him so much, she didn’t have to kill him!” Vivian said as she wailed. “Was it necessary to kill him? I thought I hated her before but now, I *really* hate her guts with a passion!”

“I don’t blame you,” Christine said. “Now, you know how I feel about her.”

“If I had known about this when she was still alive,” Vivian said, “I would’ve gone right after her myself and killed her! Never mind calling the police!” Vivian heaved as she continued to bawl. “I can’t believe my mother did this! I just can’t believe it! That’s something I’ll never get over!”

“Hell, she killed our father,” Christine said. “She admits it in her diary without being so direct.”

“I’ll never forgive her for this! Never!” Vivian walked around in circles for a couple minutes as her mind reeled. “Oh, gosh! I can’t—I can’t think straight. I just can’t think clearly. I don’t want to read any more.” She let the diary drop to the floor. “I’ve had enough.”

“Well, *I* haven’t,” Christine said between clenched teeth.

“Give it a rest. I’m going downstairs.”

Vivian bolted from the room and went downstairs.

Christine continued to read.

I had plans and needed to get Charles out of the way. On this night, when the drunken oaf had too much to drink, I watched from the doorway of my bedroom until he had come out of his room while my personal handyman watched within the shadows from the other end of the hall and take care of the rest.

“I’m guessing this is when our father got to the head of the stairs,” Christine said out loud, “where her personal handyman sneaked up behind him and shoved him. ‘A scream was heard which gave neighbors the impression that an accident happened.’ Indeed, who was going to know what had really happened since *you* were the one with all the knowledge, yet you dared to ask who would ever know. You disgust me!”

The only way anyone would know is if they found out about the soon-to-be-installed mezzanine. I confidently conclude it would be impossible (and improbable) for anyone to find out. The fools would have to wait until I was long gone before coming across

such oh-so-shocking information as this. Goodness, what a field day the press and the media would have.

After Charles was gone, I had sold most of the household furnishings. Other stuff had been donated to Goodwill and The Salvation Army.

Some time later, I had informed the Weavers that I would be accompanying a business associate to Europe, first to London, then to New York. I did not know when I would be back but had mentioned to them that I would be gone for quite a while. In the meantime, I had said that I would keep in touch with them by way of phone and postcards.

I had plans to travel extensively and it made no sense to haul all those things everywhere I would go. I would not want to stash it in one or more bank accounts or safe deposit boxes. I would much rather have the mental security of knowing that all my personal valuables would be stored in one place and only I would know the location. I would be constantly reassured of its safety, as well. It is that important to me. It is my nest egg. In the interim, I will maintain the property and continue paying the mortgage and the bills, even from abroad.

However, before I could travel, I found out that I had been three months pregnant with a fourth child when Christine had been a little more than a year old. My secret pregnancy had been one of the reasons why I kicked them all out.

I had an appointment with my doctor earlier that day where I gave a urine specimen. The doctor ran a test and in a matter of minutes, my pregnancy was confirmed.

The moment I arrived home, I heard Vivian and Blaine arguing, typical of young adults, even if they were siblings. I took advantage of the situation and used it as a ruse to fuel my rage against them. I had told them that enough was enough, then went into my bedroom, pulled out two suitcases, then went to Vivian's bedroom and yanked some of her clothes off

hangers, pulled other clothes from drawers, and stuffed them into one suitcase. Then, I went to Blaine's bedroom and did the same. I stood by the railing on the second floor and tossed both suitcases down to the first floor. Then, I went into the nursery and picked up Christine from the crib, carried her downstairs, and lumped the baby into Blaine's arms. I told both Vivian and Blaine to get out.

Vivian fumed in anger, Blaine shook with shock and fear, and Christine cried in Blaine's arms. Blaine just walked out without a backward glance. Vivian looked back with fury etched on her face. I just stood expressionless and motionless as they left.

I could not care less where any of them went, what they did, or how they fared on their own. I just wish Vivian, Blaine, and Christine had not been born. Each pregnancy and eventual birth had been a hindrance to my career and unnecessary nuisances in my life. I was more concerned with myself, my dilemmas, and my pending success in my career.

Regarding this dreaded (and unwanted) pregnancy, I had been determined not to keep the baby and fervently hoped for a miscarriage. I had always been against abortion. Thus, I worked all the harder and pushed myself past the point of exhaustion, past the point of normal human endurance. Come to think of it, I should have had my tubes tied but never got around to it due to a hectic fast-paced life, which I maintained and enjoyed immensely.

This pregnancy is not the only reason for throwing out Vivian, Blaine, and Christine, but I had untold preparations for installing a mezzanine which would be situated between the attic above and an empty, unused room below. It would be used as a secret place of storage for my mass accumulation of wealth, including all the necessary and important documents. The purpose of all this, plus the dire secrecy, is so absolutely no one would know about it except me and my diaries. This way, all this would be shielded from public view.

When the squalling little brat had been born, I gave it up for adoption and didn't care where the child went. However, I can only hope the child has a halfway decent home with halfway decent commoners for parents. Then again, what difference would it make? Do I really care?

“What's this ‘hope’ crap?” Christine said to herself, bewildered and beyond disbelief that this callous, cold, and uncaring monster had expressed such a flagrantly flippant attitude as she had in those pages of the diaries.

The last passage Christine read sent shivers up her spine and made the blood drain from her face.

Moreover, I am determined that in the end, everything will solely be mine—the money, the property, the jewels, the power, you name it. All in all, in the great words of General MacArthur, “I came through and I shall return.”

23

CHAPTER

As Christine went downstairs and entered the living room, she had an epiphany. Damage from the quake and the weakness with which it rendered the door meant easy access—a *very* easy access—to the sealed room and the world’s most coveted possessions: money, jewels, highly privileged information, scathing secrets, unabashed revelations, and incriminating evidence.

She hoped Vivian would not replace the decrepit door with a new one right away.

Oh, no, not just yet, Christine thought as she went downstairs. *No way, no how.* She also had to contend with “The Case of the Missing Gun.”

That creep, Christine thought with reference to Vivian. *I’ll get her and I’ll get her good!*

“What’s so funny?” Vivian asked. She cried and dabbed her eyes with a Kleenex, then blew her nose.

“You just had to ask, didn’t you?” Christine said. “Have you got a major surprise coming your way.” She plopped onto the couch across from Vivian. “Here.” Christine held out one of the diaries toward Vivian. “This one’ll flip your cookie.”

“I’ve read enough,” Vivian said with a dismissive wave of her hand.

“No, you haven’t.”

“Well, I don’t want to read any more.”

“Well, you’ll just have to. Go on. Read this section right here.” Christine pointed to a section of a page and tossed the diary across the coffee table.

It landed on the cushioned seat a few inches from Vivian. She hesitantly picked it up. Silence dominated the living room as Vivian read excerpts from the diary. Her face paled and she swallowed hard. “So she was pregnant and gave the baby up for adoption,” Vivian said. “If she were still alive, I’d have her arrested, prosecuted, and incarcerated.” She snapped her fingers for emphasis.

“Yeah, right,” Christine said. “How valiant of you, Viv. So would I, for that matter. However, she would have had us killed the instant she knew any of us had our hands on those diaries, among her other treasures. That explains why she had it oh-so-hidden from the world, let alone us. You know, I’m more inclined now than ever to believe that she’s actually alive. *Really* alive. It’s not just a hunch, and I know I’m not crazy, either. I honestly believe this entire scenario on her part was a setup of sorts. When you think about it, everything was just a smoke screen all this time. She even admitted that her scream, after our father’s tumble down the stairs, was a smoke screen. I’ll grant a wee bit of credit to the clever witch. I’m gonna start investigating.”

“You’d be wasting your time. I strongly doubt if anything would turn up. I couldn’t even fathom how she’d still be alive after all those years. Now that’s a disturbing thought. Even if she were,” Vivian wondered aloud, “how did she manage to survive the plane crash in London, if indeed, she had been on the plane in the first place?”

“Back to Square One. It’s a smoke screen, as I said. It’s been a cover-up all this time, don’t you get it? Oh, I just thought of something. We wouldn’t want to show those diaries to the police, would we? I couldn’t bear the thought of those pigs scavenging through the trunk. I certainly wouldn’t want them to get their filthy hooves on *my* property!”

“Since when did those valuables become *your* property?”

“Since I laid eyes on them, okay?”

After reading those diaries which revealed the true causes of Charles and Rob’s deaths, Vivian thought, I wouldn’t put anything past Rose, even if something happened to her second husband, Jack Windom. It seems to me she had it all planned out, long before she married Jack.

Vivian sighed and closed her eyes for a moment. “I wish Rob was here,” she said

24

CHAPTER

The next morning, as Christine walked out of the guest room, she glanced down the hall to her left and noticed movement through the frosted, opaque sidelight adjacent to the front door. Curious, Christine went into the foyer.

“Hey, Viv,” Christine said. “You got company.”

Vivian emerged from the breakfast nook, bleary-eyed from lack of sleep. She carried a cup of chamomile tea and a small plate with a half-eaten slice of lemon bread cake.

“I saw what looked like a car,” Christine said. “It was making its way around the semi-circular drive to the front of the house when I saw it through that side window next to the front door.”

Vivian and Christine went to the foyer and looked through the sidelights.

“Even though we can’t see too well, I’m guessing it’s somebody with a wrong address,” Vivian said. “The security gate out front should be closed and locked. Why isn’t that so?” She turned away from the sidelight with her back to it, pensive.

“The gate could have been rendered inoperative by yesterday’s earthquake,” Christine said.

“That’d be the most likely plausible explanation.”

“Well, I don’t see a car anywhere. It was probably a police cruiser or a security patrol driving by to—”

The doorbell chimed.

Vivian turned around, opened the front door, and gasped in shock.

“No,” Vivian whispered. She shook her head in disbelief. “No way. It’s not possible.”

“It can’t be,” Christine said without turning to look at Vivian. “It’s just not feasible.”

Rose Hutchins stood before them, wearing a white turban fastened in the front by a two-inch gold pin with a pearl affixed in the center, a white blouse with a gold-and-pearl brooch, matching slacks and low-heeled pumps. She bore an air of great dignity.

“What are you doing here?” Vivian asked, astounded.

“Yeah,” Christine said, “and how the hell did you know about us being here, *Miss Hutchins*?”

Rose glanced behind her with a knowing smile. Vivian and Christine followed Rose’s line of vision and saw a limousine by the gate at the end of the driveway and a dark-blue car parked at the curb.

“I’ve come to reclaim my home, and for the record, my name is *Mrs. Julia Windom*,” she said, softly patting the back of her turbaned head. “I legally changed my name after your father’s death and before I remarried.”

“Well, for whatever purpose you had your name changed,” Vivian said, “I hope it served you well.”

“I had my reasons,” Rose said.

“And, what’s with the stoopid turban, anyway?” Christine said. “Hey, is that big, bad, blond boy over there one of your—” In that instant, realization dawned on her. “Wait a minute . . .” Her eyes narrowed, then widened. “That blond guy . . .”

“What about him?” Vivian asked, agitated and confused.

“I’ve seen that mop of blond hair before,” Christine said. “I only caught a glimpse of it, just for a second. Vivian, he was trespassing on the estate a while back, that day you thought you lost or misplaced your keys, that day you went to the market to get some groceries and I was alone . . .” she turned to gaze directly at the blond man “. . . or so I thought.”

“My goodness,” Vivian said to Rose. “Have you no decency? Is nothing sacred? You had someone spying on us?”

“I had to know what was going on,” Rose said.

“It had been reported in the news,” Vivian said, “that you were killed in the plane crash in London twenty-two years ago. You were declared dead, yet all this time, you’ve been alive. Geez, haven’t you caused enough grief already?”

“So you’re back from the dead,” Christine said. “And while you’re at it, why

don't you just go back to your grave where you belong? After all, there is a marker with your name on it at Forest Lawn!"

"Regardless," Rose said, "step aside."

"No way!" Vivian said and slammed the door shut. "Oh, man!" She exhaled, breathless. She put her shaky hands to her cheeks. "I don't believe this."

The door opened and in stepped Rose. "How dare you!"

"Get the hell out of here *now!*" Vivian said. "You're not welcome here!"

"Oh, yes, I am." Rose reached into her purse, withdrew the deed of trust and the thirty-day unconditional termination notice, and handed them to Vivian. "Read it and weep."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Christine asked.

"Fooled you all, didn't I?" Rose said with a smirk.

As Vivian read the forms, she chuckled. "Oh, please," she said. "You can't be serious."

"I assure you," Rose said, "this is no laughing matter. The forms are official. You have thirty days to pack everything and get out."

Christine became enraged. Her eyes flashed with hatred and flickered with anger. Her nostrils flared and she bared clenched teeth. If only the barrel of her .38 caliber gun hadn't poked out of the mouth of her handbag when she dropped it on the floor, and if only Vivian hadn't taken the gun and hidden it somewhere, Christine would've gotten the gun and killed Rose on the spot.

"Why you—" Christine said.

She lunged at Rose and clutched her neck. She wringed it with as much strength as she could muster. Profanities spewed from her lips.

"Christine, no!" Vivian said as she grabbed Christine to try to pull her away from Rose. "Don't make it worse than it already is!"

"Let go of me!" Christine said. "Let go of me, damn it!"

After a moment, Vivian succeeded in pulling Christine away from Rose.

"C'mere!" she said. She dragged Christine into the living room and pushed her down onto the couch.

"You move from this spot and you're dead, you hear me?" Vivian said as she pointed an angry finger at Christine.

Vivian heard Rose come into the living room.

"Okay," Vivian said to Rose with a sigh. "You want us out? We'll get out."

"*What?*" Christine said. "No friggin' way!"

"Be quiet," Vivian said to Christine.

"I'm not leaving this place! It's mine! Mine! Ya hear me! *Miine!*"

"Christine! For once, shut up!"

"Oh, man," Christine said as she glared at Vivian. "You're messed up, but then

again, you've always been messed up."

Vivian gripped Christine's face with the thumb and fingers of her hands and squeezed Christine's cheeks tightly until her lips puckered.

"Oowww!" Christine said.

"You'd best shut your trap, you hear me?" Vivian said.

"Let go, damn it! You're hurting me!"

Vivian pushed Christine's face away from her. Christine fell back on the couch, then immediately shot to her feet, shoved Vivian aside, and excreted a large wad of saliva at Rose. It landed right where Christine had intended—in the middle of the old woman's face.

"*Bitch!*" Christine screamed in Rose's face, then bolted to the guest room and slammed the door hard.

Rose turned and walked out of the house. She strode toward the waiting limo as she wiped the saliva off her face with a handkerchief. The fact that someone spit in her face utterly disgusted her and made her feel queasy.

Don't think I will go away any time soon, Rose thought to herself as she got in the limo. *I will be back before you know it.*

25

CHAPTER

Vivian fumed most of the night. She eventually cried herself to sleep as the sun rose.

“I will get a good lawyer and sue the living crap out of her,” Vivian said as she went to the kitchen later that morning. “I will have her arrested and charged with murder.” She sipped milk and nibbled on crumb cake.

On second thought, I doubt if I can contest anything, Twenty-four years ago, Rob is killed—nay, murdered. Two years after that, the monster kicks us out. Shortly thereafter, she disappears and is supposedly killed in a plane crash. Fifteen years later, I come back and now this. By all rights, it’s still her place. Not a pretty picture, is it? By the way, she has way too much money and too much power. She would have me and Christine squished like ants in no time and we would be laughed out of court. Therefore, I figure, let her knock herself out.

“She’ll get what’s coming to her,” Vivian said.

“I thought I heard someone mumbling,” Christine said as she sauntered into the kitchen. She went to the fridge and opened the freezer. “Other than mumbling to yourself, let’s see what else you do best. How about refraining from hauling her ass to court, I wonder?” She withdrew a half-gallon of vanilla-flavored frozen yogurt and laid it on the counter. She opened the fridge and took out a quart of

soy milk, some fresh strawberries and blueberries and set them on the counter. “Declining to use those diaries as evidence against her, maybe?”

“It may not be admissible in court,” Vivian said. “Besides, it wouldn’t be a good idea. Going through her most personal stuff is considered an invasion of privacy, a violation of her civil rights in the eyes of the law. We could be in trouble for that. Also, since the old crone is too clever, she may tell the police that they’re merely notes for writing a book. With her affluence, she could bribe a judge. She could make it look any way she wanted it to and still get away with it. Even murder.”

“You give up too easily, Viv. Not a good sign.”

Christine pulled out a blender from one of the cabinets and plugged it in. She put the ingredients in the blender while Vivian spoke.

“I’m being practical,” Vivian said. “I have no other choice. There’s nothing else we can do. Let the law of reciprocity take care of everything, especially where she’s concerned. I’m just worried she may come after us and have our asses hauled in court for going through her personal stuff.”

Actually, I should be more concerned with the gun, Vivian thought, and with what Christine would do to Rose, should she elect to do something.

“Still, not good enough,” Christine said. She pushed the ON button. The blender whirred for several seconds. Christine poured the fruit smoothie into a glass and took a few sips.

“Well, you know what they say,” Vivian said, “the Lord works in mysterious ways. What goes around, comes around. Karma will kick her in the ass.”

Not if I get to her first, Christine thought. She drank the rest of her smoothie.

26

CHAPTER

The next four weeks were difficult. Christine seethed with anger and sulked. It had been a living hell for Vivian. The shock of seeing their mother after twenty-two years and the forced eviction from the house had been too much to bear.

“Guess what?” Vivian said one day. “You won’t believe this, but I found a small not-too-shabby two-bedroom rental where we could stay for the duration. I was going through some ads in the classifieds that I found online the other day. It’s old, not too expensive, and it’ll do for now.”

“So, where is it?” Christine asked.

“Not too far from here. It’s just down the hill, also right here in the Studio City area. It’s near these quaint little shops, a cozy coffee house, and the CBS Studio Center is a hop, skip, and a jump from there.”

“Geez, why not find something high up in the hills of Bel Aire or Beverly Hills, if you can afford it? I hear about Mulholland Drive, Sunset Boulevard, and Pacific Coast Highway all the time. Why not find something classy along those world-famous streets? After all, you’ve said you weren’t hurting and that you didn’t have to worry about anything.”

“Well, I like the area and it was something I found at the spur of the moment, something affordable for now. I didn’t have a lot of time to go looking for

something nicer and more expensive. We have up to thirty days to get out of here. I'm not the kind of person who shells out a million bucks the first chance I see something. I'm not a big spender. Never was, never will be. I just want to be careful. We need some sense of financial security."

"But why in such close proximity to this house? I thought you wanted to get as far away from *her* as possible. Why not get some two-bit, slip-shod shack in the middle of shanty-town?"

"So, sue me," Vivian said. "Like I said, it was something I found at the spur of the moment. Look, this place has what we need. It's got two bedrooms and one and a half bathrooms. The others I looked at weren't as appealing.

"Anyhow, keep in mind it's just for now," Vivian said. "Who knows? You might like it enough to stay a while. Eventually, I'll see if I can get a bigger and better place for us. In the meantime, I'm putting most of my stuff in storage. The rest of Rose's crap can stay here. Just take what you need and we'll be out of here soon enough."

27

CHAPTER

Christine sneaked into the sealed room late one night while Vivian was asleep. She brought two empty suitcases and loaded each with jewels, gems, bars of gold, and bundles of wrapped dollar bills. She saw that there wouldn't be sufficient room in either suitcase for the diaries and the photo albums. Therefore she left them in the trunk. She figured she would retrieve them on another day when the time was right.

"Okay, Rose Hutchins," Christine said. "This is war."

Christine placed the suitcases in the guest room and set them on the floor inside the walk-in closet. She then looked all over the house for her gun. After two and a half hours of searching, she went into the garage. She saw that everything was in its proper place and stored in an orderly fashion.

She snooped around the wooden shelves along one wall, then pulled open each drawer of the tool storage organizer. Next, she eyed another wall where columns of cardboard boxes, piled atop one another, were stacked as high as six feet. The majority of the boxes were small in size, small enough to heft one and carry it across the room unless it had too much weight.

Christine went up to one stack of boxes and glanced around to the side. She saw two more columns of boxes behind the first set. She shined the beam of light

around the garage and saw a collapsible stepladder at one corner. She went to it, brought it over, and climbed it with care to maintain her balance. She opened and closed each box at the top of each column. Most boxes contained papers and documents.

She opened yet another box and aimed the beam of light into it. She put her hand in the box and pressed down on one side of a bunch of yellowed papers, then pressed down the other side which did not give way. It had a rock-solid feel to it. For a second, she thought it might be either a paperweight or a stapler. She lifted the small bunch of papers.

“Bingo,” Christine said.

There lay her gun.

28

CHAPTER

For this, I'm gonna kill her, Christine thought. She briskly strode up the stairs to the second floor, gun in hand. *I'm gonna blow her freakin' brains out!*

By the time Christine reached the closed door to Vivian's room, she stood there for a few moments. She placed her free hand on the doorknob and turned it slowly, wincing at the slightest sound. She heard her own erratic breathing. She held her breath until the door opened barely a notch. This made her think of a scene in Edgar Allen Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*, where the creepy guy spent many long minutes slowly turning the doorknob and ever-so-slowly opening the bedroom door, millimeter by millimeter, as opposed to inch by inch.

Now, she held the door knob tightly, immobile. As she pushed it open, she quietly exhaled the air she held in her lungs. With stealth, Christine went around a small table covered with a cream-colored tablecloth. A clear crystal vase filled with water and a long-stemmed red rose inhabited the top of the table.

Don't get too near it, Christine thought. *Be sure to refrain from knocking it over. Careful now.*

She took step after painstaking step with grueling precision. Even the occasional *wisp-wisp* of the hem of her robe, which lightly brushed against the hardwood floor, seemed loud to her.

Christine told herself to pay particular attention to every detail within the dark confines of this overstuffed room. She made a mental note to be sure not to step on the comforter or sheet on the floor by the bed.

Vivian cleared her throat.

Christine froze as her heart palpitated. Beads of sweat broke out on her eyebrows and at the ridges of her upper lip. *Damn you for scaring me like that!* she thought.

Christine walked two steps and felt a tug at the sleeve of her robe. She gasped reflexively and turned. It was too dark to see what tugged the sleeve. She reached out with her free hand and her fingertips trailed across the surface of a wooden dresser bureau of medium height. Her sleeve had gotten caught on the corner of the bureau. She shook the sleeve loose.

Christine approached the bed and glared down at her sleeping sister. She slowly raised her arm, gun in hand, until the barrel barely brushed some strands of Vivian's hair at the temple.

Well, what are you waiting for, damn it? Christine thought. *Do it! Blast the stoopid miscreant to Hell!*

Christine placed her index finger on the trigger and scarcely applied pressure.

C'mon! What are you waiting for? Just do it!

Vivian cleared her throat once again and turned in her sleep.

Christine jerked her arm back. She clutched the gun with both hands tightly against her pounding chest. She placed the gun near Vivian's temple once again, though not as close as before. She held it there for a moment.

"Bang," Christine whispered.

It's the other one I really want to get, she decided. *Vivian will just have to wait until another day.*

29

CHAPTER

By late afternoon on the twenty-ninth day, most of Vivian and Christine's paraphernalia were vacated from the house and taken to their new rental down the hill. Vivian's least important belongings had been put in storage.

A movers' truck had been positioned by the gate, the limo sat idly in front of the truck, and a sheriff's car was parked across the street. Two sheriffs maintained scrutiny.

"Are we about done?" Christine asked Vivian, irritable.

"Yeah," Vivian said. "Let's do a walk-through just to be sure we didn't forget anything."

Christine entered the guest room, where she shed tears of anger and bitterness as she looked around. After a few moments, she composed herself, picked up the suitcases loaded with the valuables she stole from the trunk, and walked out of the room.

"There's nothing left," Vivian said to Christine as she came down the stairs.

"There's nothing left for *you*."

Christine stepped out of the house and as she passed the limo, she swung one suitcase so that it banged against the rear passenger door where Rose sat as she examined her reflection in the compact mirror. She flinched at the impact.

“Don’t think for one second it’s over,” Christine said to Rose, “because it ain’t over till *I* say it’s over. Bitch!”

Christine went to her convertible parked several feet behind the truck. She placed both suitcases on the floor in front of the passenger seat, got in the car, and drove away.



After Vivian and Christine brought some of their belongings into their new place, they took a break. They ordered pizza with chicken wings and soda. Vivian looked around the front room with a sigh. Boxes lay everywhere.

“I feel like such a damn fool,” Vivian said.

“If anyone’s a damn fool,” Christine said, “it’s that ancient, withered old mummy.”

“I realize now it was a mistake to go back there in the first place. I thought I had done the right thing. It took a lot of courage, what with the unpleasant memories of having been kicked out before. It was her mistake to do this to us . . . *again*. This is the second time she’s thrown us out.”

“I assure you, she’ll most definitely get what’s coming to her and then some. I guarantee it.”

I’ll make damn sure of it, Christine thought as she munched on a chicken wing and sipped some soda.

30

CHAPTER

Shortly after nightfall, Rose attempted to settle in to her home. However, with the knowledge that Vivian and Christine had stepped foot in this house, lived in it, breathed its air and exhaled *their* air, and went about their daily lives in this house made Rose all the more resentful.

Soon after Vivian and Christine had left, Rose went upstairs to check the sealed room. She gasped with horror as she saw the door to the room had been left wide open and askew.

Oh no, Rose thought, my "trump card"!

The trunk lay before her with some of her most treasured valuables loosely scattered about and those included her opened diaries. Rose noticed the latches had been cut. She stepped into the room and scooped up a handful of gems.

Do they know? Rose thought. How much do they know? How much have they read? Did they call the police? Would they have? Would they dare? If they did, then the police would have been here already, and I would have been arrested and be sitting in jail. I would not be able to bear that, not after all the trouble I have gone through to ensure such secrecy. I was too sure of myself. So sure. I should have expected such a possibility. What happens now? What happens next? What shall I do?

Rose glanced around the room and grimaced at the yellowed walls with some

chips and fissures in them and the one window with spider-web cracks. She decided she would hire someone to help straighten up the mess and either have the trunk reinstalled in the mezzanine or placed elsewhere.

Rose looked in each room and disapproved of anything and everything within sight. She pointed a crude, accusatory finger here and there as she made snide comments to Iris about different things. The living room disgusted Rose with its ugly taupe carpeting. She would have every interior within the house redone.

“Look at this, Iris,” Rose said. “Just *look* at this. Every wall is punctured with *nails*. As for the cracks on the walls and other damages around the house, well . . . Mother Nature cannot be blamed, can she?”

31

CHAPTER

“I’m going out for a drive,” Christine said to Vivian.

“This late at night?” Vivian said.

“I need to get away for a while. If you want me to bring back something, let me know. I’m going to stop at some fast-food joint on the way back.”

“Just don’t go near *her*,” Vivian said.

“Hey, no worries,” Christine said. “I won’t.”

At least, not yet, Christine thought.

“I don’t want anything,” Vivian said. “Thanks for asking. I’ll just help myself to a sandwich later.”

“Okay. I’ll be back in a while.”



Christine sat in her convertible in the parking lot at a Thai food restaurant in Sherman Oaks. She sipped some lemon-lime soda from a white Styrofoam cup that she held in one hand. With the other, she pulled out her cell phone from her handbag and speed-dialed a number, then lifted it to her ear.

“Dougie!” she said when the phone was answered. “It’s Christine! Huggie

huggie huggie! How are you? How's Miami? Boy, have I got *lots* to tell you. It's incredible, you won't believe it. How's Tawny? Oh, lemme lemme lemme speak to her. Please please please! Tawny!" Christine shrieked in delight.

They talked for several minutes as Christine explained what had been going on.

"It's *really* important," Christine said. "This is why I'm calling. I would like to know if you and Dougie could come out to LA in a week's time. I know it's pretty short notice, especially since you guys live in Miami. Also, I'm going to get in touch with Jimmy in New York. I have a plan and it's of utmost importance to me. So, if you and Dougie are able to come out, please let me know this instant. I'm going to need some help from you guys."

"Sure," Tawny said from the other end. "Why not? We'd love to. It's been ages since we've seen each other. I think it would be worth it. What do you say, Dougie?"

Christine could hear Dougie's voice in the background as he uttered his response.

"It's a go," Tawny said to Christine. "When would you like us to be there, and what's the plan?"

"Well, first I gotta check with Jimmy to be sure," Christine said. "I would like you guys to be here by no later than Monday, if possible. That's about a week from now. I'm rather anxious. Desperate situations call for desperate measures, you know?"

"Whoa, sounds heavy. So, what's the plan?"

"I'll tell you when you get here. I don't want to say anything over the phone, you know. Um, now let me see here. This is *absolutely* vital, no questions asked. You must *drive* from Florida to here and that's a very, very big must. Whatever you do, *do not* fly. No planes, no trains, either. I assure you, you just cannot afford to go any other way except by driving."

"Rad, man. Far out. What else?"

"Does Dougie still have underground connections in that black market thing or whatever you call it?"

"Of course, and he's got *plenty* of connections."

"Okay. Here's what I need." Christine explained what she had in mind.

"Geez, Christine," Tawny said, whistling in amazement. "Are you serious?"

"Dead serious," Christine said. "Anyway, I'm gonna get in touch with Jimmy in a minute. So, let's stop for now and I'll give you a call back to let you know what's what and confirm everything we've gone over, okay?"

"*Ciao, bella.*"

Christine then called Jimmy.

“Jimmy! It’s Christine! That’s right, your pristine Christine! Shimmy shimmy shimmy!” She shimmied her shoulders and laughed. “How are you? How’s New York? Oh, indeed, it has been quite a while. Listen, I just got off the phone with Dougie and Tawny in Miami. Here’s what’s happening.” Christine reiterated her call with Tawny. “Now, just to be sure, I need to know if you still, uh, have underground connections, you know, with whatever it is you deal with.”

“Yeah,” Jimmy said. “And Dougie and Tawny are going to be in LA? What’s this got to do with me?”

“It’s got everything to do with you, man. I need your help.”

“I don’t understand the driving part. What’s wrong with flying or taking the train?”

“I was just getting to that. First, I need to know if you could make it out here.”

“Sure, no problem. What is it that you need?”

Christine told him.

“Now I see why you don’t want us to take the plane or the train,” Jimmy said.

“I knew I could count on you. *Mwah!*”

Christine called Tawny.

“Hey, Tawny. It’s a go. Now, by the time Monday rolls around, I’ll have rented a very nice penthouse—or a presidential suite—at a hotel for all of us. We’re going to be there for an indefinite period. I’ll get us the best suite with the best room service at the best hotel . . . with a killer view.”

32

CHAPTER

“Hey, Viv,” Christine said as she stepped inside and closed the door. She carried a large white plastic bag in one hand and a sturdy cardboard cup holder with two large Styrofoam cups in the other hand. The heady aroma of spicy sauces, stir-fried chicken, and steamed vegetables seeped from the bag.

“I’m back,” Christine said. “I got us some stir-fry chicken dinner and some soda from the Thai food joint in Sherman Oaks, in case you didn’t have your sandwich yet.”

Vivian sat on the edge of the loveseat next to the end table by the phone and sobbed.

“What now?” Christine asked, annoyed and irritated.

“I don’t know how much more I can take,” Vivian said as she choked between sobs and gasped for air. “It just gets worse and worse.”

“What do you mean?”

“I just got off the phone a while ago with Blaine’s wife, Mary Beth. Blaine’s dead.”

The blood drained from Christine’s face.

“He was shot and killed about eight weeks ago,” Vivian said, “approximately a week before you arrived in LA”

“Nooo . . .” Christine said. “He can’t be! What happened?”

“After you left, it dawned on me that I was forgetting something. I stood over there in the middle of the room . . .”

Vivian looked around, sifted through boxes yet to be unpacked. She took her time and organized her thoughts. While she went through parts of the new residence, she envisioned where some of the items and furniture would go.

She decided to give her mind a rest from all that had happened with Rose. Vivian figured she would get as much taken care of tomorrow with her mind more alert. She had been in the mood to do some needlepoint work for a while.

Vivian looked through some of the boxes and found her embroidery bag with her cross-stitching and needlepoint materials. But, the canvas with the two roses could not be found anywhere.

Where is it? Vivian thought. I guess the better question is: Where did it go?

She sifted through several bags and went through some boxes once more. She couldn’t imagine where it had gone. She thought it had been in the first box she looked at where she found her embroidery bag.

“Could I have misplaced it?” Vivian said to herself. “I know some things get lost when moving. Hope I didn’t lose that canvas.” Her stomach growled with hunger. “Well, I better fix a sandwich now or else I’ll get a headache. I’ll just have to look for it later.”

As Vivian went into the small kitchen, it dawned on her that she had meant to get around to calling Blaine.

Darn it, she thought, how could I almost forget?

Vivian sat on the edge of the loveseat and held the folded slip of paper in her hand. She contemplated what she would say. She

exhaled a nervous sigh and unfolded the paper, then picked up the phone and dialed the number. After three rings, a woman answered.

"Uh, hello," Vivian said. "May I speak with Blaine, please? Blaine Hutchins?"

"May I ask who's calling?"

"This is Vivian. Vivian Hutchins. I'm Blaine's sister. Hello? Hello? Are you there?"

"This is his wife, Mary Beth," the woman said.

"Oh, hi, Mary Beth. Christine had mentioned that you are Blaine's wife."

"Blaine and Christine had mentioned you from time to time. As for Blaine, he's dead. He was shot and killed eight weeks ago."

This bit of news stunned Vivian.

"What happened? It was my understanding that Blaine was fine, according to Christine when she saw him last before coming to LA. I'm just trying to get in touch with him after twenty-two years, and I wanted to let him know about a number of things that had been going on from my end."

Vivian heard Mary Beth sniffle.

"He was shot twice in the back, Mary Beth said. "This happened at an outdoor ATM not far from our house. It was a drive-by shooting, they say. 'They' being the police, of course. Happened in daylight, would you believe? During the lunch hour. Apparently, robbery wasn't the motive, since nothing had been taken. Not his wallet, not his money or credit cards, not even his gold watch. They think it was a random act of violence by some gang member. They don't have any leads or suspects yet, but they're still looking.

"Blaine's funeral was held one week after he was killed," Mary Beth said. "My husband had no enemies to speak of. He was a good man, a very good man, a wonderful guy."

Vivian could hear Mary Beth crying.

"He was very well-liked by many and easy to get along with. Maybe it's true what they say about the good ones, that the Lord takes the good ones and . . . and leaves the bad ones behind."

Vivian heard Mary Beth blow her nose.

"Pardon me," Mary Beth said. "I'm sorry . . . I'm sorry I had to be the one to tell you. In fact, I tried looking for some way to get in touch with Blaine's next of kin."

"Christine said she has his number," Vivian said, "but wasn't able to find it yet. I know it sounds ridiculous, but are you absolutely sure about Blaine? It was him and not someone else?"

"Oh, I'm sure," Mary Beth said. "I was the one who made a positive ID of him at the morgue. The police came to my place about an hour or so after my husband was killed. I know it seems surreal. It's still surreal with me, even eight weeks later."

"Apparently, Christine doesn't know that Blaine had been killed," Vivian said, distraught.

"This happened about a half-hour after Christine had left. She stopped by for a bit to say good-bye before driving out to LA."

"I see. Well, I'll let Christine know what you just told me and take it from there."

After Vivian hung up, she sobbed until Christine returned.

"Apparently, you didn't know about it," Vivian said to Christine now, "which means you had left some time after Blaine was shot and killed. I guess you were on your way to LA when it happened."

“I’m surprised you’d stoop that low and snoop around my personal stuff!” Christine said. “How dare you!”

Christine’s unexpected reaction surprised Vivian.

“I wasn’t snooping around, Christine. I’d been meaning to ask you for his number, but I kept forgetting, what with so much going on lately. I just happened to come across his number the morning of the earthquake.”

Curious about the ceiling debris that had fallen on Christine’s comforter, Vivian decided to see how much damage had been done to the ceiling. She went into the guest room and looked at the comforter. She saw powdery bits of fragmentary plaster and stucco on the comforter, then looked at the ceiling which had cracks in it.

Vivian looked around the room and saw some crumbled retail receipts, personal notes, and slips of paper with names and addresses on the night table. She noticed one piece of paper with Blaine’s name and number written on it, which caught her attention. She had made a mental note to get in touch with him as soon as possible. Impulsively, Vivian took the slip of paper, folded it, and placed it in the front pocket of her jeans.

“I had completely forgotten about it,” Vivian said now, “even though it was way in the back of my mind until I remembered to make the call.”

“Well, if you had remembered to remind me again,” Christine said, “I would’ve gladly given it to you! I don’t appreciate this at all!”

“Come on, Christine! This is our brother we’re talking about! Have some compassion and respect, will you?”

“I don’t see where *you* had any respect when you sneaked into my room and got Blaine’s number!”

“Christine, what’s with you, huh? You haven’t even shed a tear. Don’t you even care?”

“I do,” Christine said. “I loved him, of course. I had no idea this happened.”

“Well, he’s gone now. Twenty-two years of hoping to get in touch with him, hoping to see him again, and he’s gone.” Vivian shook her head wearily.

“I’m sorry,” Christine said. “I’m sorry for the way I reacted. I didn’t mean to snap at you like that. There’s just been so much crap lately and my nerves are shot.”

“I know. C’mere.” Vivian said as she held out her arms. “It’s just you and me now.”



They didn’t eat the stir-fry chicken dinner. Vivian put it in the fridge, then went upstairs to bed, and Christine went to the guest room to watch some TV for a while, then dozed off.

Christine envisioned herself walking up the path to the front door of Rose Hutchins’s residence. She rapped on the door. The door opened and Rose stood with a sneer. Christine sucker-punched Rose and broke her jaw—

The door opened and Christine threw a jar of sulfuric acid on Rose’s face. Rose howled in agony as her face burned and dissolved like molten putty—

Christine thrust a large butcher knife into Rose’s solar plexus—

Raised a carpenter’s ax and swiftly brought it down. It cut the air between her and Rose as the blade fell toward the top of Rose’s cranium—

Opened the lid of a small wooden box which contained a few scorpions and jerked it toward Rose—

Tossed a Burmese python—

Shot flames from a military-grade flamethrower—

Fired her .38 caliber gun—

“Bleedin’ bitch . . . bleedin’ bitch . . .” Christine said in her sleep. “Bleedin’ bitch . . .”

33

CHAPTER

Rose rang the bell and knocked on the door incessantly at quarter to seven in the morning while Vivian and Christine were asleep.

“Come on,” Rose said. “I do *not* have all day!”

Christine stirred in her sleep.

“Who *is* that?” Vivian asked as she came into the front room from her bedroom. She cinched the waistband of her pink robe tighter.

“Oh, man,” Christine said. She woke up as the crude knocking continued. “All right, all right, all right! Enough already!” She yanked the covers aside, jumped up from the loveseat, and stomped her way to the front door.

“Just stay out of it, Christine,” Vivian said.

“Nobody, but *nobody* disturbs my slumber!” Christine said through clenched teeth, her face flushed. “I’m *not* a morning person!”

“I’ll handle it,” Vivian said.

Vivian opened the door and before she had a chance to say anything, Rose said, “All right, where are they? Cough it up right now!”

“Now, how the hell did you find out where we are?” Vivian said. “What is it that you want this time?”

“Yeah, just what the frig do you want, bleedin’ bitch?” Christine said.

“Woman, I’m gonna beat the livin’ crap outta ya!”

“If you do not give them to me,” Rose said as she gave Christine a sidelong glance, “I am going to call the police.”

“Whuckever!” Christine said as she held up both hands, thumbs touching and middle fingers extended to form the letter “W.”

“Just who do you think you are?” Vivian said to Rose.

“A freakin’ Loser is what she is,” Christine said as she formed the letter “L” with her extended thumb and middle finger on her forehead.

“If I’d known better,” Vivian said with a dry chuckle as she turned to Christine, “I think she came to have us evicted from *this* place.”

“Haw haw,” Christine said as she rolled her eyes.

“Very funny,” Rose said.

“All right,” Vivian said with a resigned sigh. “What is it you want this time? Whatever it is, I simply can’t imagine what it could be.”

“Whatever it is, don’t give it to her!” Christine said.

“You know very well what it is I want,” Rose said.

“Duuuhhh!” Christine said. She put a hooked finger in her mouth which hanged at the corner of her lips. “Gee, I wonder,” she said, then made a slack-jawed, open-mouthed, cross-eyed face with her tongue distended from her mouth.

“You think you are funny,” Rose said, “but you are not. Laugh now, cry later.”

“Haw haw, wah wah.”

“I was up until the middle of the night inventorying my things of which you trespassed upon with those vile hands of yours. I also know you read my diaries which are evidenced by the straps that been cut. Therefore, I know what was taken and how much was taken.”

“We wouldn’t dare take anything of yours since they’re just as worthless as you are.”

“I think I know what you’re talking about,” Vivian said to Rose as she eyed Christine. “All right. Fess up, Christine. Where are they?”

“What?” Christine said. “What’cha tawkin’ about, Viv?”

Vivian grabbed Christine’s wrist and nearly twisted it.

“Ow! You’re hurting me!”

“I’ve had more than I can take from you, young lady,” Vivian said. “Now, where are they?”

“I didn’t take anything!”

“She wouldn’t be here if you didn’t take something. Now, fetch it or else.”

“I’m not a friggin’ dog, man!” Christine said as she forcibly wrenched her wrist from Vivian’s tight grip.

"I know you read my diaries," Rose said.

"That's right," Vivian said.

"Yeah? So?" Christine said.

"That is an outright, blatant invasion of my privacy," Rose said.

"What'cha gonna do about it, *murderer*?" Christine said.

"I could call the police," Rose said.

"You didn't take those diaries, did you, Christine?" Vivian asked. "*Did you?*"

"Of course not!" Christine said.

"You better not have," Vivian said. "Just give back what you took from her."

"All right, all right, all right! I'll get it!"

Christine whirled on her heel and stomped through the front room to one corner where her suitcases lay.

"You just wait outside," Christine heard Vivian tell Rose. "You're not welcome to come in here."

Vivian went to the corner of the front room and observed Christine pick up one suitcase by the handle and heft it with the support of her other hand. She deliberately left the other suitcase that contained more of Rose's valuables.

"Happy now?" Christine said to Vivian. "After you, master. I'll just be right behind you like a good little doggie."

"Oh, no," Vivian said. "After *you*, miss."

"Miscreant," Christine said as she walked past Vivian and rudely nudged her aside with her elbow.

"Watch it," Vivian said.

Christine deliberately slowed her pace and pretended to drop the suitcase. "Whoops!" With stealth, she surreptitiously unlatched one lock. "Never mind, I got it." She lifted the suitcase and slowly made her way through the front room. She feigned another drop of the suitcase and unlatched the other lock. "Boy, this thing is heavy. Whew!" She strode through the front room.

"You want it back?" Christine asked Rose at the door. "Here. Have at it!" She hefted the suitcase high above her and hurled it over Rose's head.

"Christine!" Vivian said with a gasp.

Rose paled and looked as if her stomach had dropped.

Christine gloated with glee and her eyes twinkled.

As the suitcase soared through the air, its mid-section opened wide and spread like wings. Contents fell out like candy from a piñata and scattered on the ground. Rose gasped in horror. Peter and Dolph skittered away as the suitcase plummeted toward them and slammed into the side of the limo.

"Oh, boy," Vivian said. "Now you've done it."

Rose bent over to pick up her jewels, gems, some bundles of money and gold

bars.

“Pick ’em up!” Vivian said to Christine.

“Better yet—” Christine said. She rammed her foot in Rose’s derriere with excessive force that the woman fell forward, though she caught herself and scraped her palms in the process. Her turban flew off and landed a few feet away. The pin popped loose and landed on the ground.

Surprised by the utterly ridiculous sight before her, Christine giggled. Her giggles grew into gales of whooping laughter as she bent over in fits of hysterics.

Scraggly white-blond wisps of hair protruded from Rose’s nearly-bald scalp.

“All right, Christine!” Vivian said. “That does it. You’re outta here as of this instant. Get your things and get out now. I’ve had it. I’ve had it with you!”

“You don’t scare me, you idiot,” Christine said. She turned around and said to Rose, “The next time I see you again, I swear I’m gonna burn you *alive!*”

Christine smashed her foot on Rose’s hand. Rose howled in pain. Peter and Dolph ran toward Christine. Dolph placed a hand on Christine’s shoulder and Vivian hissed her stern warning, “Don’t you *dare* touch her. I’ll deal with her myself.”

Christine vigorously elbowed Dolph in the solar plexus, which knocked the air out of him and caused him to double over.

Rose picked up her turban and pin and placed them back on her head. She struggled to get to her feet. Dolph and Peter pulled Rose to her feet, then they walked her to the limo. Peter opened the rear passenger door and Dolph assisted Rose as she gingerly eased herself into the back seat. Dolph and Peter went back to pick up the rest of her belongings.

“C’mere, Christine,” Vivian said as she grabbed Christine’s wrist and dragged her into the house while Christine laughed. Vivian’s angry voice quavered and her chest heaved. “I know you’re angry and I know you’re hurting. How do you think *I* feel?”

Christine shrugged insolently.

“So be it,” Vivian said. “I’ve tried to be a good sister to you. I’ve tried to be patient as well as sympathetic and understanding. I’ve been more than fair and generous with you, and what thanks do I get in return? Well, listen, sister, and listen good. I suggest you straighten up that despicable attitude of yours or seek professional help, like anger management counseling. You’ve got a very serious problem and it’s not funny. You’ve gone way too far and your irreverence is not tolerated.”

“Must you tell me?”

“Christine, I’m trying to let you know that I care about you. I really do. I love you. Apparently, that’s not good enough. It doesn’t seem to be doing any of us

good. That's your fault. Now, you're going to get your things and leave. I hate to do this, but it has to be done. Don't ask me where you're going to go because you're on your own. All I ask is that when you find a place for yourself, just let me know where you are."

"Why should I?"

"Because I would appreciate it. Don't worry, I'm not going to spy on you. You're a big girl now. You can take care of yourself."

"Okay. Whatever you say."

"I just hope she doesn't sue us for aggravated assault as well as for invasion of privacy," Vivian said more to herself than to Christine.

"Give me an hour," Christine said. "I need to freshen up a little before I get my things, then I'm outta here."

While Christine took a shower, Vivian went to the limo and crouched to eye level with Rose.

"Tell me one thing," Vivian said.

Rose eyed Vivian, cold and silent.

"I want to know how you survived the plane crash in London," Vivian said. "That's all I want to know, nothing else. I have some idea as to why you led us to believe you were dead all these years. Just how did you manage to survive, if in fact, you were on that plane?"

"It was a miracle," Rose said.

"You were identified among the dead."

"That is right. You see, it is simple . . ."

Rose had come up with a phony alibi: herself. She had flown to London alone and from there, intended to fly to New York. She had informed the others who had known her that she would be going with a business associate.

When one of the plane's landing gears had become inoperable during takeoff, it jammed while being elevated into its compartment, and the plane had been forced to land. It skidded off the runway and slammed into a large shed nearby. The plane exploded and bodies were tossed about, some of which had been burned beyond recognition and others with body parts severed.

Rose had been fortunate enough to have had escaped with a few scratches and bruises, as did some of the survivors. It had been nothing the doctors could not take care of.

She had a window seat in first class and memorized the number of an aisle seat next to hers, where the charred body of a dead female passenger had lain. That person's jaw had been sheared off and disintegrated. The remainder of the skull had been pulverized.

Rose figured it would be difficult for the medical examiner to conduct postmortem identification of said passenger, even with dental records. She assumed they'd come up with a presumptive identification if the pathologist couldn't get a positive ID. Therefore, she identified the charred body as Rose Hutchins and identified herself as "a business associate of the deceased," as she had stated to the authorities when asked to identify herself. She had not even bothered to give a name for she thought there had been no reason to. She had figured the airport authorities and police officials would come up with the name of the business associate—Julia S. Windom—which she had registered under at the time she had made the reservations.

"In a nutshell, I switched identities with a dead passenger," Rose now said with pride. "Not only that, but she was a dead ringer. As you can plainly see, everything fell into place and there you have it."

She gently adjusted her turban.

34

CHAPTER

Christine changed her clothes and collected her luggage, which included one suitcase that contained Rose's treasures. She would load them into her convertible herself.

I wouldn't want Vivian's help, Christine thought as she sifted through the suitcase. *Good thing she's in the back yard at the moment. Don't come back in just yet.* Christine went to the loveseat and crouched on her knees. *Stay out there a little longer, if you have to. I hope you fry in the sun. Too bad there isn't a swimming pool where you can fall in and drown—metaphorically speaking, of course.*

She pulled out a shoebox from under the loveseat and lifted the lid. Inside were some more of Rose's valuables, which Christine had hidden as an extra precaution.

Buried beneath the colorful trinkets lay Christine's gun. She withdrew it, stashed it in the waistband in the back of her jeans, and covered it with an oversized black T-shirt she wore. She replaced the lid and put the shoebox in the suitcase, then closed and locked it.

She casually glanced around the front room and slipped an arm under the loveseat once again. She felt around within the dark confines and pulled out Vivian's needlepoint canvas.

“Weren’t you looking for this?” Christine said with a malevolent snicker. “Well, here it is.” She hurriedly walked over to a group of boxes by the wall and put the canvas in Vivian’s embroidery bag, face down.

“Yo!” Christine said. “I’m outta here!”

Vivian met her at the front door.

“Well,” Christine said as she flashed a smile, “in all sincerity, I just want to say I apologize for all the trouble I’ve caused. All in all, I hadn’t meant it, really.”

“I know you’re not as sincere as you’d like to sound,” Vivian said, “but thanks for mentioning it. I understand you’re still young and at an emotional phase in your life. So, where are you going to go?”

Christine stuffed her hands in her pockets and shrugged.

“I’m going to look online,” she said, “and see if I can find a room to rent. I should be able to find something in no time. I’ve also got some modeling assignments and auditions to go to. I guess I’ll give you a call to let you know what’s going on.”

“I would appreciate that,” Vivian said. “Remember what I said earlier. I care.”

Christine nodded. “Oh, by the way,” she said, “where’s my gun? You said I could have it now that I’m no longer in the picture.”

“Why do you want it?” Vivian decided to go along with her game.

“Because it’s mine, damn it. I bought it.”

“Well then, you shouldn’t have brought it with you in the first place.”

“What did you do with it?”

“What would you do with it? Go after her? Tough luck, sister. You’re on your own.”

“Did you flush it down the toilet? Throw it in the trash? Take it somewhere to have it destroyed? Did you have it hocked at a pawn shop?”

“Christine, it’s a lost cause and you know it. You’re just wasting your time.”

“You’re just not going to give it to me, are you?”

“You got it,” Vivian said with a quick tilt of her head. She winked at Christine and clicked her tongue.

“Oh, yeah? Well, that’s okay. You don’t have to give it to me because . . .” Christine smiled a devious smile and her eyes twinkled with mischief. She reached behind her with an arm, withdrew her gun from behind and brought it around before her. “I found it.” Christine brandished the gun in Vivian’s face.

“Christine!” Vivian said as she flinched with a gasp.

Christine stepped back a few paces as she held the gun at eye level with her finger on the trigger. “Bang,” she whispered, then snickered. Her snickers grew to giggles, then chuckles, then gales of whooping laughter as she walked down the driveway to her convertible. She wiggled her hips, then turned around and

affected a caricatured military salute and an overdramatic bow with her head nearly level with her knees. She stood up straight and flipped two middle fingers in Vivian's direction, then jumped in her convertible, slammed the door, and laughed hard as she drove away.

35

CHAPTER

Christine cruised east on Ventura Boulevard to the Summerlin Suites, a thirty-floor hotel on the other side of town near Universal Studios Hollywood.

“Good afternoon, ma’am,” the valet said as he greeted Christine with a grin. She handed him her car keys, walked through the double glass doors into the atrium lobby, and approached the reception area.

“Hi,” Christine said to the front-desk clerk whose name was Curtis which she noted by his name tag. “I would like a presidential suite on the top floor where it’s facing those hills to the south, if you have one available.”

“One moment, please.” Curtis looked down at the computer screen. “Yes, we have one available. Would this be for one person?”

“Yes.”

“For how long?”

“Indefinitely.”

Curtis expressed mild surprise. “All right. Would this be on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis?”

“Uh, make it weekly.”

“All right. One moment, please. Method of payment?”

“Charge,” Christine said. She withdrew a credit card from her handbag and gave it to the desk clerk.

Once Christine entered the expansive presidential suite, she toured the plush surroundings and savored everything in awe. She made it a point to go to the enormous picture window that faced south and overlooked parts of the hills above Studio City. She gazed a little to the west and saw Rose’s house.

Christine called Dougie and Tawny, then Jimmy. She informed them of her present whereabouts and gave them the address and the suite number of the hotel.

“See ya Monday,” she said before she hung up.

Christine eyed the Hutchins’s residence with fanatical scrutiny.

“Now, you’re *really* gonna get it,” she said. “You have absolutely no idea what I can do and what I’m capable of. Just you wait. I guarantee you will see . . . hear . . . and *feel* my wrath.”

Christine continued to stare at the house on the side of the hill.

36

CHAPTER

Rose rinsed the caked blood and dirt off her palms and had Iris apply ointment.

“I am just glad the scratches are not any worse than they could have been,” Rose said.

“How are they now?” Iris asked.

“They sting a little, but I will be all right.”

“Would you like me to schedule an appointment with a manicurist?”

“No. I will do some filing and put on a fresh coat of polish.”

Iris followed Rose to the living room where Dolph and Peter inventoried Rose’s valuables.

“Well?” Rose asked.

“Just about everything is here,” Dolph said. “I’d say you’ve lost a handful of stuff.”

“So, what is a handful?” Rose said. “Let the poor urchin have whatever she took. The pitiful ragamuffin has nothing compared to what I have, and with what I have, I can do a lot more and go a lot further than that hot-tempered, little guttersnipe. All right, leave them here and I will take care of them later.” She turned to Iris and said, “With all that has happened recently, stress is what I do not need. Since the house needs repairs and renovations, there are calls for

you to make. There is a Rolodex on the desk in the study containing the names and numbers of painters, carpenters, and landscapers. Afterward, we will make arrangements to go to Antigua soon. I need to get away from here for a while as it would do me a bit of good.”

“Yes, Mrs. Windom.”

37

CHAPTER

“Gooood Mooooorrrnniinngg!” Christine said as she incessantly pounded on the front door of the Hutchins’s residence. *“It’s quarter after five! Rise and shine! Cock-a-doodle-doo!”*

I hate being up so damn early in the morning! she thought to herself as she repeatedly pressed the doorbell. *This is the only exception.*

The door opened and Dolph stood there with a scowl.

“Since you need not be informed,” he said, “madam had me call the police. Now, beat it.”

As Dolph proceeded to shut the door, Christine quickly whipped out her gun from the inside pocket of the black windbreaker she wore and placed the gun’s barrel between the doorframe and the door.

“Oohhh, not so fast, *blondie*,” Christine said. “Open up.”

The door opened slowly.

“Open wide,” Christine said. “Wider. Now say, ‘Aahhh.’” She let out a mischievous chuckle with an ear-to-ear grin and her eyes twinkled with mischief.

When the door opened wide enough, Christine stepped inside with the gun pointed at Peter.

“You know, missy,” Rose said as she came into the foyer. “I have had enough—”

“No, you haven’t,” Christine said. “Not nearly enough.”

“Is that necessary?” Rose asked as she eyed the gun.

“Look, you Hutchins dragon, my name is *not* Missy and you had better start calling me by my proper name.”

“Need I say your name is not worth wasting my breath, just as I am wasting it right now with you?”

“Actually, I came here to apologize for everything,” Christine said. “For all the hardship I’ve caused you.” She put the gun back in her windbreaker.

“You are wasting your time, let alone mine.”

Rose turned and walked into the living room. Christine followed behind, as did Dolph.

“Wait a minute—” Christine said.

“Child, I do not wait for anyone,” Rose said, “least of all, you and your kind.”

Rose sat on the couch, picked up a home renovation magazine from the coffee table, and placed it on her lap.

“Dolph, have Iris fix me some tea,” Rose said, then gently pressed the front of her turban.

Dolph nodded and went into the kitchen.

Christine stood directly across the coffee table from Rose and glanced at several magazines and a plate of breakfast pastries on the table. “Wha—?” she said. “No tea or pastries for *moi*?”

Rose glared at Christine, then returned to the pages of the magazine before her.

“You know, we’re two of a kind,” Christine said as she seated herself on the sofa. “Really. We could do so much together.”

“Dream on.”

“I just want to be your daughter. After all, I *am* your daughter. Together, we can share in the wealth and power, the glory each of us have worked so very hard for.”

Iris came into the living room and placed the cup of tea on the table. She curiously looked at Christine for a few seconds, then turned and headed for the kitchen. Christine effused a mocking shrug with a sneer behind Iris’ back.

Rose flipped through the magazine before her. She picked up her cup of tea, sipped it, and gently laid it in her lap.

“So,” Christine said with a loud sigh. “Where’s your husband? I haven’t seen nor heard of him at all. Is he dead, too? Did you kill him like you killed your first hubby, Charlie? He was my daddy, too, ya know. Do your measly servants know what you really do for a living?” She flashed a toothy grin.

“There is a phrase,” Rose said, contemplative. “‘Tough as nails.’ I am one

thousand times tougher than that.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, I’m a million-gazillion times tougher.”

“May the best woman win.” Rose forced a chilling smile at the corners of her lips, her eyes narrow slits of scorn. She sipped some more tea.

“Indeed, I shall,” Christine said. “You know, I may be the princess of the Valley, but mark my words, I’ll be queen of the hill one day—and soon.”

Dolph answered the knock on the door and returned with two uniformed police officers.

“All right,” Christine said as she rose from where she sat. “Have it your way. Nonetheless, I’m not done with you, yet.”

“Is that a threat?” Rose asked.

“No. That’s a promise, and the funny thing is the cops can’t do anything until *after* something actually happens.” Christine chuckled. “And by then, it’ll already be too late.” She turned to the officers and chuckled some more, then cleared her throat. “I was just leaving. I can show myself out, thank you.”

38

CHAPTER

The next few days moved at an excruciatingly slow pace for Christine, who had been irritable as well as anxious. She could barely contain the excitement of seeing her friends again.

Her cell phone rang.

“Yes?” Christine said.

“Hi, Christine. It’s Tawny. We’re just passing through Phoenix, Arizona. We’ll be there in a matter of hours.”

“Excellent! I can’t wait till you guys get here! Man, oh, man, the torture of the waiting game! I’ve been going nuts trying to keep myself preoccupied.”

“I hear ya.”

“Oh, by the way, have you heard from Jimmy?”

“Yeah. As a matter of fact, he’s right behind us. We met him at an out-of-the-way greasy spoon in Texas. Heck, what would life be like without cell phones?”

“Word! See ya soon!”

“Huggers.”



“I don’t believe this,” Vivian said to herself. She fumed as she stood at the kitchen counter and poured raspberry-flavored iced tea into a tall glass. “I don’t understand that girl at all. It’s been one week and not a word from her. Maybe I should chalk it up and consider the source.”

Vivian went into the front room and sat on the loveseat. She put the glass of tea on the coffee table. The embroidery bag with her needlepoint and cross-stitching materials had been placed on the floor two feet from her. She reached over and pulled it toward her.

“It’s just as well,” Vivian said. “Christine obviously hates me and for what? Trying to be a good sister?”

Vivian looked in the bag, withdrew a skein of black yarn and a package of needles, and laid them on the table.

“Well, Christine, you’ll just have to come to terms with it yourself, I guess.”

Vivian pulled out the needlepoint canvas from the bag and was stunned to see that it had been crudely drawn over with a thick, dark-red marker. Drops of blood oozed and fell from the roses. *Bless This House* now read *CURSE This House*.

39

CHAPTER

Christine answered the knock at the door. She jumped with joy and emitted a shrill scream.

“Jimmy!” Christine said as she gave him a bear hug. “Dougie! Tawny!” More bear hugs. “Come on in!”

“Hey! That’s rad, man,” Tawny said with a smile as she looked around the suite and nodded her approval.

“Hmm, very nice,” Dougie said.

“Why a presidential suite?” Jimmy asked, baffled. “Isn’t that a bit over the top?”

“C’mere,” Christine said. She wrapped her arm around Jimmy’s and guided him to the window. “Here lies your answer.”

Jimmy took in the panoramic view of the hills of Studio City. He observed lights that twinkled from several homes as the sun set.

“All I see are houses on hills,” he said. “What about it?”

“You see, Jimmy,” Christine said. She gently took his face in her hand and turned it to the right. She guided his line of vision a little to the west. “Right there is a big, ol’ two-story, white house near the top. So, with an expansive view like this, how could I afford not to have an advantage, hmm?” She flashed a smile.

“Advantage? I don’t understand,” Jimmy said.

“I’ll get to that soon.”

Christine noted the luggage they brought. “Whew, that’s a lotta luggage ya got there, guys.”

“There’s more in the car,” Dougie said. “Just what you wanted us to bring and then some.”

“Oh?” Christine turned to Jimmy with a questioning look. “Were you able to bring what I asked you for?”

“Would I let you down?”

“Well, what are we waiting for?”

They brought the rest of the luggage up from the car and placed them on the marble floor inside the door of the suite. Jimmy hefted a large black case and laid it on the oversized couch in the middle of the room. He opened it and inside contained several components that, when assembled, would be a large, powerful telescope.

“Awesome,” Christine said as she caressed the components with admiration.

“I presume you want this by the window, right?” Jimmy asked.

“Duuuhhhh,” Christine said in a sing-song voice.

Jimmy assembled the components, then went to the window and set the telescope on its tripod. He located the white, two-story house through the viewfinder, then sat down on the floor with the others. He opened one suitcase and showed Christine twenty cellophane-wrapped rectangular blocks of clay each with separate pairs of colored wires.

“C-4,” Jimmy said.

Next, he withdrew a small, black object from another suitcase.

“Oh, oh, oh!” Christine said. “Don’t tell me! Don’t tell me! It’s my early Christmas present.” She giggled gleefully. “I know what it is. That little red button right there is a dead giveaway.”

“Merry Christmas,” Jimmy said.

Christine roared with laughter.

“That thing with the little red button,” Jimmy said, “is a long-range wireless detonator.”

“Awesome!”

“The Uzi’s in the other suitcase over there.” Jimmy pointed at the suitcase nearby.

“What’cha got there, Dougie?” Christine asked.

Dougie inventoried each item as he withdrew them.

“Fire accelerant, some pipe bombs,” he said, “and last, but not least, is an added surprise because we love you so.”

“Awww,” Christine said. “You’re so sweet. Well, don’t keep me in suspense!”

Dougie unlatched the locks of a large, rectangular-shaped suitcase and opened it. He removed the plastic protective sheeting ribbed with air bubbles.

Christine gasped in awe, stunned beyond belief.

“Holy crap,” Christine said. “Are you serious?”

“Your Christmas has just been made merrier,” Dougie said.

Jimmy and Tawny laughed, but Christine didn’t. Her attention was undivided. She caressed her early Christmas present with trepidation and reverence—a shoulder-fired rocket launcher, missiles included.

40

CHAPTER

Christine continued to herald the arrival of her friends with an impromptu party, which included champagne and meat-and-cheese and veggie platters. Music softly streamed from Jimmy's electronic tablet.

Christine raised her glass and prompted others to raise theirs.

"To success," Christine said.

"To success," the others said in unison.

"To more success," Christine added. "And to Christine."

Jimmy guffawed, Dougie groaned, and Tawny rolled her eyes and pretended to vomit. Christine laughed.

"Hey, I'm not all that bad," Christine said.

"Yeah, right," Dougie said.

"Don't you wish," Jimmy said.

"Well, sheeeee-it!" Christine said.

Tawny doubled over and howled with laughter. Some champagne spilled from her glass. She playfully slapped Christine on the shoulder.

"You are sooo friggin' *funny!*" Tawny said. "No wonder I love you so much."

“Wuv woo, too,” Christine said and laughed along with Tawny.

After a few moments, their laughter tapered off.

“So, what’s next?” Tawny asked.

“Well,” Christine said. “Here’s the plan. Since our stay here is indefinite and I assure you that money is no object whatsoever, we are to maintain a constant vigil of the house. We’ll go in four-hour shifts, like from six in the morning until ten in the morning, then from ten in the morning until two in the afternoon, and so on. It’s absolutely crucial that I know what’s going on at all times, who’s coming and going. After this little frivolity of ours, we begin surveillance.”

41

CHAPTER

At 5:15 the following morning, Jimmy was peering through the telescope when he saw the front door open and Peter step out into the early morning light. He had a suitcase in each hand. Dolph and Iris followed behind as they carried luggage. They walked to the limo parked several feet from the front door.

Jimmy stepped away from the telescope and quietly went to where Christine slept in one of the bedrooms. “Christine,” Jimmy whispered as he approached the bed and gently nudged her awake. “Christine, wake up.”

Christine stirred, stretched, and yawned. “Yes?”

“They’re leaving,” Jimmy said. “They just stepped out with luggage and stuff.”

Christine bolted upright and quickly scampered to the window with Jimmy by her side. She looked through the viewfinder and saw Rose carrying a suitcase. Iris took the suitcase from Rose and put it in the trunk, and they all got in the limo. It rounded the semi-circular drive, went through the front gate, turned onto a street, and disappeared from view.

Christine backed away from the telescope. “Wonder how long she will be gone for this time?” she said. “If she’s being dropped off somewhere, her staff will be back later. If not, that means they’ll be staying with the Queen of Mean, wherever the hell they’re going. We’ll just have to keep watch, that’s all.”



About three and a half hours later, the limo appeared in Christine's field of view through the telescope. "They're back!" she said.

She chewed on a blueberry muffin and looked through the eyepiece. Jimmy, Dougie, and Tawny stood behind her and waited their turn to look.

"There's just the blond guy," Christine said in reference to Dolph. "I'm guessing the others were dropped off at the airport. Looks like he'll be house-sitting for a while. Damn!"



After Rose disembarked from the plane in Antigua, she wasted no time. She had Peter rent a car where he drove her and Iris to her private resort.

"There will be no need to unpack right away," Rose said. "I am just going to relax for a while. As for the house's repairs and renovations, they should take about a month or two."

42

CHAPTER

The skies were still light at 6:35 on a balmy spring evening. Dougie and Tawny took turns as they maintained vigil.

“I’m hungry,” Christine said. “Let’s do an early dinner. That way, if I’m gonna do anything, especially where that cursed house is concerned, I want to do it on a full stomach.”

“What do you feel like having?” Tawny asked.

Christine pondered, deep in thought for a few moments.

“Four little Indians,” she said, contemplative.

“*What?*” Tawny asked.

“I was just musing,” Christine said. “There are four of ’em: the beefy blond guy, the chauffeur, that nervous mousy assistant, and the old freak-tard herself. Take ’em out one by one until there is none.”

“Well, we’ll worry about that when the time comes.”

“No, Tawny. You don’t understand. I’ve been *agonizing* over this for weeks. Now, I’m going to do what I’ve wanted to do, and I’m going to get what is rightfully *mine*, absolutely no exceptions whatsoever.”

“And what is rightfully yours?”

“Funny you should ask. My sister asked me the same thing not too long ago,

just after I told her I had come out to LA to get what was rightfully mine. When she asked what was rightfully mine, I clammed up right then and there.” She snapped her fingers for emphasis. “I honestly could not think of an answer. What would’ve been the best way to tell her that the house itself was—and still is—rightfully mine? *I* say it’s rightfully mine because *I* didn’t get to live in it, didn’t get to grow up in it. All my birthdays and Christmases were spent with brother Blaine in New Jersey. Well, now that I’m here, I have that chance and since that decrepit fart of a dinosaur is alive and well after all this time, I’m going to have fun with her. Lots and lots of fun.”

“Whatever’s good for you is good enough for me. Anyway, ya want Mexican, Chinese, Italian, or what?”

“I’m in the mood for some tacos. Let’s just make a beeline to the nearest taco place instead of ordering from room service tonight and come right back here. I wouldn’t want to miss a beat.”

“You sure have a way with words, my friend,” Tawny said with a chuckle. “Well, I’m all for it.”

Christine jotted down orders from Tawny, Dougie, and Jimmy. She folded the slip of paper and put it in her handbag.

“Okay,” Christine said. “Ready?”

Tawny nodded.

“Now, boys,” Christine said as she shook her finger like an indignant parent would to an unruly child. “No faggin’ around whilst we’re gone for the time being. You’d best behave yourselves or else.”

The girls laughed boisterously as they went to the door.

“And don’t forget when you go to confession on Sunday,” Christine said, “be sure to tell the priest every lurid, sordid detail. They like to hear such crude stories of sin every once in a while, you know. It does their hearts good.”

“Yes, mother,” Dougie said and saluted Christine in jest.

Christine whirled around on her heel. Her eyes pulsed with cold fury, her nostrils flared, and her face reddened.

“Don’t ever call me that,” Christine said with such iciness that Dougie, Tawny, and Jimmy froze. This was the moment when they suspected that Christine could be bipolar. “Never, ever call me that, you understand?”

Christine forcefully nudged Tawny out the door and slammed it.



Dougie maintained vigil on the house and Jimmy watched the svelte, dark-haired, brown-eyed weather girl on TV. She stood before a large projection screen

as she prattled on and pointed to animated icons of jovial suns with glittering rays, thunderstorm clouds with lightning bolts, swirling tornadoes, swaying palm trees, and hot and cold fronts that languorously moved throughout the digital map of the continental United States.

“Now, as you can see here,” the weather girl said as she pointed to an area of the Atlantic Ocean, “there’s a tropical depression approximately 960 miles southeast from Barbados. This weak low-pressure system gives cause to the air above the Atlantic waters as being unstable, and winds have been clocked at thirty-five miles per—”

Jimmy flipped the channel via remote and watched a classic 1960s sitcom about a mortal man married to a blond witch.

Christine and Tawny walked in with bags of tacos and beverages.

“We’re baaaack,” Christine said with a grin. “Eat up, everyone.”

43

CHAPTER

Approximately 960 miles southeast from Barbados, the surface of the sea was 82^o Fahrenheit. An aerial funnel formed that rose to 38,000 feet.

Masses of vast cumulus clouds swirled and grouped together, and distributed high air currents. Heat and moisture from below gathered into the funnel. The earth's rotation gave it a twist that generated Tropical Storm Aidan, the first of the Atlantic hurricane season.

A weather satellite took meteorological statistics and transmitted data to the output feed at the Severe Weather Bureau in Miami, Florida.

A tropical storm watch was now in effect.

44

CHAPTER

The night was perfect. Dougie and Tawny sat in Christine’s convertible down the street from the Hutchins’s residence. They maintained an ever-vigilant eye on the house. A “Dead End Ahead” sign stood twenty-five feet before them.

“He might not have any reason to go out tonight,” Dougie said in reference to Dolph. “What a wasted evening it would be.”

“Sshhh,” Tawny said. “There’s tomorrow night and the night after and the night after that.”

Dougie groaned with displeasure. Tawny kissed him on the cheek to assuage his irritation.

Jimmy and Christine were on the next road up the hill and about 100 feet to the east. They sat on their haunches on the shoulder of the road where they could see below.

“Careful of that thing now,” Jimmy said to Christine as she handled the rocket launcher.

“Whew! Man, that thing is heavy,” she said. “That S.O.B. had better get his tail outta there and haul ass. I don’t have all night.”

“Suppose he doesn’t come out?”

“Oh, he’ll come out one way or another, even if I have to drag him out.”

“What if he doesn’t come down this way?”

“Oh, brother. Sometimes you can be dense, but that’s what I like about you. Stop fretting so much. He has to come down this way. It’s the only way to come and go because there’s a dead end down that way. Well, wait till he comes to *this* dead end.” She snickered quietly.

Nearly an hour and forty-five minutes went by when the front door finally opened and Dolph stepped under the porch light. Dougie and Tawny watched Dolph fumble with a set of keys, then get in the limo and drive away.

“I hear a car,” Christine whispered as she rose from her haunches.

Christine and Jimmy looked down and saw Christine’s convertible go by as the headlights flashed a couple times. Tawny leaned out the passenger side window, looked above and waved. She thumbed in the direction behind the car, then encircled her thumb and forefinger to indicate that everything was okay.

“Help me with this flippin’ thing,” Christine said.

She kneeled on one knee as Jimmy lifted the front end of the launcher. Christine hefted the back end and placed it on her shoulder. With one hand, she held the launcher steady and with the other, she delicately placed a finger on the trigger.

“Ready . . .” Christine said.

She looked through the viewfinder.

“Aim . . .”

She focused the crosshairs on the limo as it came into view and cruised down the road.

“Fire!”

She pulled the trigger.

The projectile shot out of its cylindrical chamber and streaked toward the limo.

“Hah!”

The missile slammed into the gas tank on the rear right side of the limo. A tremendous explosion reverberated throughout the neighborhood. Christine and Jimmy felt heat emanate from the huge fireball. Flames crackled and thick smoke billowed into the night air.

45

CHAPTER

Christine gave Jimmy, Dougie, and Tawny each a bear hug and laughed with pleasure as they whooped and hollered when they returned to the presidential suite.

“Shh, shh, shh,” Christine said. “We don’t want to wake the dead.” She laughed. “Oh, man. Wasn’t that great? One down and three to go. Bring out the champagne, but let’s go easy with it. Later, after the smoke clears—pun intended—there’s something else I want to do.”

“Oh, no,” Dougie said. He shook his head. “Not tonight. I’m beat. Could it wait until tomorrow?”

“As a matter of fact, Dougie,” Christine said, “it’ll have to wait several days or several weeks. The police will be investigating the area until then.”

Christine went into the kitchen, withdrew a chilled bottle of champagne from the refrigerator and pulled some fluted glasses from a cupboard.

“As I’ve said before,” Christine said, “I want what is mine—*rightfully* mine—and it’s in that house.” She poured champagne into each glass. “By all means, I’m going to get what I want and I shall. You see, it’s apparent that I don’t let anything stop me from getting what I want most. I let absolutely nothing stand in my way or else. The explosive incident earlier this evening is testimony to what I’m

saying, and as you'll see later on, I'll further demonstrate what I mean."

"So, what are you suggesting?" Dougie asked.

"What is it?" Tawny asked.

"You'll find out soon enough," Christine said. "Now, drink up. It's time to celebrate. Wheeeee!"

46

CHAPTER

Christine forced herself to wait a few weeks. Then early one morning at 3:30, she trudged up the road carrying two suitcases with Dougie and Tawny in tow.

“Oooohhh, look-it, look-it, look-it,” Christine said. She chuckled at the charred spot where the limo had exploded in a ball of flames. “That’s not all that *remains*, you know. There’s more where that came from, heh-heh.”

They continued to walk up the road.

“Why is it that the geriatric biddy gets to come and go as she pleases?” Christine said as the foursome approached the Hutchins’s residence. “I used to come and go as I pleased when I was modeling, auditioning for TV commercials, doing walk-on parts in films, and all that blah-blah jazz.”

“You talking to yourself?” Jimmy asked with a teasing smile.

“Oh, hush. Let’s just get inside and get it over with.”

They went around to one side of the house and stepped quietly and with care so as not to trip over unseen rocks or sprinklers. They approached a pair of sliding glass doors to the sunroom near the back of the house and viewed the backyard with the swimming pool, grassy terrain, and gazebo. Tawny let out a low, discreet whistle.

“Must be nice,” she said.

Christine shrugged with indifference, then beckoned to Dougie with her head. “Get to work,” she said. “Oh, before I forget, when we’re all through and it’s time to leave, please remind me to check on something.”

Dougie withdrew an apparatus from his beige jacket and affixed it to the glass near the brass door handle. He etched a hole the diameter of a grapefruit, and, with a suction cup, carefully withdrew the circular piece of glass. He tossed it into the flower garden off to one side, where it landed without a sound. Dougie put his hand through the hole and unlocked the sliding glass door. Christine gave him a thumbs-up and entered the dark premises.

“Don’t go crazy with the flashlights,” Christine said. “Please try to be discreet. We don’t want to call attention to ourselves. You get the idea.”

The trio nodded.

“Jimmy,” Christine said, “do with what you will with these.” She handed him the suitcase with C-4. “Put ’em anywhere, everywhere you see fit. I don’t care.”

“Wow, man,” Jimmy said. “I don’t want to make a clean sweep of the whole damn neighborhood.”

“Screw it,” Christine said. “Use ’em all, every last one of ’em. Just do it!”

Jimmy set the suitcase on the floor and unlocked the latches.

“When you’re done with the suitcase,” Christine said, “give it to me. I’m gonna need it.” She turned to Dougie and Tawny. “Come with me. There’s something I want to show you.”

Christine led them upstairs to the sealed room. The door had been replaced with a new one as well as a different set of locks.

“Last time I was here,” Christine said, “there was this big, ol’ brown trunk that fell from the mezzanine during the earthquake. Within the trunk is the stuff that dreams are made of, and they *all* belong to *me*. I doubt it’s still there.”

“Then, what are we doing here?” Dougie asked.

“Just checking, snooping around,” Christine said. “I want to see the room again, see what’s *not* there.”

“Well, that’s an interesting way of putting it,” Tawny said.

“Unhinge the door,” Christine said to Dougie. “There’s no sense kicking it in.”

Tawny withdrew a large screwdriver from her small bag and handed it to Dougie. He went to work while Christine and Tawny stood by and watched. They spoke in conspiratorial tones.

Jimmy planted the plastiques throughout the house. He made sure they were in the most inconspicuous places like underneath the sofa, behind a desk, in the ventilation system, and in the back of the meat freezer in the cellar.

The door to the sealed room came away unhinged at last, and Dougie carefully placed it against the wall nearby.

“There’s the spot where the trunk landed,” Christine said. She highlighted the space with the flashlight. She could see the new floorboards had replaced the ones that had been punctured by the trunk. Christine trained the beam of light on the ceiling and saw that it had been resurfaced with new drywall and paint.

“That’s the mezzanine from whence the trunk came tumbling down,” Christine said.

“Rad,” Tawny said with awe.

Christine walked over to the closet, opened the door, and scanned the dark confines with the flashlight.

“I knew they wouldn’t be here,” she said.

“You still haven’t told us what we’re looking for,” Dougie said.

“You’re right,” Christine said. “But I warn you, they’re mine, although I’ll gladly share some of them with all of you as I intend to. Eventually, when it comes time to say farewell, I’ll give you your share as parting gifts. The things which I speak thereof are gold and silver jewelry of every conceivable kind, gems ranging from diamonds and pearls to rubies and sapphires, bundles and bundles of cash, and several gold bars. But, the diaries and the photo albums are mine and mine alone. Those are what I’m looking for in the closet.”

“Wow!” Tawny said.

“We’ll have to search the entire house from the top down,” Christine said. “Be sure to check behind every wall picture for a safe, should there be one. Now, let’s go.”

Dougie went to the attic. Christine worked the second floor. Tawny worked the ground floor. Jimmy meandered about the cellar. After a while, they all converged in the living room and came up empty-handed.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake,” Christine said. “What the hell could she have done with them? Where could she have put them?”

Christine stood and thought for a moment. She tapped her foot, then turned to look outside. She felt blood drain from her face.

“Oh, no,” Christine said with a groan.

“What?” Tawny asked. “You see someone out there?”

“No. There’s no one out there. I just hope she didn’t hide them in the walls or under the floorboards. What if she hid them in the flower garden or buried them somewhere out there or hid them in the porticoes of the gazebo? Oh, no. This is too much.”

“That gazebo over there,” Dougie said as he pointed a finger at it, “was it as you last saw it?”

“No,” Christine said. “One of the porticoes was cracked in the middle with a haphazard stance, you know, like it was ready to break apart and fall to the

ground. The cupola was slanted a little. Now, it looks perfectly fine. See, it's obvious she had something done about that, just like with the ceiling and the floorboard upstairs. It's apparent she had the whole house completely redone. Damn!"

"Well, if it's any consolation, I even looked in toilet tanks," Tawny said. "Sometimes, people put their valuables in plastic bags and hide them there. I also looked in flour canisters, coffee cans, and the freezer, not to mention the drawers, cupboards, and cabinets."

"I checked behind wall pictures," Dougie said. "There was no wall safe anywhere."

"Crap!" Christine said.

"I have a suggestion," Tawny said. "Come to think of it, my mother and grandmother used to keep different stuff in the basement and in the garage."

"I found my gun in the garage a short while back," Christine said.

"Wait a minute. Let me finish. The attic most likely would never do. It's too small and wouldn't hold much. One can't get around too well in cramped spaces, and they're icky anyway with rats and rat droppings, spiders, dust, lack of habitation, and so forth." Tawny shuddered. "Regardless, the gist of it is to look. It may sound coincidental." Tawny shook her head. "Nonetheless, look. You might come across something, you might not. It never hurts to try."

"That's what I told myself last time," Christine said. "What if we don't find anything at all? Oh, man. I can't tear the whole place apart."

"You won't have to," Tawny said. "My mother and grandmother told me they used to hide their valuables in grimy old boxes, and they were always on the bottom of other boxes that had been stacked to the ceiling. Who would have thought such treasures existed at the bottom of the stack in the back of the basement?"

"Yeah, who would've thought?" Christine said. "All right, let's start with the attic, though I doubt we'll find anything. Then we'll do the cellar and the garage."

They sifted through boxes, lifted dusty sheets, looked beneath old chairs and tables, and inspected dark corners.

"Let's check the freezer," Tawny said.

"Be careful," Jimmy said. "There's a plastique in the back of it."

"Jimmy, by any chance, did you look in there?" Christine asked.

"Yes. It's just frozen meat wrapped in paper and plastic."

"But, did you *sift through* them? Look underneath?"

"No! It's too damn cold for my hands."

"Well, we're gonna have to lift these suckers whether we like it or not."

Christine lifted the lid and a draft of cold air with a little mist brushed against

her cheeks. She picked up one package of meat and laid it on the ground. Jimmy, Dougie, and Tawny did the same.

Near the bottom, Dougie lifted one package that was cold but not exactly solid. It had the feel of several small wooden blocks that moved about and rubbed against one another within the package. Dougie tore open the package and bundles of dollar bills tumbled out.

Christine and Tawny gasped at the sight of the money.

“Oh, Dougie!” Christine said. She hugged him. “You found it! My goodness, you found it!”

Christine dug into the freezer and withdrew other packages that contained frozen meat and more bundles of money.

“The suitcase, Jimmy,” Christine said. “Where is it?”

Jimmy ran upstairs to retrieve the suitcase while Christine, Dougie, and Tawny tore through other packages with bundles of money and put them on the ground.

When Jimmy returned, they put the money in the suitcase along with the wrappings so they wouldn’t leave evidence behind. They also rewrapped the meat and tossed them back into the freezer, then closed the lid.

“There may be something in the garage,” Christine said as she carried a second suitcase that was empty. “C’mon, let’s go.”

They went to the garage and looked through boxes.

“Let’s have the boys help us go through the boxes,” Christine said.

“Hallelujah,” Christine said an hour later.

She withdrew the gems from one of the stacked boxes and put them into the second suitcase.

“Okay, guys,” Christine said. “Just keep looking. You’ll get your chance for close-up scrutiny of the goodies after we’re all done here. Again, please don’t take anything. I promise you’ll get your share. Why do I feel like I’m forgetting something?”

“You wanted to check on something before we left,” Dougie said.

“Oh, yeah, that’s right,” Christine said. “Duh me. That would be the kitchen and it’ll be the very last thing right before we leave. You’ll see what I mean.”

After they sifted through more boxes, they finally found Rose’s diaries and photo albums.

“We’ll take the entire box,” Christine said. “So what if she’s one box short. The old she-devil is already one brick short of a load anyway. We’ll be on the beach in Miami by the time she notices some things are missing.” Christine cackled.

They continued to forage through other boxes. They found jewelry in velvet-lined cases placed within cardboard packages.

“We’re getting warmer,” Christine said. “The gold bars must be somewhere. They have to be.”

Tawny rummaged through one box, lifted a small yet heavy parcel thickly wrapped with brown paper. She tore open one end and looked at it with a flashlight. The beam of light bounced off the shiny object and into her eyes.

“Ow!” Tawny said. “Whoa. Would this be it?”

She handed it to Christine, who took it and peeled off the rest of the paper. It revealed a gold bar.

“You did it,” Christine said. “Put ’em in the suitcase with the other stuff.”

When they were done, Jimmy, Dougie, and Tawny waited by the sliding glass door in the sunroom while Christine went into the kitchen and blew out the gas pilots. She turned all the knobs to the ON position. She then bent down close to the tiled floor, pulled open the door to the broiler, and blew out the little blue flame.

She met her friends by the door.

“Mission accomplished.”

47

CHAPTER

Christine and her friends continued to maintain a twenty-four-hour vigil on the house for the next four days. By the fifth day, Christine cursed out of frustration, and by the sixth day, she had a temper tantrum.

“Well, I guess I’ll just dilly-dally till she gets back from wherever the hell she is!” Christine said. “I can’t *staaaaaand* the thought of her and the stinky, rinky-dink cretin that she is! Smell *her!* A dumb-ass, demonic jackal probably gave birth to the frickin’ Cerberus that she is.”

“What’s that?” Tawny asked.

“Hades’s three-headed devil dog in Roman mythology. In Greek mythology, it’s Kerberos, which is basically a multi-headed hellhound, a *terrrrrribly* ugly thing which is supposed to guard the entrance of the netherworld to keep the dead from escaping and the living from entering. At least, the old fuddy-duddy has one foot in the grave already, haw haw. Always coming and going whenever she damn well pleases. Well, not for long. I intend to see that she has *both* feet in the grave—and soon!”

“You said she has servants, right?” Jimmy asked.

“Yeah. So?”

“What if one of them sees the evidence of breaking and entering? You know,

the hole that Dougie made in the sliding glass door near the back of the house.”

“Don’t worry about it, Jimmy. The worst they can do is call the police and squeal. The best I can do is simply kill ’em.”



Later that evening, Christine had more than a few glasses of champagne and called Vivian for no reason other than to relieve her boredom. She hadn’t cared that she neglected to get in touch with Vivian as soon as she found a place to stay. Christine figured she had put it off long enough.

“Hi,” she said to Vivian. “Now, now, before you prattle on, let me just say I apologize for not getting in touch with you sooner. I hope you weren’t sick with worry. I’ve been busy, you know.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Look, I said I was sorry. I *have* been busy.”

“Indeed, you *have* been busy, so much so that you still managed to find a little time on your hands to do something or other.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Why don’t you think about it, Christine? And after you have carefully thought long and hard, call me again sometime.”

“Wait a minute. What are you getting at? Hello? Hello?”

Christine hung up in a huff.

“Stoopid girl,” she said. “No one hangs up on me.”

Aww, poor Miss Sensitive is upset ’cuz I didn’t call her sooner, Christine thought. I’m all verklempt. Wah wah wah. Effin’ crybaby. What could’ve possibly upset her so? Well, I apologized. If she’s still in a tizzy about that thing with my gun, well then, she’ll just have to get over it . . . or shove it where the sun don’t shine. Oh, wait. I know what it is. Vivian’s problem is that she’s still got it in her thick, thick skull that I came to LA just to settle the score with the old geezer. Yes. That’s what it is. Plus, when I took all the jewels and all the money, apparently the old freak-tard figured it out like the slutty sleuth that she is and had the unmitigated gall to come a-knockin’ veeeerrrrryy early that one morning. That’s when I tossed everything over her head. Is that it, Vivvy-Wivvy? Well, gee, I wonder what else it could be that has Vivian acting as if she has a bee in her bonnet? What else am I forgetting? Oohhh, come to think of it, it’s that stoopid needlepoint thing of hers that I mucked up. Her infernal bleedin’ bitch-ass roses. That’s gotta be it. After all, I admit that what I did to it was crude, hee-hee.

Christine sipped some more champagne and called Vivian again.

“Okay, I get it now,” she said to Vivian. “You’re ticked off ’cuz I messed up your needlepointing thingy-wingy.”

Tawny stifled a laugh with a hand clasped to her mouth.

"You sound drunk," Vivian said.

"Well, what can I say?" Christine said.

"Yes, what can you say?"

Drop dead, Christine thought and belched into the phone.

"Well, I apologized," she said.

"That's beside the point and you know it," Vivian said. "You acted irresponsibly and with malice. It hurt me that you deliberately did this. It may not mean anything to you, but it had some meaning to me. I'm just going to let it go. I can always do another one. Just drop it. Forget about it."

"Okay, if you insist."

"I hope you've been keeping yourself busy."

"You still sound huffy."

"Can I help it? Well, at least, without me around, you're staying out of trouble, I hope."

"Of course, Viv. I've been busy with all the endless modeling assignments and auditions and acting workshops and what-have-you. Anyway, um, I want to let you know that I'm staying at the Summerlin Suites Hotel. Actually, I wasn't going to tell you—"

"Oh, thanks a lot."

"Cram it. Now you know where I am in case of an emergency or whatever."

"Well, I hope you can manage," Vivian said. "I mean, isn't that very expensive?"

"As you can see, I still haven't found a place for myself, yet. I assure you, money's no object."

"All right. If you need anything, you know where I am."

"Likewise." Christine hung up. "The frigid nitwit."

Tawny's unexpected shrill laugh startled Christine.

"Hey, it's true," Christine said. "When you think about it, her hubby was killed and she has no children to speak of. After all, her hoo-ha and related entrails are like a frozen tundra."

"Oh, man, you're vicious," Tawny said as her laughter tapered off. "By the way, how are your acting workshops, auditions for TV commercials, and modeling assignments going so far?"

"Eh, things are kinda slow right now."

"Yeah, those things go in cycles, more or less. They slow down, then pick up again, then there's nothing for a while, and so on."

"True that. So, how's it hangin'?" Christine asked Dougie as she came up behind him while he looked through the telescope.

"Short, shriveled, and to the right," Dougie said with a chuckle.

“Haw haw, very funny,” Christine said. “Well, I hope the old harpy isn’t away for too long or else I’ll start looking for her, even if it means chasing her around the world.”



It was now Jimmy’s turn to sit by the window and look through the telescope while Christine slept on the couch after drinking a little too much champagne. He glanced at the TV every so often and waited for the weather girl to appear on the evening news. Finally, she stood before the digital weather map, gave the national and local weather reports, and cautioned local citizens about the impending fire danger.

“Since we’re right on the cusp of summer,” she said, “and the Southland is at the beginning of fire season, officials have put out a red-flag alert that the notorious Santa Anas will bring more heat and drier air in the next few days, starting tomorrow. As you can see here, the high pressure system over the southwestern part of Utah will bring a strong offshore flow, which isn’t very encouraging news. As for the wind advisory, expect winds of up to thirty-five miles per hour with gusts up to fifty miles per hour in the deserts and through the canyons and mountains. Later on in the broadcast, we’ll have someone here to share fire-safety tips with our viewers. Turning to international weather, residents in the West Indies, from Cuba to Grenada, are boarding up as Tropical Storm Aidan continues to gain strength and momentum, traveling north-northwest at seven miles per hour with winds clocked from fifty to sixty miles per hour.”

48

CHAPTER

Vivian stood by the bay window in the front room around 10:30 a.m. and watched trees sway in the wind. She could see that the hot Santa Ana winds had arrived. Blades of grass simulated waves on the front lawn and leaves from nearby shrubbery fluttered.

She pondered, deep in thought. Since being thrown out the second time, her anger surfaced. It had simmered at a steady rate.

I'd like to pop her a good one, Vivian thought in reference to Rose, though she knew she couldn't. *I need to reason with her, whether she likes it or not.*

Vivian figured it may be a waste of time, but at least she had been determined to make an effort to set things right—for her own sake.



Vivian's yellow Honda Civic appeared in Christine's line of vision through the telescope. It rounded the semi-circular drive and stopped by the front door. The driver's door opened and Vivian stood in the bright afternoon light.

"What the hell?" Christine said. "That's my sister! Oh, man, what's she doin' there? She's cracked, I tell ya."



Vivian walked up to the front door and pressed the doorbell, waited a moment, then knocked.

“Hello?” Vivian said. “Anyone home?”

Vivian knocked again, then cocked her head and strained to listen for any sound from within. She looked through the sidelight and cupped her hands to block the glare from the sunlight. She saw no sign of life from within. She rang the bell and knocked on the door once more.

“I’m not leaving until someone answers,” Vivian said. She stood there for several minutes.



“Why is she standing there like a harebrained statue?” Christine asked herself as she continued to watch Vivian. “She might as well have been a hand-carved stone replica of some repressed woman back in ancient Rome, the kind who desperately needed it from a man and finally got it in the nick of time just as Mount Vesuvius blew its top.”



“It’s just like her,” Vivian said, frustrated. She opened her purse and retrieved her keys. “So typical of her to pack her things and take off to who-knows-where. I wouldn’t be surprised if she were staging a second death.”

Vivian went to her car and drove off.



“Well, I guess it’s a good thing the cantankerous shrew and her skeleton crew haven’t returned yet,” Christine said. “I wouldn’t have wanted her home just yet, not with my dumb-ass sister around there like that. *I* want to be the one to personally deal with *her*.”

49

CHAPTER

Clear azure skies and a gentle sea breeze dominated the picture-perfect scenery of Antigua.

Iris stood on the lanai and enjoyed the view of the ocean and the waves. She looked to the southeast, far beyond the horizon.

Peter stepped out into the tropical sunlight and stood next to her.

“Hi,” he said to Iris with a smile.

“Hello, Peter,” she said as she gazed at the ocean.

“Well,” Peter said, “it’s official. Just heard on TV that there’s a tropical storm watch in effect. Forecasters are predicting the storm will be here by the day after tomorrow, unless it shifts course.”

“Yes. That’s what I heard.”

“You okay?”

“Worried. Nervous. Scared, actually. After what we’ve seen of previous hurricanes, I don’t want to be here when this one hits. That’s the hard part.”

“You’re torn between your loyalty to Mrs. Windom and saving your skin, right?”

“Yes. Until now. Even if it means getting terminated.”

“Count me in.”



“You are *not* going anywhere,” Rose said to Iris. “How dare you take it upon yourselves to be excused without a written request in advance.”

“I have family, Mrs. Windom,” Iris said. “So does Peter. It isn’t worth our lives to stay here.”

“Then, by all means, go to your families. Consider yourselves terminated as of this instant.”

“Please, Mrs. Windom,” Peter said. “Be reasonable—”

“Do not tell me to be reasonable!” Rose said. “It is people like you who think the worst instead of attempting to be optimistic. It will blow over, you just watch. Mark my words, we will only get the tail end of it. It just may change course and head somewhere else.”

“With all due respect, Mrs. Windom,” Peter said, “get real.”

Rose’s face reddened with fury.

“So be it,” she said with an unusually eerie calm. “Permission granted to be excused . . . permanently.”



Iris rode in silence as Peter drove a rental car to V.C. Bird International Airport in St. John’s. After they settled into their respective seats on the plane, Iris cried softly. Peter took her hand in his and squeezed it gently.

“Sshhh,” Peter said. “It’s going to be okay.”

“I can’t help but feel bad,” Iris said with a sniffle. She dabbed her eyes with a Kleenex and discreetly blew her nose. “I’ve never been terminated. I don’t know why, but I feel guilty.”

“Oh, come now,” Peter said.

“Well, it’s been fun while it lasted. We got to travel the world, stay at the best places, and dine at the finest restaurants, all at her expense.”

“And we got paid very well, too.”

“Did you ever notice Mrs. Windom never, not once, ever said ‘please’ or ‘thank you’ or ‘you’re welcome’? Almost every word she uttered was a command, like ‘do this,’ ‘do that,’ ‘come here,’ ‘go there,’ as if we were automatons.”

“Yeah,” Peter said with a nod. “She’s got the makings of a tyrant, I’ll grant you that. I was wise to have always kept to myself and stay out of trouble, hence the façade of indifference you’ve may have observed all those years.”

“Who are we going to use for a reference?” Iris asked. “Mrs. Windom would

make us look bad.”

“Don’t worry. We’ve got each other. We can manage.”

“I guess I’ll just cop out and make it easier for myself. ‘Reason For Leaving: Previous employer croaked of natural causes.’”

“That’s the spirit,” Peter said with an affectionate chuckle.

He lifted her hand in his, planted a soft kiss on the back of it, and winked at her.



Rose picked up her cell phone and called the landline number at the Hutchins’s residence. The line rang without an answer.

“Where is Dolph?” Rose said.

She dialed his cell number.

I need to inform him that Peter and Iris have been terminated, she thought, and that they are to get their personal belongings out of the house and leave.

Dolph’s phone rang and rang and rang.

Why is Dolph not answering? Rose thought, baffled. What is going on? Have Peter and Iris contacted him to let him know what’s been going on? Has he sided with them in their spiteful rebellion against me?

50

CHAPTER

Fifty-mile-per-hour gusts blew through the San Fernando Valley. Lights flickered while Vivian ate her dinner of homemade lasagna, peas and baby carrots, a garden salad with Italian dressing, and seasoned garlic bread. Vivian hoped there wouldn't be a power outage.

As she reasoned with herself, she realized that her actions earlier in the day had been founded on delayed anger. She felt compelled to stand up and fight for what was right, just, and fair. Now she knew how Christine felt.

The window panes rattled and the lights flickered again.

51

CHAPTER

Peter and Iris disembarked from the plane at Bob Hope Airport in Burbank, California. Peter called Dolph and his frustration grew when the phone rang incessantly. He hung up and redialed.

“Where is he?” Peter said as he listened to the endless succession of rings. “We should’ve contacted him before we left Antigua,” he said to Iris, then hung up.

“He might be in the restroom,” Iris said, “or he could be outside doing some yard work.”

“Yeah. It’s possible he might be out on an errand, also. I’ll give it a few more tries, otherwise we’ll just get a cab. I was hoping he would pick us up.”



The yellow taxi rounded the semi-circular drive and stopped by the front door of the Hutchins’s residence. Iris and Peter exited the cab and pulled their luggage from the trunk with the cabbie’s help.

Peter unlocked and opened the door. He reflexively recoiled and fanned the air before him with a wave of his hand. He groped for the light switch and the porch light came on.

“Something’s wrong,” Peter said to Iris. “The whole house reeks of gas.”

52

CHAPTER

The telescope had been left unattended.

Christine and her friends finished the remnants of an Italian takeout dinner which consisted of chicken Florentine, fettuccine pesto, and lasagna with a side of antipasto salad. Now the boys lounged in front of the TV while the girls rinsed plates and stacked them in the dish rack.

“Oh, I shouldn’t be away from the window for this long,” Tawny said to Christine. She shook excess water off her hands. “Dougie?”

“Yeah?”

“Would you be a dear and go peek through the scope for me? I’m busy at the moment with my hands wet.”

Dougie sauntered to the window and looked through the lens. He saw the yellow cab roll down the end of the driveway. It turned onto a street and disappeared from his field of vision. He also saw Peter and Iris standing and talking at the front door with luggage on the ground.

“Oh, damn!” Dougie said. “They’re back!”

“What?” Jimmy said.

“Hey, Christine!” Dougie said. “C’mere! They’re back!”

Christine dropped the dish towel onto the kitchen counter and ran to the

window. Dougie stepped away from the telescope to let Christine look through it.

“Crap!” Christine said.

She saw that the lights had been turned on at the ground floor and at the east wing of the second floor. Peter and Iris had gone inside to open windows. Christine did not see Rose anywhere.

“They’re opening all the windows, though I don’t see the madam of the house,” Christine said. “Where the hell is she? She’s gotta be inside. I take it she’s resting. She’s probably dipping her arthritic toe in lukewarm bath water as we speak. Damn!” Christine pounded her fist into the palm of her other hand.

“I’m sorry,” Tawny said. “It’s my fault for stepping away for a few minutes to help you with the dishes.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Christine looked out the window. “At least, she wasn’t gone for months on end, which I’m grateful for. Well, it’s time to fight fire with fire. Let’s use the launcher.”

“*Are you kidding?*” Jimmy asked. “Everyone between here and there would see a flying missile and call Washington!”

Dougie chuckled.

“What’s so funny?” Christine asked with a sneer.

“Oh, can you imagine?” Dougie said, still chuckling. “People along Ventura Boulevard and the 101 Freeway seeing a fiery object whiz over them. They’d think it was a meteor or a UFO.” Dougie continued to chuckle.

“Or a SCUD missile,” Jimmy said.

Dougie laughed.

“Ready?” Christine asked.

“Maybe we shouldn’t,” Tawny said. “Not with the high winds and the fire danger.”

“All right,” Christine said, “forget the launcher then. Get the detonator. *Now.*”

“What’s your hurry?” Jimmy asked.

“If I can’t have it, neither can she.”

“But you got everything else you wanted.”

“I didn’t get the house.”

Jimmy went to the suitcase on the floor by the sofa and retrieved the detonator. He went back to the window and eyed Christine for a moment. Christine nodded in return. Jimmy looked through the viewfinder, then out the window. Christine blinked her eyes several times in rapid succession and slowly licked her lips. Her heart palpitated with nervous excitement.



Vivian picked up a battery-operated fluorescent lamp and a flashlight from the floor in the bedroom closet and carried them to the other end of the room. She set them on the bed, then went to the window. She watched trees sway and bend in the night.

Shadows cast by phosphorescent light from street lamps moved erratically along streets, sidewalks, rooftops, and walls of homes. She listened to the winds.



“Okay,” Christine said under her breath. “Let ’er blow.”

Jimmy poised his thumb over the red button and—

“Wait!” Christine said as she immediately thrust out her arm, palm forward and fingers splayed.



While Iris sifted through suitcases in the living room, Peter went to the sunroom toward the back of the house to unlock and open the sliding glass doors. He noticed a gaping hole near the brass door handle.

“Call the police,” Peter said as he briskly strode to the living room. “There’s been a break-in while we were gone. Maybe that explains why the house reeks of gas. I’m going to check the grounds.”

Iris picked up her cell phone and dialed 911.



“Gimme the detonator!” Christine said. She held out her hand, palm up. “I wanna do it.”

Jimmy handed it to her and recoiled when she grabbed it from him forcefully. She looked out the window and eyed the Hutchins’s residence.

“Fare thee well . . . bitch.”

She pressed the red button.

Bright yellow-white flames lit up within the walls of the house and rapidly spread through every room.

“Thar she blows!”

Windows and walls blew out with such incredible force that even the Weavers’

windows imploded, as did the windows of another house on the other side of the Hutchins's residence. Debris sailed in the air and dispersed everywhere. Thunder from the explosion reverberated throughout the neighborhood and the whole hill shook.

The image of a tremendous orange ball of fire that shot thirty-five feet into the air reflected in the cornea of Christine's one eye.

Clouds of thick black smoke billowed into the night sky and drifted with the winds. Flames perilously licked the hillside. The corners of Christine's lips stretched to a wide face-splitting grin.

"Yeee-Haaaw!" Christine said. "Hoogah-boogah, hoogah-boogah, hoogah-boogah!"

Jimmy, Dougie, and Tawny watched the inferno spread along the hill as the winds fanned the flames.

"Thus perished Rose Hutchins," Christine said.

53

CHAPTER

Vivian stood by the window and flinched when she saw the bright white-yellow flash on the side of the hill.

A low rumble followed that sounded like thunder. She saw thick, black smoke belch upward into the sky. She sighed and blinked in disbelief. She wondered what may have happened.



Christine laughed, jumped with joy, and twerked her butt off.

“I did it! I finally did it!” Christine said. “Yesterday, she was alive. Tonight, she is dead. Yahooooo, mofo!”

Christine executed a gangsta-style wave with her arms along with a two-hand peace sign and crossed them at the wrists.

“Boo-yeah!” she said and flipped both middle fingers.

They all laughed.

“C’mon,” Christine said. “Let’s get our things and beat it. Go, go, go!”

They scrambled for their luggage and stepped out into the hot, windy night. They looked to the west where Rose Hutchins’s home had stood moments ago

and observed several houses go up in flames as the fierce Santa Anas fanned the fires. The conflagration kindled and burned trees, shrubs, and homes. Sirens screamed in the night. Strokes of red lights flashed and pulsed as several fire engines arrived at the scene of the impending crisis.

“Burn in Hell,” Christine said. “The ninth circle, that is. For eternity.”

They stopped by Dougie’s car for a few minutes while he put luggage in the trunk.

“My convertible’s over there,” Christine said. She pointed to the third tier of the parking structure.

“I’ll go with you,” Jimmy said.

“Be right back,” Christine said to Dougie and Tawny.

Jimmy helped load her luggage into the trunk. Christine turned to Jimmy and brushed strands of hair from her face as the winds continued to blow. She gazed at him with a smile.

“Thank you, Jimmy,” Christine said and hugged him.

He returned the embrace.

“Thank you again for coming to help,” she said. “I appreciate it.”

“Sure,” he said with a nod. “Anytime.”

“Well, I’m going to be staying with Dougie and Tawny for about a week or so, then after that, I’ll come up to see you. Okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll definitely get paid. I’ve actually thought about moving to New York for good. I would like to be on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and to be closer to you. As a matter of fact, I’ve thought about getting a condo there.”

“Cool. But, I’m quite a ways from the Upper West Side.”

“Oh, no prob. It’s cool. See ya soon.” Christine hugged him once more. “It’s been a blast. *Literally*. Take care, Jimmy.” She planted a kiss on his cheek and hopped in her car.

“Ready?” Tawny asked from the passenger’s seat when Christine pulled up next to Dougie’s car.

Christine turned to face Tawny and nodded with a smile, then watched the conflagration before her as she stared through the windshield. Transfixed, she observed flames shoot thirty feet in the air and ignite everything in its path.

After a few moments, they were on their way to Florida while Jimmy drove to New York.

54

CHAPTER

Rose woke up the following morning and glanced out the bedroom window. She noticed puffs of cumulus clouds in the Caribbean sky.

She listened to the international news on TV while she brewed some tea.

“. . . the Japanese Nikkei dropped 201.62 points or minus 1.41 percent to 14,096.59,” the anchorman said. “Turning to American news, more firefighters in California have been called to the scene of the inferno as wind-whipped flames continue to spread. The fires are traveling perilously at five miles per hour, burning everything in its path, damaging property, and destroying homes as well as dry brush. So far, no fatalities have been reported. However, there are reports of minor injuries and twenty-two homes have been damaged or destroyed. Shifting winds have made firefighting difficult and northerly thirty-five-mile-per-hour winds with gusts up to fifty are driving flames up one major populated hill known as the Santa Monica Mountains, threatening homes and properties.”

Rose poured hot tea into a cup and sipped it. News of the firestorm made her concerned about her house. She hoped the fires did not go anywhere near it.

“We’ll have updates throughout the day as the firestorm rages out of control,” the anchorman said. “And we have the latest on Hurricane Aidan, now churning at eighty-five miles per hour and continuously gaining strength and momentum

DARYL HAJEK

as it travels west-northwest at ten miles per hour. A hurricane warning has been issued and the storm is expected to make landfall some time the day after tomorrow. The storm surge—”

Irritated, Rose shut off the TV with the remote and drank the rest of her tea.

55

CHAPTER

Thick, black smoke drifted south as the fires raged on. Vivian shook her head pensively. She sat on the loveseat with her face in her hands.

“It’s hopeless,” Vivian said to herself. “Why do I feel as if all is lost?” She reminded herself that when conditions seemed bleakest, a silver lining appeared. Despite all that had happened these last several weeks, she felt as if she couldn’t keep up with it anymore.

“I must be a walking bad luck charm,” Vivian said. “It seems that wherever I go, disaster follows. Well, I shouldn’t feel as if I’m to blame.” She realized she was being ridiculous. She knew she hadn’t done anything wrong except to move back into Rose’s house seven years ago.

“Gosh, I so loved that house,” she said as she choked back a tear. She recalled how she had worked so hard and had put so much love and money into it. She told herself it was time to close this chapter and move on and that she should stop worrying about Christine, Rose, and the beloved house.

“There’s me to think about,” Vivian said. “What do I do now? Where do I go? Where *could* I go?”

Vivian hadn’t the faintest idea. She knew that she couldn’t stay here forever. She didn’t know if she still wanted to be here or anywhere else in Los Angeles or

in California.

I'll just have to think about it for a while, she thought.

All she knew was that she would like a change of scenery. She sat in silence for a while, deep in thought.



“Here’s the latest on the Southland firestorm,” a reporter said. “Firefighters are continuing to fight the fires as winds finally begin to subside. Officials expect to have containment by tonight. So far, there have been thirty-seven homes damaged or destroyed, five casualties, and injuries ranging from minor burns to third-degree burns. We’ll have an update on the situation throughout this newscast. Right now, it’s still hot with clear blue skies, and it’s ninety-two degrees right here in Studio City. We have winds going at twenty-five to thirty miles per hour with gusts of up to forty miles per hour. Coming up is the latest on Hurricane Aidan, right after these messages.”

56

CHAPTER

Gigantic cumulus clouds heavily laden with rain rolled west-northwest at twelve miles per hour as they approached the green sloping mounds of the Leeward Islands.

Winds picked up speed and palm trees swayed as Rose viewed the scenery through the window from the drawing room. She could see tides ebb higher than normal as the skies became more ominous.

Rose went to the closet adjacent to the front door and withdrew a battery-operated LED lamp and extra batteries which were next to a portable digital AM/FM radio.

“I still say we are going to get the tail end of it as it blows over,” Rose said to herself. She closed the door and returned to the drawing room where she set the lamp on a rolltop desk.

It had been forecast that the hurricane would make landfall by mid-morning or early afternoon the next day. Officials issued warnings, special instructions, and addresses and phone numbers of local shelters.

As the day turned to night, torrential rains fell on the island of Antigua and ferocious winds howled. Walls of homes and other structures creaked from the pressure of the winds. Waves slammed the shorelines, boats and yachts rocked in

their docks, and all the grassy grounds became sodden. Windows rattled, street lamps and telephone poles wobbled. Palm trees swayed wildly, lightning slashed the sky, and thunder ruled the air.

The ruckus made sleeping difficult for Rose. Agitated, she tossed and turned on the bed and listened to the sounds of a relentless, unmerciful hurricane. Booming claps of thunder irritated her all the more.



Rose woke up with a jerk when a patio chair banged against the side of the house. She yanked the covers off, flicked on the LED lamp, and turned on the radio.

She was withdrawing a box of tea bags from the kitchen cupboard when the drawing room window imploded. The noise and wind startled Rose and jangled her nerves. Thick wind-whipped pellets of rain blew into the room and splattered on the carpet and furniture. Rose peered into the drawing room and observed the wet mess the storm began to create.

Rose looked around the room and listened to the roar of the winds as the lights flickered. The radio emitted static. According to reports, the eye of the storm was approximately eight miles from the island of Antigua and a storm-surge warning had been placed in effect.

Tiles ripped off the roof. A large branch with palm fronds blew in through the open window into the drawing room. Rose panicked and felt powerless.

Several minutes later, one wall creaked and groaned loudly. It crumbled as Rose stood in the middle of the drawing room. Driving rain pelted her body and harsh winds ruffled her bathrobe as she ducked her head and shielded it with raised arms. The remainder of the wall tumbled into the living room and the roof caved in.

Rose screamed in terror as the collapsing roof forced her to her knees. Cinderblocks of plaster and wood fell on her as well as around her. A ceiling beam fell and slammed her from behind, which knocked the breath out of her and shoved her flat to the ground. Her turban tumbled from her head and plopped on to the floor a few feet before her. A thin stream of blood oozed from a small gash on her forehead. Her cheeks, hands, and arms sustained lacerations. Blood also trickled from one nostril as she lay on the wet floor.

The fury of high winds and torrential rain continued its relentless assault on Rose's private resort.

57

CHAPTER

It had been clear, sunny, and sultry in Miami where Christine, Dougie, and Tawny lay on the beach and watched people go about their business.

Dougie lay on a dark-blue beach towel with a pair of shades perched on the bridge of his nose as he listened to music streaming from his electronic tablet. Christine and Tawny ogled the men along the beachfront as they made comments and discreetly pointed at them. They observed the girls as well and compared their own physiques to other girls who walked up and down the shoreline.

Christine looked to the southeast. She tried to see as far past the horizon as she could. Sailboats dotted the ocean in sporadic places. The gentle sea breeze fluffed her hair and sunlight reflected off the ocean, which glimmered like diamonds and pearls.

“If it comes this way, I’m taking off,” Christine said.

“What?” Tawny said.

“Hurricane Aidan.”

“Oh, yeah. Rad, huh? Awesome what it did to some of those islands out in the Caribbean.”

“I’m serious. I wouldn’t want to be caught dead in a hurricane. Soon as it heads this way, if and when it does, I’m heading straight to New York. *Pronto.*”

“Well, we’re staying. We have no choice.”

“I understand. We’ll just have to wait and see which way the wind blows—
pun unintended.”

“Eh, what the heck? It’s been fun while it lasted, right?”

“Yep. It sure has.”

While the girls talked, Christine brainstormed as to her strategy for when she would get to New York. She didn’t share her true plans with Tawny.

58

CHAPTER

Puffy clouds dotted the skies and moderate winds wafted by.

A search party with specially trained dogs sifted through hard-hit areas of Antigua several hours after Hurricane Aidan had blown through.

Chuck and Edward, two search party members, carefully trod the premises and cautiously lifted fallen ceiling beams, chunks of the roof, and portions of a crumbled wall.

They found Rose where she had lain for the last several hours. Scraggly wisps of hair protruded from her nearly bald scalp. Her face, hands, and bathrobe were caked with dried mud and coagulated blood. Puddles of water and other wind-tossed debris blanketed the drawing room. Chuck walked over to Rose and carefully removed the ceiling beam from her back and threw it aside.

“Ma’am?” Chuck said as he hunkered down on one knee. “Ma’am? Can you hear me?”

He placed two fingers on the side of her neck and felt a faint pulse.

“Call for an ambulance,” Chuck said to Edward. “She’s alive, but her pulse is weak.”

Edward lifted a walkie-talkie from his waistband. When the ambulance arrived moments later, EMT personnel placed Rose on a stretcher and drove to

the hospital.

When Chuck painstakingly sifted through the house for hours, he found Rose's purse which had been on the floor by the rolltop desk. He rummaged through it and withdrew two wallets. He opened the first one. An ID card and some credit cards acknowledged this Jane Doe to be Julia S. Windom of La Jolla, California. He held on to the wallet and flipped through the second wallet.

"What the hell?" Chuck said.

The ID card and credit cards contained information that differed from the first set. He found the woman was also Rose Hutchins of Studio City, California.

"Well, I'll be damned," Chuck said.

59

CHAPTER

Christine handed both Tawny and Dougie a brown paper bag.

“There you go,” Christine said. “Just as I promised.”

“Thanks,” Tawny said. She thrust her hand in the bag and withdrew a fistful of sparkling gems and jewelry. “Wow!”

Dougie withdrew several bundles of wrapped dollar bills from his bag and fanned one bundle with his thumb.

“As Tawny usually says,” he said, “Rad!”

“I’ve decided to keep the gold bars,” Christine said. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“Oh, not at all,” Tawny said. “These’ll do just fine. Ooohh, baby! Come to Mama!” She brought her hand to her face and placed the cool surface of the gems on her cheek.

“I’ll take these any day,” Dougie said.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Tawny said. “*You’ll* take these any day? I don’t think so.” Tawny kissed him on the cheek and took one bundle of dollar bills from him. “We share and share alike.”

Dougie rolled his eyes.

“Well,” Christine said, “I’m gonna be off soon to see Jimmy. I want to thank you both so much for your help and for your friendship.”

“We’re gonna miss you,” Tawny said. “Please don’t go so long between visits.”

“I won’t. Once I find a place and get settled, you’ll get to come up and see me again. I’ll definitely have a housewarming party. In the meantime, I’ll be staying with Jimmy for a short while. Just call me when the mood strikes you.”

“Will do,” Tawny said as she embraced Christine. “You’re simply the best.”

“I know.” Christine gave Tawny a mischievous wink. “How could I afford not to be, hmm? Hey, Dougie. Huggie huggie huggie!” She laughed as she hugged him.

“Well . . .” Christine said. “This is it.”

“Take care,” Dougie said. “Be good.” He winked with a mischievous smile and a cluck of his tongue.

Christine groaned and rolled her eyes. *Bye*, she mouthed silently with a wave and walked out the door.

60

CHAPTER

Vivian stayed up to watch the news at 11:00 p.m. John Bowman reported a new development stemming from the recent firestorm.

“Fire officials have determined the cause of the explosion to be an act of malice,” John Bowman said. “Investigators have found evidence of arson. Fragments of an incendiary device with chemical residue suggest a powerful explosive of some type, which officials have taken to the forensics lab for analysis. The local fire chief expressed suspicion of murder by way of arson, and officials aren’t saying what device was used until chemical tests have been concluded. Two charred bodies were found amidst the rubble, burned beyond recognition. Dental records will be used to identify the victims. Police don’t have any suspects at this time but encourage anyone to come forward with any information that may be helpful in this case.”

Vivian wondered if Christine may have had anything to do with the explosion, either directly or indirectly.

No, she thought. That’s stretching the imagination. She’d been staying at a hotel by herself all this time. She’s one person. But then again, that’s all it takes—just one person. Sister or not, suppose she did it, and how would she have gone about it?

You shouldn’t be speculating, a different voice said.

Christine would have to have a very, very good reason for doing so, Vivian thought.

Maybe she did, the other voice said. It's obvious she had a reason, valid or not.

I'm sure she had more than a reason. She also had opportunity and motive. I know how Christine is. I've seen what she's capable of, seen what she's done. Again, I know I shouldn't be surmising. I know there isn't a shred of proof. I don't believe where this is going. Vivian shook her head in disgust. My thoughts are becoming muddled. I'm going to bed.

She rose from the loveseat in the front room, switched off the TV with the remote, and went upstairs.

How about calling the police? she thought as she reached the top of the stairs. All of a sudden, I feel compelled to call the police.

You wouldn't dare, the inner voice said in a menacing tone.

Oh, yes, I would.

Would you tattle on your baby sister?

I have my suspicions. It's possible she may have had something to do with it. Who else would plant a bomb, or whatever it was, in that house and let it go off like that?

You're basing all this on circumstance. You'd be wasting your time and making a fool of yourself.

Maybe. But what if I'm right?

What if you're wrong?

61

CHAPTER

Christine checked into a hotel in New York and called Jimmy.

“You can come over any time,” she said. “I don’t mind. I’d really enjoy your company, and I just want to thank you and pay you. I have the goods here with me.”

“Be right there,” Jimmy said.

She shrieked with delight when she opened the door and saw Jimmy twenty minutes later. She jumped on him and wrapped her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck. She planted her lips firmly on his.

“Wha—?” Jimmy said with a look of confusion. He blinked a few times.

Christine smiled and pecked him on the cheek.

“Oh, Jimmy!” She said as she laughed with joy. “I’m so happy. It’s good to see you again.” She kissed him once more.

“What’s gotten into you?”

Jimmy stepped over the threshold and closed the door behind him with a gentle push of his foot while Christine clung to him. He walked into the middle of the room.

“Oh, I just miss you,” Christine said, “even if it was for more than a week. I love you as a friend, and I like you in ways you may have not been aware of.”

“Oh?”

“You see, it goes like this. I want you to do me. Now. Right this instant.”

Christine put her hands on his face and drew his face closer to hers and kissed him.

“It’s been a long while since I’ve been with anyone,” Christine said. She planted a quick kiss on the tip of his nose. “I want to give you more than just the goods.”

The breath went out of Jimmy.

CHAPTER 62

“I repeat, I’m not all that certain,” Vivian said into the phone. “I’m basing it purely on speculation, just as I told you what had gone on before, but it all seems to tie together somehow.”

“All right,” Officer Schaeffer said, one of the police offers at the North Hollywood Police Department. “Do you know where she is?”

“When I last spoke with her, she said she was staying at the Summerlin Suites Hotel in Universal City.”



“Good afternoon. Thank you for calling Summerlin Suites, this is Curtis. How may I help you?”

“Good afternoon,” Vivian said. “Could you connect me to Christine Hutchins’s room,?”

“Yes, ma’am. One moment, please. I’m sorry, ma’am, but there isn’t a Christine Hutchins registered with this hotel.”

The blood drained from Vivian’s face.

“Are you sure about that, sir?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I see,” Vivian said more to herself than to Curtis. “Well, thank you anyway.”

Did Christine lie about staying at the hotel all this time? Vivian wondered.

63

CHAPTER

Jimmy slept next to Christine when she stirred awake the following morning. She stretched and yawned, then turned to look at Jimmy for a few moments.

She lightly caressed the outline of his facial contours with the tip of her finger, then trailed down the side of his neck and over his biceps. Jimmy stirred in his sleep. Christine smiled with adoration for him and quietly eased herself out of bed. She went into the bathroom down the hall and took a shower. As the hot water pelted her and the steam enveloped her, she thought about her plans for today.

Afterward, she put on a little make-up and change of clothes, then collected her paraphernalia. She sat on an office chair adjacent to Jimmy's computer desk, slipped on her walking shoes and tied them. She then went to one side of the room where she pulled out a couple of brown paper bags from her handbag and placed them on the night table. One bag contained several wrapped bundles of money and the other had jewels and gems.

She wrote a note and put it next to the two bags.

Dearest Jimmy,

Muchos gracias for everything. Here is your payment. You've been more than generous. Your time and patience with me are most sincerely appreciated. You're simply the best (but I'm better than you, ha-ha).

It's been great! Stay in touch and take care.

Hugz 'n lixxx,

—Christine



Christine left Jimmy's place and drove to the Upper West Side. By mid-afternoon, she was exhausted and irritable when she came to the tenth high-rise condo that day. A "For Lease" sign stood out front. She parked her convertible at the visitors' spot in the parking structure and went inside the swanky lobby.

She looked at the one-bedroom/one bathroom unit on the eleventh floor and liked what she saw. She filled out an application and waited while the assistant manager ran a credit check. Upon approval, she paid the deposit in cash.

Now I can get started on my plan, Christine thought. *The sooner, the better.*

64

CHAPTER

Rose lay in the hospital bed with an oxygen tube, a neck brace, and an IV drip line.

The heart monitor off to one side beeped monotonously. A green hospital cap covered her head in lieu of her turban.

A nurse adjusted the dial connected to the IV tube. Dr. Norris checked Rose's pulse, then lifted each eyelid and looked at each pupil with a penlight. He picked up the patient's chart from the wheeled food tray, skimmed over it, and jotted down some notes.

"What is her current status, Dr. Norris?" the nurse asked.

"Her condition is critical," he said. "But with a little progress, her condition may be upgraded to serious."

65

CHAPTER

Delivery men brought furniture into Christine's condo.

Later, Christine shopped at a local department store for kitchenware and bathroom accessories. At the grocery market, she bought items of necessity and picked up a copy of *On Screen* magazine at the checkout counter. She scanned the back pages for the classifieds and saw several ads with boldfaced headlines. Some offered typing and word-processing services for treatments, manuscripts, screenplays, résumés, and so forth. Later, she stopped at an electronics store where she bought an all-in-one computer and an all-in-one printer.

Christine returned to the condo and turned on the TV as she put the groceries away. A talk show ended as credits rolled and whimsical music played while audience members clapped. A commercial break came on followed by a news brief.

“Good afternoon, everyone. I’m Patricia Vargas and coming up, we’ll have a shocking report of a legendary actress who had been presumed dead for more than twenty years and is now in the process of recuperating from a devastating hurricane that tore through parts of the Caribbean more than a week ago. Also, we’ll have more stories and an update of a bank heist gone awry, plus all the news, traffic, weather, and sports in a moment.”

The phrase “a legendary actress who had been presumed dead for more than twenty years” repeated in her head a few times. Christine wondered who it could have been, then shrugged indifferently, as if she cared. She went into the living room and sat on the couch, then skimmed through the pages of *On Screen* magazine.

“Good afternoon, I’m Bruce McGuire,” said the anchorman.

“And I’m Patricia Vargas. We have a shocking report of a legendary Hollywood actress and former magazine model. It begins on the island of Antigua where Rose Hutchins—” Christine’s head snapped up “—also known as Julia Windom, survived devastating blows from Hurricane Aidan, which tore through the Caribbean some time last week.”

“*What?*” Christine’s eyes were riveted to the screen.

“We have this report from Teri Atherton who’s standing by in the newsroom with details. Teri?”

“Patricia, this incredible story of deceit, selfishness, and survival merely boggles the mind. Rose Hutchins had been purportedly killed in a plane crash at Heathrow Airport twenty-two years ago on October 12, 1992.

“As recent as a few days ago,” Teri continued, “she was discovered lying unconscious in a private resort in Antigua where she is presumed to have lived all these years. She is currently at a hospital in St. John’s where she has recovered consciousness and is listed in critical condition. Doctors say her condition eventually will improve within time. Security personnel have been posted outside her room to prevent visitors—”

Christine stopped listening. Her heart palpitated and her world spun. She felt dissociated from her body. She had assumed Rose had been in the house during the explosion. Fury rapidly replaced shock and disbelief. Blood rushed to her face.

“I don’t believe it,” Christine said. “I *don’t* believe it!” Her chest heaved as she hyperventilated for a few moments. She seethed with unbridled rage. “You mean to tell me she’s back from the dead—*again?* She’s still *alive*, damn it! She should’ve been in the house! Why wasn’t she in the house?”

She hurled the magazine at the TV and threw two sofa pillows across the room. Tears streamed down her ruddy cheeks.

Moments later, Christine was pacing the living room. “Damn!” she said.

She called Universal Airways. “I would like to reserve a one-person round-trip flight from New York City to St. John’s, Antigua. I don’t care about the day or time. I want the next available flight.”

“One moment, please. This would be a chartered flight—”

“*I don’t care!*” Christine said. “I just want the next available flight as soon as possible!”

66

CHAPTER

Christine landed in Antigua approximately four hours later.

I'm so sick of this hotel/motel crap, she thought as she drove to the nearest hotel in a rented car. Seems like all I ever do anymore is travel. This is the last time I'll be doing this sort of crap, once I bump off the old douche bag for good. I just can't believe she wasn't at the house when it blew.

At the hotel, she washed her face, pinned her hair back and covered it with a knitted beanie cap, then donned a pair of cheap drugstore reading glasses and drove to the nearest hospital.

At the hospital, Christine went to the nurses' station.

"Hi, I'm Sharon Cruickshank," Christine said to one nurse. "I'm Rose Hutchins's great-niece. Rose is my maternal grandmother's sister. I'm her only living relative and I just flew in straight from Miami as soon as I heard about what happened."

"Hard to believe, huh?" the nurse said.

"I have never been so astounded and relieved as I was when the news broke. All those years, the family thought she was dead. Please, let me see her. Is she all right?"

"Well, based on what they've been saying on the news with updates regarding

her condition,” the nurse said, “we know she’ll be okay, but she’s not here. She’s at St. John’s Medical Center, which is about twenty minutes across town.”

“Oh,” Christine said. She blushed with embarrassment. “I’m sorry. I feel so stupid.”

“Don’t be. I understand. I just hope security will let you through.”

“Oh, I’m sure they will. After all, I *am* her blood relative. Well, thank you so much. Your help is appreciated. Thanks again.”

“You’re welcome and good luck.”

Christine sped to St. John’s Medical Center. She saw news vans and a throng of reporters when she entered the parking lot.

“Typical of rabid, news-hungry media hounds licking their chops,” Christine said. She shook her head in disgust as she parked her car.

“Excuse me, please,” she said as she wound her way through the crowd of reporters. “Pardon me. Thank you.”

She breezed through the automatic sliding doors and quickly took in the surroundings. The waiting area was off to her left, the nurses’ station to her right, and a long, wide corridor led to offices and examination rooms before her. Christine put on a nervous, worried expression, and sidled up to the nurses’ station.

“Hi,” she said to a group of three nurses who stood there. “Excuse me. I’m Michelle Ferguson, Rose Hutchins’s step-granddaughter. Rose is my late stepfather’s mother. I’m her only living relative and I just flew in straight from Chicago as soon as I heard about what happened.”

“May I see some identification, please?” the head nurse asked Christine.

Oh, damn! Christine thought. *I should’ve thought that they might ask for an ID.*

The head nurse noticed Christine’s momentary hesitation.

“It’s for security reasons, as you can see,” the head nurse said.

“Oh, uh . . .” Christine stammered nervously. “I see. Uh, just a sec, please.” She opened her handbag and fumbled within for her wallet. She pulled out her ID card and handed it to the head nurse.

“I have never been so astounded and relieved as I was when the news broke,” Christine said. “Please, let me see her. Is she all right?”

She looked away with nervous eyes and bit her lower lip. She felt like a fool for not having come prepared to be asked for identification.

“It says here your name is Christine Desirée Hutchins,” the head nurse said as she eyed Christine with suspicion.

“What? I’m sorry. Did I give you my name as Michelle Ferguson? Oh, pardon the flub. Michelle Ferguson is the name of a character I’ve been playing. I’m a stage actress. I do small theater and off-off-Broadway productions. I’m just

starting out now that my modeling career is on hold.”

“Like grandmother, like granddaughter, eh?”

“Yeah, well, it goes with the territory, I guess,” Christine said with a shrug of indifference.

“All right,” the head nurse said with a nod. She handed the ID card back to Christine. “Take the elevator to the second floor, make a right at the first corner you come to, and she’ll be down the corridor to your left. You’ll see a security guard by the door. He’ll ask for identification.” She gave an apologetic shrug. “Security is tight.”

“I understand. Thank you very much. I appreciate it.”



Christine stepped off the elevator on the second floor. She walked down the corridor and made a right at the first corner. She hesitated for a second when she saw the security guard by the door. Christine slowed her pace and took a deep breath.

“Hi, uh, I’m Christine Hutchins,” she reluctantly said to the security guard. She didn’t want to give her real name. “I’m Rose Hutchins’s step-granddaughter.” She pulled out her wallet and showed her ID card. “I just spoke with the head nurse who said I could come up and see the patient. This can be verified with her, if you have any questions, unless there’s a problem.”

The security guard closely scrutinized the ID card and nodded with consent. “Five minutes,” he said.

“Thanks.”

Christine gently pushed open the door and quietly stepped inside. A nurse sat on a chair by the bed and read a novel. She looked up and saw Christine.

“I’m her step-granddaughter,” Christine said. “I was granted permission to see her.”

The nurse nodded.

“I’d like to be alone,” Christine said, “if that’d be all right.”

“Just for a few minutes,” the nurse said and left.

Christine looked at Rose, who lay in bed with her eyes closed. It took all of Christine’s strength not to laugh when she observed Rose without her trademark turban.

Christine faked sadness as she approached the bed to get a closer look. She examined the heart monitor dials and the other medical equipment. She placed a finger and thumb on one dial. She shook her head with uncertainty and looked at the clear, plastic bag of saline hanging from the arm of the metal pole. She

walked over to it, reached up, and gently squeezed the bag, then lowered her arm and placed her hand around the dial on the IV dispenser. She moved the dial a few notches with her thumb. The pace of drips increased. She turned the dial the other way which slowed the drips to its normal pace, then to a stop. She glanced at her watch and looked around the room.

Christine went to an empty bed on the other side and picked up a pillow, then returned to where Rose lay. She stood with her back to the door and held the pillow with both hands and slowly raised it to chest level.

The door opened and Christine froze.

“Your five minutes are up, ma’am,” the security guard said.

With her back still to the door, Christine pretended to choke back a tear. She hugged the pillow. She cleared her throat. “Thank you,” she said. “Just give me a minute and I’ll be right out.” She hugged the pillow again and drew in her shoulders with a snuffle. She heard the door slowly close.

Bastard, she thought.

She returned the pillow to the other bed, then went back to where she stood and gawked at Rose.

I don’t have a lot of time, Christine thought, and there’s no sense pushing my luck here, either. I’d still love to do her in with my bare hands, and I’d hate it if she were to die of natural causes, especially from her injuries. Well, I gotta get back and focus on getting my manuscript published.

“I’ll get back at’cha later, ya mangy old cur,” Christine said.

67

CHAPTER

Christine browsed the back pages of *On Screen* magazine the next day. With a red marker, she circled an ad with borders and centered text:

PRIME TYPE
*Manuscripts * Screenplays * Treatments*
*Résumés * Correspondences * Reports*
A Professional Typing Service
(212) 555-4185
Janice Levine

Christine picked up her cell phone and dialed the number.

“Good afternoon,” a woman answered. “Prime Type, this is Janice. How may I help you?”

“Hi,” Christine said. “I have a series of handwritten diaries that I’d like transcribed. How fast do you type?”

“One hundred words per minute.”

“Far out! Are you serious? How much do you charge?”

“Five dollars per page for the first time a page is typed and three dollars per

page each time a page is revised. When would you like to have them typed?"

"ASAP, no doubt. I want them done in a few weeks, if possible. I'm in a big, fat hurry."

"I understand. It can be done if the text is not too illegible."

"I can help with that. I would like to know if it can be done at my place."

"Well, I have a word processor—"

"Actually, I have my reasons for wanting it to be done here. I'm not comfortable with the idea of having the diaries removed from the premises. They're just too valuable, too precious. You'll know what I mean when you see them."

"Do you have a computer with a word processor then?"

"Yes. I recently bought one along with a printer, though I don't know anything about typing or computers. The boxes are still sitting here unopened. Would you, by any chance, know how to set it up?"

"Oh, yes. It's a breeze. Also, you won't need the printer unless you want a hard copy of the script. Everything is done online nowadays. You can send your manuscript by e-mail or upload it to an online publishing company. You can even self-publish, if that's your preference. Make sure you have backup though, like a flash drive."

"I don't even know what a flash drive is."

"I can help you with that."

"Oh, good. Well, I guess it's a deal then. Oh, one more thing. I'm going to give you a typing test, just for the sake of validity. I want to be certain of what I'm getting into, you know."

"I understand. It's no problem."

"Good. When can you start?"

"Immediately."

"Perfect."



Janice plugged the cord into the power surge protector under the computer desk.

"There," she said. "Now, we're all set."

Janice stood and brushed lint from the front of her cream-colored slacks. She turned on the computer and the printer. Christine stood by with mild indifference.

"I want to thank you again for all the trouble you've gone through, Janice," Christine said. "I appreciate it more than you know."

"Naw," Janice said. "It's not every day that I get to do this sort of thing. It helps to deviate from the norm, you know. I'm enjoying it. The daily conundrum

and isolation from typing at home can get to me after a while.”

“All righty then,” Christine said. She walked over to the table, scooped up an old paperback novel, then selected a page at random, and handed it to Janice.

“I’m going to time you for five minutes. Just type this. Afterwards, I’ll have you sign a confidentiality agreement because what I’m about to give you is considered *very* privileged information. I would like for you to be here eight hours a day. You’re more than welcome to do overtime, if you wish. You may come in at eight, nine, or ten in the morning, and you’re free to use the restroom, take your lunch break anytime, and as for breaks, there are no ten- or fifteen-minute breaks. Feel free to take all the breaks you want, provided you get back to typing. Also, there’s coffee and stuff here for you, and if you smoke, please smoke out on the balcony.”

“I don’t smoke.”

“Even better.”

“So, what’s the overall scheme of things concerning the diaries?”

“The plan is to write an exposé that would become an international, bestselling, nonfiction book and blow everything wide open about Rose Hutchins.”

68

CHAPTER

“Your condition has been upgraded from critical to serious,” Dr. Norris said to Rose. “In the next few days, your condition should be upgraded to stable, then fair.”

“When would I be able to leave?” Rose asked.

“Well, that depends. Hopefully, you’ll be able to leave in a couple of weeks or so. At this time, you need rest and plenty of it.”

“My private resort . . . It is gone, is it not?”

The doctor nodded solemnly.

“No matter, I still have a home in Los Angeles. I just need to get in touch with Dolph soon. He is my personal handyman. I tried calling him a few weeks ago before all this happened with the hurricane, but neither the house landline nor his cell phone answered. So, I do not know what is going on. When I am not in so much pain and not as weak, I will let him know where I am and what has been happening. I want to know how things are from his end.”

“Well, for now, just take it easy. You’ll get around to it soon enough.”

69

CHAPTER

Janice typed fast and paused at times to read some illegible words.

Christine carried a plate of cold cuts and crackers, and set it on the table in the living room. “You’re doing excellent work, Janice, and your errors are minimal.”

“Thank you. You’ve been generous. I appreciate it more than you know.”

“It’s nothing, really. You sure make a great typist, you know that?”

“So, I’ve been told,” Janice said with a hearty chuckle. “I gotta tell ya, after five days of typing, I’m still marveling that this woman has done such atrocious things. I’m having nightmares. This is the stuff best sellers are made of. Be sure you go for wide distribution of the book with mass marketing and lots of publicity. The publishing company, whichever you choose, will help you with that. I don’t doubt you’ll get millions from this. Aren’t you worried about getting sued by this woman for invading her privacy and having such damning and incriminating information published for all the world to see?”

“Why the hell not, huh? Christina Crawford did it.”

“Yes, but her mother was dead. Joan Crawford wasn’t able to defend herself.”

“Who cares? I guarantee you the old turd won’t live long enough to see much of anything once it’s printed,” Christine said with a smirk. “For once, *I’m* going to be in the limelight and she’ll most likely end up in total darkness—six feet under.

That'll put her other foot in the grave. Hey, maybe the exposé will cause her to have a heart attack or a stroke or maybe she'll commit suicide. Su-weet!"

"You really hate her, don't you?"

"With a purple passion."

70

CHAPTER

“Do you have relatives?” Dr. Norris asked Rose.

Rose stared at the ceiling for a moment, then let out a tired sigh. “My husband was killed in a house fire a short while back. Not to worry, I could not care less. He was a louse anyway. I do not have any offspring because I had been too busy with my burgeoning career back then and I had put everything on hold until it was too late. Dolph, my personal handyman, is the only one who is close to me and the only one whom I trust, more than the other two measly servants whom I recently terminated under my employ. Dolph has always been a good and faithful servant. He has even gone out of his way to have done some special favors for me on occasion. There is no one else to notify of my whereabouts if that is why you are asking.”

“I’ve been informed by one of the nurses that a young woman claiming to be your step-granddaughter came here more than a week ago, asking to see you.” Dr. Norris noted the confused expression on Rose’s face. “The nurse couldn’t remember the woman’s name, except to say that the woman first gave one name, then another name. She just remembers saying, ‘Like grandmother, like granddaughter.’ The woman is an actress and a model.”

“Oh, I think I have an idea of who it is,” Rose said. “As far as I know, I do not

have a step-granddaughter.”

“Would you happen to know who this young woman is?”

“Describe her for me.”

“I’m afraid I wouldn’t be able to, since I didn’t see her. The head nurse saw her, but doesn’t remember what she looked like.”

“Well, if she comes back, I want her immediately arrested, right on the spot and, yes, press charges. Also, I want twenty-four-hour security posted at the door.”

“There is a guard at the door. Not only that, but after this mystery woman left and I came in to check on you, I noticed the IV drip had stopped.”

Rose paled at this revelation.

“Whoever this woman is,” Dr. Norris said, “what she did was criminal. The police have been contacted and they’re looking for her. By the way, are you aware that you are being talked about in the news?”

“Yes. I have seen snippets of the news. I just want to be left alone.”

“Makes for an incredible story, you know.”

“Makes for a potential threat of extortion from some crazed individual, like that woman who came in here, thus my request for twenty-four-hour security.”

“That’s understandable. If anyone requests to see you, they’ll be turned away.”

71

CHAPTER

“Aaand . . . that’s all she wrote,” Janice said as she stopped typing. She sat back in the chair with a sigh of relief and rubbed her neck. “Whew!”

“All done?” Christine asked, wide-eyed and excited.

“Yeah. Not bad for three weeks of work, eh? Hey, you like the title? I came up with it myself. It’s pretty self-explanatory. Of course, if you would prefer another, that’s fine, too.”

Christine looked at the monitor and read the following:

Blood Blossom: Memoirs of the Life of Rose Hutchins
Compiled by Christine Hutchins

“*Blood Blossom*,” Christine said, her eyes glued to the monitor. “‘*Blood*’ because she’s obviously got blood on her hands. ‘*Blossom*’ because her name is Rose. I love it. Oh, Janice, you’re simply the best.” Christine hugged her.

“Thank you. You’ve been wonderful, as well.”

“Oh, pooh. Don’t even mention it. Let’s celebrate. I’m gonna bring out the champagne.”

“Sounds good,” Janice said. “There are still a few more things to do.”

“Like what?” Christine asked as she set the chilled bottle of champagne on the counter.

“Look up publishing companies online, either the major publishing houses or self-publishing companies, it doesn’t matter. You want to get your script out to them as soon as possible and have them do *everything* for you, such as the following: reading evaluation to make sure everything’s copacetic; proofreading and copyediting to check for and correct sentence structure; word choices; and grammatical, spelling and punctuation errors. There’s interior page layout and formatting and cover design. You can print your book in hard cover, paperback, e-book, and/or PDF formats. There are many options for advertising. Then, there are interviews with some online radio stations that specialize in books, writing, and authors. Don’t forget marketing and distribution—make that *wide* distribution. Also, there are the daytime and nighttime talk shows, book signings and book fairs, virtual book tours, and an option to have the book converted into a screenplay so that it could potentially be made into a movie or a documentary.”

“Excellent! This is great, Janice! You’re gonna really appreciate the payment.” Christine’s eyes twinkled with excitement. “It’s better than what you think.”

Christine pulled two fluted champagne glasses from the cupboard and filled both glasses.

“To Janice,” Christine said.

“Thank you,” Janice said, “and to Christine.”

“Better yet, to *Blood Blossom*.”

They clinked glasses.



For the next few days, Christine and Janice looked up several publishing companies. They checked out the major publishers and compared them to online self-publishing companies. They jotted down notes and did price comparisons.

Christine decided to settle for one of the major publishers and e-mailed a query letter with a copy of her manuscript. She wanted them to do all the work, especially with advertising, marketing, and wide distribution, plus she had the financial means to afford it.

Janice reeled from shock when Christine paid her fifty thousand dollars in cash and handed her a brown paper bag loaded with jewels and gems.

“Now you know where I got all this from,” Christine said. “Of course, this is strictly between you and me, you understand?”

“I sure do. Thanks again.”

72

CHAPTER

Vivian answered a knock at the door. Two men stood at her door.

“Vivian Hutchins?” one of the men asked.

“Yes,” she said.

“I’m Lieutenant Pineda,” the first man said as he showed his badge, “and this is my partner, Lieutenant Neuman. We are from the Los Angeles Police Department, Parker Center, downtown LA. We are here to let you know we received communications from the North Hollywood Police Department regarding the search for Christine Hutchins.”

“I figured as much.”

“At this point in time, she’s just a person of interest,” Lt. Pineda explained, “and we would like to ask her some questions. According to a list of her credit card charges, it seems she drove from Florida to New York about two weeks ago or so.”

“She may or may not be in New York,” Lt. Neuman said, “but we’re not wasting time. We’re having our counterparts in New York on the lookout for her, and we will have them put out an APB. In the best-case scenario, she’d be located soon and taken in for questioning.”

“What’s the worst-case scenario?” Vivian asked.

“We’d contact the FBI.”

73

CHAPTER

Christine relaxed in a tub of warm water with bubbles and lavender-scented bath oils. A lone votive candle on one corner of the tub gave off a scent as its flame undulated.

Soft music wafted from her smartphone which was on the marble bathroom counter away from the sink. She lifted a fluted glass half-full of champagne, silently toasted herself with a grin, and took a few sips.

The TV in the living room droned on at a low volume, but Christine did not hear it.

“Los Angeles police have contacted its New York counterparts,” Patricia Vargas said. “They are looking for an unnamed person of interest. Police are also investigating a suspicious explosion, where a limousine mysteriously burst into flames a while back. They are seeking clues as well as answers, which eventually would lead to a clearer picture of what happened and why. Rose Hutchins is also being sought for questioning by police as well. We will keep you informed as new developments arise . . .”

74

CHAPTER

Two men entered the lobby of a condo and approached the desk clerk.

“NYPD,” one of the detectives said as they flashed their badges.

“Yeah, I can see that,” the clerk said.

“We have reason to believe that a Christine Hutchins resides at this address. She’s wanted for questioning. Would you direct us to her unit, please?”

“Uh, sure. One moment, please.” The clerk looked away from the two men and glanced around the lobby. He saw the doors to the elevator open and out stepped Christine.

“There she is,” he said to the two men as he nodded in her direction. “She’s the one with the short, blond hair and wearing a black windbreaker.”

“Miss Hutchins?” the first man said as he approached Christine.

“Yes,” she said.

“I’m Detective Burke,” he said as he held up his badge, “and this is my partner, Detective Vaughn. Would you come with us, please?”

“What for?” she asked.

“Well, that remains to be seen,” Detective Burke said.

“I want to know right now why I’m being taken in,” Christine said.

“You either come with us for questioning,” Detective Vaughn said, “or we’ll

drag you down there ourselves. Which is it?”

“Could you at least tell me what this is all about?” Christine asked.

“We think you know what this is about,” Detective Burke said. “If you don’t, then you’ll find out soon enough.”



“You cop folks think you’re so right!” Christine said. She fumed as she sat on a chair at a table in the small interrogation room. “No such thing happened! It couldn’t have! Where would I have gotten such explosives?”

“You tell us,” Detective Burke said.

“Well, I don’t know anyone with connections to C-4. I was all by myself at the hotel.”

“We know at least three other persons were with you at the hotel in LA,” Detective Vaughn said. “If we have to, we will hunt them down, too. You don’t have to give us names. We’ll find them, with or without your help.”

“Look, I got kicked out of my sister’s place,” Christine said. “I didn’t have a job and couldn’t share the expenses. I wouldn’t help my sister around the house and didn’t get along with her, either. So, out I went, on my own. I swear I had nothing to do with whatever happened to the house. I didn’t even know such a thing happened until I heard it on the news, and I didn’t realize it happened on the same night I checked out of the hotel. It’s purely coincidental. And, yes, I had some friends visit me on occasion. So what?”

“Well, we’re going to need their names,” Detective Burke said, “to validate what you’ve just told us. Otherwise we’ll look for them ourselves. Also, we know the story about your mother, too.”

“Let me tell you something,” she said with a snarl as she leaned over the table and pointed an angry finger at Burke and Vaughn, her eyes ablaze with fury and hatred. “She’s *not* my mother. She *never* was. Don’t you *ever* utter that moniker again.”



Christine stomped down the corridor to the front door of her condo.

“I’ve never been so humiliated,” Christine said.

She fumbled in her handbag for her keys and when she withdrew them, they slipped from her fingers and fell on the floor.

“Oh, damn it!” she said. “You stoopid klutz!”

She snatched up the keys and flung them at the door in a huff. They dented

the door and plopped to the ground with a clatter. She picked up the keys and inserted each into its proper slots, rotating each as she did so, then opened the door, entered her condo, and slammed the door.

“Just wait till I get her,” she said. “I’ll get her good. How about a little visit, big sister?”

She withdrew her smartphone from her handbag and called Jimmy, then Dougie and Tawny, and reiterated her visit to the police.

“Run! Jump! Fly!” Christine urged Jimmy. “Just scam! Anything to avoid the police. They’re on to us . . . Oh, don’t worry about that, dear. I’ll take *real* good care of her myself. I’ll fly out there and see her *first* thing tomorrow. You can be sure it will be the *last* time she ever mucks with me.”

75

CHAPTER

Darkness had fallen as twilight came and went. Vivian was reading a home-and-garden magazine when the phone rang.

“Hello,” she answered promptly.

“How dare you humiliate me,” Christine said in a deathly ice-cold voice. “You called the cops on me, you bleedin’ stoolie. Do you know what happens to stoolies, you dumb bitch? You just wait, old girl. Better yet, no need for you to wait since *I* won’t be waiting.”

Vivian heard the click on the other end as Christine hung up.

76

CHAPTER

“We summoned a cab to pick you up,” Dr. Norris said to Rose when he entered the room.

Rose turned to Dr. Norris with a tepid smile. “I appreciate what you have done for me.”

“Anytime. Now, if you need anything, please don’t hesitate to call me.”

A nurse came in with the wheelchair and Rose got out of the bed and sat in it. They went down to where a cab pulled up.

Rose sat in the back seat of the cab and instructed the driver to take her to the nearest hotel.

Once Rose checked into the room, she dialed her residence in Los Angeles.

“We’re sorry,” an automated female voice said after a click and a beep were heard. “The number you have reached has been disconnected or is no longer in service. Please check—”

Rose hung up and redialed. She received the same message. Flustered, she redialed. This time, she paid particular attention to the digits she had pressed. She heard the message for the third time and hung up, bewildered.

“What is going on?” Rose said to herself.

She figured Peter or Iris may have had something to do with it as a means of

getting back at her for firing them. She dialed Peter's cell number. It rang without being answered. Then she dialed Iris's cell number, which also rang nonstop.

"It is just as well," Rose said. "Let them hate me and be spiteful."

Rose dialed Dolph's cell number. It, too, rang without end.

"Something is wrong," Rose said.

She dialed another number.

"I would like to book a one-way flight for one adult from St. John's, Antigua, to Los Angeles, California, for tomorrow."

77 CHAPTER

The next morning before Christine hailed a taxi and had the cabbie drive her to La Guardia Airport, she logged on the computer and quickly checked her e-mail. There was a welcome letter from one of the publishing companies she had decided to go with. The e-mail also briefly outlined its various services and publishing packages.

The world may be talking about Rose Hutchins now, Christine thought. Soon, they'll be talking about me, me, me!

Christine was excited.

This was precisely what she wanted.

Exposure.

As much as possible.

To be seen by the world.

To tell *her* side of the story.

I'll get started on the book as soon as I get back, she thought.

She affected a melodramatic gasp. "After the book is published, I'm gonna be on TV! I'm gonna be a celebrity! A star! Move over, Christina Crawford!"

78

CHAPTER

Rose boarded the plane. From St. John's, Antigua, she flew to Los Angeles, and from there, hailed a blue-and-white checkered cab.

She was driven to Studio City. She scanned the scenery from the backseat. It dismayed and unnerved her to see charred portions of the burnt hillside. Her nervousness became more profound as the cab wound its way up the hill to her most beloved residence. The devastation shocked and disheartened her, especially with her house no longer there. Charred lumber, blackened trees, and burnt debris lay about.

Everything is gone, Rose thought disconsolately. *The money, the jewels, the gold bars, the papers, the photo albums, and the diaries.*

Tears welled in Rose's eyes. She sat back and brooded for a few moments.

Her Spanish villa in Belize had been given to the Holcombs as a gift. Hurricane Aidan destroyed her private resort in Antigua. Her main residence in La Jolla had burnt to the ground when Jack set fire to it. She hated Paris and had no interest in returning there or anywhere else in Europe.

She intended to ask Vivian questions as to what had happened to her home, then place the blame fully and squarely on Vivian and Christine's shoulders. Additionally, she figured she would have to stay at yet another hotel, which she

DARYL HAJEK

was sick of, until she started looking for a new home. She didn't know whether to remain in Los Angeles or even in the state of California. The decision-making would come later.

Rose gave the cab driver an address and had him whisk her there immediately.

79

CHAPTER

The flight from New York to Los Angeles landed at Bob Hope Airport in Burbank where Christine disembarked from the plane.

She went to a car rental agency which did not have a Mazda Miata convertible in candy-apple red, so she opted for a metallic-red 2014 Chevrolet Corvette Stingray convertible. It was stylish, sleek, and sporty, just the way she liked it.

Christine drove to a small, nondescript motel on Cahuenga Boulevard West in Studio City. After she checked in, she looked up pawn shops on her smartphone. The closest one was on Van Nuys Boulevard in Sherman Oaks. She drove there and purchased a used black Ruger LCP .380 and a package of bullets.

80

CHAPTER

Since Vivian needed some groceries from the local market, she decided to walk. She checked her mail on the way back.

Once inside, she laid the bags on the kitchen counter and sifted through the mail. Each piece of mail had a yellow postal sticker, which indicated that mail had been forwarded to the new address along with a brief reminder for Vivian to inform senders of the new address. There were some bills, junk mail, and a nondescript envelope without a return address. Vivian saw that it had been addressed to her with the address of the Hutchins's residence and marked "Personal and Confidential." It had been postmarked from the Van Nuys post office annex nearly three weeks ago.

Vivian opened the envelope and read the letter.

Dear Vivian,

I am writing in the hope that this letter will get to you. You don't know me, but my name is Joan Patton and I live in Canoga Park with my parents.

I don't know where to begin, but this is very personal. My parents don't know that I am writing you, but I have my reasons. It has to do with family. I'm going to leave it at that.

Please give me a call at the number listed below. I have a cell phone. Please be discrete. I deliberately omitted my return address to avoid any unforeseen complications.

Please get in touch with me at your earliest convenience. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

-Joan

Cell: (818) 555-0336

Vivian dialed the number.

"Hello," she said. "Is this Joan Patton?"

"Uh, yes. Would this be Vivian Hutchins?"

"Yes," Vivian said, wary.

Joan exhaled a quiet sigh of relief and sounded glad. "I've been expecting your call. How come you waited so long to call?"

"I just got your letter today. Would you like to tell me what this is all about?" Vivian said with exasperation. "If this is about money—"

"It's not about the money—"

"I'm afraid I can't help you . . . I'm sorry, did you say it wasn't about money? Did I hear you right?"

"Yes, you heard right. I assure you, it's *not* about money. Not at all. As I said in the letter, it's about family."

"I see. Would you care to elaborate?"

"Actually, I'd rather not discuss this over the phone. As I mentioned in my letter, I live with my parents and they don't know anything about this. I want to keep it that way for now."

"Is it that bad?"

"No, it's not bad at all, I assure you. I'd like to ask if we could meet somewhere so we could discuss this further, if that'd be okay with you?"

"I don't know."

"I assure you, this isn't extortion. It's *not* about money, as I said."

“I guess it would be all right to get together. By the way, how did you get my name and address?”

“Um, could it wait until we meet face-to-face?”

“Yeah, I guess that would be fine. I just want to know what I’m getting into.”

“I’ll tell you everything when we get together. I don’t want to say too much over the phone.”

“All right. Where and when would you like to meet?” Vivian impulsively decided to take a chance. “If you’d like, you’re welcome to come to my place. I have no problem with that and I live alone. Unless you’d prefer we meet somewhere else.”

“No. Your place will do. How about later this afternoon, like in about an hour or so? I’ve got a car and I don’t mind driving out your way.”

“That would be fine.”

“Okay. I’ll be on my way shortly.”

“I’m no longer at the same address where you sent me that letter. That’s why your mail took so long to get to me. Here’s my new address.”

Vivian reiterated the new address to Joan.

“Got it,” Joan said. “Thanks.”

“No problem. Is there anything else you’d like to tell me before you come over?”

“Uh, yeah . . . Come to think of it, even though my name is Joan Patton, my real name is Hope . . . Hope Windom.”

81

CHAPTER

Vivian was pretty sure that Hope was her long-lost sister, the one even younger than Christine, whom Vivian had never met.

The prospect of meeting Hope made Vivian nervous. She didn't know what to expect and took a few deep breaths.

How many secrets does Rose have? Vivian wondered.

Vivian opened the door to a young woman with long brown hair, brown eyes, and a creamy complexion. For some reason, she'd assumed the young woman would have some features analogous to Christine or Rose. She greeted Hope with a warm smile and a friendly demeanor. "Hi, Hope. Please come in." She stepped aside to let Hope enter.

"Thank you, Vivian," Hope said.

Vivian closed the door and led the way to the front room. "Have a seat. Would you like something to drink or—"

"No, thanks. I'm all right."

"Well, if you'll please excuse me a moment, I'm going to fix myself a glass of iced tea." Vivian went into the kitchen and returned moments later, and sat near Hope.

"So . . ." Vivian said. "You're my sister."

“Yes. Half-sister. I’m just as surprised as you are.”

“That’s the understatement of the century.”

“As you may already have put two and two together, I was born to Jack and Julia Windom, my biological parents. I had been given up for adoption shortly after I was born. That makes me twenty-one years old now. My adoptive parents are Anthony and Karen Patton. I’ve lived in Canoga Park all my life and went to school there. Right after my high school graduation, my parents informed me that I’d been adopted. Naturally, it hurt at first, but they were very kind and generous enough to provide me with all the necessary information, which subsequently led me to you.”

“How come you didn’t want your adoptive parents to know that you would be coming here to see me?”

“I didn’t want them to know yet. I didn’t know how it would turn out. I would rather avoid any clashes or hard feelings. Don’t get me wrong, I love them very much. They’re good parents and wonderful people. I was afraid, you know.”

“I understand.”

“Not much about my biological mother had been mentioned over the years, but it’d been said that she used to be a model, then an actress, and that she’s also your mother, from what I understand. I’ve heard very little about your father, Charles Hutchins. I’ve also been told that my biological father owned and operated some worldwide ecological corporation and that he was a CEO or a financier or something like that. As for your grandmother, Desirée Hutchins, I don’t remember much of what was said about her.”

“She passed away from natural causes years ago.”

“I’m sorry.”

As Vivian mulled over the information in her mind while she spoke with Hope, she recalled that night when Christine pointed to a page in one of Rose’s diaries where Rose had written that she had been pregnant with a fourth child and had given it up for adoption. Vivian now understood what Rose had meant when she’d written, “. . . and I can only hope the child . . .” Vivian recalled the word “hope” had been underlined a few times. It hadn’t been for emphasis. It had been a hint.

“Well, Hope,” Vivian said, “all I can tell you is that this whole thing, where you and I are concerned, is one very long story. It goes back twenty-two years where it all began. I’ll tell you all about it. It’s unbelievable.”

82

CHAPTER

The cab pulled up to the curb. Rose ordered the cabbie to wait, then let herself out.

She sneered as she stood and looked at the small house. She patted the back of her turbaned head and walked up the driveway.



“Well, I’d best get going,” Hope said as she got up from the loveseat. “I don’t want my parents to get worried.”

“I can’t believe it’s been two and a half hours already.”

“Me, too. I appreciate your time to meet with me and to talk with me.”

“Never you mind. Thank *you* for coming. It was very nice having you here. You have my number and e-mail address?”

“Yes,” Hope said with a nod.

“Next time we get together, we’ll have to do brunch or dinner.”

“It’s a deal. Thanks again.”

A loud knock on the door startled Vivian and Hope. Vivian answered the door and yelled, “*Unbelievable!*”

"I knew I'd find you here," Rose said as she barged into the house uninvited.

Hope glanced at the woman nervously.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Vivian said. She held her hand up, palm forward. "Now, you wait just a minute!"

"I don't wait for anyone!" Rose said.

"I'm gonna get going now," Hope said.

"Wait, wait, wait," Vivian said to Hope. "There's something I want you to know. Hope, this is our so-called mother, Rose Hutchins." Vivian turned to glare at Rose.

"Excuse me?" Rose said.

"No excuses, ma'am," Vivian said. "This is Hope Windom, the half-sister I never knew I had."

Hope curiously eyed Rose. "*You're* my mother?" Hope asked. "What a monster you are!"

Rose barely acknowledged Hope with a sidelong glance.

"Glad you gave me up for adoption," Hope said. "Because from what I'm seeing now and from what I've heard about you, it's apparent that my adoptive parents are nice people compared to someone like you."

"Who cares?" Rose said. She turned to Vivian. "I demand to know what happened to my house, and I want to know who is responsible for the destruction of my property."

"Now you wait just a damn minute," Vivian said as she shook an angry finger at Rose. She drew nearer to Rose in a menacing manner.

"How dare you take that tone of voice with me! And the unmitigated gall of you shaking your finger at me like that!"

Vivian whacked her own mother across the face with a fierce backhand swipe.

"Wow!" Hope said with a gasp.

"You're not welcome here!" Vivian said. "Get out! Now! Just *leave!*"

In the background behind Rose, Vivian and Hope observed a metallic-red convertible speedily pull up in the driveway. Its tires burned rubber, emitted bluish-gray smoke, and left skid marks on the concrete as it came to a screeching halt. The door flew open and Christine jumped out.

"Oh, no," Vivian said with consternation.

Rose stiffened as she saw Christine, who had a twisted, vicious snarl on her face. Christine stomped from the convertible to the entrance of the house.

"*You can run, but you can't hide!*" Christine yelled with a hoarse voice at Vivian. "I said I was gonna get ya! From the word 'go,' you have been nothing but trouble! Worse than a thorn in my side, much worse than a bug up my ass!"

"You want to know who was responsible for the destruction of your property,

Mrs. Windom?” Vivian asked. “Well, here’s your answer.”

Christine stepped in. She huffed and puffed. Her eyes blazed with insanity.

“Figures,” Rose said. “Nonetheless, you are all to blame.”

“I didn’t come here for this,” Hope said. “I am outta here. Sorry, Vivian.”

She left Vivian’s side and headed for the front door, but Christine slammed it shut with a quick kick with her heel.

83

CHAPTER

“For cryin’ out loud, do we got a family reunion here or what?” Christine said through clenched teeth. She glanced at Hope. “Who is she? What is she doing here?”

“This is Hope,” Vivian said. She walked up to Hope from behind and placed her hands gently on Hope’s shoulders. “Hope Windom, the sister we never knew we had.”

“Half-sister,” Hope said.

Christine scrutinized Hope’s facial features and noticed some resemblance between Hope, Vivian, Rose, and herself. Her eyes were daggers when she turned to glare at Rose.

“Another well-kept secret, huh?” Christine said. “Another sister we never knew we had?” Then it suddenly dawned on her. “So, *that* was what was meant by giving the child *hope* or some such stoopid thing!”

“What are you going to do about it?” Rose asked.

Christine’s eyes narrowed to dangerous slits. She reached in her handbag, pulled out her gun and pointed it at Rose.

Hope gasped and took several steps away.

“Damn it, Christine, no guns!” Vivian said. “Put that thing down now!”

Christine whipped the pistol around and brandished it in Vivian's face.

"Get over there," Christine said to Vivian as she flicked the gun to one side. "Go on. Over there. Atta girl. That's a good girl." She glared at Vivian. "You make me sick! Always wanting to know this, always wanting to know that! So damned nosy, aren't ya? Still nosy for the truth about what happened to Blaine? Well, how about this? Back in New Jersey, several months before coming to Los Angeles, I went to a gun show where I applied for a permit, which I received about two months later.

"From there, I purchased a handgun at a local gun dealership. Shortly before I left New Jersey, I stopped by Blaine's house to say good-bye. He said he would stop at an ATM at the local bank to get some cash to treat me and his wife to some Chinese for lunch. He explained that he'd rather not use his card at the take-out joint. 'Can't trust anyone these days, even those who work the cashier behind the counter,' he had said, then asked if I wanted anything. I told him I wasn't hungry and that I'd be on my way to Los Angeles soon and pick up something then. I thanked him anyway.

"Moments after Blaine left, I stealthily followed him from a distance. When he parked his car and went to the ATM, I drove by and shot him twice in the back, then drove all the way to LA. I didn't want him to know I was coming here to settle the score with the old Jezebel. He would've stopped me if he'd known."

This revelation with regard to Blaine's murder astounded and shocked Vivian.

"Oh, but there's more," Christine said. "All that stuff about my acting, auditions for TV commercials, and modeling shoots was a load of bull. I put on a bunch of pretense. All those things are actually on the back burner. My real reason for coming here, as you have already gathered, was to get back at *her*." Christine jabbed the gun in Rose's direction. "Also, I had three friends staying with me at the hotel the whole time I was there. You remember Jimmy, Dougie, and Tawny. I mentioned them to you one night during dinner. You had asked if Jimmy was my boyfriend, and I had said no. Well, now he's officially my boyfriend but that's irrelevant."

Christine turned to face Rose.

"*You . . .*" Christine said. The muscles in her jaws pulsed. "*You . . . I hate you.* I've always hated you. Here are a few examples of how so very much I *hate* you. Your cursed house, for one. *Kaboom!* Oopsie! Hadn't meant to set off a firestorm in the process.

"Oh, and that big, blond dude who slaved for you—*Whoosh! Kapow!* That was my good friend, Little Johnny Rocket. That's why I had some friends come out and stay with me. To help me with the plans I had against you. I certainly couldn't do it on my own.

“I even went out of my way to pay you a surprise visit at the hospital on that stoopid little island in the Caribbean, but you were dead asleep. You should’ve just been plain *dead*.”

“Oh, better yet, before your doomed domain went up in smoke, I had my friends help me break into your house and take *every* single gem you’ve had, *all* the jewels, *all* the gold bars, *all* the important papers, *all* the millions of dollars and—I saved the best for last—I took *all* the diaries . . . *your* personally handwritten diaries and your photo albums, and I compiled them into a tell-all book.”

“No wonder my calls were not answered by my servants!” Rose said. “You are the one responsible for murdering them, including Dolph!”

“Who the frickin’ hell is Dolph?” Christine asked. “The better question is: do I even care?”

“He was the ‘big, blond dude’ whom you just mentioned a minute ago.”

“So he was one of your slovenly slaves. Who gives a—”

“He was my personal handyman, the one whom I had favored above the other servants—until you killed him! He was my *son!*”

“*Excuse moi?* You mean to tell me I killed my own brother—or half-brother, if even that?”

Vivian glared hard at Rose, her eyes orbs of seething anger and unbridled hatred.

“You mean you had your ‘personal handyman’ kill my husband and your movie producer?”

“Yeah, by ‘fixing’ their cars,” Christine said as she eyed Rose, “and blacklisting and killing your screenwriter and making it look like suicide, and helping to get some ‘blonde Adonis’ deported back to Germany, and shoving our father down the stairs.”

Rose stood silent, tight-lipped.

“Dolph was my son by another man,” Rose said after a moment as she eyed Vivian. “Long before I had met and married your father, long before you were born. I never married the guy who had fathered Dolph. It had been one of those things, like a one-night stand, and nothing more. I had met a guy through friends at some event somewhere a couple years after I had graduated from high school. I thought he was attractive, cute, and good looking with that big physique and blond hair. As you can see, I gave birth to Dolph out of wedlock when I had been in my early twenties or thereabouts. As you may have deduced, I hated Desirée, whom I am loath to address as ‘my mother,’ because when she had found out that I was pregnant, especially having been an unmarried woman, she had harangued me *ad infinitum* about the Bible, God, Jesus, Hellfire, eternal punishment, and

so on. She had *never* let it go, had *never* let me forget. After the birth of my son, she called me an immoral, loose woman.”

“Oh, now you tell us,” Vivian said. “I would’ve thought you’d put this information in the pages of your diaries.”

“Since you read my diaries, you may have noticed some pages had been blacked out and torn out. I threw them in the fireplace after I had changed my mind and decided that those things should not have been written in the first place. Instead, it was to be my deep, dark secret.” Rose turned to Christine. “Now, as for everything you took from the trunk, I demand that you give them back to me!”

“The hell I will!” Christine said. “It’s way too late anyway, because I paid my three friends and a professional typist for their help by giving them most of the jewels and gems and thousands of dollars. Plus, I’ve already got a manuscript written, and as we speak, the book will be published soon. Too bad you won’t live to see me bask in glory.”

“You could not possibly have—”

“I had it all planned since I saw the goodies in the trunk that fell from the mezzanine during the earthquake, right down to the very last minute detail.”

“You did not.”

“Oh, no? Need I say more?”

Christine raised her arm and pulled the trigger. The bullet grazed Rose’s left ear.

Hope screamed.

“I demand you drop that gun at once!” Vivian said to Christine.

The cabbie heard the gunshot. He called 911.

Christine fired the pistol again. This time the hot bullet punctured Rose’s left shoulder below the collar bone. Rose stumbled backward and fell on her backside. The fall loosened her turban, which sat askew on her head.

“*Now, look what you’ve done!*” Vivian said to Christine.

“Gladly,” Christine said. She bent over and pressed her face close to Rose, cocked her head to one side, and gawked at her with a smirk.

“That’s not funny, Christine!” Vivian said.

Rose lay on her back and gasped for air. Blood oozed from the gunshot wound and stained the top she wore.

“At long last, my pride and joy,” Christine said with a snicker. “Now, I’ve got something to be proud of.” She laughed hard.

“Give me the gun *now*,” Vivian said to Christine. She held her out hand, palm up.

“How about I give you a bullet instead?” Christine pointed the pistol in

Vivian's direction.

"Come on, Christine. Hand it over before someone else gets hurt."

The front door flew open and the cabbie's sudden appearance startled Christine and caught her off guard. She turned and fired in the cabbie's direction. He dashed for cover as he jumped to one side of the door frame.

"Damn you, Christine!" Vivian said. "That's enough!"

Christine aimed the gun at Vivian. The cab driver regained his composure and ran toward Christine. She swiftly turned around and pointed the gun at his leg.

"Down boy," she said and fired the pistol.

The bullet grazed one side of his left leg. He went down and groaned in pain.

"You stupid girl!" Vivian said to Christine.

"I should've shot you square in the temple the night I crept into your room," Christine said as she turned to wield the pistol at Vivian. "Yeah, that's right. A short while back, I sneaked into your room with the intention of splattering your brains on your pillow while you were sleeping."

This revelation didn't surprise Vivian. She knew how Christine was, especially with her unconstrained anger and maniacal lust for blood.

Right now, Vivian kept in mind that four bullets had been fired so far, but didn't know how many bullets were left, if any. She didn't know how many bullets the pistol's chamber held, but she wasn't taking chances. She immediately lifted her hand and hit Christine's wrist with such agility that it took Christine by surprise. Vivian had intended to knock the gun out of Christine's hand. In the process, Christine impulsively fired the gun twice. Vivian ducked as the bullets whizzed over her head at an angle and ended up lodged in the ceiling.

"You bitch!" Christine said. She aimed the gun at Vivian's face and pulled the trigger.

The gun did not fire. Christine pulled the trigger several more times and realized the gun was out of bullets.

"Oh, crap!" Christine said.

She threw the pistol in Vivian's face.

"Ow!" Vivian said as she groaned in pain.

Christine dashed to the other end of the front room to the sliding glass doors. Vivian ran behind her.

Hope helped the cabbie to his feet. He winced with pain and glanced at the bloody gunshot wound on his left leg. He and Hope helped Rose to her feet and took her to the rear of the cab where she lay on her back. Hope ran back into the house while the cabbie plopped into the driver's seat. He hastily floored the accelerator and inadvertently flooded the carburetor.

"Oh, come on!" he said.

“Vivian?” Hope called out from the front door as she stepped inside, then closed and locked the front door.

Christine pulled open one of the sliding glass doors. Vivian ran and lunged at Christine and knocked her over.

“*Oof!*” Christine said.

They tumbled to the ground.

Vivian crawled on top of Christine.

“Got’cha,” Vivian said, breathless. She panted as her chest heaved. “What are you going to do now, huh?”

Vivian pushed herself off Christine and forced Christine to her feet by pulling on her arms. “Get up! Get up, I said!”

“*Ow!*” Christine said. “Watch it, woman! You’re hurting me!”

“Oh, yeah? Well, I’ll hurt you a lot more if you don’t do as I say.”

Vivian grabbed Christine’s right arm and quickly twisted it around behind her back.

“*Ow!*” Christine said.

With her free arm, Vivian firmly placed it around Christine’s neck in a chokehold.

“Oh, man,” Christine said. “C’mon, Viv. Do you have to do this?”

“Do you claim defeat?”

“Never.”

“Shut up, then.” Vivian nudged Christine forward. “Hope? Hope? Call the police.”

Hope nodded and saw a cell phone on an end table.

“Easy now, you hear?” Vivian said to Christine. She nudged her forward and maintained the chokehold. They slowly made their way into the middle of the front room.

“You really wouldn’t turn in your own sister, would you now?” Christine asked with a nervous chuckle.

“Pull another stunt and I swear I’ll turn you into compost. Got it?”

Suddenly, Vivian, Christine, and Hope felt a sharp jolt and heard a loud crack.

“Oh, gosh, an aftershock,” Vivian said with a gasp.

The house vibrated with intensity as windows rattled, walls shook, and other objects moved.

“Aftershock, my ass,” Christine said. “It’s more like a damn earthquake.”

“Oh, man,” the cabbie said. “I don’t believe this.”

The cab shimmied a bit.

Rose groaned from the backseat.

“Get this thing moving,” she said weakly with erratic breath.

“I’m trying, ma’am! I’m trying!”

He turned the ignition, applied a little pressure to the accelerator, and revved the motor. It lurched forward and pulled away from the curb.

Nervous from the aftershock, Vivian unintentionally loosened her grip on Christine, who then bolted from Vivian and ran across the room. In her state of panic, she lost her balance due to the tectonic force from the tremor. She tripped and fell.

Vivian stood still with her hands on the wall to maintain her balance while the ground continued to shake.

Christine shot to her feet, stumbled through the front room and raced for the door. Hope stood nearby with the cell phone in her hand. Reflexively, she flinched and stepped out of Christine’s way. Once again, Christine tripped over her own footing.

“Damn it!” Christine said as she fell face first to the ground.

The ground’s movements stopped and Christine scrambled to her feet. Vivian ran and lunged at Christine once again and knocked her back down.

Christine saw the pistol nearby where she had thrown it at Vivian’s face earlier. The pistol was a half-inch from her fingertips.

“Oh, c’mon!” she said.

She thrust her arm further forward and grasped the butt of the pistol with her fingers while Vivian did what she could to pull Christine’s arms away from the gun. Hope dropped the cell phone and ran to where the pistol lay and kicked it away.

“Damn you, girl!” Christine said.

Christine then grabbed Hope’s ankle with both hands, pulled herself forward, and bit Hope’s ankle hard. Hope cried out in pain. She wiggled and twisted her leg to pull herself away from Christine’s tight grasp.

“Let go of me!” Hope said.

Christine twisted Hope’s ankle, which caused Hope to lose her balance. Hope managed to regain her balance and wrench her foot from Christine’s grasp. Vivian pushed herself off Christine’s back, grabbed Christine’s ankles, and pulled her away from Hope. Christine rammed the heel of her tennis shoe into Vivian’s right knee. Vivian howled in pain. Christine quickly pushed herself off the floor, shoved Hope aside, and ran to the front door to open it only to realize it had been locked. She hurriedly unlocked the door, yanked it open, and dashed to her convertible.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” Vivian said. She tried to get to her feet even though her right knee throbbed with pain.

“You should take it easy, Vivian,” Hope said with concern as she helped Vivian

to her feet.

Vivian watched Christine jump into her convertible and slam the driver's side door closed. The motor revved as Christine burned rubber. She guided the car back down the driveway, then turned into the street and sped off.

Vivian rubbed her sore knee with the palm of her hand. She hobbled as she stood for a moment, then, to Hope's surprise, she abruptly bolted from Hope's side.

"Vivian!" Hope said.

Vivian half-ran, half-limped out the front door. She gritted her teeth and winced in pain with every step.

"Vivian!"

Hope ran after Vivian, who jumped in her yellow Honda Civic and turned the ignition.

"Vivian," Hope said. "You don't have to do this. It's not worth it."

"I've got to stop her!"

"You're in no condition to drive. Just let her go."

"No!"

Vivian speedily backed out of the driveway and drove off. Hope stood there, feeling helpless and forsaken.

Moments later, Hope hopped in her car and chased after Vivian.

CHAPTER 84

“You stinking, rotten freak-a-zoid!” Christine screamed at the air before her as she sped down the street.

Tears of anger spilled from her eyes and saliva drooled from the corner of her lips. She bared clenched teeth. “I ain’t done with ya, yet! You, too, Viv! Ya make me so sick! I hate ya, I hate ya, I hate ya both! You had better be there, ya old-fangled hussy! I ain’t done with ya!”

She cackled maniacally, then abruptly ceased when she saw the cab ahead. She sped up some more when she saw the cab make a left turn onto Ventura Boulevard. She didn’t care when she whizzed by a cop. The strobe lights and the siren came on, and the cruiser pulled away from the curb.

“Noooo!” Christine yelled in anger. She glanced at the rearview mirror and whipped her head around to look out the rear windshield. “Forget yyyyyooooouuuuu, man!” she said with a laugh as she flipped the middle finger and vigorously shook it. She returned her gaze to the road before her. She sped faster and changed lanes. “Outta my way, road hog, unless you wanna be roadkill!” she said to the car in front of her. She blasted the horn. “You want a piece of me? Outta my way, I said!”

Vivian barreled down the street and turned left onto Ventura Boulevard.

She swerved in time to avoid another car, which approached from her left. She groaned and winced in pain while alternately accelerating and braking. She looked ahead to see if she could locate Christine's car. Red-and-blue strobes from a police cruiser up ahead caught her attention. Vivian glanced in the rearview mirror and did a double-take. She saw Hope's car two vehicles behind her.

The cab made a sharp right from the busy boulevard onto a winding, residential street. It went up the hill and headed south.

"Where are you going?" Rose asked with a moan.

"We're being chased from behind by that crazy woman, ma'am," the cabbie replied. "I'm taking the safer streets with shortcuts and less traffic to get you to a hospital quicker while trying to lose her at the same time."

Christine cut in front of a car as she made a sharp right turn onto a residential street from Ventura Boulevard. The other car came to a halt and blared its horn. That car was then rear-ended by another car behind it which was rear-ended by yet another car.

"Oh, shut up," Christine said in response to the sounds of metal against metal behind her.

Hope slammed on the brakes as the cars before her rear-ended other cars. The hood of Hope's car stopped inches away from the car in front of her. She struck the steering wheel with the palms of her hands in frustration. It irked her that she could not continue to chase after Vivian.

Vivian continued to follow the police car. Christine continued her pursuit of those in the cab before her with fierce determination. Beads of sweat broke out on her forehead and at the ridges of her upper lip.

The police cruiser closed in on the convertible from behind with its siren wailing.

Christine brought the convertible closer to the rear of the cab and honked the horn as she laughed.

"Outta my way, you stoopid Loser!"

She laughed once again, then rammed the front end of her car into the rear of the cab.

"Whoopsie!" she said. "My bad! Though, you ain't getting an apology from me!"

She rear-ended the cab again. The cab swerved from the impact and Christine roared with laughter.

"Ungh-ungh-ungh-ungh!" she grunted with comic delight. "Here, have another!"

Christine hit the cab once more, then immediately steered left and crossed the solid double-yellow line. She then wheeled right and sideswiped the driver's

side of the cab. She rammed the cab's side again and it, in turn, slammed its side against the convertible.

"Oh, yeah?" Christine said.

This infuriated her all the more. She tore away from the cab as she pulled left, then made a hard right, ninety-degree turn. She gave her all and slammed on the gas pedal. The convertible's nose plunged head-on into the driver's side of the cab and thrust it beyond the shoulder of the road. The cab dangled perilously close to the edge of the drop-off which led to the hillside below.

She gassed the car again and the convertible shoved the cab over the edge. It keeled over and began its descent. It rolled as it tumbled down the hillside.

The police officer stopped several feet from the convertible. Vivian reacted reflexively and immediately steered left to avoid rear-ending the cruiser before her. She crossed the solid double-yellow line and saw a teal-green pick-up truck ahead. She quickly steered right to avoid a head-on collision with the truck.

Christine screamed in horror as she saw Vivian's yellow Honda Civic rapidly approaching the convertible.

Vivian instantly braked, only a second too late, for she plowed head-on into the rear of the convertible's passenger side. Her body lurched forward then bounced back. She gasped as she watched the convertible slip from the shoulder of the road and teeter precariously at the edge of the drop-off for a few moments, then slid from her field of vision.

"Christine!" Vivian screamed in horror. "Nooo! No!"

The convertible went down as it rolled several times before coming to a halt at the bottom of the hillside. Sand and dust plumed toward the hazy afternoon sky.

The police officer from the cruiser appeared at the driver's side of Vivian's car. "You all right, ma'am?" he asked as he opened the door. "Are you hurt?"

"I tried to stop my car," Vivian said. "I couldn't stop it sooner. I hadn't meant for this to happen."

"It'll be all right, ma'am" the officer said.

"What am I going to do?"

"Ma'am, please step out of the vehicle."

"What's going to happen to me?"

"I've called for assistance. They're on their way."

"I'm sorry." Vivian opened the door and slowly eased herself out of the car with the officer's help. "I hadn't meant for this to happen. I'm so sorry."

"Please calm down, ma'am. You'll be okay. Everything'll be all right."

"Ow!" Vivian said. "Be careful. My right knee hurts."

Vivian sat near the shoulder of the road. She gasped and heaved as tears spilled from her eyes. Guilt wracked her mind, body and spirit. Moments later, she

heard the sounds of sirens from three police cruisers, an EMT truck, and two ambulances.

“Oh, Christine,” Vivian said above a whisper. She shook her head, distraught and miserable. “Forgive me. I’m sorry. I hadn’t meant for this to happen.”



Christine ended up as part of the mangled heap of metal, barely conscious and with a faint pulse. Blood oozed from her nostrils, from one corner of her mouth, and from every laceration her body sustained during the descent down the hillside.

She didn’t know if she was alive or not. She had no way of knowing, no way of telling. She couldn’t be sure. It was as if she had been in a dream. A barely perceptible voice deep in her subconscious suggested to her that she was dead.

She could barely hear the sounds of sirens. She vaguely heard ringing in her ears, as if she had tinnitus. If it had been quiet instead, then that would have meant she may be unconscious, comatose, or dead.

She felt as if she had been pumped full of painkillers. She had an imperceptibly weird notion that the fluid which coursed through her veins and arteries could be morphine instead of blood. Her physical being could not discern nor ascertain whether her heart beat or not. She barely sensed a pulse.

She had no knowledge if she had been breathing or not. There had been no way of telling if air passed through her nostrils or through her open mouth and down her windpipe and through her bronchial tubes into her lungs. Her spirit yearned to reach for the surface, to make contact with the outside world, and to inquire if she were all right and if the world still turned on its axis and orbited the sun.

Unconscious or dead?

Sleeping or comatose?

Dreaming or floating?

She cracked open one eye and viewed the tangled, gnarled mess before her, a metallic and dusty mass of debris.

Now I know I’m in The Twilight Zone, the voice in the back of her mind wanted to say, but could not. What happened?

She could hardly make out the misshapen remains of the cab beside her. She wanted to get out the last word. She had one more final thing to say to the old wretch in that cab.

A pair of white tennis shoes, a pair of black-polished dress shoes, and a pair of tan worker’s boots appeared in her line of vision. She saw a blur of blue jeans and

black trousers. She heard the shuffling of feet and scraping of gravel against the dirt. Adult male voices were scarcely audible and discernible.

As she sank into darkness, her vision—and her world—went black.

E P I L O G U E

The news had reported that Jimmy Woodruff, Dougie Carlucci, and his wife, Tawny Carlucci, suspects in a couple of explosions and black-market weapons smuggling, had been arrested.

They were also implicated as accomplices in murder. Since their arrest, they had been arraigned and held without bond, and were awaiting trial.



The summer evening was balmy and clear, with stars twinkling in the sky. Crickets *sang* their mating songs in the bushes nearby, and the sweet aroma of night-blooming jasmine permeated the air. Vivian and Hope sat on chaise lounges on the outdoor brick patio in the back of Vivian's small rental. They gazed at the stars. A light breeze wafted between them. Vivian slowly raised her right knee and massaged it gently.

"You okay, Vivian?" Hope asked.

"My knee still hurts, but not as bad as it was a few days ago. How's your ankle?"

"Much better, thank you. It wasn't as bad as I thought, thank goodness. I want to thank you for telling me everything."

"I was glad to tell you. It's about time you got to know me a little better."

Hope nodded in agreement.

"I'm sorry about Rose and Christine," Hope said.

“Well, believe it or not,” Vivian said, “I’m sorry, too. We needn’t worry about them anymore. I don’t mean to sound so callous.”

“I understand.”

“It’s too bad Rose died from her injuries. Otherwise, if she were still alive, she’d have been arrested and incarcerated for life. Now, she’s buried at Forest Lawn where she should have been the first time when she really wasn’t dead.”

“Will you visit her grave?” Hope asked.

“I doubt it,” Vivian said with a shake of her head. “I would visit my grandmother, my father, and my husband’s graves, and maybe give a quick look over at where Rose is buried. I was just thinking about the cab driver and his family earlier. I feel sorry for his loved ones. A shame he got killed. It’s unfortunate that he happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. As for Christine, she deserves to either be in prison for a long time or at an institution for the criminally insane once she recuperates from her injuries. It will take a long time to recover from all those broken bones, fractures, concussions, and lacerations.” Vivian paused briefly in thought. “All for naught. How sad.”

“Yes,” Hope said. “Such a shame. The jewels, the money, the gold bars, and all those secrets. The whole world’s talking about it. It’s on every talk show, news and radio station, and on the cover of every gossip rag out there.”

“The truth had to come out sooner or later. One can only hide it for so long. As for Christine, I’m going to have to try my hardest to forgive her for killing our brother, Blaine. That’s something I’m still having a hard time getting over.”

“What about your mother? Forgiving her, I mean.”

“Don’t forget, she was your mother, too. As for forgiving her, I don’t know.” Vivian fell silent for a few moments. “I guess time will tell.”

“Will you see Christine? Visit her some time, whether at the hospital or at prison?”

“Maybe. We’ll see. I’m not trying to be evasive or uncaring, and I’m not trying to avoid the subject. It’s just that I have a lot on my mind right now, and it’s going to take some time to mull over and digest everything.”

“I know it isn’t easy for you to talk about. Yet, I appreciate you sharing all this with me.”

“That’s what sisters are for,” Vivian said. She reached out and gently squeezed Hope’s hand. She entwined her arm around Hope’s and embraced it.

“I was just thinking,” Hope said, “I can see that it was a good thing that I was adopted. Maybe it wasn’t in the cards for me to live with someone like . . . Rose.”

“You’re right. You’re absolutely right.”

“So . . . what happens now? Where do we go from here?”

Vivian looked at the stars above. She took a long, slow, deep breath, inhaled

the jasmine, and exhaled a sigh.

“We close the chapter and go on to the next,” Vivian said. “We just go on living as we were. Writing new chapters and creating new memories.”



Christine lay in the hospital bed. Visions of Vivian’s yellow Honda Civic plowing head-on into the rented metallic-red convertible replayed in Christine’s mind.

She saw herself in the convertible as well as the nose of Vivian’s car as it barreled toward her. She remembered screaming in horror . . . then heard the loud crunch of metal against metal. She remembered being violently thrown about as if she were a rag doll. She tensed as the car teetered on the edge of the drop-off for a few moments . . . then sensed as if she were light as air when the convertible plunged down the—

Christine woke up with a start. Her heart palpitated.

Beads of sweat broke out on her forehead, eyebrows, and upper lip. She wondered how long she had been out this time.

She noticed the wallpaper around her. She squinted as she adjusted her eyes and earnestly focused on one wall in front of her. She blinked several times in rapid succession. She could make out the little images of the wallpaper on the wall.

Awww, cute little piggies, she thought sarcastically. Cute, indeed. But why pigs? Funny, I could’ve sworn I saw pink peonies earlier.

She lifted a hand to scratch an itch on her cheek but the handcuff tied to the bed rail wouldn’t let her raise it much. Being cuffed to the bed rail rankled her and made her resentful. She used her free hand instead.

The zigzag lines showed her heart’s pace quicken as she exerted movement and the monotonous beep of the machine increased in speed. She tugged at the IV drip line attached to her arm. Both arms were weighted down with gauze bandages wrapped around them. She could feel bandages snugly wrapped around her head, torso and legs.

The smell of antiseptic penetrated her sinuses. Typical hospital sounds such as the soft pitter-patter of nurses’ and doctors’ footsteps, a squeaky gurney as it passed by, and subdued voices from patients and visitors in other rooms were heard.

Oh, so I crashed, she thought sardonically. Glad to know that I survived. But boy, do I hurt bad. Well, what to do now except lie here for who knows how long? I ain’t sticking around here forever, that’s for damn sure. I may have been arrested and put under house arrest while I’m recuperating, but I ain’t giving up, even if I may be

sent to prison. I can always get out in half the time for good behavior. Whoop-dee-doo!

Christine wondered if Rose was still alive.

Well, Christine thought, she had better have the decency not to come visit me or I will really create a scene, even in my current condition. I sure hope she's dead. Dead and buried. Too bad I didn't get the chance to kill her personally with my own hands. I would've loved to have had the pleasure and the satisfaction. Just so long as she is dead.

Christine would have loved to stand at the gates of Hell while she held open the flaming gate. When it would be Rose's turn to walk through into eternal damnation, Christine would have oh-so-gladly greeted her with a contemptible curtsy worthy of bestowing upon a plebeian.

"Welcome to Hell, ma'am!" Christine would say. "Have a nice vay-kay and a permanent one at that! All expenses paid for by the poor choices you made in your pathetically ephemeral life while on planet Earth! The following have been paid and/or furnished prizes to you by Satan for doing his will. Losers doomed to Hell like you have been furnished with complete rules and have met eligibility requirements. The only tax you have to pay is your lame-ass soul!"

As for Vivian, Christine decided she wouldn't give the frigid spinster credit for being a strong-willed, strong-minded, supposedly wise woman.

Christine silently laughed as her abdominal muscles convulsed in pain. She winced and moaned, and her eyes squinted in rhythm with each pulse of the pain.

She could imagine Vivian and Hope out on the brick patio in the back of that little two-bit charmer as they sipped iced tea or iced water with a lemon wedge, talking about Rose, talking about what had happened twenty-two years ago, talking about what had happened recently, talking about Rose's secrets and the bad deeds she had done all those years ago, talking about Christine, talking about Vivian and Hope getting to know one another after all this time now that Christine would no longer be in the picture, talking about Vivian and Hope's current plans and their future. Talking talking talking talking, chat chat chat chat, yak yak yak yak, gab gab gab gab, blah blah blah blah blaaaaaaaahhh . . .

Well, ain't that nice? Christine thought rancorously. *As for you, sister, I'll just have to figure out another way to get you. Some time, eventually, somewhere down the road, all in good time . . .*

She dozed off for a while.



A twitch in her leg caused Christine to wake up.

My friends! she thought with a pang of guilt, even while groggy. Her head and her entire body had a weighty heaviness to it. *Are they okay? Have Jimmy, Dougie, and Tawny managed to escape from the clutches of the police or have they been caught? I'll find out sooner or later. As for Janice, she can keep the money and the other stuff I gave her. She earned her keep.*

Christine experienced a wave of nausea for a moment as she thought about her book.

My manuscript! What's to become of it? When will I get to work on it? What if I end up in jail? What if nothing comes of the manuscript? What if? What if? What if? More importantly, what if an editor from the publishing company tries to contact me even though I don't have my cell phone with me? It's most likely busted along with—Oh, no! The car! Oh, man. Christine groaned. *I'm gonna have to pay for the loss of the car, damn it. I fully place the blame on the shoulders of that cursed bitch who got me into this frickin' mess! It's her fault! Her fault, her fault, her fault! Damn her to Hell!*

Christine lifted her head and moaned in pain and discomfort. She felt the brace around her stiff neck when she moved her head. She drifted between being awake and sleeping, her mind muddled and dense. She closed her eyes and thought of roses.

Oh, yes, what memories they bring, Christine thought. *Giving Vivian a rose on those few occasions to cover up my guilt and to distract her from whatever suspicions she may have had about me. Then there was that clever, little colorful stunt I pulled with her stoopid dumb-ass, two-rose, needlepoint thing. Made for a nice pair of bloody blossoms, didn't it? Colorful, indeed!*

A wicked smile formed at the corner of her lips. She wanted to chuckle, giggle, and laugh, but she dared not for she knew that her sore muscles and aching body would be in more pain and discomfort.

She opened her eyes and looked at the wallpaper. She thought her eyes were playing tricks again. She now saw the pink peonies again. *What happened to the cute, little, pink pigs?* she thought.

Christine gasped and flinched with a start. She thought she saw movement.

“Oh, man,” she said above a whisper, her eyes wide. “This is weirding me out.” She blinked several times. “W-what’s happening? W-w-what’s going on?” She slowly craned her neck to the right, then to the left. She couldn’t turn around enough to see behind her.

Several peonies in sporadic places on all four walls in the room oozed drops of blood from their petals.

“Stop! S-s-stop it!” Christine said to herself and shut her eyes tight. “Oh, please . . . p-p-please, make it stop.” Terror gripped her. “I’m not s-s-seeing this. It’s all in my head, all in my head . . . Just my tired mind playing t-t-tricks . . .”

She opened her eyes and saw numerous peonies ooze blood as thin columns of dark-red fluid trickled down the walls.

She screamed.

**The following is a synopsis for
Daryl Hajek's next novel, *The Preternatural*.**

A deaf family experiences increasingly frightening paranormal activity after moving into their newly purchased home. They seek help from neighbors, prayer warriors from a Christian church, a psychic medium, a demonologist, and a paranormal research institute.

Will any of them be able to help the family defeat the unseen and unheard evil?