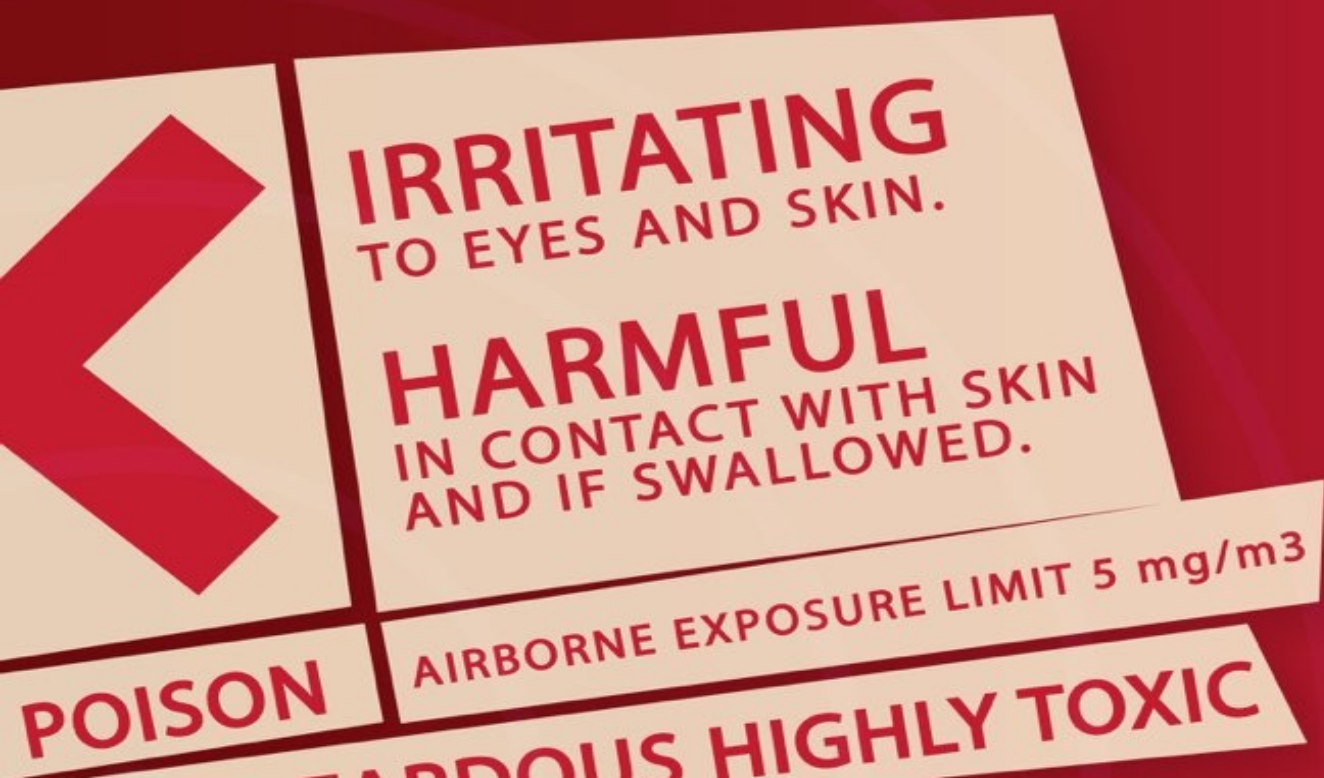


A MEGAN SCOTT/MICHAEL ELLIOTT MYSTERY

SANDRA NIKOLAI

# F A L S E I M P R E S S I O N S



**IRRITATING**  
TO EYES AND SKIN.

**HARMFUL**  
IN CONTACT WITH SKIN  
AND IF SWALLOWED.

AIRBORNE EXPOSURE LIMIT 5 mg/m<sup>3</sup>

**POISON**

**DANGEROUS HIGHLY TOXIC**

# **FALSE IMPRESSIONS**

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A MEGAN SCOTT/MICHAEL ELLIOTT MYSTERY

SANDRA NIKOLAI

FALSE IMPRESSIONS

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## **JOIN SANDRA'S NEWSLETTER!**

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*This novel is dedicated to the memory of my parents  
who inspired me with a series of Nancy Drew  
mystery books when I was ten years old.*

If I'd known I would be visiting the morgue just weeks after I saw my husband sitting with Pam at Pueblo's Café, I'd have gone over to say hello that sunny Monday afternoon in July and maybe changed destiny.

But I was late for a five o'clock appointment.

That night, I told Tom I'd seen him at Montreal's trendy downtown café.

"Yeah...talk about weird," he said, undoing his tie and tossing it on the bed. "I was waiting for a client when this blonde comes over and sits down at my table. I didn't recognize her until she introduced herself as your boss and mentioned the Christmas party last year."

"She's also the friend I told you about. The one I go to the movies and have dinner with every week. Didn't she mention that?"

He nodded absently, as if it were a vague memory. "What did the doctor say?"

My eyes began to sting, and I fought back the tears. "I'm not pregnant—again. So much for those home pregnancy tests." I tried to rationalize the situation. After all, we'd only been trying for six months. Statistics showed it took most couples up to a year or longer to conceive. "The doctor told me to relax and not think about it. Same conclusion as the shrink. Easy for them." I wriggled out of my jeans and kicked them off, my frustration flying across the floor with them. "Neither of us had siblings. It's what makes having a baby so special. Is it too much to ask? I mean, we're both healthy."

“It’s my fault, Megan. I’m never home. All those business trips to dig up new clients—”

“It’s not your fault. Besides, those new clients got you that promotion to senior manager. Now that you’ll be home more often, I can relax and—”

“Not really. I have to travel even more now.”

My heart sank. “You’re not serious. I miss you so much already.”

He shrugged. “That’s why BOTCOR pays me the big bucks—to sell their software.”

BOTCOR Dynamics customized multimedia-training programs, to be precise. Way over my head. “Okay, so the upside is that we’ll have more money to invest in the new house.”

For three years, we’d pooled every extra dime into a savings account toward the purchase of a two-story brick home in the prestigious west end of the city—an area renowned for its tall trees and spacious parks. According to my calculations, we’d be able to leave the leased condo apartment and move into a house by next spring.

“What do we have so far? About forty thousand?” I asked him.

“Yeah...almost.” Tom dropped his shirt on the bed, then unzipped his pants and stepped out of them. He walked over and slid his arms around me. “About the baby, it’ll happen. You’ll see.”

I stood on my toes and wrapped my arms around his neck. “You know that trying to get pregnant is the most important part, don’t you?” I kissed him on the lips.

He responded with a passion that made me want him even more and reminded me how much I loved him.

We lingered in bed later, my head resting against his back. Even in the dim light, I could see the small tattoo of two intertwining roses on his lower back—the same one we’d both had engraved while honeymooning in Nassau.

“I wish we could pack a few things and fly away to an exotic place,” I said. “When was the last time we took a vacation? I mean, a real vacation. On our honeymoon?”

“Yeah.” He turned to face me. “Mmm...tell you what. I’ll try to take some



time off. We'll go away for a weekend. Okay?"

"You've worked every weekend for the last six months. Please don't make promises you can't keep."

"I'll make it happen. I promise."



I managed to get a seat on the bus to work the next morning—a rare occurrence on a weekday in this city of multitudes. I took it as a good luck omen on this hot, humid day and enjoyed the view of the majestic maples and historic sites along Sherbrooke Street even more.

Half an hour later, I got off and walked down the block to the fifteen-story building that housed Bradford Publishing. I crossed the lobby, flashed my ID card at Carlo at the front desk, and took the elevator up to the sixth floor.

Lucie, the fresh-out-of-college receptionist Pam had hired last month, greeted me with a wave from across her desk as she spoke into her headset. I made my way down the corridor and passed the glass-framed boardroom. Kayla Warren, the project coordinator, was sitting in a closed-door meeting there with a client and a woman named Helena who was a freelance ghostwriter like me. Next up was the admin assistant's office. Emily Saunders was tapping away on her keyboard while talking into her headset. Lots of giggling and weird lingo going on. Definitely not work-related, but typical for the twenty-one-year-old.

Minutes after I'd arrived at my desk, voices drifted in from Pam's office at the far end of the corridor. Bradford's offices only occupied fifteen hundred square feet, so conversations flowed easily through the air when the doors were left open. I couldn't tell who the other woman was, but her tone of voice grew argumentative as "bitch" and other slurs reached my ears.

Emily strolled in. "Who is that?" she whispered, pointing a thumb toward Pam's office.

"I haven't a clue." I did a double take. She was wearing a white blouse almost identical to the one Pam had purchased last week at Holt Renfrew. Ditto for the red lipstick—

My thoughts scattered as the altercation in Pam's office escalated.

"I'm *not* sleeping with him," Pam shouted. "You have me confused with someone else."

"I doubt it," the other woman said, her tone curt. "Keep this in mind: My family doesn't tolerate scandals. We don't get rid of people who disrupt our lives by paying them off either."

"Is that a threat?"

"Call it priceless advice."

Footsteps approached. A woman with a stride that said, "Get out of my way!" whizzed past my office. Well-coiffed hair, dark blue suit, lots of makeup, fiftyish. Old money.

It was Tricia, the wife of company president, Bill Bradford.

Emily turned to me, her face a shade paler. "Oh my God! What's *she* doing here?"

The main door slammed shut.

I rushed out of the office, Emily on my heels, and almost collided with Pam as she peeked out into the corridor.

"Good. She's gone." Pam looked past me to Emily, perception flickering in her eyes as she took in the familiar blouse and shade of lipstick.

"What did Mrs. B. want?" Emily asked her, as if she hadn't overheard the conversation.

"Nothing to worry about." Pam waved a hand in the air. "Em, did you call the lab to find out if the photos for the cookbook project were ready?"

"Oops, I forgot. I got real busy." Emily twirled a strand of long blonde hair around her finger—a habit she fell into whenever she was caught in a lie.

"Call Ray now," Pam said. "If the photos are ready, run over and pick them up. We have to approve them ASAP."

Emily's eyes lit up. She'd been dating Ray Felton, photographer and karate enthusiast, on and off since he'd joined the company weeks ago. "Okay, but what about the clients we're meeting with in half an hour?"

Pam gave her a pointed look. "*I'm* meeting with them."

"But I need their signatures on the contracts the lawyers prepared."

“Bring me the paperwork. I’ll take care of it.”

“Whatever.” Emily scowled, then gave me a side-glance and left.

I waited until she was out of hearing range, then said to Pam, “What an attitude! No wonder she got fired from her last job.”

“She was laid off. There’s a big difference.”

I shrugged. Pam had believed Emily’s tale about having lost her former job due to downsizing, but I hadn’t. My phone call to Emily’s last employer had confirmed she’d lied, but Pam had decided to keep her on anyway.

“I realize she’s made a few mistakes,” Pam said, “but she wants to learn. She’s just an ambitious girl trying to assert herself in this cutthroat world. Anyway, I can’t fire her. Where would she go? Companies are downsizing all over the place.”

I said nothing. It was clear that Pam had made up her mind.

“I know you think I’m a real suck when it comes to underdogs like Emily. So maybe I am.” She waved the topic away. “Come, let’s sit down.”

Entering Pam’s office was like stepping into a different decade. The spacious room had recently been revamped in a black-and-white 60s décor theme. Two black-and-white pieces of optical artwork, supposedly worth a small fortune, filled the wall at the far back. The circular “op art” generated movement through visual illusion, but it was enough to have anyone reaching for their migraine meds. In the center of the room, a glass table with chrome legs provided a landing strip for three narrow metal sculptures winding their way up like tornadoes from hell—the creation of a local *artiste* whose book Bradford had published. Six black vinyl chairs with chrome trim completed the steely look.

The redo—along with a hefty salary increase—was Bradford’s way of rewarding Pam for the string of VIP clients she’d brought in over the last two years. The list included corporate gurus, five-star chefs, and fashion icons who were thrilled at the notion of producing their memoirs through Bradford Publishing, the most reputable publisher in town. The talk was that Pam’s charm had lured them in, but insiders knew her offer to promote the client’s book was what finalized the deal. From software to chocolate truffles to gold-plated bookmarks, her clients got the best freebies for their book launch. Not to

mention media kits and TV interviews.

The metal tips of Pam's three-inch heels clicked against the black-and-white checkered linoleum as she moved to her desk, the trail of Prada perfume lingering in the air behind her. She sunk into a black leather chair. "I guess you heard everything Mrs. B. said."

"Hard not to." I sat down, glanced at her collection of cat figurines displayed in a corner bookcase. Trips-without-sex gifts from the older men she'd dated. She hadn't added any other pieces since January.

She leaned forward and whispered, "If Mrs. B. is right about her husband, I need to find out who the hell is spreading rumors about me. I have a feeling it's someone from the office."

I kept my voice low. "Who?"

"I heard Em and Lucie talking by the coffee machine yesterday. Em said I dated different men more often than she changed underwear. How would she know? I only confide in you."

"Maybe she overheard you talking on the phone. Sound travels well in here."

"Maybe." She paused. "I heard Lucie say that Mr. B. ogled me in meetings. The gossip could have reached his wife."

"It doesn't mean anything. Everybody knows he's a big flirt. He ogles all the girls."

She gave a little nod but didn't seem totally convinced.

"Mrs. B. is just fishing," I said. "If you did nothing wrong, why worry about it?"

"You're right. She can't prove a damn thing. To hell with it." She dismissed the topic. "Thanks again for listening, Megan."

"Isn't that what friends are for?" I smiled. "By the way, Tom told me he bumped into you at Pueblo's."

"You know, he didn't even recognize me," she said, glancing away. "I was so embarrassed. He must have thought I was trying to pick him up or something." She laughed, pushing strands of short white blonde hair off her face.

I laughed too. Pam had dated more men in the last year than other thirty-three-year-old women had in a lifetime. Her one stipulation: no married men.

“You’ll find someone special one day,” I said. “Just wait and see.”

“No way,” she said. “The ‘white picket fence’ fantasy doesn’t work for me anymore. I’m all about having a good time with no strings attached. Use them, then lose them. And believe me, I’m enjoying every moment of it.” Glossy red lipstick played up her smile.

I should have known better than to go down that road again. A suave investment broker had dated her for almost two years, even promised to marry her. When Pam discovered he was married and had two kids, her naiveté died—and with it her dream.

She reached into her in-basket. “Can you fit a new client into your schedule?”

“Sure.” I’d never refused a job from Pam. She’d sent so much work my way that Bradford had become my sole source of income two years later. Even though I worked at home most of the time, she’d arranged for me to have my own office here too. Friendship had its privileges.

Pam handed me a book and a flash drive. “Michael Elliott, a true crime writer. He self-published his first book. It’s about his career as an investigative reporter. He needs help with the second one he’s drafted. It’s on the flash drive. He’s so hot, I was tempted to take on the project myself.” She laughed. “He’s promoting his first book around town, so try to work around his schedule. Give his project three weeks tops. Focus on clarity and organization of the material, consistency of voice. You know the routine. Bill the company as usual.”

Back at my desk, I picked up *The Inside Track*, the book Pam had given me. There was no photo of the author on the back cover, so I checked the inside flap. There it was.

Pam was right. Michael Elliott was “hot”...and a familiar face from my past. The last time I’d seen him, he was reading Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* while our English Lit professor lectured the class on Renaissance culture. I had a secret “thing” for this boy with the tousled brown hair and blue eyes, but he didn’t even know I existed. The next semester, I heard he’d left McGill University to attend the School of Journalism at Ryerson in Toronto.

I leafed through the pages of his book. It was a compilation of newspaper

articles he'd written on criminal activity in major cities across the country over the last decade. Topics ranged from fraudulent marketing schemes to child molesters and included reports on ensuing legal proceedings. I read an investigative piece he'd written on the illicit gun trade in Canada and discovered he'd won a national award for it. My admiration for him suddenly soared. I'd have loved to read more, but I needed to work on his new project.

I popped the flash drive into my computer and spent the rest of the day skimming through Michael's manuscript. *Drug Trafficking in Canada* focused on a single and obvious topic. I glimpsed passages here and there that referred to organized crime groups, anonymous informants, and police intervention. I had to assume that Michael had done his homework and the information was accurate. There was no time to check it. However, I did notice a less than smooth transition in the flow of the contents. Topics and dates were assembled in a haphazard manner—not in chronological order or theme. That's where I came in. And from where I sat, three weeks would be a tight deadline to meet.

Later that afternoon, Pam stopped by my office on her way out. "Mr. B. just called. He wants me to attend a VIP meeting with him tomorrow morning, but I'm scheduled for publicity photos with Michael Elliott then. Would you fill in for me at the shoot? It'll give you a chance to introduce yourself." She gave me an expectant look.

"Sure," I said.



The next day, I felt like a schoolgirl and fussed with my hair for half an hour. I couldn't decide what to wear and changed three times before choosing a light blue jacket and skirt.

I was applying lipstick in the bathroom when Tom peeked in, looking impressive in a dark suit and tie, briefcase in hand. "Peter's coming by the condo to drop off his company car at lunchtime." He stared at me. "I thought you said you'd be home today."

"Something came up at the last minute," I said.

“Will you be back by noon?”

“I don’t know. Can’t you wait until Peter gets here?”

“No. I have to meet with a client at ten.” He checked his watch. “In about an hour. Then I’m taking him out for lunch. On top of that, I’ve got a blasted headache.” He frowned.

“Again?”

“It’s okay. I popped two pills.”

“Well...can’t you call Peter and set another time?”

“No. I need his car for my trip to Toronto this afternoon. I have to go. A taxi’s waiting downstairs.” He walked away.

“Wait! Where’s *your* company car?” I followed him down the hallway.

“It’s with the mechanic for a tune-up.” He opened the front door, then glanced back at me. “Please, Megan, you have to get back here in time for Peter.”

“You can’t do this to me. I have clients too, you know.”

“Sorry. I have no choice.” He shut the door behind him.

Damn!

I entered Bradford's photography studio and found Michael sitting comfortably in a director's chair, looking more charismatic than I remembered. He wore a dark jacket over light pants and a buttoned-down sports shirt. His tanned, chiseled features suggested a preference for rigorous outdoor pursuits, such as mountain climbing or sail boating, rather than writing. Tousled brown hair still framed those blue eyes.

I was surprised to see Emily there, chatting with the makeup artist. Had Pam asked both of us to stand in for her at the shoot? Off to the side, Ray was checking the lighting.

I walked up to Michael and introduced myself.

He stood up and shook my hand with a firm grasp. "Right. You're my ghostwriter. Pam told me about you." He smiled, kept staring at me. "This isn't a come-on line, but I know you from somewhere."

I laughed. "You were in my English Lit class at McGill."

"Ah, yes, I remember you now. You used to sit at the back of Professor Becker's class. I kept trying to talk to you, but you kept ignoring me." His smile widened.

Our eyes locked in a split-second of body chemistry, and I felt the blood rushing to my face.

He glanced at my wedding ring. "So you're married now."

"Yes," I said.



“How long?”

“Five years.”

Emily edged her way in and put a hand on his arm. “Um...Michael, we should get started. Would you like to sit down so Ray can take some pictures?” She switched her gaze to me. “We’ll take some of you with Michael in a bit.” She dismissed me with a nod of her head.

I stood off to the side and watched.

Between shots, Emily found any and every excuse to ease her way over and chat with Michael. She fussed with his shirt collar, asked if he wanted something to drink, made sure his jacket fell just so...

Michael kept his cool. My admiration for the man grew each time Emily invaded his private space.

Before I knew it, it was eleven o’clock. Peter was supposed to come by the condo at noon. I was still angry with Tom and hated the way he’d dumped the matter of the company car on me, but I didn’t want to leave Peter stranded. I’d have to head for home soon.

“Okay, Megan,” Emily called out. “We only need a few quick shots of you.”

Her message was subtle but I got it.

As I sat down in a chair next to Michael, he said, “Too bad you never sat this close to me in class.” He grinned.

I changed the subject. “Do you miss Montreal?”

“Yes. Especially the downtown area. I grew up in Westmount and—”

“Michael, did you know the Bradfords lived in Westmount?” Emily cut in. “Their kids went to Selwyn House, an exclusive all-boys private school in the area. Really expensive. Ever heard of the place?”

“Yes, I attended Selwyn House,” he said.

“Seriously? You were a rich man’s kid from Westmount?” Emily’s eyes widened, and I could almost see the dollar signs light up behind them.

Michael shrugged. “I was a spoiled brat. My parents believed the discipline would cure me.”

“Well, I have the perfect antidote for that.” Emily laughed. “I know some super hot spots in town where we can hang out. We can check out a couple of

them later.” She smiled at him, waiting.

Just then, Ray stepped in to take more pictures. “Sorry to break up the party, but I have a schedule to follow. I need to take more shots.” He frowned at Emily.

Emily glared at him. “We have enough photos. The shoot is over.”

Ray disagreed. He insisted on taking more shots. Emily refused. They moved off to the side, wrangling back and forth, the tension mounting between them.

With no reason to hang around any longer, I said to Michael, “I’d like to meet later to discuss the timeline for your manuscript. Are you free this afternoon?”

“Yes, I am,” he said.

“Is three o’clock good for you?” Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Emily approaching.

“Three o’clock is good,” he said. “Can we meet in my suite at the Elegance Hotel? It’s a lot quieter than your office.”

I wasn’t happy about meeting with him at the hotel, but judging from his earnest expression, I couldn’t refuse. “Okay. What’s your room number?”

“788.”

“See you later.” I ignored Emily’s frosty stare and left.



Gray hair at the temples, deep wrinkles, and rimless glasses. Peter Ewans had aged ten years since I’d seen him weeks earlier. As we stood by the front door to my apartment, he handed me the car keys but dropped them. We both made a move to retrieve them. I was faster.

“It’s a beige Ford sedan,” he said. “I parked it at the back of the condominium in lot 16, like Tom said. The papers are in the glove compartment. The license number is on the key tag. I hope everything is fine.” He hesitated, as if he were trying to come up with something else to say, then quickly asked, “Do you drive to work, Megan?”

“No, I take the bus,” I said.

He nodded, then rearranged his glasses over protruding ears and stared at the

floor.

Another awkward pause.

“How’s Ann doing?” I asked.

“Ann? Oh, she’s fine. Still talking about the brunch we went to—when was it—a month ago?”

“Yes. It was lots of fun.” To celebrate Tom’s promotion, Peter and Ann had invited us to a fancy brunch at *Le Cartet*. I’d initially met the forty-something couple through Tom at a BOTCOR Christmas party several years earlier. We’d gotten together a few times since then.

“Ann and I, we don’t socialize a lot these days, with both of us working and the kids and all. So it was a special treat for us too.”

“Maybe we can do it again some time,” I said.

He smiled at me. “Really? Ann will be very happy to hear that.”

“Would you like a ride back home or to work?”

His eyes bulged. “In the Ford?”

“No, I meant I’d call a taxi for you.”

“Oh...no, thanks. I’ve already arranged for a taxi to pick me up downstairs. Well, goodbye.” He fumbled with the lock on the door and let himself out.



It was two o’clock and Tom hadn’t returned from his lunch meeting. I’d hoped to see him before he drove off to Toronto, but I had to take the bus and go meet Michael in town.

Shortly before three, I stepped from the sweltering outdoor heat into the air-conditioned Elegance Hotel, one of the jewels in the city’s historic Golden Square Mile. Marble tiles paved the lobby, and soft music—maybe Chopin—drifted my way from speakers hidden behind parted drapery that revealed the busy street.

A reporter’s salary couldn’t begin to cover one week’s stay in this hotel. Then again, if you were “a rich man’s kid from Westmount,” chances were you could easily afford to stay here.

Looking comfortable in a T-shirt and jeans, Michael welcomed me into his suite and ushered me along a short hallway. The gray wall-to-wall carpet extended into a spacious living room.

I squinted at the sunlight flooding in through white vertical blinds suspended from ceiling to floor.

“Here,” he said. “I’ll fix that.” He drew the blinds halfway.

On my right were two oversized reprints of unknown origin—a flowery design you wouldn’t recall even if you’d seen the same one in dozens of hotel rooms. Beneath them sat a royal blue sofa. In the center of the living room, two magenta armchairs flanked a coffee table.

Michael gestured toward the armchairs. “Please, have a seat.”

I placed my briefcase next to the armchair on the left and sat down. Along the wall facing me was a credenza topped with a flat-screen TV, an AM/FM radio, a large plant, and water bottles. A corridor to the left led to the bedroom and bathroom. A purple sofa hugged the far wall.

“Want some cold water?” he asked. “I picked up a pack at the convenience store moments ago.” He took two bottles and handed me one, then sat down opposite me.

“Thanks.” I twisted the cap off, took a sip, sensed the coolness trickle down my throat. I hadn’t realized how parched I was. Or was it a case of hormones gone wild? “How did you like the photo shoot?” I asked him, raising a familiar topic.

“Ray was great,” he said. “Emily confirmed they’re going to place two photos in *The Gazette* this week with a promo piece about me.” He drank some water.

I had to know. “Did Ray and Emily stop squabbling after I left?”

“Yes. Then Emily escorted me down in the elevator.” He paused. “Are you and Emily good friends?”

“No. Why?”

“I practically had to fight her off.” He chuckled, but his fading smile told me otherwise.

Another strike against Emily. I made a mental note to tell Pam about her,

then put my bottle on the table and moved things along.

I retrieved a pen and a canary yellow notepad from my briefcase. "I'd like to set up a schedule that'll work for both of us. We can start with your book-signing events over the next three weeks. If you give me the dates and times, we can set up our meetings around them."

"Sure." He pulled out his cell phone. "I'll check my calendar."

I copied the dates and we discussed potential meeting times. Michael had book-signings and interviews on most days, which only left the evenings free for us to meet.

"Unless it causes a problem at home," he said.

"No, it's okay. I'd like to review your manuscript tomorrow." I scanned Michael's schedule. "We could meet again Friday afternoon to discuss it. Is two o'clock okay?"

"No problem. Here? In my suite?"

I got the impression he was still trying to avoid Emily. "Okay," I said. "Now, about your manuscript..." I explained the concern I had with the flow of the text.

"You noticed that, didn't you? It's not my usual way of doing things, but I was in a hurry. Sorry."

"You don't have to apologize."

"Then I'd like to explain."

"Go ahead." I sat back.

"I was covering a couple of illegal drug cases last month. Meeting with street informants and handing over evidence to the police. I got the go-ahead to ride along with the police on drug busts as long as I stayed behind the scenes. Their maneuvers went on longer than I'd planned. Before I knew it, the promo tour for my first book was about to begin. I ran out of time."

I secretly acknowledged the risk inherent in his work, his courage to follow through in spite of it...and the mellow tone of his voice. Qualities that would draw any woman to him, no doubt about it.

Michael went on. "Some details might be sketchy. Ask me about them. I didn't set up the manuscript the way I wanted either, but you already know that."

"Don't worry about it. We'll work together to get it right."

We spent the rest of the afternoon grouping similar topics and setting up the contents in chronological order. We agreed that I'd review a segment at a time and meet with him afterward to discuss any questions I had. I checked the meeting times to make certain we had enough free evenings to cover the entire manuscript.

Michael glanced at his watch. "Six o'clock already?"

"Oh. Do you have to be somewhere?" I hurried to gather my notes.

"Just dinner. Want to join me?"

"Dinner?" My fridge contained six eggs, two apples, a wedge of cheese, stale bagels, and a jar of mustard.

"If you can't make it, I understand," he said, mistaking my silence for a refusal. "Your husband is waiting—"

"No, Tom is away on business. I'll join you."



A blast of hot air greeted us like an open oven door as we stepped outside the Elegance. The heavy downtown traffic added to the heat and humidity that had lingered in the city for weeks. Luckily, it was a short walk to *Santino's*—Michael's suggestion for dinner.

I was familiar with the fine Italian restaurant owned and operated by a family of the same name for decades. The red brick façade was unpretentious, adding to its reputation for excellent food and service.

Indoors, the foyer housed a huge porcelain fountain with three ceramic angels pouring water from decanters into a basin. *Fontana degli angeli* was the inscription on the gold plaque adorning it. Wood beams along the ceiling and walls lent an old country ambiance to the place. As we waited to be seated, the aroma of pasta sauce wafted in my direction and stirred my appetite.

The maitre d' walked up to us, the buttons of his black satin vest straining to contain a belly that was a testimony to the success of the place—if not his love of Italian cuisine.

"Hi, Luigi," Michael said to him. "Table for two, please."

“I have the *perfetto* table for you,” Luigi gestured, his forefinger and thumb linked to form an “okay” sign. He led Michael and me to a secluded corner at the back of the restaurant, and I realized too late that he’d read more into our relationship than intended.

Maria arrived to take our orders for pasta, then returned to fill our glasses with red wine.

After she’d left, I said to Michael, “I’m curious about something. You self-published your first book, but you’re not going the same route with your second book. Why not?”

“The truth? I’m lousy at self-promotion. After a friend told me about Pam and Bradford Publishing, I met with her. And from what I’ve seen so far, I’m glad I did.”

“Bradford has many successful clients because of Pam’s efforts. You’re in good hands.” I took a sip of wine.

“Are you happily married?” he asked, catching me off guard.

“Yes...of course.”

“Any kids?”

“Not yet. We’re working on it. Have you ever been married?”

“No such luck.” A shadow flitted over his features.

“That’s surprising.” I caught myself. “I mean—I would think—”

“Haven’t found the right girl yet.” He briefly glanced away. “Do you play any sports?”

My life had become progressively tedious, but he didn’t have to know. “No. I’m too busy with work. And you?”

“I go out for a jog in the morning. Have to keep fit.” He patted an abdomen that would be the envy of most men. “You travel much?”

“We’ve tried to get away, but Tom travels a lot on business.”

“Even on weekends?”

“Yes. Sometimes he leaves for ten days straight.”

“It must get lonely for you.”

“I keep busy.” I drank more wine.

“Wherever I travel, I can be surrounded by crowds of people and still feel

lonely. It's plain crazy, isn't it?"

His expression reflected sincerity. Without trying, he'd forced me to confront a sad truth deep inside me: that I missed Tom more than ever.

But I'd be damned if I was going to start feeling sorry for myself in front of a stranger. I took a few more sips of wine and searched for a less invasive topic of discussion.

I found my answer in the terracotta pots, old-country china plates, and odd pieces of earthenware that decorated the wooden beams along the walls. A row of antique vases included porcelain pieces that were chipped. Either they were old and valuable, or someone had damaged them on purpose to make them appear that way. "I wonder if those vases are real or fake. What do you think?"

My tactic worked.

Michael began to tell me how one of his friends had a knack for finding valuable antiques while browsing in flea markets. I made sure we stuck to topics that were just as neutral throughout the rest of our dinner.



Later that evening, I opened the door to my apartment and was surprised to find Tom sitting in the living room. "Tom, you're still here. What happened?" I shut the door and noticed his luggage in the hallway.

"I had an accident," he said. "A wheel spun off Peter's car. I crashed into a couple of parked cars downtown. Good thing I wasn't driving fast. It saved me a trip to the hospital—or the morgue."

"Oh, my God!" I rushed up to him. "How are you feeling?"

He rubbed the back of his neck. "I have a headache and a bit of whiplash. I'll be fine." He frowned. "It's eight o'clock. I tried reaching you at the office. Where were you?"

"With a new client." We'd agreed from the start that we wouldn't discuss our boring jobs or clients with each other, so it wasn't as if I had to tell him about Michael and how he'd driven me back home in a fancy sports car. "Did you tell Peter about the accident? And BOTCOR?"



He nodded. “Peter went nuts. The poor guy almost had a nervous breakdown when I told him. BOTCOR put me on a first-class flight to Toronto tomorrow morning and gave me a travel bonus. They’re pissing in their pants, hoping I won’t sue them.”

“I thought the company ensured regular maintenance checks on their cars.”

“They do. The auto shop has high standards, but mistakes can happen anywhere.” He shrugged. “It’s Peter I’m worried about. He’s already got enough issues with management.”

“What do you mean?”

“You remember what he said at the brunch? How it was the third time they’d passed him over for a promotion, how stunned he was when they handed it to me—a newbie?”

“Yes, but he joked about it and said he was too old for the job anyway,” I said.

Tom rubbed his temple. “It’s a different story at work. He told me he’d lost everyone’s respect there and blames management. Sometimes he gets real angry about it.”

“Maybe he shouldn’t have left his old job as a chemist.”

“Don’t get me wrong. He’s a hard worker. That’s why I kept him on my sales team.”

It might not have been the best time to re-visit the subject, but I gave it a shot anyway. “I’m looking forward to getting away for a weekend. Except for the occasional outings, we rarely go out.”

“What about your friend at work? You go out with her once in a while.”

“Pam? No, I meant we—as in you and me. It gets so lonely here without you, Tom.”

“I already told you I’m working on it.” He stood up, massaged the back of his neck. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to snap. It’s this awful headache. I’m going to bed. I have an early flight.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“A couple of days.” He kissed me, then walked out of the room.



I worked from home on Thursday and tried to get a hold of Pam, but Lucie told me she was out of the office with clients and wouldn't be available until tomorrow. I scheduled a meeting with her then.

Friday noon, I arrived at work. As I passed Emily's office, I saw her lift the papier-mâché rabbit on her bookcase and put a small shiny item under it. I assumed it was the key to her desk but didn't give it another thought.

I knocked on Pam's door. "Lunch is served." I held up a brown paper bag. "Two cream cheese and smoked salmon bagels. Two coffee lattes. A bag of chocolate almonds to share."

"Great!" Pam sprang from her chair. "I've been in meetings with clients all morning and I'm starving. Let's eat."

I dug the wrapped bagels out of the bag and placed them on the glass tabletop, then sat in one of the chrome chairs. "It's been weeks since we got together for lunch."

"I know," she said, sitting down. "I've been so busy." She glanced at her watch. "And my next meeting is in half an hour. Thanks for picking these up." She unwrapped her bagel. "Lucie said you wanted to meet to talk about Michael Elliott."

"Actually, it's more about Emily." I briefed her on the photo shoot.

"Em's a bit of a flirt, but I figured if you were there, she'd behave." Pam took a bite of her bagel.

"What? You expected me to babysit her? She was all over Michael. And from what he told me, she harassed him in the elevator too."

"Oh, no. The last thing I want is a complaint reaching Mr. or Mrs. B. about this. They'll think I can't control my staff."

I said nothing and bit into my bagel.

Pam went on. "The possibility of losing a client like Michael Elliott because of an incident like this would reflect so badly on me. I'll talk to Emily and—" She stopped, seemed to be revisiting her plan of action. "No, it's too late for that. From what you just told me, I should fire her and get it over with."

“It’s your decision,” I said.

Emily strolled in and I almost choked on my bagel. She stood there, documents in hand, her eyes boring into me. It was clear she’d overheard part—if not all—of our conversation. “Pam, this is the paperwork you wanted for the Demetri account.”

“Thanks.” Pam waved a hand. “Leave them on my desk, Em.”

“So how did your VIP meeting go yesterday?” Emily asked her.

“Fine,” Pam said, turning her attention back to her bagel.

“Just *fine*? That’s all?”

“I don’t have time to talk about it,” Pam said, her mouth full.

Emily’s lips tightened. “Mrs. B. left messages for you. Lucie tried to reach you but—”

“I know,” Pam said, annoyance rising in her voice.

“Seriously, you don’t have to bite my head off,” Emily shouted. She flung the documents across Pam’s desk, toppling an empty coffee mug, then stormed out.

“Anger-management issues,” Pam whispered. She took a sip of her coffee. “All things considered, I have a lot more reasons to fire her. I’ll take care of it.”

“What about the calls from Mrs. B?”

“I’ll take care of that too.”



I went to my scheduled meeting with Michael at the Elegance Friday afternoon.

“A reporter from *The Gazette* just phoned me for an interview,” he said as we stood in his suite. “He’s on his way up. Had I known earlier, I would have called you.”

“Oh...that’s okay.”

“Can you come back in half an hour?”

“Sure. I’ll leave these here for now.” From my briefcase, I pulled out the flash drive and manuscript. I found a free spot among the crumpled papers on the coffee table and placed the items there. It beat lugging them back and forth.

“See you later.”

The heat and humidity that hung over the city was wearing me down. Lucky for me, it was only a block down Sherbrooke Street to Bradford Publishing.

I swung into my office and dropped my briefcase at the foot of the desk, then sat down to check my messages. Three were from clients; the fourth was from Tom. He’d called from Toronto. It could only mean one thing. He’d made good on his promise to spend a weekend together.

Not intending to spoil his surprise, someone from a resort had phoned me at home earlier to request confirmation of the weekend booking. I searched my briefcase for the canary yellow sheet I’d written the information on but couldn’t find it. I opened up my agenda and wrote down what I remembered from the call, then phoned Tom back.

“My client wants me to stick around a few more days,” he said, letting out a sigh. “I can’t wait to spend a weekend away from the city for a change.”

“Me too,” I said, smiling into the phone. I looked at the page where I’d jotted the information. “Louise from Pineview resort called to confirm our August 10 weekend. Dinner and Jacuzzi for two. Sounds relaxing.”

“Pineview?” He paused. “Damn it. Our people in admin screwed up again. I’m working on a marketing project with Peter and the team at Granite Ridge that weekend.”

Disappointment enveloped me. “Oh. I thought you’d planned something special for the two of us.”

“I’m sorry, Megan. Next time. I promise.”

“It’s always the next time,” I muttered, then regretted my words, knowing that his hard work was for our mutual benefit. “I have the Pineview number if you want to call them.”

“No, I’ll have the admin people fix their mistake. Have to go now. Talk to you later.”

I scanned my notes. “Wait. One more thing. A man from the life insurance company called. He didn’t say what it was about.”

“Yeah, he called me before. Tried to up-sell me on a pricier policy. I’m glad I’m not in the insurance business.” He chuckled. “Okay, gotta go. Bye, Megan.”

“Bye.” I hung up. No weekend alone with Tom. Again.

I reached for the chocolate-covered almonds remaining from my lunch with Pam. They helped to calm me, but I needed to vent.

I opened up my e-mail. Time for a cleanup of old files. Pressing the delete button over and over provided an outlet for my frustration. After I’d finished, I called back the clients who’d left messages. Two wanted billing information; the third wasn’t there, so I left a message.

I dug into my briefcase and retrieved three letters that I’d picked up from the lobby mailbox on my way out the condo earlier. Mrs. Speck had stood next to me then, making idle chitchat, gawking through thick black-rimmed glasses at the letters in my hand. I’d heard how she chatted up the letter carrier every day while he sorted the letters, bills, and small packages. He’d hurry to get the job done, but it was all he could do to stop Mrs. Speck from looking over his shoulder.

I shredded the first two envelopes. Junk mail. Given that our bill payments went through Tom’s bank account, it amazed me how advertisers managed to get a hold of our home address.

The last envelope was addressed to me. The return address read: Sunny Watering Hole, Bistro Hot Spot, Montreal, Québec. I’d never heard of the place. I opened it up. Inside was a photo of Tom and Pam. The scene was oddly familiar. Of course. It was a shot of them sitting at Pueblo’s. It was the same day I’d seen them there because Pam was wearing the same outfit. The photo had been taken from inside a car. The window wasn’t rolled down all the way.

A search online turned up nothing for Sunny Watering Hole. No surprise there. I assumed one of Tom’s friends had sent me the photo as a prank. Probably Greg, the new marketing recruit. Tom told me one of the guys from work had sprayed Greg with woman’s perfume at Coby’s last week on his fortieth birthday party. It had taken three phone calls to convince Greg’s pregnant wife, Ashley, that he hadn’t been with another woman. I’d felt sorry for his wife. If I’d been in her situation, I’d have lost it too.

The photo was old news and not worth calling Tom about. He’d get a good laugh out of it on his return.



On my return to Michael's hotel suite, I found the door slightly ajar. I heard voices and figured the reporter was still there. I peeked inside.

A woman was standing in the living room, her back to me. Dark brown hair fell to her shoulders in curls. A short skirt showed off a trim waist and long legs.

"I come all the way here and you say you're too busy to meet me for coffee," the woman said. "Are you serious?"

"I am. Look around." Michael gestured toward the living room.

The woman took a few steps to the left, disappearing from my line of sight. "So much paper... Which reminds me. I saw your publicity photo in the newspaper this morning, the one with that pretty redhead from the publishing company—Megan whatever-her-name-is. Are you holding out on me?" she asked in a soft voice, as if she were promising a child he wouldn't be punished if he owned up to bad behavior. "Well?"

"You mentioned you had something for me," Michael said, sounding impatient.

She walked back to him. "Yes." She reached into her small shoulder bag and handed him a pendant on a gold chain. "You forgot this in my hotel room the other night. I know how important it is to you. And to the woman you'll want to share your life with."

He accepted it from her without a word.

"I have to run but we need to talk, Michael. See you at dinner tonight. Maybe I can convince you to accept your grandmother's settlement." She kissed him on the lips.

That was my cue. I stepped back, slowly counted to five, then knocked at the door.

Michael swung it open. "Hi, Megan. Good timing." He introduced me to Jane Barlow.

If Jane was surprised at seeing me in the flesh, she didn't show it. Her blue-gray eyes studied me for a moment before she offered some vague excuse about rushing off.

As Michael and I settled in the magenta armchairs around the coffee table, he said, “Jane works as a paralegal. She’s in town to see a client.”

“Uh-huh.”

“We first met a year ago in a Montreal court when we sat in on a drug possession case. We met again in a Toronto courthouse when I was working on a drug case there two months ago.”

Why did he feel obliged to share these facts with me?

He went on. “We dated for a while afterward, but there’s nothing serious between us now.”

For some unknown reason, he needed to clarify his relationship with Jane. He concluded his tale with a smile and a familiar gaze that gave me butterflies.

I gathered my thoughts and reached for the manuscript on the table. I was astonished to see my note with the name Scott and the Pineview information sitting on top of the pile. “How did this get here?” I held up the canary yellow paper.

“Oh... I lifted your printout to make room for the reporter’s stuff, and it fell out from the bottom. I thought it might be important.”

“It’s not.” I crumpled it and placed it beside the other discarded papers on the table.



That evening, I watched the late night news on TV and caught a clip of Montreal’s International Fireworks Competition. Up until three years ago, Tom and I used to attend those events live. Then our work got in the way and we hardly spent time together. All to say that I saw Tom all of three times over the next two weeks.

The first occasion was dinner Monday evening after he’d returned from Toronto. I surprised him with a home-cooked meal—a rare occurrence in our kitchen. I’d called my mother to get the recipe for her lasagna, and it had turned out pretty good. She would have been proud.

We’d just finished dinner that evening, when Tom’s cell phone rang. After a

brief conversation, he hung up and announced, "I'm going to Coby's. Have to meet with a new client."

"I thought we were going to spend a quiet evening together," I said.

He shrugged. "I couldn't say no to the guy. If the deal works out, it means a pay bonus for me." He suddenly grimaced in pain, rubbed his temples with both hands. "You got any aspirin? I finished my bottle."

I stood up. "You keep getting these headaches. Maybe you should go see a doctor."

"I'm okay. I went for a physical in the spring. It's just stress." He followed me to the master bathroom where I plucked the bottle of pills from the cabinet and handed it to him. He swallowed two pills with a gulp of water. He smiled at me, then kissed me on the lips. "Dinner was incredible. Don't wait up."

I didn't.

I saw Tom a second time that week. I was working at home when he arrived from New York. Hours later, he packed a clean set of clothes before rushing out to take a plane to Windsor.

The following week, I spent an afternoon helping him pack for a seven-day trip to Toronto. That trip would take him through to Friday, August 10, which was the start of his working weekend with Peter and the team. Another trip in what I imagined would be an endless schedule of the same.

Ironically, I spent more time with Michael during those same two weeks than with my own husband. Book-signings and interviews with the media filled the crime writer's days, so all our get-togethers turned into dinner meetings. Michael was okay with our arrangement since he preferred to discuss his work with me in person rather than on the phone or through email. I was okay with it because it meant I wouldn't have to eat dinner alone.

Every third evening, I'd meet Michael at Santino's. We discussed the material I'd reviewed since our last meeting. Whether I needed clarification of facts or whether he had comments regarding my interpretation of them, our conversation focused on work. But by the time we ordered coffee, our discussion had spread to a range of topics, from favorite movies to least favorite politicians, interspersed with hilarious experiences from our youth and his backpacking trips



to Europe.

He rarely mentioned his family except to say that his parents were retired and lived out of town. I didn't talk much about my family either, except to mention Tom's weird car accident and my Mom's penchant for playing bingo.

I looked forward to Michael's easygoing rapport and to our discussions during dinner—the stuff of which I hadn't experienced with Tom in years. I wished it could go on like this forever, but Michael was going back to Toronto soon, and I doubted I'd ever see him again. Reality soon rushed in with a reminder of my upcoming work schedule at Bradford and its state of dull predictability.

We were sitting in Michael's suite that last Friday, August 10—my deadline for his project. I used his laptop for a final save of the file and sent a copy by email to Kayla at Bradford minutes before closing. She confirmed seconds later that she'd received it.

I leaned my head against the back of the armchair. “We made it.”

“No kidding.” Michael smiled. “I'm flying back to Toronto tomorrow. I thought we could celebrate our success over dinner...unless you have other plans.”

“No plans. Tom is gone for the weekend. Another business trip.”

He nodded, familiar with my mantra by now. “How about going to Santino's for old time's sake?”

The thought of having dinner with Michael one last time gave me pangs of nostalgia. I'd only known him for a few weeks, but it felt like a lifetime. With Tom out of town for the most part, evening meals with Michael had grown into as comfortable a routine as one would expect from two people trying to get into each other's head every other day.

But tonight I'd have to say goodbye to him. I hated endings, especially when they had to do with friendships. That I'd picked my friends carefully all my life and had so few close ones would explain my reluctance to part with them.

We were enjoying our pasta dishes—lasagna for Michael and ravioli for me—when his cell phone rang. He reached for it and glanced at the display. “Emily. She keeps calling me. At the hotel too.” He frowned, put the phone back in his

pocket.

Pam hadn't said anything since our chat about Emily's behavior at the photo shoot. And she hadn't fired her either. Whatever she'd told Emily obviously hadn't stopped her from hounding Michael.

Why should I care anyway? His personal life was none of my business.

In fact, Michael would no longer be a part of my life after tonight. Only brief memories would remain: our animated discussions, the way he laughed when I told him about a funny incident that happened to me when I was a kid, the intensity in his eyes that gave me butterflies...

By the time Maria served coffee, the verbal exchange between us had dwindled to a few words. Michael kept his eyes downcast. I couldn't tell if he was eager to leave or sad that he was. On my part, mixed emotions had taken over. I couldn't think of anything to say without sounding trite.

Michael drove me home afterward. We didn't speak, and I was thankful that the low hum of the air-conditioner filled the silence. When we came to a stop at the front of my condo, he surprised me when he turned off the engine and stepped out. He walked around to the passenger side and opened the door for me—not part of his usual routine when he'd dropped me off before.

He offered his hand. I took it and got out of the car. We stood facing each other for a long moment. The expression on his face was as pained as the way I felt.

"I hate saying goodbye." He wrapped his arms around me and held me tight. "I'm going to miss you, Megan." His lips brushed against my cheek.

Mixed emotions ran through me. I swallowed hard and muttered, "Yes...I'll miss you too."

He smiled. "Thanks for everything."

As he moved away, I saw Mrs. Speck in the window of her second-floor apartment. She'd opened the curtains and was standing there, bony arms crossed. Even in the moonlight, I could see her black-rimmed glasses and her gray hair pulled back in a tight bun. I pretended I hadn't noticed her and turned away.

I waved goodbye to Michael one last time and watched him drive off, sadness adding weight to the humid night air. I was losing a friend, if not an

ideal dinner companion.

Yet I felt a deeper loss—one similar to the pain I'd felt when I was sixteen and my first boyfriend had dumped me. I thought the world would come to an end then.

Get over it, I scolded myself. The world won't come to an end. Besides, you're married. You have Tom and he loves you.

Yes, my life would definitely go on without Michael.

But little did I know how soon our paths would cross again.

I slept in till noon on Saturday. With Tom gone for the weekend, I had lots of time to tackle the house chores.

The phone rang.

It was my mother. “So? Am I a *nonna*-in-waiting this month?” she asked, her words laced with a hint of the Italian dialect she’d retained since her youth.

“No, Mom,” I said. “You didn’t make the Granny list. I’m not pregnant.”

“It can’t be,” she said. “You’re from Irish-Italian ancestry. Practically blue blood. Look at my seven brothers and sisters and my four in-laws. They have thirty-three children altogether. Their children are already having children.”

A rare tumor had dashed my mother’s hopes of having more children after I was born. I suspected she was eager to have my babies fill that void—as eager as I was to give birth to them. “It’s not a race, Mom.”

“I know, but the timing is perfect, so don’t wait too long,” she said, as if I were holding the eggs back from the sperm on purpose.

“You can’t possibly imagine how often I blame myself for not getting pregnant. I don’t need another guilt trip.”

A deep sigh at the other end, then silence.

I’d hurt her feelings. “Sorry, Mom, I didn’t mean to take it out on you,” I said softly. “I have to get back to work now.”

“That’s the problem. You and Tom work too much. You need to take some time off. Go on a trip. Your father and I used to take trips every year.”

“I have a job, Mom. I can’t leave whenever I want.”

“Nothing should stand in the way of a happy marriage, Megan. Family values. That’s what my parents brought with them when they crossed the ocean. That’s what I’m teaching you now.”

I gave it another try. “I’m in the middle of housework,” I said. “I’ll call you later. Okay, Mom?”

“Okay, but not too late. I’m going to bingo with my friends tonight.”

I’d just hauled out the vacuum when the doorbell rang. I ignored it. It had to be a pesky salesperson. After the fourth ring, my patience ran out. I slammed the button on the intercom in the hallway and shouted, “Yes?”

“Madame Thomas Scott?” A male voice echoed in the foyer downstairs.

Who would use such an unusual version of my name? “Who is this?”

“I am Detective Lieutenant Moreau of the Sûreté du Québec.” I perceived a heavy French-Canadian accent this time. “I would like to see you about a grave personal matter.”

A grave personal matter?

A lump suddenly materialized in the pit of my stomach. I buzzed him in and opened the door to my apartment.

My heart pounded as two men in plainclothes stepped out of the elevator, each wearing a badge on a chain around his neck. As they neared, I recognized the insignia as that of the Québec Provincial Police force, or QPP, as known to the English-speaking population.

“*Bonjour*, Madame Scott. I am Detective Lieutenant Jean Moreau. This is Detective Sergeant Claude Duchaine. May we come in?”

“Of course.” I caught the scent of cigarette smoke on Moreau’s clothes as he breezed past me into the living room. A tweed jacket, a lilac shirt, and a tie that looked as if it had been used to wipe off paintbrushes gave the impression he’d selected his clothes in the dark. While strands of mousy-brown hair made a futile attempt to cover the top of his head, a thick mustache filled the narrow space between his thin lips and a pointy nose. Sporting a black attaché case, he could have passed for a fifty-year-old salesman peddling insurance door-to-door.

Duchaine stood at least four inches taller and that much wider than Moreau.

A buttoned jacket strained to contain his beefy physique. His brown hair was cropped short, tinged blond on top, and balanced out a square jaw. I placed him at about thirty-five.

“Please sit down,” I said, indicating one of two black leather sofas.

“*Non, merci, Madame Scott,*” Moreau answered for both of them, his dark eyes peering at me from under eyebrows as bushy as his mustache. “But perhaps *you* would like to sit down.”

Their faces were grim with purpose. A sudden weakness hit my knees and I sunk into the sofa.

“We regret to inform you...” Moreau paused. “Your husband, Thomas Scott, is dead.”

My heart beat out of control. “No! It can’t be. It must be a mistake.”

“It is not a mistake, Madame.”

“Do you have proof?”

Moreau pulled a black notebook from his jacket and flipped it open. “Thirty-four years of age, slim, dark brown hair, tattoo of two roses on the lower back —”

I raised a hand. “Stop...please.” He had just confirmed that the love of my life was gone.

I started to cry. I grabbed tissues from a box on the table and sobbed until I thought my heart would break. All the while, the two police officers stood waiting.

I took a deep breath and tried to calm down. This wasn’t the time to fall apart. I needed answers. “I’m sorry,” I said, choking on the words as I wiped away the tears.

“There is no need to apologize,” Moreau said. “Is there anything we can do for you?”

“Yes. Can you tell me how Tom died?”

Moreau shook his head.

“Was he in a car accident?”

“No.”

The fact that Tom might have died from a stroke crossed my mind. He was a

Type A personality and his excessive workload wouldn't have helped any. I'd also read that younger men weren't as impervious to strokes as doctors had once thought. "Did he die from a stroke?"

Moreau shook his head again.

"Was he attacked?"

Again, silence.

I waved my hands in the air. "For God's sake, Detective, you must have some idea of the cause of death."

"We expect an autopsy report in several days. I am not a medical expert, Madame Scott."

I bit my tongue and refrained from telling him exactly what I thought he was. Instead I came up with more questions. "Where did he die? Who found him?"

"A business associate thought something was wrong when your husband did not meet him before a scheduled game of golf this morning," Moreau said.

"What business associate? Do you have a name?"

He motioned to Duchaine. "*Votre calepin, sergent.*"

The sergeant produced his own black notebook. "His name is Peter Ewans." Duchaine's heavy French accent implied he had the same heritage as Moreau.

"Peter...yes," I said. "He was working with Tom this weekend."

Moreau studied me. "Madame Scott, did you ever suspect your husband was having an affair?"

His question threw me. "An affair? Of course not. We're trying to have a baby."

He kept his eyes on me. "The body of a young woman was found next to your husband."

"What?" I said.

He glanced at his notebook. "Pamela Strober."

I stared at him in disbelief. "Pam?"

"You know this woman?"

"Yes. She's—she was—my boss at Bradford Publishing."

"Did you know that your husband was spending the weekend with her at a Pineview cottage?"

“It’s impossible. She doesn’t date married men.” That excuse now sounded so pathetic. As I did, I imagined. “Pineview?” The name now sunk in. “Tom didn’t go to Pineview.”

Moreau said a few words in French to Duchaine who took notes.

My knowledge of the language wasn’t perfect, but I did manage to grasp *le mobile du meurtre*—the motive for the murder. “You think my husband was murdered?”

Moreau raised an eyebrow. Was he surprised that I understood French? “Anything is possible,” he said. “Where were you last night, Madame Scott?”



The news of Tom's death propelled me to my feet. "I'm sorry, Detectives," I said to Moreau and Duchaine. "I want my lawyer present before I answer any more questions."

"Very well." Moreau put his notebook away and so did Duchaine. "Until our investigation is complete, we are withholding information about this case from the media. Consequently, we ask that you keep our conversation confidential."

"Of course," I said, then surprised myself by saying, "I want to see my husband."

Moreau frowned. "But Madame Scott, it is not necessary. His identity has been confirmed."

"I have a right to see him, don't I?"

He nodded. "As you wish. When would be convenient for you?"

"Now."



The tall steel and glass building on Parthenais Street housed the QPP headquarters. It also housed the morgue—the destination for people who had died under “unnatural circumstances” such as murders, suicides, and work-related deaths. The stench of the place alone was enough to kill you, so the corpses had an advantage in this respect. No kidding. Combine the odors of

bleach, urine, fish, rotten cheese, and formaldehyde with stainless steel trolleys and refrigerator drawers, and you have the morgue.

An attendant led me to the viewing area, but nothing could have prepared me for it. A gasp caught in my throat. It was Tom, all right, but he looked nothing like the handsome husband I once knew and loved. The corpse was that of a young man with pasty white skin, blue lips, and agony etched all over his face. There was no indication of a knife or bullet wound or any other sign of trauma that might point to a physical confrontation—at least not on the part of the exposed torso made visible to me.

One truth surfaced above all else: Pam's body had been found next to his.

Sadness washed over me and sank deep inside until it hurt.

What were you thinking, Tom?

Why would you risk our marriage, our future?

How could you betray me?

He'd left me too soon. Too soon to share our most intimate loves and fears. Too soon to build a future and have children. Too soon to work things out between us.

Then again, what was there to work out? Nothing. Not a damn thing because Pam had walked into our lives.

Pam. My so-called close friend. My blood boiled at the thought of that woman and how she'd stolen the best part of my life from me forever.

Anger replaced grief and surged inside me. I clenched my teeth in frustration. A guttural sound emitted from my throat.

"Mrs. Scott?" The morgue attendant peered at me through rimless glasses. "We have several personal items belonging to your husband," he said in a quiet voice. "Would you like to take them home with you?"

"Yes," I managed to say.

After I signed the release form, he gave me a plastic sleeve containing Tom's keychain and leather wallet. The keychain was a letter T in sterling silver. I'd had Tom's initials engraved on the wallet and given him both items as Christmas gifts last year. In return, he'd given me a pair of diamond stud earrings that I'd worn every day since. The attendant assured me that Tom's overnight bag and its

contents would be sent to me after forensics completed their examination.

In keeping with protocol, Moreau arranged for a police cruiser to drive me back home. I didn't object. Everything had happened so fast and seemed so surreal—as if I'd just viewed a movie in fast-paced clips. I couldn't trust my emotions or my senses. It wouldn't have been wise to walk out of here alone in my state of mind.



Back home, I drifted into the bedroom and opened the door to the walk-in closet. Two hangers lay on the floor. Tom's sweaters were in disarray on the shelves. These signs gave the false impression he'd rushed off on a business trip and would soon return. I picked up the wooden hangers—Tom didn't use wire hangers—and folded his sweaters. I ran my fingers along his shirts and suits, adjusting a jacket that hung lopsided and a tie that threatened to slip to the floor. I arranged his shoes, aligning each pair in each cubicle.

Tom's briefcase was tucked in a corner behind a rack of pants. How odd. It had always accompanied him on trips. On the other hand, he wouldn't have had much use for it at Pineview—not with Pam there. I gave the closet a final check, as if the orderliness of this aspect of his world would somehow prepare him for the next one, then I shut the door behind me.

The floor leading to the kitchen stretched ahead. It took forever to get there. The table hadn't been cleared. There was a pile of dirty dishes in the sink.

I pulled out a chair and sat down. The nerves in my body began to unravel. I'd lost the love of my life. I'd never see Tom again. But I couldn't cry anymore. Something was holding me back.

There was a simple explanation. I felt betrayed. Tom had betrayed me. He had cheated on me with a close friend, a friend who said she didn't date married men.

I laughed out loud. How ironic. The man I'd loved for the past five years, I now hated with an equal dose of intensity. It proved that you don't really know someone—even if you thought you did.

I ran through the events of recent weeks, trying to evoke the warning signs I might have missed, anything that could make the pieces fit. Nothing hinted of an affair between Tom and Pam. Nothing except their chance meeting at Pueblo's...

No matter. Pam had been with him at Pineview. There was no justification for her presence there. She hadn't just popped in Saturday morning to have a cup of coffee with him either. Tom had been disloyal to me and, by some weird twist of fate, so had Pam.

My mind went on a tangent. I grappled with the possibility they had been murdered. The notion was terrible enough to fathom, but the fact that the police might consider me a suspect petrified me even more. That was what Moreau had implied, hadn't he? That I had a motive. Good thing I'd had the common sense to cut short his interrogation.

I needed to talk to someone I trusted. I picked up the phone and hit the first speed button. After three rings, my mother answered. I asked if she'd be home this afternoon. She said yes. I said I was going over.

To hell with Moreau.



It was a ten-minute taxi ride to my mother's two-room condominium. Several years after my father had passed away, she'd sold their small suburban home and moved downtown to be closer to me and have easier access to the shopping areas. Her pension income wasn't enough to cover the mortgage payments, so I'd been helping her by giving her a few hundred dollars every month. I didn't tell Tom because I respected her desire to appear self-sufficient.

My mother now led me into the kitchen, our usual chatting place whenever I visited her. "You look a little pale," she said. "Why don't you sit down and eat something?" She motioned toward the serving plate of grapes, Brie cheese, and slices of fresh Italian bread she'd placed on the table. It could have served four. "If you want me to, I could cook you some pasta instead."

"No, no, this is fine." I sat down across from her. "Mom, I'm afraid I have bad news." She'd admired Tom, so I tried to be gentle when I broke the news

about him.

Her eyes welled up. “Oh, my God, not my precious Tom!” She shook her head, disturbing a cloud of white hair that had once been dark brown.

Her reaction didn’t surprise me. Tom had been the standard by which she’d judged all previous suitors in my life—not that there had been many—but Tom warranted the right to become her son-in-law. She’d shown her approval by throwing a lavish wedding reception that two hundred family members had attended.

She took a tissue from the counter and wiped her eyes, then sat in the chair next to me. “How did it happen, Megan?” she asked, placing a hand on mine.

Her caring touch moved me, but I’d promised myself earlier I’d be brave for her sake. “The police don’t know,” I said, fighting back the tears. “They asked me not to talk about the case with anyone, so keep it between us, okay?”

“But the family needs to know. We have to hold a wake, make funeral arrangements—”

“In due time, Mom. There’s something else you need to know.”

Her grief changed to shock when I told her about Pam. “He was sleeping with another woman?” she whispered, as if saying it any louder would bring down God’s wrath upon us.

“More than that. She was my friend. Can you imagine? I can’t wrap my head around it.” The emotional barrier I’d fought so hard to maintain until now broke down. “Oh, Mom, I loved him so much,” I said, shaking, the tears rushing forth. “We wanted babies.”

“I know, I know.” She stood up, grabbed a couple more tissues, and handed them to me.

I dabbed at my eyes. “I trusted him. He lied to me. How could I have been so blind?”

“These things happen. Sometimes the truth is right in front of us and we don’t see it—or don’t want to see it. It might seem difficult now, but you’ll find a way to go on.”

The sadness in her eyes told me she understood my pain. My father had died from cancer six years earlier, but the loss was as fresh in her mind today as it

was in mine.

As far as Tom was concerned, I was way ahead of the game: I'd cut my losses the moment the police had told me about Pam.

My mother gestured toward the plates on the table again. "We can't let this food go to waste," she said, sitting down. "Eat. You need your strength."

I'd slipped into the role of the pampered daughter once again—a privilege that had no age limits when it came to my mother. I wasn't hungry, but to please her, I plucked a cluster of grapes and put it in my plate. "What about you? Aren't you eating?"

"The doctor said I have to cut down on bread and sweets and watch my cholesterol." She placed a hand on a tummy that had expanded into her waistline over the years. "Ah, what the heck do they know anyway?" She leaned forward, took a slice of bread from the plate, and spread butter over it.

We had coffee and biscotti in the living room. I sat in my father's burgundy wing chair and ran my hands along the smooth teak armrests. My mother polished the armrests twice a year with lemon oil, even though the chair didn't get much use any more. She'd refused to give it away after my father had died. "Family values," she'd say as an excuse to hang onto it, believing that deep in her heart, it kept her close to him.

I indulged in a moment of self-pity, knowing that I'd never feel that way about Tom. Lesson learned. I'd have my head examined before I'd ever trust another man again.



The solace I'd found at my mother's vanished when I returned home. I wandered into the bedroom and stared at the unmade bed. It wasn't right to sleep in the same sheets I'd shared with a man who had married me for better or for worse and had chosen to give me worse. Even if I'd found out about his affair with Pam after his death, it didn't lessen the pain and rejection any.

I tore the sheets off the bed, stripped off the pillowcases, and ditched the whole lot in a garbage bag. The sheets I'd stored in the linen closet met the same

fate except for a set I'd received as a gift from my mother that I hadn't used yet.

I fingered my wedding ring—a gold band dotted with tiny diamond chips. I slipped it off and put it in my jewelry box. I removed my diamond earrings and placed them in the box too. “There. Now it's over for good, you two-timing cheat.”

I raced to the computer in my office. Within seconds, I'd deleted every digital photo of Pam taken at Bradford's Christmas party, at staff birthday events, at dinners we shared... Satisfied, I made my way back to the bedroom.

A cacophony of phones echoed down the hallway. The one in my home office rang with a normal ring tone, and the one in the kitchen had a rolling ring tone. The office was closer. I rushed back there and grabbed the receiver.

“Hello, Megan. This is Peter Ewans.”

He'd surprised me. “Oh...Peter, how are you?” My words almost denied the fact Tom was dead.

“I don't know if you've heard...about Tom.”

“Yes. The police were here earlier.”

“Ann and I...we'd like to offer our condolences.”

“Thank you.”

“Tom's death was such a shock to us. We can't imagine what you're going through. I want you to know, for my part, I've lost a dear friend.”

A dear friend? Strange choice of words. If only I could think straight. I had so many questions. “The police told me you found Tom.”

“That's right,” Peter said. “I went looking for him when he didn't meet me before our tee-off. I tried his cottage first, but the door was locked. I looked through the front window and saw him facedown on the floor, not moving.”

“Were there any signs of a struggle?”

“I saw broken cups and plates on the floor near the kitchen table. I guess Tom and Pam were having breakfast when—” He stopped.

“It's okay. I know all about Pam.”

He let out a sigh. “I'm so sorry, Megan. Tom told me things weren't going too well between you two lately.”

“What things?”

“He said you were in the process of getting a divorce.”

“A divorce?” I laughed at the absurdity of it. “He lied.”

Peter went on as if he hadn't heard me. “The team brought their wives to Pineview. It was a company outing. I was hoping to see you there. I didn't know Tom was bringing Pam.”

I lost it. “There was no talk of divorce! Do you hear me, Peter? You knew Tom was having an affair, didn't you? You're covering up for him.”

“No, that's not true. He only recently told me about the divorce...threatened to fire me if I told you about Pam...said he didn't want to hurt you.” Another deep sigh. “Megan, I'm fifty-two years old. It's not easy to find another job. I have a home, family, my children to consider. I couldn't afford to lose everything. Not at this stage of my life.”

So I wasn't the only one who'd suffered an injustice. “What happened after you found Tom?”

“I ran over to tell Louise, the manager. She called the police.” Peter paused. “You asked me earlier about any signs of a struggle. Do the police suspect foul play?”

“I don't know. They're waiting for the autopsy results.”

“I can tell you this much: It wasn't a pretty sight. Tom and Pam were sprawled out on their stomachs not far from the door.”

“Maybe they were attacked,” I said.

“I don't think so,” Peter said. “I didn't see any blood. Just scratch marks on the floor.”

“Scratch marks?”

“As if they were trying to crawl their way out. They were foaming at the mouth and—”

I shut him out. That gross image and the one of Tom's pallid body on the steel slab at the morgue flashed before my eyes. A nauseous feeling swept over me.

I hung up and made it to the bathroom just in time. After two purges, my stomach settled. I washed my face, brushed my teeth, then went back to the bedroom and opened a window.



Thanks to a brief rainfall, cool, dry air had replaced the humid heat of the past month—albeit temporarily. Beads of water glistened on the grass and on the yellow and purple pansies lining the path to the condo. I took in a deep breath. The fragrance from lavender flowers below was soothing and refreshing. I took in another breath, left the window open a bit, and sat down on the bed.

I had to make sense of it all before I lost my sanity for good.

I concentrated on Peter's words, this time with more objectivity. If he'd seen no traces of blood and no disorder in the cottage, except for the dishes that Tom or Pam might have knocked to the floor by accident, maybe they hadn't been murdered after all. Maybe something else had caused their deaths.

Or maybe it was just wishful thinking on my part.

Nothing disturbs me more than hearing the phone ring early in the morning. So when it broke the silence in my apartment on Monday morning, I thought, “Oh, no! Now what?”

The display on the phone read UNKNOWN CALLER. My heart hammered until I heard a familiar voice.

“Megan, did I wake you?” Michael asked at the other end.

Instant relief. “No, I was up.” Street traffic echoed in the background. It sounded as if he were outdoors or near an open window. “Where are you?”

“Outside the Elegance Hotel. I’m on my cell. I called the office, but they said you weren’t going in today. Are you okay?”

The reality of Tom’s death rushed back to me. I blurted out the news.

“I’m coming over,” Michael said.

“You don’t have to—” But he’d already hung up.

The Elegance Hotel? Wasn’t he supposed to be in Toronto? I’d find out soon enough.

I checked my watch. Ten past nine. Already? On any normal workday, I’d have been working on a project, meeting with a client, or confirming appointments for upcoming projects.

But this day was far from normal.

The staff at Bradford Publishing had surely heard about Pam’s death by now, with news of her affair with Tom making the rounds of the employee gossip

circuit. The police were probably there and in the process of interrogating them.

I imagined the shock waves running through the place, the chaos in the work routine, the phones ringing with a flood of inquiries from Pam's clients...

Regardless, I had to call the office as a matter of duty. No use putting off the inevitable. I hit the speed button on the phone before I changed my mind.

Kayla answered after the first ring. "Oh, Megan, how are you? I was about to call you."

Someone next to her echoed my name. As the sound of chatter in the background fell to a murmur, I visualized Kayla silencing the staff with an outstretched hand. Was she standing in the receptionist's area?

"Everyone's been so worried about you," Kayla went on. "Our sincere condolences on the loss of your husband."

"Thank you." She'd excluded Pam. Whether Kayla was trying to be considerate or discreet, I didn't know. Maybe both. "I need to print out a hard copy for a client, so I'll drop by later. I'm taking the rest of the week off."

"Of course. Take all the time you need. Um...could you hang on a sec?" She put me on hold. I had nothing more to say to her and contemplated hanging up, but she returned moments later. "Okay. I'm alone in my office now. This place is a zoo. Police investigators are here questioning everyone. The staff is clinging to me like I have inside information or something. I even caught Emily snooping in Pam's desk again. She must have a duplicate key."

I said nothing. I had enough problems without worrying about what kind of mischief Emily was getting herself into this time.

Kayla went straight to the point. "We were told that Tom and Pam died at Pineview on the weekend. Do you know anything more?"

"No. The police are waiting for the autopsy results." Just then, my door buzzer rang. I made up some excuse about a delivery and ended the call.

I pressed the intercom button to allow Michael into the building, opened my apartment door, and waited. I tried to be brave, but when I saw him step out of the elevator and rush down the hallway toward me, I burst into tears.

He wrapped his arms around me. His leather jacket made a scrunching noise as he held me closer. I felt safe in his embrace. Then I remembered the way his

lips had brushed against my cheek Friday night, and I slowly pulled away from him.

“Megan, I’m so sorry for your loss,” he said. “If you want to talk about it, I’m a good listener.”

His offer was sincere. I’d clearly misconstrued his embrace as one with romantic overtones and felt embarrassed about it. I waved him inside.

After we settled in the living room, I gave Michael a recap of Moreau’s visit, Tom’s affair with Pam, and my trip to the morgue. “Tom lied to me—even about Pineview.”

Michael frowned. “He wanted to make damn sure you didn’t show up there to spoil his plans.”

“I should have insisted on going with him,” I said, my mother’s words of advice coming to the fore. “If I’d been there with him, he might still be alive today.” An image of Tom and Pam crawling on the floor and foaming at the mouth popped into my head. I blinked, wishing I could erase it for good.

“Did you think his life was in danger?”

“No.”

“So why would you have gone with him?”

He had a point but I insisted. “It makes no difference. I should have—”

“The police don’t know the cause of death. It could have been accidental. Right?”

“But I could have prevented—”

“Stop blaming yourself.” Michael’s voice was firm. “Things happen for a reason. Look at it this way. If Tom had brought you along, chances are they would have found *your* body on the floor next to his.”

His logic helped me to concentrate on the facts. It all came together at once and triggered a memory. “Moreau asked me where I was Friday night.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Nothing.”

“Why not?”

“I was afraid.”

“Of what?”

“That he would get the wrong idea if I told him I was with you,” I said.

Michael shrugged. “It was only dinner.”

So that’s all it was for him? Dinner?

I’d clearly mistaken his smooth rapport with me as something else. “Of course, but eight times in the past three weeks might raise a red flag.”

“It was business,” he said. “We discussed my work.”

“Moreau might interpret it as much more.”

“That’s plain crazy.”

“Not at all. When he was here, he asked Duchaine to take note of a possible motive for murder.”

“That’s a stretch.”

“Even so, I didn’t want to give him a reason to follow through on it.”

“It’s a long shot,” Michael said. “First, he has to prove that Tom was murdered. Second, using our relationship as a motive doesn’t cut it. You have nothing to worry about.”

I weighed his arguments and opted for caution. “I’d feel better if I knew my rights. I need to find a lawyer.”

“I can refer you to one. Dan Cummings. He’s a top-notch criminal lawyer and a close friend. He works out of Montreal and Toronto.”

There was something about Toronto. “Weren’t you supposed to be on a plane back home Saturday morning? For radio interviews?”

“I did them by phone instead. I couldn’t pass up a lead I picked up on illegal drug-trafficking here. It turned out to be important, so I delayed my flight home. I’m glad I did.” He gave me a brief smile.

I didn’t know how to interpret his reply. Did he mean he was glad he stayed in town to follow a lead? Or was he glad to be here to console me?

I had to stop reading more into Michael’s words than was there. “Why did you call me this morning?”

“No particular reason.” He paused. “How is your family taking the news?”

“My mother took it hard. The detective advised me not to talk to anyone about the case, so I asked her not to tell the rest of the family for now.”

“I’ll respect your confidence too,” he said. “What about Tom’s family?”

“His adoptive parents died years ago in a plane crash to South America. He has no other relatives that I know of.”

“I was very close to my grandmother in Toronto. She died about a month ago.”

“How did she die?”

“A nineteen-year-old was driving his father’s car and struck her one night when she was out walking the family dog. He was charged with DUI. I’m still dealing with the repercussions...financial and otherwise.” A tiny muscle pulsed along his jaw.

Standing outside his suite that day, I’d overheard Jane mention a settlement that had to do with his grandmother. Maybe the paralegal had counseled—and comforted him—during that time.

Michael went on. “You can’t fight destiny, but time sure is a great healer.”

“I’ll need more than time if the police start questioning me again,” I said.

“I can speed things up. I’ll call Dan right now.” He pulled out his cell. “He’s not easy to reach. I might have to leave a message. Do you have a cell number?”

Too busy with work, I often let my cell phone die. With landline access at the office and home, I didn’t use it much anyway. “You can give him my home number.”

Michael placed the call and waited. “He’s not answering.” He left our phone numbers with a message. He dug into his jacket again and pulled out his wallet. “Here’s Dan’s business card.” He held it out to me.

“Thanks.” I tucked it into the front pocket of my jeans. “How about some coffee? I only have instant, but it’s Colombian.”

“Sounds good.” He took a seat at the kitchen table while I filled a kettle with water.

Michael’s presence brought back memories of the enjoyable evenings we’d shared after we worked on his book. There wasn’t a better time than now to take advantage of that trusting friendship between us.

“Waiting for news from the police is driving me nuts,” I said.

“I know how you feel. It’s as if your life’s on hold. Speaking of which... I’ll be flying back to Toronto on Tuesday. I scheduled book signings and have

enough material to start working on my next book.”

Emotions surged inside me, ready to explode like a can of soda pop someone had shaken but not opened. “That’s great,” I said, forcing a smile. My eyes began to sting and I turned away. I blamed Tom’s death for making me sensitive to any upheaval that came along, no matter how small. I took two mugs from the cupboard and placed them on the counter, then took two spoons out of the drawer, taking my time while I tried to compose myself.

“Don’t worry,” Michael said. “I won’t leave town without making sure you have legal representation. If Dan’s too busy to take on your case, I’ll find another lawyer for you.”

I turned to face him. “Oh, you don’t have to do that. I’ll ask around for—”

Michael’s cell phone rang. He answered it. “Hey, Dan. How are you doing, old buddy?” His voice brimmed with enthusiasm. Dan’s reply made him laugh. “Too long... Yes, I know. We’ll catch up soon.” The conversation took on a serious note as Michael explained the nature of his call. “In an hour?”

I nodded yes.

“Okay. Thanks. See you soon.” He hung up. “Talk about timing. Dan’s in town. He’s staying at the Regency Hotel.”

No sooner had the words left his mouth than the doorbell rang. I rushed down the hallway and pressed the intercom button.

“*Bonjour*, Madame Scott. This is Detective Moreau. May I come up?”

I buzzed Moreau in, then opened the door to the apartment. “He must have the autopsy results,” I said to Michael as he reached my side. A sudden wave of nausea hit me. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Take a few deep breaths. You’ll be okay.” He wrapped his arm around my shoulders and gave me a brief hug.

Moments later, I was introducing Michael, in beige khakis and rolled-up shirt sleeves, to Moreau, the embodiment of the public servant in a white shirt, dark blue jacket, and an attaché case. A Kodak moment.

I shared a sofa with Michael. Moreau unbuttoned his jacket and sat opposite us, his attaché case close by. He gave his mustache a rapid stroke. Was he somewhat on edge? Maybe his uneasiness had to do with the contents of the

folder he was opening up.

“Madame Scott, what I am about to tell you is confidential.” His eyes flitted from me to Michael and lingered on him.

“It’s okay,” I said. “Michael is a good friend. Anything you have to say to me is okay to say in front of him.”

I caught the glint in Moreau’s eyes. It didn’t take a genius to see he was speculating about the nature of my relationship with Michael and the myriad of possibilities that could affect his future line of questioning.

“*Très bien.*” He fingered a document. “The autopsy is not completed, but we have received an initial report from the forensic pathologist.” He studied it. “It states your husband and Pam Strober died unnatural deaths.”

“What do you mean by *unnatural*?” I asked.

“It was a substance consistent with a fatal poison.”

“Poison?” I repeated.

Michael leaned forward. “What kind of poison?”

“Potassium cyanide,” Moreau said.

“How is that possible?” I asked.

A deep crease gathered between the detective’s eyebrows. “We do not know if the victims ingested, inhaled, or touched the poison. It does not appear to have been given by force, but our pathologist cannot confirm this.” He returned the file to his attaché case.

A sinking sensation swept over me. “Are you saying they could have committed suicide?”

“It is a possibility,” Moreau said.

“So is murder,” Michael said.

“*Naturellement*, Monsieur Elliott.”

“Do you have any suspects?” Michael asked him.

The detective fixed him with sudden interest. “If it is determined to be murder, everyone is a suspect.” He fixed his gaze on us.

Anger rose inside me, but Michael remained silent and calm. I took my cue from him and remained quiet too, concluding it was in our best interests to do so.

Moreau addressed Michael. “As I mentioned to Madame Scott the other day,



the police will continue to withhold information from the public. I must insist that you keep our discussion confidential as well.”

“No problem,” Michael said.

The detective pulled out his notebook. “Madame Scott, if you please, I have more questions.”

He was persistent but I was prepared. “Sorry, detective. Not without my lawyer. Here’s his business card.” I handed it to him.

He peered at it, then slipped it into his attaché case.

I remembered one more urgent matter. “Detective, I’d like to make funeral arrangements for my husband.”

“The pathologist has not completed his work, but I will contact him regarding the formalities.” He picked up his attaché case and stood up. “Good day, Madame Scott, Monsieur Elliott.”

After Moreau left, I stormed back into the living room. “Did you see the way he gawked at us? And that insinuation? He might as well have come right out and accused us of murder.” I waved my hands in the air.

Michael nodded. “I can see it now: the vindictive wife and her obliging friend.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I.”

I plopped down next to him on the sofa. “Every time Moreau shows up here, the situation goes from bad to worse.”

“Once Dan comes on board, he’ll put a stop to this crap.”

“What if he refuses to take me on as a client?”

He shrugged. “I don’t see why he would.”

Fingers crossed on that one. My mind diverted to another topic. “Potassium cyanide. I don’t know much about it. Do you?”

“It’s one of the most lethal poisons around,” he said. “Death can occur within minutes from the tiniest amount. It’s extremely painful.”

“What are the symptoms?”

“Dizziness, stomach pain, among others.”

“We have time. Let’s check the Internet.”

I led Michael down the hallway and into my office.

“You’re quite the collector,” he said, gesturing toward my two bookcases crammed with literature I’d gathered over the years. “Hemingway, Milton, Shakespeare.”

“Mostly from my university days. I used to have lots of free time to read for pleasure then. Now it’s called work.”

“Tell me about it.”

I sat at my computer and clicked on the first website that came up on a Google search. The site explained how potassium cyanide worked. “Less than one hundredth of an ounce is a lethal dose if the substance comes in contact with a liquid.” I scrolled down. Shocking photos of poisoned lab mice surfaced. I exited the site.

Another site listed the effects on the body from cyanide ingestion. Michael leaned over my shoulder and read them off the screen. “Initial symptoms are confusion, dizziness, headache, difficulty breathing, vomiting, abdominal pain —”

“There’s more.” I guided the cursor down the list. “Coma, seizures, cardiac arrest—”

“Talk about cold-blooded murder. This is gruesome stuff. What sick, demented person would use cyanide to kill someone?”

“I can’t possibly imagine. No one deserves to die like that.” I checked my watch. “Keep searching if you want. I need to change my clothes before we go see Dan.” I got up.

“Okay.” Michael slid into my chair.

“Oh, I almost forgot.” I grabbed a flash drive on my desk. “I need this for a client.”

I headed for the bedroom and slipped the flash drive into my purse, then made my way to the bathroom.

A glance in the mirror revealed a pale complexion. Dark auburn hair accentuated the obvious. As a rule, I didn’t wear much makeup in the summer. I’d apply sunscreen, then sit outdoors on the weekends and get my fifteen minutes of sunshine, but I hadn’t had the time to do much of anything these days

except work. I compromised with a few strokes of powder bronzer on my face and a touch of lipstick.

From the walk-in closet, I chose a beige jacket, a white crew-neck top, and a pair of clean jeans. It spelled casual, yet conservative, and portrayed a figure other than the grieving widow people might expect from a woman who'd just lost her husband. But I didn't care. I'd have lots of time to mourn later.

Right now, my freedom was at risk. The detective had hinted at murder as a possible explanation for Tom and Pam's deaths. Michael hadn't missed the insinuation either. Whether I was prepared to accept it or not, my future depended on the legal advice of one man alone: Dan Cummings.

**A** light breeze did nothing to alleviate my worries as Michael and I walked down the path from my condo. Would his lawyer friend take me on as a client?

Michael was making small talk to quell my anxiety before our meeting with Dan. Although I half-listened to him, I did catch the gist of his chat: something about how living and working inside four walls for too long drove him crazy, how spending time outdoors was good for his health, blah-blah-blah.

Two blocks down, we hailed a taxi. We rode eastward along Sherbrooke Street, home to heritage buildings, art galleries, and upscale shops. The drive was a memory lane of sorts for me—one that I enjoyed whenever I took the bus to and from Bradford Publishing. Each time I passed the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, I recalled my first visit there. I was only eight and too young to appreciate it, but I'd returned a dozen times since.

Michael's voice dispersed my thoughts. "I met Dan four years ago in a Toronto court. He has this amazing ability to retain volumes of legal jargon. I envied him for it. Things leveled out when he told me how much he envied my knack for digging up leads and getting into trouble." He chuckled.

I smiled but didn't feel much like talking.

Up ahead was Crescent Street, or "party central," as locals called it. Along this street and bordering ones were French cafés, Irish pubs, and restaurants that offered the finest in culinary eateries spanning the gamut from American to

Russian. Among them was Pueblo's, a café Tom and I had frequented when we were dating.

The image of Tom and Pam sitting at that same café now tarnished those memories forever. Too bad I hadn't seen through their "impromptu" encounter. Then again, why would I mistrust a loving husband who gave me no reason to doubt him and a close friend who made dating single men her lifelong ambition?

"We're here," Michael said as the taxi came to a stop at the curb.

The Regency Hotel stood twenty stories high on Mountain Street and shared its prestigious downtown location with a bustling trade district. The interior décor was a far cry from the old-style opulence of the Elegance Hotel. In the lobby, ceiling pot lights cast a warm glow on dark wood tables, brown leather sofas, and porcelain tile. Gold wallpaper with a tiny repetitive motif of the letter R adorned the walls. Tinted glass panels replaced the standard elevator walls and gave one the feeling of being airborne between floors.

Dan welcomed us into his tenth floor suite. "Hey there, Michael," he said, exchanging a hearty embrace and pats on the back with him. He extended a hand in my direction. "My condolences on your recent loss, Megan."

"Thank you." I caught a whiff of his cologne. The blend of woody spices told me there was a warmer aspect to this man than the strategic thinking intrinsic to his profession.

I glanced around. Pot lights, cushy sofas, and a glossy oval table with four black Parson chairs. The same stylish vibes as the lobby.

A digital recorder, a black pen, and a notepad sat on the table. Dan obviously didn't rely on his memory alone when he interviewed clients. It was feasible that all lawyers took the same safeguards against memory loss to preserve the integrity of their information.

"Haven't heard from you in a while," Dan was saying to Michael. "What no good have you been up to?"

"Remember that book I was working on?" Michael asked him.

"The one about the court cases you covered?"

"Yes. I published it."

Dan smiled. "That's great news. Congrats."

“Thanks.” Michael gave Dan a recap of how we’d been working on his manuscript together during the last weeks. “I’m on a book tour now...hitting the major cities...”

While the men conversed, I compared them.

Dan stood about four inches taller than Michael and had the kind of build that might have secured him a football scholarship in earlier days. Salt-and-pepper hair and a fleshy waistline now added years to his age. His leather shoes made a statement about the style of attire that people in his profession could afford, while Michael’s jeans and running shoes embodied the dress code for blasé writers.

The dissimilarities between these two friends extended to the way they spoke. Dan often dropped words in a sentence, as if he were in a hurry. Michael’s tone was calm, his choice of words intentional.

As their conversation ended, Dan invited us to sit at the table. Michael and I sat next to each other opposite Dan.

“The recorder is for my personal use only.” Dan switched it on and cited the date, location, and names of the parties present. “Megan, let’s begin with the police investigation into Tom’s death.” He picked up his pen. “What have they told you so far?”

I gave him an account of Moreau’s two visits and the results of the preliminary autopsy.

“You stated you didn’t know about Tom’s trip to Pineview,” Dan said. “When did you find out?”

“When Moreau told me.” I mentioned Louise’s original phone call and Tom’s claim that the booking was a mistake. “I was stunned to find out Tom had gone to Pineview and not Granite Ridge as he’d told me. But I don’t think Moreau believed me.”

“Why would you say that?” Dan asked.

“Moreau thinks it’s possible that Tom and Pam were murdered. If so, I could be his most likely suspect. That’s why I’m here. I want you to represent me.”

To my surprise, Michael added, “I’d like you to represent me too.”

“Why you?” Dan asked him.

“Moreau was sizing us up. If it turns out to be murder—”

“It was murder,” I said. “Tom wouldn’t have killed himself. He had too much to live for.”

Michael gave Dan an apprehensive look. “I can picture Moreau coming after us for a speedy arrest.”

“Then he wouldn’t be doing his job,” Dan said. “I’ll consider your involvement after I hear all the facts.” He turned a page in his notebook. “Megan, where were you on Friday, August 10th, the day and evening prior to your husband’s death?”

“I was working with Michael in his suite at the Elegance Hotel,” I said.

Dan scribbled a note. “What time did you leave?”

“About seven-thirty.”

“What did you do the rest of the night?”

“I had dinner with Michael at Santino’s.”

“And then what?”

“He dropped me off at home.”

“What time was it?”

“About nine.”

“What did you do afterward?”

“I went to bed.”

Dan turned to Michael. “Do you have a receipt from Santino’s?”

“Yes,” Michael said. “I used my credit card. Left the waitress a generous tip.”

“Then she’d remember you both,” Dan said. “What did you do after you dropped Megan off?”

“I went for a drive.”

“Where?”

“What difference does it make?”

“If the subject ever comes up in a police interview, you’ll need to prove your alibi.”

“I drove out of town,” Michael said.

“Why?” Dan asked him.

“To meet with an informant.”

“Did you happen to speak with this person on the phone?”

Michael grinned. “Are you kidding?”

“Required for trace purposes,” Dan said. “Provides proof of your whereabouts.”

“No phone calls. A mutual acquaintance set up the meeting.”

“Where did you meet?”

“Can’t say.”

“Can’t or won’t.”

“Both.”

“You have to give me something to work with.” Dan reached for his hankie and patted his face.

Michael had told me how Dan suffered from overactive glands and used a hankie to wipe perspiration from his face whenever he was tense. This was one of those times.

“I won’t jeopardize my informant’s life,” Michael said.

“I can appreciate that, but nothing beats a solid alibi,” Dan said, tucking away his hankie. “Moreau will launch his investigation by seeking out motives. From what you’ve told me, he’s already pointed a finger in your direction.”

If Dan interpreted my association with Michael as anything but friendship, he didn’t show it.

“Okay, okay.” Michael raised his hands, palms up. “I went to Sainte-Adèle, up in the Laurentians.”

“You rented a car?” Dan asked him.

“Yes, a Mustang Coupe.”

“From where?”

“Avis on Metcalfe Street.”

“When?”

“About a week ago.”

“Did you return it?”

“Not yet.”

“Where is it?”



“In my hotel parking.”

Dan jotted more notes. “Aside from your informant, did you speak with anyone else in Sainte-Adèle?”

“I stopped to get a coffee at a roadside diner on the way up,” Michael said.

“Did you keep the receipt?”

“No, I paid in cash. I don’t like to use plastic in strange places.”

“Any other stops?”

“I fueled up before returning to Montreal.”

“Where?”

“At an independent gas station outside of town. Before you ask me, I paid in cash. No, I don’t have a receipt because the point-of-sale machine wasn’t working.” Michael paused. “If it helps, the cashier at the counter was an older guy with a white beard.”

Dan scribbled a note. “What time did you get back to Montreal?”

“Just before midnight.”

“Any witnesses see you return Friday night?”

“A clerk at the front desk said hello to me. I doubt he’ll remember me, though. There were a lot of people hanging out in the lobby. Some kind of party going on in one of the halls.”

“What about you, Megan?” Dan asked. “Any witnesses see you come back home?”

“Mrs. Eloise Speck. A neighbor who lives on the second floor.” I was grateful for the old woman’s intrusive habits for a change. “She saw Michael drop me off Friday night.”

“All right.” Dan turned off the recorder. While he scanned his notes, he flipped his pen back and forth in rapid succession. I took it as a sign of nervousness or deliberation, or both.

I prayed that he’d take us on as clients. If he didn’t, I’d have a hard time finding another lawyer I could trust half as much as Michael trusted Dan.

Dan pulled out his hankie. A pat of his brow and a tuck back into his pocket rounded out the process. “I can see where this situation might be heading. Unless either one of you is concerned with a potential conflict of interest, I’ll represent

you both.”

“No problem.” Michael smiled. “Thanks, Dan.”

“Yes, thank you,” I said, relief running through me.

“Can’t make any promises. We can try to freeze this investigation in its tracks before any charges are laid against you.” Pen and notepad in hand, Dan heaved himself out of the chair. “Have to make a phone call. Help yourselves to some coffee when it’s ready.” He flipped the switch on a coffee machine sitting on a side table, then crossed the living room floor and disappeared around a corner.

Michael stood up and stretched his arms. “So far, so good—despite my screw-ups with the receipts.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself.” I walked past him to the window and gazed upward at the metal cross atop Mount Royal Park, the highest site in the center of the city. At one hundred feet high, it graced the downtown skyline and was a popular tourist attraction. Ever since 1643 when its original wood version was mounted, locals have acknowledged it as a symbol of hope.

*Hope.* How apropos.

Michael came up to me. “You’re angry with me because I didn’t ask for receipts, aren’t you?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. I can tell by the way your eyes are shooting those tiny daggers at me.”

“I’m angry but not at you. What if this whole mess takes a turn for the worse? It’s bad enough I’m under suspicion, but how are *you* going to prove your alibi without receipts?”

“Don’t worry. Dan will take care of it. You’ll see.” He whispered, “What do you think of him so far?”

“He’s methodical,” I said. “I hope he can get Moreau off our backs before it’s too late.”

“After Dan gets through with him, Moreau won’t have a choice. He’ll have to write us off and focus on catching the real murderer.”

I couldn’t share his optimism. Life was too short for wishful thinking.

We humans were so naive about the danger around us. How often had we brushed against its borders as we wandered through the rituals of our lives, not paying attention to strangers who crossed our paths? We only had to refer to the news for reports covering the abductions of children and women in broad daylight. More often than not, their lives had come to a dreadful end within hours, even minutes.

The image of Tom's pallid body at the morgue suddenly flashed through my mind. I blinked it away.

"Cyanide," I said. "What kind of monster could have carried out such a horrible death?"

"A lunatic," Michael said. "I'd bet the cops have already gathered a list of potential suspects from their database."

"Small consolation. It might not prevent Moreau from zooming in on us."

"I can't blame him," he said. "The perpetrator is often someone within an immediate circle of family or friends. Statistics support that fact."

"Oh, thanks. I feel so much better now." I shivered. Had Dan upped the air conditioning in the suite to compensate for his perspiration problem?

"You're trembling." Michael put a hand on my arm. "Come. Let's have some coffee."



We were sitting at the table enjoying our second cup of coffee when Dan rushed back, tiny beads of sweat lining his forehead. Not a good sign.

He sat down and switched on the recorder. "All right. We located Pineview. It's near Knowlton, about sixty miles southeast of Montreal. Sainte-Adèle is about fifty miles north of Montreal."

"What are you getting at?" Michael asked him.

"The similarity in mileage from here to Pineview or to Sainte-Adèle is something the police might jump on to refute your alibi." Dan pulled out a hankie and dabbed his forehead.

"You can't be serious." Michael stared at Dan as if he expected him to follow

up with a redeeming statement.

“Did you drive anywhere else that night?” Dan tucked the hankie away.

“Short distances in the city. Why?”

“We need tangible facts to prove your alibi ASAP.”

Michael frowned. “How are you going to manage that? I already told you I didn’t keep any receipts.”

“My team will visit the gas station in Sainte-Adèle,” Dan said. “Interview the cashier you described.”

“Some people don’t do well with facial recognition.”

“Most gas stations have surveillance systems. We’ll try to get a copy of the videotape.”

“What about the surveillance video at the Elegance?”

“We’ll try to get that too. Could help to narrow the time gap in your trip that evening.” Dan jotted a note. “Megan, does your condo have a monitoring system?”

“There’s a surveillance camera in the lobby,” I said.

“How about the rear exit?”

“I’m not sure.” I mulled over his question. “I didn’t leave the condo by the back door after Michael dropped me off, if that’s what you’re hinting at.”

“The police might think otherwise,” Dan said.

“The lack of a surveillance system could work in her favor,” Michael pointed out.

“In the absence of a feasible alibi?” Dan nodded so-so. “I could use that argument to support the claim that Megan was home the rest of the night. Might create a reasonable doubt in the minds of the jury.”

“The jury?” Michael’s eyes went wide. “Whatever happened to innocent until proven guilty?”

“Look at this from another perspective.” Dan tapped his pen against the table. “An alleged double murder makes headline news and creates public unrest. Pressure from higher-ups forces the police to solve the case ASAP. That’s why a flawless defense is of major importance for us. It has to include confirmation of your alibis.”

“I’m a realist,” Michael said. “I study the facts. What if you can’t prove our alibis?”

“We’ll do the next best thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Prove your innocence.”

“Like I said before, I thought that was a given.”

“Not theoretically,” Dan said. “We’ll have to work the flip side of the coin. Explore other factors. Work at creating doubt about your guilt. Hint at the existence of other suspects. For example, we’ll verify the check-in times of the guests and staff at Pineview. People who might have entered Tom’s cottage in the hours before and after his arrival. Not all suspects can cover their tracks.”

“So you’re doing Moreau’s legwork for him,” Michael said.

“Not really. He has to go through the same motions.”

“For different reasons.”

Dan moved on. “Megan, can you stay away from Bradford Publishing for a day or so?”

“I took the rest of the week off,” I said. “Why?”

“My team will interview the employees at Bradford. They might open up more about Pam if you’re not around.”

Dan’s perspective shed a new light on things. Had anyone else at the office found out about Tom’s affair with Pam before I had? Emily? Lucie? Peter had known long before the trip to Pineview.

How did that saying go again? Ah, yes. The wife is always the last to know.

Dan continued. “If we go to court, the prosecutor is going to pitch tough questions. We don’t want the jury to have any doubts about either of you. Don’t want them to wonder why we didn’t ask the most obvious question to the two most obvious suspects.”

Michael leaned forward. “What question is that?”

When Dan pulled out his hankie, I could have bet my life on what he was going to ask us next. “Was the relationship between you two intimate at the moment of Tom’s death?”

A flush warmed my cheeks. “No, it was not,” I said with as much resolve as I

could muster.

Dan's insinuation didn't faze Michael. "Megan and I had a professional relationship while we worked on my novel," he said, his voice even. "We remain close friends today. End of story."

"Credible," Dan said, tucking his hankie away. "Might convince the prosecution. If we ever get to that stage."

Anger replaced my embarrassment. "But it's the truth."

Dan shrugged. "Even so, the police might not buy it. They'll shove your relationship with Michael under a microscope. Try to prove you two had a fling of your own. That's where motive comes in. They'll use your connection to Michael to show you planned to get rid of Tom. We have to prove you're both beyond reproach. In every respect."

"You're right about that," Michael said. "When cops feel pressured to make an arrest, they pick the most obvious suspects—sometimes based on a scrap of evidence. One way or another, they manage to get a conviction in court. Stats on the number of guys who spent years in jail and are found innocent later are proof of it."

Dan raised his pen in a cautionary gesture. "A word of advice, Michael. Until Moreau completes his investigation, I advise you to remain in town."

"You're kidding," Michael said. "I've got a book tour to wrap up."

"If you leave now, it might provoke undue suspicion."

"Okay. I'll cancel my flight."

"All right." Dan flipped to a new page in his notepad. "Megan, do you know if anyone ever threatened Tom or wanted to see him dead?"

"If he had any enemies, he didn't mention them to me," I said.

"How did he get along with business associates? Bosses? Fellow employees?"

"Okay, I guess. Except for Peter Ewans, a co-worker. Tom told me Peter was upset when Tom won the senior management promotion over him."

"Peter Ewans. Why is that name familiar?" Michael paused. "Wait a sec. Wasn't he the guy who dropped off the company car at your condo? The one that Tom crashed?"

“Yes.” I briefed Dan on the incident.

“How did Tom react?” he asked me.

“He said it was an accident. Peter had a hard time getting over it, though. He gave Tom tickets to Place des Arts to make up for it. Two of the best seats in the house.”

“Let’s backtrack. Did Tom’s promotion create any animosity between Peter and him?”

“I don’t think so. It wasn’t the first time Peter had been passed over for a promotion. He told Tom he felt as if he’d lost respect at work and blamed management.”

“Peter must have had loads of resentment brewing inside him for years,” Michael said. “Loss of advancement, loss of additional income, loss of reputation—”

“People get promoted every day,” I said. “Their competitors don’t kill them because of it.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Michael said, a wry smile on his lips. “The news is full of stories about ex-employees who got mad as hell because they were laid off. Did they go out and get counseling? No way. They got revenge. They went back to their workplace and shot their bosses and co-workers dead.”

Dan tapped his pen, ending our banter. “So Peter confided in Tom. A two-way street? Maybe Tom confided in him too?” He gave me a questioning look.

“If you mean about Pam, the answer is yes.” I recounted my phone conversation with Peter. “He covered up for Tom because he was afraid he’d fire him.”

“Add that to the list of Peter’s resentments,” Michael said.

I peered at him. “Was it reason enough to kill Tom?”

“Resentment runs deep in some people when they’re forced to do stuff they don’t want to do,” Michael said. “Peter could have been waiting for the right opportunity to strike. And maybe he did.”

“You’re moving too fast,” I said. “We haven’t even begun to make the pieces fit. We don’t know who the real target was. It could have been Pam and not Tom.”

“Or both,” Michael said.

“All right,” Dan said. “My team will interview Peter and other BOTCOR employees. Megan, would you know if any Bradford employees harbored resentment against Pam?”

Emily came to mind. I didn’t know much about her private life, except that she lived with her mother who couldn’t afford to live alone. She was jealous of Pam and mimicked her, but petty office antics aside, I doubted she’d want to kill her.

“The staff gets along pretty well,” I said.

“What about Pam’s family? Friends?” Dan asked.

“I never met her family. I was her closest friend.” I almost choked on the words.

“Any men friends?”

“She dated a lot, but I never met any of them.”

“Any enemies?”

“I don’t know.”

“Any bad blood between her and her clients?”

“No, they loved her. Wait. There’s Mrs. Bill Bradford, the owner’s wife. She gave Pam a rough time at the office once.” I recapped the incident.

“We’ll verify it.” Dan’s pen skimmed across the page.

There was a knock at the door.

Dan switched off the recorder. “I’ve taken the liberty of ordering lunch for us.” He opened the door to a hotel attendant who wheeled a serving cart into the room.

As we enjoyed our club sandwiches and a fresh pot of coffee, the dialogue wove its way to common acquaintances that Michael and Dan knew. I was surprised when a familiar name popped into the conversation.

“Remember the drug possession case we worked on together last month in Montreal?” Dan asked Michael.

“How could I forget?” Michael said. “I’d tailed the guy for weeks. My testimony meant nothing after he was acquitted.” He turned to me. “I had leads on this guy the length of my arm. Then I heard he walked because the police had



contaminated the evidence.”

“Their defense team was my biggest competition,” Dan said. “Including the paralegal that worked for them.”

“You mean Jane Barlow?”

Dan nodded. “The one and only. Sharp as a Samurai sword and twice as lethal. Never missed a detail. She approached me for a job several weeks ago.”

I expected Michael to bring up Jane’s visit to his hotel suite but he didn’t.

“I hired her.” Dan beamed as if he’d discovered the next best thing to imported leather shoes.

From the dazed look on Michael’s face, it was clear Jane hadn’t told him she was working for Dan. Michael said nothing, reached for his glass of water.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Dan said. “She’s only twenty-five, but I have to admit she’s brilliant. Ambitious too. Going to make a fine lawyer one day.” He raised a thumb in the air.

“Is she working on a Montreal case with you?” Michael asked.

“We wrapped up a corporate case here this week. She’s staying in a suite down the hall. Phoned her minutes ago. Asked her to get the witness interview process rolling for your case. It helps that she speaks French better than I do.” He chuckled.

Michael said nothing, kept his eyes fixed on the glass of water in front of him. Was he having doubts about Dan assigning Jane to our case?

The awkward silence intensified until Dan asked him, “You have a problem with my hiring Jane?”

“Me? Oh...no. No problem. She’s the best.”

“Any other questions about our discussion so far?” Dan asked us.

“Um...yeah.” Michael glanced at me. “Megan and I were talking earlier about the cruelty of death by cyanide poisoning. If you could show we were incapable of such an attack, wouldn’t it help clear us?”

“Perhaps on moral grounds,” Dan said. “No previous record of violence. No criminal record. And so on.”

“I know one thing that would swing suspicion away from us,” I said. “Finding the real murderer.”

“Megan’s right,” Dan said. “It only takes one tiny lead to crack a case.” He rose to his feet. “All right. It’s a wrap for now. I’ll update you both by this evening. Where can we meet?”

For no reason other than the convenience of being in my own home, I said, “My place.” I looked at Michael. “If you don’t mind coming over.”

“No problem,” he said, slipping into his leather jacket.

“In the meantime, I’ll give you my cell number.” Dan jotted it down on the back of two business cards and gave us each one. “Another word of advice. Don’t answer questions from the police or the prosecution unless I’m present. Understood?”

“Or reporters,” I added.

“Especially reporters,” Dan said, then gave Michael a pat on the back. “No offense.”

“None taken,” Michael said with a grin. “I know too well how those guys operate.”



Michael and I rode the elevator down in silence. The satisfied look on his face told me he felt confident about Dan’s legal preparation—even though it meant Jane had resurfaced in his life. With such a strong legal team behind us, Michael gave the impression that he’d dismissed the uncertainty of our predicament.

But he hadn’t. I’d garnered that much from him from having worked on his book. Given the nature of his job, he thrived on uncertainty: meeting with informants under the darkness of night; traveling to unfamiliar places to get a scoop on a story; following a gut feeling even if it defied logic...

I couldn’t live that way. I needed stability in my life. After all, weren’t humans known as creatures of habit? I didn’t know who originated that phrase, but it described my method of living.

Predictability of routine gave me a sense of control. My job was proof of it. I worked in a structured environment where I arranged meetings with clients, scheduled every project, and set up Plan B in the event of a setback. At home, I

carried out specific chores each week so that order prevailed and chaos was non-existent—at least to the extent that I could ensure it.

Of course, Dan's expertise reassured me. With horror stories of legal corruption hitting the news every other day, I was grateful to have an ethical and competent lawyer like him on my side. And from the praise he lavished on Jane, he considered her a qualified member of his team too.

But would their intervention divert Moreau's focus from Michael and me?

The detective's suspicions kept me on edge and had me contemplating what his next move might be. Not knowing in which direction his game plan was heading did nothing but increase my uncertainty about the future.

Outside the Regency Hotel, a blazing sun had pierced through the clouds and chased away the cool summer morning. The weather was so volatile these days—just like my life since Tom’s death. With my freedom at stake, I expected more of the same. Would things ever return to normal?

“The heat wave is back.” Michael removed his leather jacket.

My eyes strayed to a newsstand on the sidewalk. “Hold on a sec.” I picked up a copy of *The Gazette*, then walked back to him. “I doubt the police spoke to the media, but it doesn’t hurt to check.”

He nodded, surveyed the heavy flow of traffic. “Are you going home or staying downtown?”

“I’ll flag a taxi later and go back to the condo. I have to drop by the office first.”

He stared at me. “You’re kidding, right?”

“A client wants a printed copy of the project I completed. I use Bradford’s facilities for that.”

“Getting grilled by the staff is the last thing you need right now. You realize the hornet’s nest you could be walking into?”

I didn’t answer.

“Want me to go with you?”

“Of course not. I can take care of myself.”

Michael studied me for a moment as if he were debating the fact. “I can drive

you back home later, but I need a change of clothes. Want to come over to the hotel after you're done?"

"Okay. See you later."

On the ride up the elevator to the office, my stomach began to knot. Maybe Michael was right. My appearance there would make tongues wag. Did I need more stress in my life? On second thought, why should I care about their gossip anyway? I owed it to my client to deliver the project as promised, and that's what I was going to do.

I pushed open the door to Bradford Publishing. Kayla was standing at the front desk, speaking with a receptionist I'd never seen before. A BlackBerry tucked in her skirt waistband reinforced the respect that her five-foot-nine frame already commanded. They both looked up as I walked in.

"Hi, Megan." Kayla walked up to me but stopped short of giving me a hug. It wasn't her style.

"Hi." I dug out the flash drive from my purse. "Here's the project I told you about."

"We'll take care of it for you." She handed it to the receptionist and said to her, "Get me a printout of this, please." She waited until the girl had walked away, then said, "I hired a temp receptionist for the week."

"It's so quiet here. Apart from Lucie, is anyone else on vacation?"

"No one's on vacation. After the police left this morning, I gave the entire staff the rest of the day off. Direct orders from Bradford himself. They can't function properly under these circumstances." She paused. "Is there anything I can do for you, Megan?"

"I have Bradford clients—"

"I'll follow up with them to re-schedule." She took a step closer and whispered, "Emily is in her office. She insisted on staying. She's applying for Pam's job and working on a cover letter to Bradford."

I couldn't hide my surprise. "What?"

"If dressing like Pam is a major requirement, then she fits the bill." She kept her voice low. "I'd have fired her months ago. She spends way too much frigging time in the darkroom—in more ways than one, if you know what I

mean.”

Just then, Emily strutted down the corridor toward us on black high heels identical to a pair Pam had bought at Browns Shoes last month. She couldn't possibly afford designer strap sandals on her salary. She'd no doubt taken them from Pam's office closet. Bits of mascara smudged her eyes and streaks of pale skin showed through where tears had washed away the makeup. That girl was going to be at a loss without her mentor around to crack the whip whenever she spoke out of line or applied her lipstick wrong.

She came up to me. “So sorry for your loss, Megan.” She put her arms around me in a limp and hasty hug as if she were going through a forced ritual. “Do you have any news?”

“Not until the autopsy results come in,” I said.

“I meant news from the police. Do they have any leads on the killer?”

“They haven't called it a murder investigation as far as I know.”

“What else could it be?” Emily grimaced in annoyance.

I didn't answer.

“So what are you doing here?”

“I came by to drop off—”

“Seriously, don't you have more important things to do, like meet with Michael Elliott?”

“What are you talking about? I handed in his project on Friday.”

“That's not what I meant.” Emily sighed. “He didn't return my calls. Do you happen to know why?”

“No,” I said. “Why don't you call and ask him?”

“Very funny,” she said with a smirk. “You guys spent a lot of time together, huh?”

I didn't like her insinuation, so I feigned ignorance. “For a book project? Three weeks was rushing it. I could have used another week or two.”

“I'll bet you could have.” She spit out the words. “Who knows how much more friendly you and Michael could have become if—.”

“That's enough, Emily,” Kayla said. “This isn't the time or place to—”

“This doesn't concern you,” Emily snapped at her. Her eyes narrowed as she

glared at me. “It’s the first chance I get to date a respectable guy like Michael and guess what? You’ve been screwing him right under our noses!”

The blood rose to my face. I had the sudden impulse to whack her on the head with the newspaper I was holding and knock some sense into her. Instead I said, “*Seriously*, Emily, I just lost my husband. I have more important things to deal with than your delusions.” I pointed to her shoes. “And have some respect for the dead.” My comment left Emily gazing at her feet. I exchanged a quick goodbye with Kayla and walked out.

Michael was right. Coming here was a mistake. Emily had displayed unwarranted hostility toward me. She’d seen my close friendship with Pam as a block to a similar friendship she’d hoped to cultivate with her mentor, but it hadn’t happened. Her snide remarks about my working relationship with Michael had originated from the same jealous place in her heart.

Another thought crossed my mind, one that could put me in a lot of trouble if Emily had acted on it: She’d shared her fantasies about Michael and me with the police this morning.

I met up with Michael in the lobby of the Elegance Hotel. He'd stopped to buy twelve small bottles of water and was holding a six-pack in each hand.

On our ride up the elevator, he asked how my visit to Bradford had gone. I told him it went okay and left it at that. I kept my chat with Emily under wraps to save myself further embarrassment.

I was surprised to find the coffee table in Michael's suite the way we'd left it Friday evening: strewn with crumpled notes and pages of his manuscript that hadn't made it to the final version.

He followed my gaze to the table. "Sorry for the mess. I didn't have time to clean up." He set the bottles on the credenza, then hung his leather jacket in the hallway closet. "The hotel staff won't touch my crumbled papers unless I put them in a wastebasket, but there isn't one in the suite. I left them three notes but no luck. You could say we have a communications problem."

I didn't say so, but I hoped his extended presence in town would serve a more useful purpose than writing notes to the cleaning staff. I was counting on his ingenuity to provide a foolproof alibi for us and wipe out any conjecture in Moreau's mind that we were guilty of murder.

"I'll get a change of clothes, then be right back." Michael rounded the corner and disappeared.

I sat in my usual chair by the coffee table. I opened up the newspaper I'd bought earlier and skimmed through the headlines. There were no write-ups



linked to Tom or Pam—not even a two-liner on the Pineview deaths that might have excluded the names of the victims.

Moreau had kept his word about barring the media from his investigation after all. He probably had no leads in the case, which would account for the absence of an article. Anyone else might have argued that his investigation was far-reaching and therefore not yet completed, but I was inclined to think he'd made no headway whatsoever. Why announce it and face public criticism?

I was only fooling myself. The detective hadn't dropped Michael and me from his scope of inquiry. Even with the prospect of Dan on board, my instincts told me the trend of ill-fated events was far from over. The ambiguity surrounding Tom's death amplified my fears, as did the realization that Moreau, with no other suspects in view, might intensify his efforts to pin us with murder.

My apprehension lingered after Michael and I arrived at my condo half an hour later and crossed paths with Mrs. Speck. As she stepped out of the elevator, her eyes darted from Michael to me, then back again, like a hawk assessing its prey. I slammed my hand against the Close Doors button to cut short her inspection.

Upstairs, I found a basket of red and white carnations outside my apartment door. The card read: "Deepest condolences from Bradford Publishing and staff." The gesture of compassion had been timely and considerate—Kayla's style of doing things. I carried the flowers inside and placed them on a corner table in the living room.

While Michael opened up his laptop in the kitchen and caught up on his email, I settled down in my office to check my phone messages.

Kayla was the first caller. I assumed she'd phoned to see if I'd received the flowers, but then I was surprised when she left a message asking me to call her back. Tom's boss and Louise from Pineview were the next callers. They expressed their sympathies. I didn't feel like talking, so I didn't call any of them back. Only one call mattered to me, and I wouldn't rest until I got it: Dan's.

I walked back to the kitchen where Michael was hunched over his laptop, tapping away. "I want to go through Tom's personal papers...legal files," I said to him. "Would you mind if I took care of—"

“No problem,” he said with an easy smile. “I’m busy writing. Don’t worry about me.”

I retreated to my bedroom behind closed doors. I sat on the bed and forced myself to approach Tom’s passing in a logical manner, the same way I’d helped my mother take care of things when my father had passed. I needed to find Tom’s last will and testament, plan the funeral and church services, pack up his clothes for drop-off at a Salvation Army outlet...

I wandered into the walk-in closet. Tom kept a small fireproof filing cabinet there, in a corner next to his shirt rack. Neither of us believed in storing legal documents or other such papers in a bank safety deposit box.

I tried to open the drawer but it was locked. I had no idea where Tom kept the key.

On a whim, I bent down and pushed aside his pants on the bottom rack. I reached into the other corner and pulled out his briefcase. I tried to open it but it was locked too. I retrieved a penknife that Tom kept in his side table in the bedroom and forced open the lock.

Inside the briefcase were BOTCOR marketing pamphlets, Tom’s appointment book, and his cell phone. It was probably the same phone he’d used when he didn’t want me to know where he was calling from, the one that came up as UNKNOWN CALLER on the display screen.

I checked the incoming messages. There was only one. It was from Bradford Publishing, and I recognized the extension. It was Pam’s. I took a deep breath, then tapped the key to listen to the message.

*“Hi, Tom. It’s Pam. Eager to spend another hot weekend with you. Can’t wait to see you this afternoon.”*

I shivered. It was as if Pam’s ghost had returned to haunt me. I turned off the phone and flung it into the briefcase.

I stuck my fingers inside the two narrow pockets of Tom’s briefcase. They might hold a small item. Nothing in the first one. Inside the second pocket, I felt something metal. It was a key. I inserted it into the lock of Tom’s filing cabinet. It worked!

I pulled open the drawer and found a copy of our apartment lease, our fire

insurance policy, and our last will and testament in which we'd named each other as beneficiary and executor. I also found a copy of Tom's life insurance policy for one hundred thousand dollars that he'd bought shortly before we were married. My name was on the first page as sole beneficiary.

There was nothing else in the cabinet but monthly statements issued on the joint bank account I held with Tom—the one we'd set up three years earlier toward the purchase of a new home. I'd just started my freelance business then and my income wasn't consistent. I gave Tom whatever I could afford, and automatic deductions were made from his personal account to our joint one every month.

I'd been so busy that I hadn't checked the balance in years. It was a comfort to know that I could dip into the joint funds now should an emergency arise.

I checked the closing balance on the most recent statement.

The July statement read \$128.16.

*What the hell?*

Other statements revealed similar low balances at the end of each month. A deposit of a thousand dollars had been posted every month—half of it mine—but cash withdrawals had drained most of the funds. All our hard-earned money was gone!

It didn't make sense. There had to be another joint account somewhere with forty thousand dollars in it. Had Tom opened another account without my knowledge?

I practically tripped in my hurry to get to my purse and dig out my bankcard. I raced to my office, closed the door, and accessed the bank site from my computer. I couldn't get through. My card had probably been deactivated because I hadn't used it in so long.

I picked up the phone and called the bank. After the usual ID verification ritual, the service representative confirmed the only joint account on record was the one I knew about. As far as finding out if Tom conducted other business in his name, the rep explained I'd have to go to the bank in person with Tom's last will and suitable ID to prove I was the official executor of his estate. I also needed to bring the required legal documents, namely a Certificate of Death

from the provincial authorities or a copy of the coroner's report.

I returned the bankcard to my purse and drifted back to the closet. After placing the papers in the cabinet, I shut the drawer but left the key in the lock for easy access.

There was no time to waste. I had to get organized.

I slipped back into my office. From my computer, I accessed the government website, clicked under the heading, "What to do in the event of death," and downloaded the appropriate forms. I made a list of the people and companies I'd have to contact regarding Tom's passing: the bank, insurance company, funeral home, accountant, notary, BOTCOR for Tom's employee pension fund...

My stomach growled. I reached for the bag of chocolate-covered almonds in the desk drawer and was disappointed to find that only three remained. I ate them, then prepared letters to each name on my list. As soon as I'd receive the legal proof of death, I'd send the letters out.

I went back to my bedroom and revisited the closet. Tom's briefcase was open. I hadn't completed my search and now reached for his appointment book. Maybe he'd noted information about his personal banking in it.

I sat on the floor and fanned through the pages. Notations indicated meetings on a daily basis. Out of curiosity, I skipped to Friday, August 10, to see what kind of schedule he'd kept on his last day. He'd penned in two meetings and a note: *P.S. Bradford 4:00 p.m.*

Bradford?

I leafed a few pages back and stopped at an entry under July 23: *P.S. Pueblo's*. It was the same day I'd spotted Tom sitting with Pam at Pueblo's. The initials P.S. stood for Pam Strober!

The following day in July, another entry: *P.S. Hôtel La Rivière*, a fancy hotel where dark chocolates are offered as a turndown treat before slipping under the covers. My stomach churned at the thought of them in bed together, yet I continued to scan the entries, urging myself on with a drive inherent in those who believe that pain builds character.

The entry on July 26 read: *P.S. Toronto*. Lucie had told me Pam was away on business that day. Tom was in Toronto then.

Armed with a new perspective, I flipped through the pages to see if Tom's inscription of P.S. appeared prior to the period I'd covered.

Other initials surfaced but they weren't Pam's. The cities written beside them had often been on Tom's marketing itinerary: Toronto, Windsor, Boston, New York. Did the initials belong to business associates or potential clients?

I turned to the back of the book and found a directory of names, addresses, and phone numbers. Most of the names were female.

I flipped back to the first day of January and worked my way forward. Every set of initials matched a woman's name in the directory. Company names were written next to some of them. Business contacts? Dozens of other notations simply had first names.

Who were these women?

An uneasy feeling filled my gut.

I happened to glance down and noticed a shoebox tucked under the cubicle that housed Tom's shoes. How peculiar. It was a tight squeeze, but I yanked it out and opened it.

Hundreds of receipts were stuffed inside the box. The first one was from Coby's for \$200.00, the next was from Hôtel La Rivière for \$400.00, another for \$350.00 from a fancy restaurant downtown... Other receipts were from nightclubs, fancy restaurants, and upscale women's clothing stores in towns Tom had visited on business.

Oh, my God! He'd spent all our money on other women!

My heart filled with anger, then sank as the dream of having my own house vanished. I stuffed the box back under the cubicle, not sure what purpose the receipts might serve in the future, if any. I tossed Tom's appointment book into his briefcase, slammed it shut, and shoved it back in the corner.

He'd had sex with other women, then had the nerve to come home and sleep with me! He'd put my health, if not my life, at risk!

I tiptoed back to my office and quietly closed the door. I struggled with embarrassment for a few moments, then called my doctor and made an appointment to get tested for HIV/AIDS and other STIs.

I hurried back to my bedroom, holding back the tears until I'd closed the

door. Then I broke down and cried. I muffled my sobs with a pillow so Michael couldn't hear me.

The next thing I heard was the clattering of plates in the kitchen. I glanced at my watch. Six o'clock. I must have fallen asleep.

I slipped into the bathroom and splashed cold water on my face. I waited until the most of the redness had disappeared, then headed for the kitchen.

I found Michael rummaging through my cutlery drawer. I hadn't given it much thought, but all of a sudden the presence of another man in the house so soon after Tom's death made me uncomfortable.

Another man. It was something my mother would say. I scolded myself for considering my relationship with Michael along silly, romantic lines.

He smiled at me. "Hi there. I was about to go get you." He set forks next to our dinner plates on the table. "Pull up a chair."

I sat down and stared at the meal he'd prepared. With the expertise of a gourmet chef, he'd brought renewed vigor back to the tired omelet. Bits of parsley and basil decorated the edges. Melted mozzarella cheese formed a soft cloud in the center. Slices of tomato added color. "It looks terrific, but I don't have much of an appetite."

"Indulge me. Try it." He sat down next to me.

I took a bite, then another, until I'd eaten it all. "That was so delicious. Where did you learn to make an omelet like that?"

"In Paris. I was on assignment there a couple of years ago. I roomed with a friend of a friend who happened to be a chef named Picasso." He went on about the roommate he rarely saw who worked evenings and slept during the day. "We'd leave each other notes. His were in French, which was bad enough, but his handwriting was worse." He chuckled.

I laughed too, thankful that he kept the discussion going without reference to the murder investigation or to the redness around my eyes.

I made a move to get up. "How about some coffee?"

"I got it." He went over to the counter and turned on the coffee machine.

"Thanks." I appreciated our friendship, even though I realized it was short-lived. As soon as Moreau completed his investigation, Michael would be gone

for good this time.

With coffee cups in hand, we headed to the living room to watch the local news. Any development in the case, no matter how insignificant, would offer a sliver of hope.

But there was no mention of the murders. The upside was that Michael and I had bought more time. More time to prove our alibis. More time to find the killer. More time to get Moreau off our backs.

I held the remote and hopped from station to station. My reasons for not parking it on a specific station ran the gamut of excuses: boring, already viewed, in progress, lousy actors, whatever. Of course, the program choices weren't the problem. It was the stress of waiting for Dan's phone call that was throwing my attention span off track.

Irritated by the futile exercise of channel hopping, I handed Michael the remote. "Here. Maybe you'll get lucky."

"I have a better idea. Wait here. I'll be back in a few minutes." He dashed out to the corner strip mall and returned with a huge bag of popcorn and a packet of chocolate almonds. He suggested we watch an old movie, *The Addams Family*. "We could use some laughs."

He was right. Even though I'd seen the movie years before, it was hard not to laugh at the hilarious antics of the ghoulish family whose medieval abode looked out over a graveyard. It gave me a chance to escape from a reality that had weighed me down for days.

So I had no explanation for my outburst half an hour into the movie. "Tom slept with other women!" I threw my arms up in frustration and knocked over the popcorn bowl, scattering pieces all over the carpet.

Michael grabbed the remote and pressed the pause button. "How do you know this?"

"I found his appointment book. It has the names of women he met on business trips." I choked back the tears, got down on my knees, and began to pick up the popcorn. "I found a box of receipts. The money we saved to buy a house is gone. He spent it all on other women. Damn him!"

He joined me on the floor, picking up random pieces of popcorn.

I continued to vent. “That he’d slept with Pam was revolting, but I couldn’t let it go at that. Oh, no. I had to go and dig up a truth that was a hundred times more repulsive.”

“Megan, please—”

“I’m an intelligent woman, right? So tell me, Michael, how did I miss the signs? Why couldn’t I see he was cheating on me?”

“He was your husband,” he said. “Why would you look for signs? You trusted him.”

“He destroyed that trust with his lies. To think we were trying to have a baby.” The tears began to flow.

Michael placed a hand on my shoulder. “I’m really sorry, Megan.”

“I was so naïve. Damn! Damn! Damn!” I thumped my fists against my thighs.

“Stop it.” Michael grabbed me by the wrists. “You’re not to blame. You understand me?” His eyes locked on mine.

I froze. I’d seen that yearning in Tom’s eyes before. There was no mistaking it.

Michael whispered my name. He drew me closer and pressed his lips to mine.

I couldn’t deny the thrill of his kiss. My heart pounded against my chest, and a tingling spread through my body. I kissed him back—harder.

Something clicked in my brain, and I came to my senses.

What kind of wife was I? My husband had just died. Hell, I hadn’t even buried him yet.

I was overwhelmed with guilt. I’d definitely broken one of the Ten Commandments. Which one. Adultery?

No, my husband was dead. It didn’t apply.

Regardless, I felt a pang of shame, as if I’d sinned. Maybe even a mortal sin—the worst kind. I blamed my strict Catholic upbringing for laying another guilt trip on me.

I pulled out of Michael’s embrace and regained my composure. “What are we doing? This isn’t right.”



“I’m sorry,” he said, lowering his gaze. “It’s my fault.”

“It’s nobody’s fault.” I turned away, looked for popcorn under the sofa while I tried to explain what had happened. “We’re under a lot of stress. Yes, that’s it. The police think we’re murder suspects.”

“But Dan will—”

“Furthermore, we haven’t a clue what Moreau is planning for us. We could end up in jail if Dan can’t prove our alibis. What’s worse than living with that kind of anxiety? Tell me, Michael. Just tell me.”

I was rambling, avoiding the real issue: Why was my heart still fluttering?

“Don’t worry.” Michael’s tone was calm. “Dan will come up with a solid defense for us. You can bet on it.” He dropped the last bit of popcorn into the bowl.

The phone rang. I made a dash for it.

It was Dan. “Is Michael there with you?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Stay put. I’m coming over.”

Dan's demeanor Monday evening increased my apprehension. The worry lines stretching across his forehead hinted that the odds stacked against us were worse than I suspected.

As for Jane, gone were the soft curls and short skirt she'd worn in Michael's suite. Her hair hung straight down to her shoulders. A band pulled it away from her face to reveal high cheekbones and accent blue-gray eyes. She wore a navy jacket and skirt, a white shirt, and a pearl necklace. The style was austere, but it was all about depicting reliability and a sense of business ethics.

What betrayed her woodenness was the scent of her perfume. A blend of lavender and vanilla, it alluded to a lighter, more carefree side of her personality and was more in line with her age group. Rather, *our* age group.

Dan introduced Jane to us. She smiled at Michael and shook his hand, but neither one mentioned having recently seen the other. Then she shook my hand. Her grasp was strong but not too tight. Although I was puzzled, I played along for Michael's sake and made no mention of our initial meeting at the Elegance either.

As we settled around my kitchen table, Dan said, "My team did one heck of a job collecting valid data from prospective witnesses. I wasn't as lucky." He shrugged. "I met with Moreau at the station. Didn't get much there."

No surprise. Since the police weren't obliged to share evidence with a defense lawyer unless they lay charges and the case goes to trial, it was a catch-

22 of sorts. The bottom line: Dan would have had more luck looking for a mite in a truckload of mattresses than trying to pick the detective's brain for any facts about his investigation. If Moreau had no leads, he wouldn't reveal his inability to solve the murders. On the other hand, if proving our guilt had become his sole preoccupation, he wouldn't share that with Dan either.

Dan went on. "To update, I had to pull team members off your case to work on other projects originally scheduled for this week."

"So where does that leave us?" Michael stared at him from across the table.

"I'll be handling your case myself. Staying in Montreal longer than planned. Jane and I will continue gathering info on your behalf." He gestured toward Jane, who sat next to Michael.

My apprehension soared. If the statements they'd obtained from witnesses had influenced Dan's decision to extend his stay, maybe things weren't looking too promising for us.

Dan retrieved some folders from his briefcase, then said to Jane, "By the way, excellent job in the field today."

"That's what I'm here for." She opened her notebook and took out a pen.

From my seat next to Dan, I stole a glance at Jane. Her expression showed no emotion as she watched him place six manila folders on the table. How many years of practice had it taken to get that stony expression down pat?

"I hope you have good news for us." Michael eyed his buddy with the usual spark of optimism.

"Some good. Some not so good." Dan opened the first file. "All right. Our expert's report on potassium cyanide. Not dangerous when dry. When it comes into contact with acidic water—even moist skin—it releases a deadly gas. Less than a fraction of an ounce can kill you. Sometimes a bitter almond smell is detected, but not always. Safe to assume that Tom and Pam collapsed and died almost immediately."

Peter's description of the scene was still vivid in my mind. I blotted it out.

"So Tom and Pam had no chance whatsoever of getting out of the cottage alive," I said.

"That's right," Dan said.

“Where did the police find the cyanide?” Michael asked.

“They’re withholding that information,” Dan said.

“What about the time of death?”

“They’re withholding that too.”

“Any fingerprints?”

Dan shook his head. “The police are working through the eliminations. Not much to go on so far. Want my unofficial theory?”

“Go for it,” Michael said.

“Staff—and other guests—went in and out of the cottage the day Tom and Pam arrived. They left dozens of fingerprints behind. Odds are the suspect wore gloves and a mask as safeguards when handling the cyanide.”

“Peter mentioned seeing broken china on the floor,” I said. “Maybe Tom and Pam ingested the cyanide in their coffee or food.”

“It’s possible,” Dan said. “Final autopsy results will reveal more.” He put the file aside and opened up the second one. “Witness reports. Louise Kirk, manager at Pineview. She confirmed the cleaning staff left the cottage at four o’clock Friday afternoon. Tom and Pam arrived at seven that evening. A BOTCOR employee saw Tom and Pam drop off their luggage at the cottage and go directly to a party held in another cottage. They stayed there until midnight.”

As I jotted details on a canary yellow notepad, I felt Jane’s eyes on me. She tried not to be obvious about it but didn’t succeed. She was sizing me up—perhaps curious about my marriage to a cheating husband, no doubt curious about the nature of my relationship with Michael.

I could tell she was still interested in him by the way her attention drifted in his direction whenever he spoke and every so often when he didn’t. That she’d chosen to sit next to him at the kitchen table was a sure giveaway.

Michael gave no indication he’d taken their relationship to a new level since their meeting at the Elegance Hotel. It would explain the pass he’d made at me minutes earlier.

No, I didn’t want to go there. Why complicate my life? His kiss had been a fleeting mistake and it wouldn’t happen again. I’d make sure of it.

Dan fingered a document. “Pineview ownership and staff.” He held it out to

Jane. "You want to do the honors?"

"Thanks, Dan, but I don't need to see the report." Jane squared her shoulders. "Stewart Kirk and his wife, Louise, own and manage Pineview. They have access to the facilities 24/7. They purchased the resort ten years ago and have had no trouble with the law. Stewart Kirk's two brothers handle the front desk in the evening and have carte blanche access to the rest of the property as well. All four have solid alibis, as do the rest of the people on staff."

"What about the security policy at Pineview?" Michael asked.

"Lax," she said, turning slightly toward him. "It basically runs on an honor system."

"Surveillance cameras?"

"None."

"How many cottages does Pineview have?" I asked Jane.

"Fifteen," she said.

"How many were occupied by BOTCOR staff?" I asked.

"Ten," she said without hesitation, which convinced me she'd read the findings more than once or had a photographic memory. "Why do you ask?"

"People who go to a resort can get laid-back when they're hanging out with a group of friends," I said. "If BOTCOR employees occupied most of the cottages, Tom and Pam might have felt safe and left their door unlocked. Anyone could have gained access to their cottage while they were out."

"You mean to plant the cyanide," Jane said.

Was she doing it on purpose to make me spell it out?

"Well, yes," I said.

"Easy access," Dan said, scribbling a note. "It's a doubt we can raise in our defense." He lifted another report from the file. "A list of the cleaning staff at Pineview. Most are semi-retired workers. Each had access to the cottages."

"Did any of them see anything suspicious?" Michael asked him.

"No," Jane replied. "I interviewed all five of them. They had solid alibis. I did the usual background checks on them too. Those came up clean."

"Who else had access to the cottages?" I asked.

"Each guest had a key to their own cottage, of course," Jane said, blinking

hard, as if I'd asked a silly question.

I ignored her and began to draw circles on my notepad. Doodling helped me to think.

Dan opened up the next file. "My team couldn't get a copy of the videotapes from the Elegance. The police have a copy, but they don't want to share." His lips tightened in annoyance. "Megan, we have a witness report from Mrs. Speck at the condo. She confirmed your return home at about nine Friday evening."

Thank goodness! That interfering witch finally came through for me.

"Michael, the desk clerk at the Elegance saw you in the lobby when you returned to the hotel around midnight." Dan paused. "Oh, one more thing. Sales receipts at Santino's substantiate you both had dinner there until eight forty-five."

The muscles around Jane's eyes tightened at the mention of my having had dinner with Michael.

"About a potential problem we raised earlier, Megan, " Dan said. "We confirmed there's no surveillance camera at the rear exit of your condo. The police might question your whereabouts after Michael dropped you off."

Exasperation crept in. "What does it take to prove I was asleep in my bed?" I said.

"A videotape." Michael grinned.

"Right." I laughed.

Jane was staring at me again, but I pretended not to notice. Instead I wrote a note to myself on the yellow notepad. I'd visit the condo superintendent and ask about installing an additional video camera at the rear of the building.

Dan lifted another report in the file. "On to Sainte-Adèle. We tracked down the clerk at the gas station. He didn't remember you, Michael."

"What about their videotape?" Michael asked, repeating what had now become the catchphrase of the evening.

"The surveillance system was malfunctioning," Dan said. "No tape was available."

"You're kidding," Michael said in disbelief.

Jane turned to him. "It's true, Michael. I spoke with the owner of a

*dépanneur* located nearby. I was hoping his store had a surveillance system in place, but it didn't. I wish I had more positive news for you. Sorry." She reached out and put her hand on his.

"No problem," Michael said. "You did the best you could."

"You drove to Sainte-Adèle *and* Pineview today?" I asked Jane, shattering the moment between them.

She slid her hand off Michael's. "Yes, I did." She gave me a half-smile, as if one side of her mouth felt I deserved it while the other felt it wasn't worth the effort. "I was visiting friends up north Sunday night. Dan paged me this morning and asked if I'd drop by the gas station in Sainte-Adèle. It was minutes away, so I said yes. Since Dan was busy in town, I offered to drive to Pineview to do the interviews there too."

Her eager-to-please attitude was beginning to annoy me far more than her diligence. I doodled more circles.

"My team confirmed the mileage on your rental car, Michael," Dan said. "It's what we'd discussed. The equivalent of a two-way trip to Sainte-Adèle, plus extra miles driving around Montreal."

"Or the distance driving to and from Pineview—give or take a few miles," Michael said, irony in his voice.

"Don't even go there," I said, wary of any evidence that had the potential to backfire. "Moreau could use it against us. Right, Dan?"

"He might," Dan said.

Michael leaned forward. "I don't like where this is going, Dan. Isn't the onus on the cops to prove we went to Pineview in the first place?"

Dan nodded. "From the prosecution's perspective, whoever planted the cyanide at Pineview needed controlled conditions. Plus a clear path and no witnesses. If Tom and Pam had reached the cottage before you did and stayed there the rest of—"

"We already know that didn't happen," Michael said.

"All the more reason the prosecution could argue you had the opportunity to sneak in and plant the cyanide, say, between ten and eleven that night when no one was in the cottage."

“Hold on,” Michael said, raising a hand in the air. “Like Megan said, anyone could have walked in if the door wasn’t locked.”

“Other suspects might surface in the interim,” Dan said. “In any case, we have to be prepared to defend our position from every angle. Raise doubts about the evidence the prosecution presents in court. If it ever comes to that.”

Michael sat quietly, said nothing.

Did he feel as if he were being singled out as a suspect? If so, I had to show him he wasn’t alone. “But Dan, Tom told me he was going to Granite Ridge. I had no reason to believe he’d gone to Pineview. Neither did Michael.”

“The prosecution might refute your claim,” Dan said. “Show how your conversation with Louise substantiated the fact you knew Tom was going to Pineview. Even if he lied about it to you.”

“Peter can vouch for me,” I said. “He covered up for Tom. He could provide us with an alibi of sorts.”

Dan tilted his head from side to side. “It’s dubious. The prosecution could create a doubt about Peter’s credibility as a witness based on his cover-up for Tom. It would cancel out the truthful answers.”

“Great. That’s all we need.” Michael ran a hand through his hair. “A case against us based on lies.”

The frustration in his voice was justified. The likelihood we could be facing murder charges was unthinkable, yet possible, if we couldn’t prove our alibis.

Dan moved on to the next file. “The BOTCOR employees. Solid alibis.”

“Peter Ewans too?” Michael asked him.

“I’ll check.” He flipped through the file, pulled out a report, and gave it a quick scan. “Peter and his wife arrived at the BOTCOR party at the same time as Tom, Pam, and other guests. They all stayed there until late that night.”

“It doesn’t mean anything,” Michael said. “Peter could have slipped out to plant the cyanide while everyone else was distracted at the party. No one would have noticed.”

“Possibly,” Dan said. “However, witness comments contradict the impression you have of Peter. It’s in here somewhere.” He leafed through the file until he found it. “A BOTCOR employee said Peter became ill right after he



discovered the bodies. Paramedics had to give him a tranquilizer on site.”

“It could be a natural reaction to a traumatic event,” Jane said.

“Or a case of nerves,” I said.

“Definitely a guilty conscience,” Michael said. “A likely suspect.”

“Circumstances might suggest it,” Dan said. “However, studies indicate that Peter’s temperament doesn’t fit the stereotype of a cold-blooded killer.”

“Why not? From what I learned in investigative journalism, the quiet ones are the ones you have to watch out for.”

Dan tapped his pen. “We can speculate all we want. It’s what Moreau thinks that counts. Let’s move on.” His eyes zigzagged along another page. “We interviewed the auto mechanic who repairs and does maintenance on the leased BOTCOR vehicles.”

“So you do have suspicions about Peter after all,” Michael said, his eyes alert.

“It’s a precautionary move on our part.” Dan studied the report. “The Ford was in excellent condition. The last tune-up was a month ago. The mechanic claims it’s odd that a wheel could have fallen off the vehicle like that.”

“Unless the mechanic didn’t do it.” Michael raised an eyebrow.

I grasped a horrific possibility. “Hold on. Peter was jealous of Tom’s success, but I doubt he’d kill him. It was an accident.”

“How can you be certain?” Michael asked me. “Here’s another one for you. How well do you know Peter?”

“I know he’s a good family man. Somewhat insecure and nervous. Why?”

He grew pensive. “Think back to the day he delivered the Ford to your place. Did he say or do anything out of the ordinary?”

“He dropped the car keys when he handed them to me, but like I said, he’s a nervous type of guy.” Then I remembered. “Wait. There was something else. When I asked if he wanted a ride back home, he was surprised. He thought I was referring to the Ford. When I said I meant a taxi, he seemed relieved.”

“It’s sounding more and more suspicious to me,” Michael said.

“Let’s not jump to conclusions,” Dan said. “Peter’s reaction to Megan might have been based on company policy. An outside party not authorized to drive a

company car, for example.” He glanced back at the report. “More notes. When my team mentioned the loose tire incident to Peter, he went white. Looked as if he were going to pass out.”

His words were lost on Michael. “It could have been an act.”

“He might have a health problem we don’t know about,” I said, switching to doodling triangles.

“I don’t buy it,” Michael said. “I’d bet his plan to get rid of Tom failed the first time. He waited for the next suitable occasion—Pineview. Motive and opportunity.”

“Possibly,” Dan said. “But why risk killing Pam?”

“Why not? Megan could have been sitting in the Ford with Tom the day the tire flew off. Peter would have killed them both.”

His comment triggered another memory, and I voiced it. “Peter called me Saturday morning. He passed along his condolences but confided that Tom had told him we were getting a divorce. Tom and I never discussed divorce.”

“More lies.” Michael waved a hand in the air. “Peter’s suffering from a double dose of guilt. It happens to the best of murderers. He’s still a prime suspect to me.”

“Pure speculation at this point,” Dan said. “We haven’t completed his background check. Have to determine a link to cyanide, and so on.”

Peter’s work background came to mind. What I was about to reveal would defeat my argument in support of him, but I had to be truthful. “Peter worked as a chemical engineer before he joined BOTCOR.”

“Aha!” Michael clapped his hands together. “The trump card. One more incriminating piece of evidence against him.”

Jane jumped in. “Dan, do you want me to check Peter for you? I’d be happy to.”

“As a witness,” Dan said. “Verify his contacts in the chemicals industry, former and current. Get a character reference from the personnel department at BOTCOR. Ask about potential problems with staff, addictions of any sort. That kind of thing. Speak with his wife, neighbors, friends.”

Jane’s pen slid across the page to keep up with his instructions.

I moved on to doodling squares and waited until they'd finished their conversation.

At one point, Dan shuffled the folders and a photo slipped out. The picture of a cottage had to be the one where Tom and Pam had stayed. He hastily picked it up and put it back in the folder. He probably thought it would upset me if I saw it.

"Dan, was that a picture of the Pineview cottage?" I asked him.

"Yes," he said.

"Can I see it?"

He fished it out and handed it to me.

I examined the photo. Three wooden steps led up to a narrow veranda at the front of the single-story cottage. A narrow window bordered the left side of the door. Eyelet curtains allowed a partial view of the inside. What I found most surprising were the four glass panels on the door.

"There's a simple lock on the front door," I said. "It would have been easy to break a glass panel and open the door from the outside." I passed the photo to Michael. "I'm surprised Peter didn't try to break in when he saw Tom and Pam collapsed on the floor."

"I'm not," Michael said. "If he planted the cyanide, he'd have made damn sure not to walk in and give them mouth-to-mouth."

"I agree," Jane said. "With Peter's experience in chemicals, he'd have known the dangers of exposure to cyanide. He wouldn't have risked it."

"The proof keeps piling up," Michael said. He handed Dan the photo.

Our discussion triggered another memory—one that required immediate action on my part. "Excuse me. I'll be right back." I went to the bedroom and retrieved Tom's appointment book from the closet, then returned to the kitchen. "This belonged to Tom." I offered it to Dan. "It could help our investigation. The names in the directory at the back might produce a lead to the real killer."

Michael gave me an admiring look. "It takes a lot of courage to do what you just did."

"Not if it's our passport out of hell," I said.

Jane leaned forward. "What exactly did you find in there, Megan?"

“The names of women my husband slept with,” I said, keeping my voice even.

“Oh.” She sat back. A brief display of compassion vanished as she turned her attention to Dan.

Dan scanned the pages of the directory and stopped once in a while to peruse the names. “If we make inquiries into the names listed here, we might have to present testimony stemming from them. Kitschy details could surface in a court of law. Cause you potential embarrassment, Megan.”

“Do whatever you have to do,” I said. “We have to flush out the killer.”

“New witness information might help your defense, but proving that other suspects are guilty is beyond the scope of our responsibilities,” he reminded me.

“I understand,” I said.

Dan handed Tom’s appointment book to Jane. “Start the interview process. Contact as many people as you can.” He reached for the next file and opened it up. “My team spoke with Mrs. Tricia Bradford, wife of fifty-five-year-old Bill Bradford. Reputable family on both sides. Old money—millions—on her side. Mrs. Bradford is involved with charities, social committees, lawn parties. Influential in high-society circles. Rumor has it she’s a silent partner in Bradford Publishing.”

“What about her alibi?” Michael asked Dan.

“Confirmed. She left to visit her mother in Hampstead on Friday morning. Stayed there several days.”

“So what?” Michael said. “Money talks. If the boss’s wife believed Pam was sleeping with her husband, she could hire a hit man to get rid of Pam and cover her tracks like a pro.”

Dan shrugged. “Why take the chance? Assuming she’s found guilty of murder, we’re talking twenty-five years in jail. Hefty price to pay for revenge. Not to mention she could forfeit the right to her husband’s estate. Huge stakes.”

“You amaze me,” Michael said to Dan. “I thought the contents of wills were off limits.”

“People talk,” Dan said.

“So Mrs. Bradford is still in the running as a suspect.”

“Possibly, but it’s not up to me to prove it.” Dan flipped open the last file. “All right. Witnesses at Bradford confirm Pam left the office at four that Friday.”

It validated the notation I’d seen in Tom’s appointment book, yet something nagged at me. “If it took them three hours to get to Pineview, they must have stopped along the way.”

“For a bite to eat,” Michael said.

“Possibly.” Dan lifted reports from the file and fanned them out in his hands. “The staff interviews at Bradford. I left this bunch for last. The interview with Emily Saunders was exceptional.”

“Good or bad?” I asked, trying to quell the uneasy feeling stirring inside me.

He plucked a report and placed it on the top of the pile. “Bad. Her comments would damage our defense without a doubt.”

After my run-in with Emily at Bradford, my instincts were on high alert. “What did she say?”

Dan let out a deep breath. “That you and Michael were lovers.”

This time I was certain I saw Jane flinch. Not only flinch but shift in her chair.

She caught me looking at her and pretended to cross her legs.

I pretended not to notice. I was battling my own demons.

*Michael and I were lovers.*

At least, that's what Emily had told the police.

The memory of Michael's kiss popped into my mind. Butterflies fluttered inside me, and I struggled to control the flush in my cheeks.

Michael spoke up. "Emily asked me out a few times. I said no. She's pissed off and taking it out on me through Megan."

"Anger is a normal reaction on Emily's part," Jane said. "She felt rejected."

"It's more than that," I said, finding my voice. "Emily is jealous and has anger-management issues."

"All right." Dan's brow puckered, as if what he was going to say would cause us more concern. "After closing hours at Bradford on Friday, an incoming call bounced from Megan's desk to the front desk. Emily worked at Bradford Sunday afternoon. She saw the flashing light on the phone and checked the message."

"When I'm not in the office, I put my phone on call forward," I said. "Who was the caller?"

Dan glanced back at the report. "Unknown. A technical device was used to

disguise the voice. The message said: Stop sleeping with Michael Elliott, or else.”

I was speechless.

Michael tensed. “That’s a blatant lie, if not a threat.”

“Emily said the police took it as a threat too,” Dan said.

It was my turn to cry foul. “She told the police about the call? Why would she promote another lie about Michael and me?”

“What do you mean, *another lie*?” Michael stared at me.

I summed up my chat with Emily at the office. “She blames me for Pam’s death and is spreading rumors to get back at me.”

“That makes two of us,” Michael said.

“Rumors are harmless schoolgirl antics,” Jane said.

“It goes beyond harmless.” Dan laid aside his pen and fixed his gaze on Michael. “The police now have grounds to suspect you had a motive for killing Tom. Your secret love affair with Megan.”

Michael leaned forward. “How can the cops rely on a ridiculous message from an unknown caller?”

“They’ll inspect company phone records to verify the legitimacy of the call and go from there,” Dan pointed out.

“It’s a long shot,” Michael said. “Emily could have asked a friend to call the office from an unlisted number or a cell phone. She could have concocted the whole thing.”

Granted, Emily’s accusation about me might have stemmed from a dark place in her heart, and yet... “Emily can be dramatic at times, but would she take a chance and lie to the police when it involves a murder investigation?”

“Good point,” Dan said. “She could be charged with obstruction of justice.”

“Dan, I should have a girl-to-girl talk with Emily,” Jane said. “I’m sure I can clear up this little misunderstanding.”

“Not a good idea,” Dan said. “We need to play down the nature of the anonymous call. If we draw attention to it, Moreau could use it as a springboard. He could launch his investigation in a number of predictable directions. Most of them based on motive.”

Jane persisted. "Dan, the anonymous call can be construed as hearsay."

"Doesn't matter," Dan said.

"Why not?"

"The implication is there." A sharp glance from Dan ended the debate.

"I'll bet Moreau already latched onto it," Michael said. "He'll chase any lead if it takes him back to our doorstep."

Dan patted his brow with a hankie, then returned it to his pocket. His expression remained serious as he addressed Michael and me. "All right. A word of advice before we wrap things up. From what we learned, you could both be at the top of the suspect list as far as Moreau is concerned. Don't give him a reason to pursue you." He gathered his files in a pile.

"What do you mean?" Michael asked.

"He won't stop until he finds reasonable and probable grounds to charge you."

"And that's supposed to scare me? Let him bring it on." Michael raised his hands in the air. "If he thinks he's going to dig up dirt to incriminate me, he's in for a huge disappointment." He stuck out his jaw in defiance.

"That's goes for me too," I said, trying to sound as bold.

Yet part of me feared we'd never break free from a chain of events that was headed for disaster.



**T**here was a commotion outside my condo Tuesday morning.

I peeked through the horizontal blinds in the living room.

Camera crews had set up their equipment on the front lawn. Reporters were competing for prime locations near the entrance. The only plausible explanation for the media presence was that information about the murders had leaked out to them.

I was glad I'd drawn the blinds the evening before. It eliminated any chance that a roving camera lens might accidentally zoom in and invade my privacy.

On the back of this latest development, another horrid thought ran through my mind: Every detail of my life was about to be placed under a microscope for the entire world to see.

The flashing red light on the phone in my office caught my eye as I went by. I'd switched off the ringer on both phones last night to get some sleep. Now I switched them back on and checked my messages.

The calls were from reporters requesting interviews. It was a miracle they'd managed to reach me since my phone number was unlisted. Maybe someone at Bradford had given it to them. Emily, I thought unkindly. From their voice messages, it was clear they were eager to get me in front of their cameras.

Fat chance. I planned to remain indoors, safe and sheltered.

Then I remembered I had an appointment with my gynecologist this morning. I had no choice. I had to leave the shelter of my condo and find a way

to dodge the media coverage.

On that note, I was somewhat curious about the extent of their coverage. Maybe one of the local channels had given the murders prime airtime this morning. I checked my watch. Eight o'clock. I hurried back to the living room, plopped down on the sofa, and clicked on the TV.

I'd missed the first seconds of the broadcast but caught a glimpse of a female reporter pursuing Moreau up the front steps of the police station. The person holding the camera had a hard time keeping it steady and most of the shots zoomed in on Moreau's briefcase or his back. Just before they reached the front doors, the reporter asked Moreau if he had any leads in the case. He looked over his shoulder and said "no comment" before he vanished inside.

What followed was a clip of a BOTCOR marketing executive whom I recognized from a company Christmas party. His name wasn't familiar, but the silver-haired man in a gray suit attested that Tom's contribution to the firm had resulted in "a substantial financial boost to the bottom line during his short career span."

How crass! It was all about the money for those leeches—right up to the end.

I sat up when the front of my condo building appeared in the next clip. A camera zoomed in on the entrance where another female reporter stood talking with...

Oh, no! Mrs. Speck! She was being interviewed in the foyer downstairs. *Live*. I turned up the volume.

"I seldom saw Mr. Scott," Mrs. Speck said, tugging at the black shawl around her shoulders. "No siree, it didn't surprise me to learn they'd separated." Her lips shut tight to form a thin crooked line.

"How do you know for a fact they were separated?" the reporter asked her.

Mrs. Speck stuck out her pointy chin. "I saw Mr. Scott leave the building with a suitcase that Friday afternoon."

"I understand Mr. Scott traveled a lot on business," the reporter went on. "He must have packed a suitcase many times before. What was so different this time?"

"He didn't return," Mrs. Speck said. "He usually returns on Sunday night. I

said to myself, this is not a good sign, no siree.” She adjusted her glasses. “Then on the weekend, I saw several strange men coming and going from Mrs. Scott’s apartment at all hours of the day and night.”

“Strange men?” the reporter prompted her.

“I’m a law-abiding citizen, so I won’t go into the details in public, but I was shocked that a woman of ill repute might be living under the same roof as me.”

I gasped. “That witch!”

The reporter yanked the microphone away and concluded her coverage.

I aimed the remote at the TV and turned it off, wishing it were that easy to turn Mrs. Speck off too. She must have been thrilled to launch my “ill repute” as this morning’s official topic of gossip.

It was reassuring to know I wasn’t the only condo dweller that Mrs. Speck spied on. Other occupants got wise to her habits after she’d start up a conversation with them about the magazines they subscribed to—information she’d acquired from peeking over the letter carrier’s shoulder as he sorted the mail in the lobby.

How often had she eavesdropped on me or stood outside my apartment door to—

The phone rang and I jumped. I cursed the media out loud for putting me on edge. I rushed to the office and checked the display on the phone. It was Bradford Publishing. I answered it.

“Hi, Megan,” Kayla’s voice came through the other end. “Did I get you at a bad time?”

“Not at all,” I said. “I received your flowers. Thank you.”

“Oh...well, it’s the least we could do for you.” She sounded a little flustered. “Megan, I hate to be the bearer of more bad news at a time like this, but Mr. B. has requested that we refrain from giving you any more contract work until this...situation is resolved.”

“Situation?”

“He’s concerned about the bad publicity surrounding Pam’s and Tom’s death and their connection to you.”

“What? That’s horrible! How can he even justify—”

“I’m sorry, Megan. I hope it all blows over soon.”

Great. Tom had squandered thousands of dollars from our joint savings account. The rent had to be paid by the end of the month, let alone the bills. I had limited savings and no viable source of revenue.

How would I survive?

Kayla went on. “If you want to send me an invoice for your work to date, I’ll make sure you get paid ASAP.”

I mumbled my thanks and had barely hung up when the phone rang again.

UNKNOWN CALLER.

I picked it up, intending to hang up as soon as the marketer began his pitch.

Annoyance turned to relief at the sound of Michael’s voice. “Hope I didn’t wake you,” he said, sounding cheery.

“No, but the reporters did. They’re parked outside the condo.” I gave him a recap of the interview with Mrs. Speck. “That wicked witch of the east! She painted me as a prostitute and said every word of it on live TV, to top it off.”

He laughed. “Strange men visiting you? Dan will get a kick out of it. As for Moreau, I don’t know.”

“Oh, he’ll be flattered.”

He laughed again. “I’m out jogging. I wanted to go over to see you. Are you up for a visit?”

“It’s not a good idea.”

“Right. The media.” Michael paused. “Can you hold on? Jane’s on the other line.” After a few seconds, he returned. “Sorry, Megan.”

“Any news about the case?”

“No. Jane just wanted to come over to the hotel.”

“Oh.”

“I told her I was out, that I’d be busy the rest of the day. Speaking of which, how about meeting me for lunch at Santino’s?”

“I can’t. The reporters will hound me as soon as I step outside.”

“Throw on a pair of sunglasses,” he suggested. “Wear different clothing. They won’t recognize you. And use the rear exit.”

I considered his invitation. I hadn’t bought groceries in days. I had a doctor’s

appointment at eleven o'clock anyway. Escape seemed like a viable option—especially the incognito part.

“Okay. See you at noon.”

I entered the kitchen and caught a whiff of the rich Colombian brew completing its pre-programmed drip. Nothing smelled better to me than fresh brewed coffee, except a pastry shop that sold fresh baked goods *and* fresh brewed coffee. I suddenly craved a cup.

But first things first.

I peeked out the door to make sure the corridor was empty. It was. I opened the door wide enough to stick my arm out and retrieved my rolled-up copy of *The Gazette*. It was a mystery how the delivery person got into the building to begin with, but I was thankful for any small favor that happened into my life these days.

I poured coffee into a huge mug and popped two slices of whole grain bread into the toaster, then sat down at the kitchen table. I removed the elastic band around the newspaper and opened it up. The headline on the front page read: “Mysterious Cyanide Murders at Pineview Resort.”

My heart thumped wildly. Was Moreau responsible for releasing the story to the media? If so, why hadn't he warned Michael and me ahead of time?

Maybe he had a new lead or solid evidence on hand—something that would drive the investigation in the right direction.

I read the first of two articles. It portrayed me as a “grief-stricken, young widow.” Given that I hadn't spoken with any reporters so far, I marveled at their ingenuity in coming up with that description. It was my good fortune that they offered a sympathetic approach regarding my emotional state. A photo of me taken at a Bradford Publishing event last year accompanied the piece. Someone had given it to the press without my knowledge or permission. Again, I hated myself for suspecting Emily, but who else could it be? With Ray working in the lab, it would be easy to get any photo she wanted.

The second article described Tom as “an ambitious, up-and-coming marketing executive with a national corporation” and Pam as “a vivacious publicity manager with a bright future in the publishing industry.” Pictures of

Pam with clients were splattered across the page in media hype style. The photograph of a cottage at Pineview was also included, though not the one Tom had stayed in. Like the other article, this one stated the police had no concrete leads and continued to ask the public's support in solving the murders.

Moreau had zilch. The write-ups contained information, but any seasoned investigative reporter could obtain that sort of basic data from a phone call or personal interview. The single significant detail—that Tom and Pam had been murdered with cyanide—had definitely come from the police and no one else. I cut out the articles to show Michael.

While I munched on a toast topped with butter, I flipped through the rest of the paper. A short article about a drug arrest in Sainte-Adèle caught my eye. There was no byline to indicate who had written the piece.

I scanned other articles and picked up three spelling errors and mentally revised two sentences. The ability to pick out typos and revise muddled text had its advantages. It took my attention off the murders. It also extended to another aspect—one that engaged my muscles: It made me crave tidiness and cleanliness around me.

I was faced with a cluttered counter, a sink full of dishes, and a floor that hadn't been washed in weeks. It was time for a crackdown. After I was done in the kitchen, I moved on to the bathroom and scrubbed it until it sparkled. Satisfied that these activities had appeased my yen for restoring order, I strolled to the bedroom closet to pick out something to wear to Santino's.

The phone rang as I passed the office, so I answered.

"Have you seen today's news?" my mother asked at the other end of the line. She subscribed to a handful of local papers and considered herself an expert in public affairs, or more precisely, the affairs of people in the public eye. Her interests spanned from fundraising events to government policy for seniors—anything that kept a conversation going with friends and relatives.

"I read the articles in *The Gazette*," I said in response to her question, praying she wasn't referring to the TV coverage. "I'm sorry I couldn't tell you sooner about the cyanide."

She sighed. "It felt like déjà vu."

“What do you mean?”

“For twenty years your father worked for that horrible plastics company. Every day he was exposed to a mix of chemicals. Cyanide was one of them.”

“You think it contributed to Dad’s death from cancer? I don’t remember the doctors mentioning it.”

“They didn’t. Your father told me. Remember how the hospital didn’t want to get involved in my lawsuit against the plastics company?”

“Yes.”

“Well, that was the reason. Anyway, it was all for the better. I didn’t need more grief.” She let out another sigh. “Megan, I promised I would respect your privacy, but I have to ask you. One tabloid said Tom was a member of a doomsday cult that commits suicide with cyanide.”

“Mom, you can’t accept everything you read as fact,” I said. “Tom loved life too much to kill himself. We both know that.”

“So who could have done such a hateful thing?”

“I don’t know.”

Silence hung on the line. I put myself in her place and tried to imagine what she was thinking. She’d often heard me complain about Tom’s frequent trips, but because he’d shone so brightly in her eyes, she’d chosen to ignore my whining for the most part.

His death might have changed her perspective. Did she wonder whether or not I’d found out about his affair and sought revenge against him? Would she entertain such dreadful thoughts about her own daughter? Would any mother?

Her voice shattered my reverie. “I can take care of the arrangements for the wake, if you want. We can have it at my place.”

“Only if you’re up to it,” I said.

“I’m fine. At my age, I have to make every minute count.”

I’d heard that line before. People in my mother’s age group often spoke as if they were going to die at any moment. She lingered a bit longer on the line, chatting, maybe sensing I hadn’t told her everything, hoping I’d use her as a sounding board the way I’d often done.

Instead I held back.

I didn't want to cause her unnecessary grief, so I didn't tell her the man I'd married—the same man she'd thought would make such a fine husband and great father—had cheated on me with more than one woman and might have infected me with a life-threatening disease.

Nor did I tell her that the police might conduct a search of my home any day now because they considered Michael—a man whom I'd met weeks ago—as my lover. Consequently, we were potential suspects in the double murders.

I especially didn't want to tell her that Michael and I had hired a criminal lawyer to represent us and that we were having a hard time proving our alibis the night Tom died.

No, some things you just don't tell your mother.

We said our goodbyes and promised to keep in touch.

I was about to step into the shower when the phone rang again. I rushed over to answer it, but there was silence at the other end of the line.

I checked the display. It was a long-distance number that wasn't familiar to me. Probably a representative from one of those annoying telemarketing companies. They used a computer-generated listing that dialed multiple phone numbers at once and left you hanging if someone else answered before you did. So I didn't answer.

At ten-thirty, I made my getaway through the rear exit of the condo—right into a hornet's nest of reporters.



A dozen reporters were lurking in the parking lot behind my condo. I heeded Michael's words of advice and strolled along, not making eye contact with anyone. He was right. No one recognized the "grief-stricken, young widow" clad in a baseball cap, jean shorts, a white T-shirt, and sunglasses. The ponytail had been a last-minute decision—my attempt at shaving off years to foil the reporters' plans. It had worked.

The wide branches of the maple trees lining the street offered no respite from the heat and mugginess that had returned to the city and would linger for another spell. Good thing it was only a fifteen-minute walk to the medical clinic on Sherbrooke Street.

I checked in, then sat down in the small waiting room.

When it was my turn, the gynecologist examined me and took the usual samples required for STI testing. He stated I'd have the results in several weeks. He took a blood sample for HIV testing and said I'd have those results in minutes.

I prayed while I waited. The results came back negative, and my anxiety level dropped until he said I'd have to return in three months for more HIV testing as a precautionary measure.

The outdoor air hung heavy with humidity. Before I'd walked the three blocks to the underground subway station, my T-shirt had absorbed the dampness and was beginning to cling to my skin. I welcomed the coolness of *Le*

*Metro*, but it was too short a train ride downtown to the McGill station for a complete cooling down period.

A gust of hot air greeted me as I resurfaced at the street level. The sun seared the pavement and sent up tides of heat that blurred my vision of objects in the distance and made breathing a chore. The two commercial blocks east of Santino's stretched out before me like two miles. The pedestrians in front of me had slowed down to a crawl. Cars, trucks, and buses inched along too, bumper to bumper, like one gigantic funeral procession.

I fought to take in each breath from surroundings so thick and dirty with gas emissions that I could almost taste the greasy stench. My eyes burned and my throat ached with dryness. More than ever, I wished I'd brought along a bottle of water.

I accelerated my pace, but three students who'd stopped to chat in the middle of the sidewalk, a young man walking a dog, and two women toting shopping bags hampered my efforts.

I picked up speed and whizzed past those who wandered along in no apparent hurry. Only when I stumbled into a vendor's rack of clothes did I realize I'd been running all the while.

Parched on the inside and clammy on the outside, I arrived at Santino's and pushed open the glass door with the last bit of energy I could muster. I removed my sunglasses and spotted Michael sitting at our usual table at the far end of the restaurant. He waved at me.

I tore past the water fountain in the entrance, its three porcelain angels in various states of undress.

I dashed past Luigi, the manager, without saying hello and hoped he would forgive my rudeness.

I squeezed by a waitress carrying a tray laden with serving dishes and almost caused her to topple it.

An icy carafe sat on our table. I reached for the fluid that would save my life and filled a glass. I gulped it down, tasting the last drops. It wasn't water. It was white wine.

"A little hot out there, eh?" Michael grinned.

“Tell me...about it.” I plopped into a chair, tried to catch my breath.

“Did reporters chase you all the way here?”

“No, I waltzed right by them through the parking lot. They’ll have to go chase a more worthwhile story.”

“No way,” Michael said, a twinkle in his eye. “A good reporter sticks with a story until all their questions are answered.”

“If they can catch me.”

Luigi approached our table, his demeanor lacking the usual high energy. In broken English, he said to me, “I see picture in the paper. Sorry for your loss, Madam.” He handed us the menus and told us lunch was on the house.

I waited until Luigi had left with our orders, then whispered to Michael, “He recognized me.”

“Why not?” Michael shrugged. “We’ve had dinner here lots of times. The guy knows our faces as well as his own.”

“I meant from my picture in the newspaper. Didn’t you read *The Gazette* this morning?” When he answered no, I pulled out the articles I’d tucked in my purse earlier and handed them to him. “Look at the headlines. I think Moreau released the information to the press.”

Michael glanced at the articles. “What if he did?”

“He could have warned us ahead of time.”

“He doesn’t have to let us in on anything.” He handed the articles back to me.

“Why not?”

“That’s just the way it is,” Michael said. “He’s the prosecution.”

I tucked the clippings away. “I’m surprised Dan hasn’t contacted us.”

“I’d bet he and Jane are busy interviewing witnesses.”

“Why do I feel as if we’re going in circles with this interviewing process?”

“I know what you mean,” he said. “Last night I kept thinking about the old guy at the gas station in Sainte-Adèle.”

“What about him?”

“I’m sure I could jog his memory if I went see him in person.”

“Why bother? Jane showed him a photo of you and nothing clicked.”

“Yeah. A picture of me posing in a fancy dress jacket.” Michael shook his head. “It’s different when you see someone in person.”

“I know where this is going, but I’ll ask anyway. What do you have in mind?”

“Want to drive up to Sainte-Adèle with me? It’ll do us good to get away for a while.”

He was right. I had no work scheduled. A change of scenery wouldn’t hurt either, but... “Do you think it’s wise? Dan said we—”

Michael waved a hand. “He won’t miss us. If he needs to reach us, he has my cell number.”

“What if Jane calls you?”

“Jane?”

“Aren’t you two...close?”

“No. I told you there’s nothing between us.”

“Not in her mind. I’ve seen the way she looks at you.”

“It’s her problem, not mine. Besides, I’d consider it a conflict of interest now that she’s working for Dan.”

“Did you tell her?”

“Yes,” Michael said. “After we left your place last night, she hinted at coming up to my suite. I made it very clear to her then.”

“How did she react?”

“She told me it would be our little secret. We didn’t have to tell Dan about it. Like the time Dan and I were working on that drug possession case in Montreal a month ago.”

I stared at him. “You were dating her when she was on the opposing legal team?”

“Yes, and I promised myself I’d never lie to Dan again.”

So that’s why Jane didn’t say anything in front of Dan either.

Michael went on. “After I finished my run this morning, I came back to the hotel. Minutes later, Jane knocked at my door. I saw her through the peephole but didn’t answer.”

“You think that’s going to discourage her?”

“Hey, whose side are you on anyway?” He grinned.

“I’m stating the obvious. She’s determined. After this case is over, she—”

“No way. Two months with Jane was enough time to find out it wouldn’t work.”

“Two months? You must have had *something* in common.”

“We did,” Michael said. “We were fascinated with lawyers who managed to trump the system and keep their guilty clients out of jail. We’d stay up all night rehashing drug possession cases, arguing how we could have changed the verdicts, which cases I should include in the book I was writing... What I couldn’t handle were her wild mood swings.”

“So she’s moody,” I said. “Who isn’t?”

“It’s different with Jane. She doesn’t discuss personal things. She keeps her emotions bottled up. When things don’t go her way, she gets...controlling.”

“Controlling?”

“The day you met her at the hotel, she was returning a gold chain I’d left in her suite the night we broke up. But I didn’t forget it there. She hid it and used it as a pretense to see me.” He paused. “Thanks to Dan, she’s back in my life again.”

“Not in the same way, though,” I said.

“True.” He leaned forward. “So how do you feel about driving up to Sainte-Adèle with me this afternoon?”

I had to wash my hair. I couldn’t tell him that without sounding girly. “Tomorrow morning would be better.”

“No problem.” His eyes darted to something or someone behind me, but he didn’t have time to warn me.

The rich cedar and sweet citrus blend of Pam’s perfume gave me a jolt. My heart started to beat against my chest, even though logic told me it wasn’t possible—she was dead. I sensed movement beside me as the scent of Prada intensified, invading my space.

Emily removed her sunglasses and peered down at me. “Hi, Megan.” Her eyes were sunken and bloodshot from either too much crying or heavy drinking. Probably both, judging from the smell of alcohol emanating from her.

“Hi,” I said. Had she followed us here?

She smiled at Michael. “I thought you were going back to Toronto on the weekend.”

“Something came up.” His tone was flat.

“Oh. Is that why you haven’t returned my calls since the photo shoot? Seriously, Michael.” She kept smiling but her glare sent out a different message.

“I told you,” he said. “I was busy.”

Emily smirked. “Yeah, too busy to talk to me but not too busy to have lunch with Megan.” She spoke as if I weren’t there.

“Megan just lost her husband,” Michael said.

“Well, I suffered a loss too.” Emily teared up. “Pam was like a big sister to me. We had a lot of stuff in common. Things that we shared deep inside us. Not visible to anyone else.” She threw me a smug side-glance.

“I know exactly what you mean,” I said to her. “It’s hard to see the truth

when you've been blinded by deception for so long."

"Deception?" She wrinkled her nose.

"Don't you have to get back to work, Emily? Spread more lies about anonymous phone calls and—?"

"They weren't lies," she said, raising her voice.

Our waitress stopped by. "One more at your table?"

"No," I said louder than I'd intended.

The waitress nodded and scurried away.

"I heard Bradford gave you the axe." Emily sneered at me.

"It's temporary," I said in response to Michael's bewildered look.

"Don't be so sure," she said. "There are lots of changes in the works at Bradford."

She was no doubt referring to her potential takeover of Pam's job. I pretended I didn't know anything about it.

"I'll leave you two alone. I'm sure you have lots to talk about." She turned to leave, then stopped. "Oh...Michael, if you ever come to your senses again, call me. You have my cell number. I'm all about giving people a second chance."

I watched her move to the take-out counter, pay for her order, and leave. I said to Michael, "How on earth did she know we were here?"

He shrugged. "Just a coincidence. She certainly can't take no for an answer, can she?" He reached for his glass of wine and took a few gulps.

I did the same. "She's jealous of our friendship. Don't ask why we're in so much trouble with Moreau."

He leaned forward. "I owe you an explanation."

"Me? For what?"

"For the way Emily acted just now."

"That's easy. She's obsessed with you and she hates my guts."

"She did leave me messages. I didn't call her back. It was rude not to, but I had more important things to do."

"Of course you did," I said. "Your second novel, the story leads you were following—"

"That's not what I meant." His voice was soft. His eyes rested on mine and

brought back the butterflies. I didn't know how to respond.

The waitress arrived and set our plates on the table. "We prepared this dish according to Luigi's special instructions. The pasta is made fresh daily right here in our own kitchen—not from a package." She sounded as if she'd been rehearsing for a TV commercial. "Enjoy your meal."

Her intrusion was well timed. It took the pressure off a conversation that was unsettling. I dug into my chicken pasta salad and changed the topic.

While we ate, I had the sensation of being watched. Had Emily returned for another round of mudslinging? A glance around the restaurant told me she hadn't.

Drawing on logic, I reasoned that it was an illusion brought on by the stress of recent events. I was also worried about not having a regular paycheck, let alone not having access to Tom's insurance money until the legalities were sorted out.

I could try to get new clients, but the publicity about the murders might make them think twice about dealing with me. Add Moreau's suspicions about Michael and me, the fact we couldn't prove our alibis, and...

Well, the situation would drive anyone nuts.

As hard as I tried, I still couldn't shake off the feeling minutes later. "Michael, this is going to sound weird, but I feel as if someone is watching me."

"You're right," he said. "I think the people at the table behind you are talking about you."

I turned around. Five senior patrons seated at a nearby table proved my faculties were intact, though not accurate, when a woman in the group waved at me. I recognized her as one of my mother's friends and waved back.

She stood up and walked over. Blue eyes sparkled beneath a puff of white bangs as she smiled at me. "You're Megan, aren't you, dear? Connie's daughter?"

"Yes, I am," I said.

"I'm Alice. Your mother's friend. We go to bingo every Wednesday at the Seniors Club. Do you remember me, dear?"

"Yes. I met you at my mother's apartment once."



Her smile faded as her expression grew somber. “I was shocked to read about your husband in the paper this morning. I called your mother to confirm it was her son-in-law. I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you.”

“When I saw you here, I told my friends about you. Anyway, dear, they send along their condolences too.” She tilted her head in their direction.

Behind me, two women and two men waved at me. I waved back.

“We wanted to tell you that you’re in our daily prayers,” Alice said. “We hope the police catch whoever did this.”

“I’m counting on it,” I said.

“Take care, dear.” She stole a glance at Michael before joining her friends.

“The fact she called my mother to check out the story gives me the creeps,” I whispered to Michael.

“Why? She came over to talk to you. It’s a good sign.”

“How?”

“It means you have public sympathy on your side.”

“And that could help our defense?” I kept my voice low.

“It can’t hurt.” He leaned forward. “Why are we whispering?”

“I don’t want anyone to hear what we’re talking about, so can you please keep your voice down?”

“Sure.” His eyes darted past me again. “Don’t look now, but your fan club is leaving.”

I turned around anyway. Alice was leading her friends out the front door. With their departure, I relaxed somewhat.

But after coffee was served, the feeling of being watched lingered on. This time I acknowledged it as a materialization of my guilty feelings about Tom’s death.

I made a mental note to contact Dr. Madison, my shrink, after the murder investigation blew over. I’d visited her in the spring to find out if stress had been a factor in my inability to conceive. She had determined I was obsessing about it too much—the same conclusion my family doctor had drawn.

Small wonder.



After lunch, Michael and I said our goodbyes, and I strolled toward the subway. The idea of fending off reporters discouraged me from going back home.

What was the rush anyway? I had no deadlines to meet or bosses to answer to. I was free to do as I pleased. I'd go shopping—albeit, window-shopping.

The sidewalks along Saint Catherine Street stirred with camera-toting tourists as diverse in multicultural backgrounds as the city's cosmopolitan makeup. The French aspect of Montreal, along with the vast choices of stores, restaurants, nightlife, international sports and art events, were the reasons this welcoming City of Festivals drew millions of tourists every year.

I continued my trek. The towering skyline, the upbeat pulse of the city core—I took it all in as a first-time sightseer would. I'd have remained above ground, but the humidity was beginning to wear me down again.

The Christ Church Cathedral loomed ahead. Its imposing neo-Gothic architecture was a contrast to the glass veneer of surrounding office towers. Under this historic site—Les Promenades Cathédrale—a modern shopping complex and the ideal place to escape from the muggy heat. The fact the mall was located under a sacred structure suddenly appealed to me. I felt safe.

Inside the mall, I gravitated to the end-of-season sales, hoping to find a bargain among the racks of stylish clothes. Despite the fact I was on a tight budget, I tried on shoes, skirts, tops, and pants, but nothing fit right.

My luck changed when I visited the Linen Chest. I found a set of Egyptian cotton sheets on sale. Though the cost was beyond what I'd usually paid for sheets, the set had an 800-thread count. It took me all of two seconds before I pulled out my credit card. If I had to sleep alone from now on, it might as well be in luxury.

Since I'd tasted the thrill of a successful purchase, I was tempted to extend my shopping spree to other stores in the Underground Pedestrian Network where mega opportunities for bargains awaited.

I'd just bought a tiny packet of chocolate-covered almonds when I thought of Michael. What if he had news and was trying to reach me?

How could anyone reach me? My cell phone was dead, but I refused to charge it in public places for security reasons.

Overwhelming dread suddenly washed over me. I needed to get out of the underground mall. I needed to head back home. There would be other days and other ways to spend money.

Or Tom's money?

Who was I kidding? It could be weeks, even months, before the legalities were sorted out and I'd have access to Tom's bank accounts and the proceeds from his insurance policy.

When I surfaced at the street level, the humidity hit me harder than before. So much for spending time in a cool underground mall.

But something else had returned—the same eerie feeling I'd had earlier: Someone was watching me.

I went into a cold sweat. I dug into my purse for my sunglasses and put them on. The dark amber shades offered a sense of security, but I couldn't shake off the sensation I was being watched.

I stood in front of a store window and pretended to look at the clothes display while I studied the reflection of people passing behind me. A man in a suit. A young woman holding a child by the hand. That McGill University was located close by explained the stream of students wearing the institution's trademark T-shirts or sporting a knapsack with the McGill insignia on it. More suits went by. More knapsacks. Nothing out of the ordinary.

There was only one reason for my frame of mind: I was on the verge of paranoia. I headed for the nearest subway station.

While I was waiting for a pedestrian traffic light to change to green, a young man in a red T-shirt, baggy shorts, and a backpack walked up to my right. The volume on his iPod was so loud that I could hear the music blasting from it. I glanced up at him and wondered what percentage of his hearing he'd lost up to now.

He smiled at me, and I turned away. It was clear he'd mistaken me for a much younger woman.

More people gathered behind me, bringing new smells to offset the ones

emanating from the street traffic. A man's spicy after-shave. A flowery perfume. Strong coffee.

A powerful push propelled me off my feet!

I plunged forward and hit the pavement.

Brakes screeched. Dust hit my face and filled my lungs.

A firm grip on my arm yanked me up.

I regained my balance, then looked up into the terrified eyes of the iPod guy.

"Are you okay?" he asked, releasing his hold on me.

"I...I think so." I got my bearings.

Crowds of people were crossing the intersection from both sides of the street. Aside from my rescuer, any witnesses of my near-fatal experience had moved on.

"Thanks for pulling me out of there. You saved my life." I gestured toward the street and winced as a sharp pain ran along my left shoulder. There was a bloody gash on my upper arm.

"Ah, it was nothing." He blushed and tugged on his T-shirt. White letters spelled out McGill University.

"Did you see who pushed me?" I asked.

"Huh? I thought you slipped or something." He glanced down at the curb. "Hey!" He bent over to retrieve my sunglasses and handed them to me. "Are these yours?"

"Yes. Thanks." I dropped them into the shopping bag I was still clutching, then adjusted my purse over my right shoulder. "I'd like to reward you. Can you give me your phone number?"

He stepped back, waved his hands. "It's no big deal, lady. Gotta go. Late for class." He hurried across the street.

I'd scared him off.

Why would he give a stranger—an older woman at that—his phone number? I attributed it to a "Mrs. Robinson" moment of sorts and put my sunglasses back on.



I entered my apartment, debating whether or not I was losing my mind. Had I slipped off the sidewalk because of my own carelessness as the iPod guy had believed, or had someone pushed me into the traffic on purpose?

I'd heard of similar "accidents" occurring in *Le Metro*. Whether a pedestrian had been pushed or had jumped in front of a speeding train of their own free will, the result was always the same: It had happened so fast that no one had seen anything. Subway authorities would evacuate the station and shut down the system along that segment of the line while the police investigated the incident and maintenance crews cleaned up the mess. Commuters who knew better stood along the back of the platform to avoid being pushed in front of a train as it sped into the station.

The outcome of my experience paled in comparison, thanks to the iPod guy's swift reaction. I weighed the possibility he might have shoved me into the street but dismissed it. It would have proved too tricky to maneuver a push from where he was standing beside me. I was convinced the thrust had come from behind.

I stepped into the shower and let the water from the jet stream massage my aching shoulder and bruised arm—confirmation of my flying leap off the curb. I switched the shower setting to a pulsating spray and slowly turned around. The stream hit the middle of my back, and I sensed a soreness there that I hadn't noticed before.

I needed no additional proof. Someone had shoved me from behind. And hard at that.

I reached for the cranberry soap on the ledge. Its aroma reminded me of Christmas when I was a kid. My parents would spend hours preparing veal cutlets, stuffed squid, breaded smelts, and lasagna for a dozen guests. For dessert, we had homemade Tiramisu, biscotti, cappuccino, Irish Whiskey Pie, and Irish coffee. The last two items were served to please my father's side of the family, my mother would say. Yet it was no secret how much my Irish relatives anticipated a taste of Little Italy every Christmas dinner. The celebration extended into the late night hours as music played and Uncle Joe recounted humorous tales we never grew tired of hearing.

That same warm, fuzzy sense of belonging and security surged back now,

providing a respite from the craziness that had pursued me since the weekend. I smiled at the memory of those family occasions that had formed an intrinsic part of my upbringing. Family values, as my mother would say.

The feel-good mood lingered as I stepped out of the shower and put on a thick terry robe and slippers. Mmm...what could possibly relax me more?

Chocolate almonds, of course. I was about to dig into my purse for the tiny supply I'd bought downtown when I remembered the larger package of almonds Michael had purchased earlier. I'd left it on the living room table.

I dashed over there, tore open the package, and chewed a couple of plump almonds. Then I prepared a cup of warm milk—the perfect soother for frayed nerves.

Now relaxed, I called Michael and told him about the incident in town.

It was a big mistake.

The panic in his voice canceled my efforts at staying calm. “What? Why didn't you call me sooner?”

I wiped my sweaty palms along my terry robe and tried to keep my voice steady. “I'm fine. Just several scratches.”

“Killing Tom wasn't enough,” he said. “Now the killer wants you out of the way too.”

I opted for another theory. “Maybe it was a random thing—like some psycho shoving a person in front of a moving vehicle. It does happen, you know.”

“My gut tells me otherwise.”

I was afraid of that.

He let out a deep breath. “It's too dangerous for you to step outdoors alone.”

“For heaven's sake, Michael! Do you expect me to live in a cage the rest of my life?”

“No, but—”

“I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself, you know.”

“Really? Is that why people keep dropping dead all around you? Is that why someone shoved you into the traffic?”

There was a long, uncomfortable pause.

“I'm sorry,” he said. “I was out of line. It's just that I—”

“Don’t say it.”

“Say what?”

“That you’re worried about me.”

More silence.

“Did you call the police?” Michael asked me.

“The police?” I echoed. “What for?”

“To ask for protection.”

“Why bother?”

“It’s your right.”

“Fat chance! Moreau would say I was turning myself into a victim to avoid being labeled a murder suspect.”

“Your attacker could have followed you from Santino’s. Damn it! I shouldn’t have asked you to meet me there.”

“Listen to me, Michael. I made that decision. Now I have to live with it.”

“I should have driven you back home, made sure you were—”

“I already told you. I don’t need a babysitter.”

“You need to understand something. Until the cops find this guy, you’re a sitting target.”

He was right. Working as a ghostwriter had given me anonymity and a sense of security I’d taken for granted. Now the double murders and the ensuing publicity they’d generated had exposed me, if not my attempts at clearing my name.

“As bad as it might seem,” I said, “there’s a positive side to what happened.”

“Yeah? Like what?”

“I flushed out Tom’s murderer.”

“And you almost got killed in the process.”

“Don’t you see, Michael? It doesn’t matter where I go.”

“What are you saying?”

“Nothing’s going to change the fact that someone wants me out of the way, and I don’t know who or why.”

I opened my door to Michael at eight o'clock Wednesday morning. A white T-shirt showed off the deep tan he'd soaked up from jogging outdoors every day. Sunglasses and cargo shorts completed his casual look.

I'd slipped into a cotton T-shirt and a pair of shorts after listening to the weather forecast. It predicted a scorcher of a day.

"Are you ready to go?" Michael asked.

"Come in for a sec." I waved him in and closed the door behind him. "What if Dan or Moreau try to reach us? I don't want them to think we did something irresponsible like skip town."

He removed his sunglasses. "No problem. I called Dan last night and told him we were going to Sainte-Adèle this morning. I explained it might be the only chance I had to prove my alibi."

"*Our* alibi."

"Right." He stalled, fingered his sunglasses. "I told him about your stalker too."

"You didn't."

"He's your lawyer. He should know these things."

"That's not what I meant. I'd have called him myself, but I wasn't in the mood to discuss it last night. It gave me the creeps just thinking about what happened yesterday."

I was too embarrassed to tell Michael that I'd slept with the lights on all



night, that I'd cradled a kitchen chair under the front door handle as an extra safeguard, and that I'd slept with a carving knife under my pillow—all for the sake of keeping my sanity intact.

“I asked Dan why he thought Moreau released the story to the media yesterday,” Michael said.

“What did he say?”

“It's possible that Moreau consulted a shrink for a professional opinion. The shrink might have suggested that Tom and Pam hadn't taken the cyanide voluntarily, that they'd tried to save themselves. So Moreau labeled their deaths as murders and fed the story to the media.”

I groaned in frustration. “Why ask a shrink? Anyone could have reached the same conclusion by analyzing the scene in the cottage. Tom and Pam were crawling toward the door, for heaven's sake!”

“For a cop, there's no better backing than an expert's statement, whether it's right or wrong.” Michael paused. “I haven't told you the real reason I wanted to go to Sainte-Adèle.”

My curiosity rose. “So tell me.”

“On one condition.”

“What?”

“The information I share with you will fall under our ongoing confidentiality agreement—if you promise to help me with my next book.”

“But my connection to Bradford is severed,” I said. “I don't know when they'll give me work again.”

“Who said anything about Bradford?”

“Oh... In that case, okay. I promise.”

“I have a lead,” Michael confided. “It's about an illegal drug ring in the Laurentians. That's the other reason I wanted to catch up with the old guy at the gas station.”

“What do you mean?”

“He's my informant. His name is Willie.”

“Oh. And why are you asking me to go along again?”

“My French is bad but his English is worse. I need an interpreter. Someone I

can trust.”

“Okay.”

“There’s more,” Michael said. “Willie’s harmless. The scumbags who stop there for gas aren’t. What Willie overhears could have fatal consequences for him if his sources find out he’s an informant. I doubt the gang members have the place under surveillance, but if we showed up there as a couple, it wouldn’t invite as much suspicion. Are you okay to do this?”

I gave it some thought. I’d ghostwritten articles for former government officials who’d blown the whistle on high-level scandals and fraud. I’d worked on memoirs about child abuse. But no interviews had come close to Michael’s chilling encounters with street-wise informants who rarely showed their faces in the light of day.

“If there’s a chance you can prove your alibi, I’ll go with you.” I grabbed my purse. “About Willie, what if he told Jane he didn’t remember you because he didn’t want to blow his cover?”

“Exactly why I want to see him in person.”

I retrieved the house keys from my purse. “What if he took the videotape from the store and hid it to protect you, then lied to Jane about a glitch in the system?” I led Michael out the door and locked it behind us.

“Right again,” he said. “Let’s go find out.”

We took the elevator down and walked out the rear exit of the building into the parking lot. Sated by Moreau’s recent handout, the media had abandoned their surveillance of the premises and were nowhere in sight.

Regardless, I didn’t let my guard down because a more challenging presence could surface at any moment: the killer. I scanned the lot. Except for an older couple getting into their car, no one else was around.

Michael’s cell phone rang. He took the call. “Oh... Hi, Jane... Tonight? No, I can’t. I’m busy. I don’t know. Okay. Bye.” He hung up and mumbled, “Some people never know when to quit.”

“Problem?” I asked.

“Nothing I can’t handle.”

The sun had already heated up Michael’s Mustang Coupe. Even after he’d

opened the doors to air out the car, the black leather seats remained hot to the touch.

He reached for a sports magazine in the back seat and handed it to me. I got the message and placed it under my bare thighs.

The northwestward itinerary from Montreal to the Laurentians followed Highways 15 and 117 for the most part, making the drive less complicated. The scenery was easy on the eyes too, what with miles of tall trees and wide open spaces dotted with farms and villages that time seemed to have forgotten. I was doing Michael a favor, but I actually looked forward to the drive to Sainte-Adèle. Anything to take my mind off Moreau and my money problems.

Michael turned on the radio. An old Bruce Springsteen tune came on. “I found this cool station in Montreal. It plays music from the 60s and 70s. Thanks to my father, I grew up listening to rock bands like Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd. I got hooked on the stuff.” He chuckled. “I listen to it whenever I’m writing. It inspires me.”

“My parents were low-key,” I said. “The Beatles, Bee Gees, Stevie Wonder —”

“I could change the station if you—”

“No, it’s okay. It covers the spectrum.”

Michael nodded, kept his eyes on the road ahead. “When I lived in Montreal, I’d come up to Sainte-Adèle in the winter with a bunch of guys. We did some skiing, checked out the restaurants and bars...the girls.” He smiled.

“Tom and I went there twice the first year we were married.”

“Really?” He glanced at me as if he were surprised I’d divulged a detail about my married life. Or maybe he was surprised I’d ever left the confines of Montreal—city girl that I was.

“It was in September,” I said. “We wanted to see the leaves change to their fall colors. All those reds, yellows, and oranges spread over the mountains. It takes your breath away.”

“Yes, but it hides the ugliness underneath.”

“What do you mean?”

“Word has it that a secret lab manufactures illegal drugs in the area. It’s over

and above other activities linked to criminal groups working there.”

“It’s hard to imagine that kind of thing going on here. It’s so scenic and touristy.”

“All the better,” Michael said. “Who would expect it, right?”

I took a guess. “Willie?”

“You bet. The drug dealers brag about their exploits in front of him. The guy’s practically invisible to them.”

“How’s that?”

“They think he’s too scared to talk. In fact, Willie said he had something important to tell me about a drug dealer in this area. That’s why it’s critical I see him today.”

“I read a newspaper article about a recent drug arrest here. It had no byline. Did you write that piece?”

“Yes, and you can bet there’s a lot more information where that came from.”



We approached the outskirts of Sainte-Adèle, then took the next exit off the highway and drove five miles further to Saint-Gustave.

Typical of small towns located in the Québec countryside, it had century-old homes with cone-shaped roofs, a church with a silver spire, a bank, a school, and a Ma and Pa store with hand-written signs displayed in the window. Many of the houses had narrow porches painted white. The vinyl siding was blue, pink, or red. The structures were built close to one another, as if to denote a community spirit based on sharing and support.

The main street of Saint-Gustave spanned three miles and came to an abrupt end at a patch of grass at the edge of the town limits. If I hadn’t turned my head to the right, I’d have missed the gas station and adjoining *dépanneur*, or convenience store.

Michael veered into the parking area and turned off the engine. He dug out his camera from the glove compartment. After he’d taken two photos of the premises, we went inside.

A young man in a striped shirt stood behind the counter, flipping through a newspaper. He looked up at us as we approached. "*Puis-je vous aider?*"

"*Oui, bonjour,*" Michael said, then nudged me with a side-glance.

"*Bonjour,*" I said, then asked the clerk about the old gentleman who worked here last week. "*Il s'appelle Willie.*"

The clerk hesitated. "*Willie ne travaille plus ici.*"

"He said Willie doesn't work here any more," I said, translating for Michael.

"Ask him where he lives," Michael said.

"I cannot tell this," the clerk said, making it clear he understood English.

"Please," Michael said. "We need to talk to him. It's important. Life and death."

The clerk hesitated, as if he were debating whether he should trust us or not. "Fire last night. Willie house burn."

"Is Willie okay?" Michael asked.

The clerk shrugged. "I do not know."

"Where's Willie's house?"

Another shrug.

Michael took out a twenty-dollar bill, slapped it on the counter.

The clerk snatched it. "Two miles that way." He gestured in the opposite direction from town.

As we got back in the car, Michael said to me, "I don't have a good feeling about this."



Michael turned onto the asphalt driveway of a house that had been ravaged by fire. He couldn't drive all the way up because debris blocked the path. We sat in silence, gaping at the charred remains.

A large section of the shingled roof on the two-story mid-century home had caved in. The rest was covered with soot. Flames had engulfed the house and made short work of the exterior frame and insulation. There was nothing left to salvage but memories. The fire had extended to a cluster of trees behind the

house, though it was apparent that firefighters had extinguished it before it did more damage.

I shifted my view to the right. An adjacent bungalow more than a hundred feet away hadn't suffered any damage except for spots of soot. Judging from the vinyl siding, the trim around the windows, and the interlocking stone driveway, the split-level home had been built in the last decade.

Two women stood chatting in front of the house and gawked in our direction.

"I'll go and ask them if the house is Willie's," I said to Michael.

I stepped out. The scent of burnt wood hit me, as well as another odor—burnt plastic. As I walked across the lawn toward the women, I tried to avoid the charred fragments and soot on the ground but couldn't. I realized too late I'd have to trash my running shoes.

The women interrupted their talk and gawked at me.

"*Bonjour*," I greeted them.

"*Bonjour*." The woman wearing a pair of oversized sunglasses smiled at me.

"*Savez-vous qui demeurait ici?*" I asked if they knew who lived here.

"*William Perron*," the other woman said, her straw hat shading a face that had already had too many years of exposure to the sun. "*La cigarette, c'est toujours un problème.*" She motioned with her fingers, pretending to take a puff on a cigarette. "*Pauvre Willie.*"

I asked them if Willie was dead.

Both women said they didn't know. The fire had occurred late last night and it had been difficult to see what was happening. However, they did notice that forensics officers transported something on a gurney from the house to a truck.

I asked them if Willie had lived alone.

They said yes, but his son visited often.

I asked if Willie had owned a dog or other pet.

They said no.

I thanked them and got back in the car.

"So much for my witness," Michael said after I'd briefed him.

"We don't know for sure that it was Willie's body," I said. "It could have been someone else."

“Could be, but if Willie’s not dead, he’s in hiding. He won’t surface until things cool down. Either way, I’m back to square one. No alibi. No videotape. No lead for my story.” He checked to see if the road behind us was clear, then backed up and drove away.

“Willie was a smoker,” I said. “Maybe the fire was an accident.”

“Not a chance. It’s too much of a coincidence.”

“You think someone found out Willie was your informant and killed him—or tried to?”

“It’s possible.”

“What if they come after you next?” The idea made my stomach churn.

“Give it time. I haven’t published anything that terrible about them yet.” He grinned.

“How reassuring,” I said, tongue-in-cheek. “As if you don’t have enough to worry about.”

“Look who’s talking? I’m not the one being stalked.”

“*Touché.*”

Michael surveyed the road ahead. “We’re going to hit the highway back home soon. We should stop to get something to eat first. Are you hungry?”

Spending too much time riding around in a car made me queasy, but I didn’t want to complain. I’d agreed to come along, so this was my karma. “Not really, but we can stop if you want to.”

“How about that diner up ahead?”

“Okay.”

We entered a 1940s diner painted silver with orange trim around the windows. Food would have added to my queasiness, so I opted for a ginger ale instead. Michael paid cash for our orders, slipped the receipt in his pocket, and carried the tray to a booth by the window.

With amusement outweighing repulsion, I watched as he folded down the paper around his thick hamburger and took a bite. It didn’t matter how dire the circumstances, one thing about him remained predictable: his appetite.



I was glad when Michael accepted my invitation to come upstairs on our return from Sainte-Adèle. I couldn't bear waiting alone for news from Dan.

Half an hour later, a knock sounded at my door. I peered through the peephole and was astonished to see Moreau looking back at me. Duchaine was at his side.

I opened the door. "Well, this is a surprise."

"*Bonjour*, Madame Scott," Moreau said. "Another tenant let us into the building," he added, as if he needed to explain why he hadn't buzzed me in advance. "May we come in?"

I didn't know what to say. He'd brought Duchaine along—not a favorable sign.

If I didn't let him in, he'd suspect I had something to hide.

I heard myself say yes before I realized what was happening.



The detective did nothing to hide his curiosity when he saw Michael sitting on my sofa. “Monsieur Elliott, how convenient that you are here once again.” He turned to me. “Madame Scott, we would like permission to search your home. May we?”

“I suppose so,” I said.

Michael had already reached for his cell phone. My guess was that he was calling Dan.

Duchaine snapped on thin latex gloves. A word from Moreau sent him down the hall to begin his search. What was he expecting to find?

I later learned that he’d inspected the bathroom cabinets, kitchen cupboards, bookshelves, laundry basket, and ice cube containers. He’d even emptied the paper clip dispenser on my desk.

In the meantime, Moreau stood in the hallway and in plain view of the living room where Michael and I sat next to each other on the sofa. The detective’s command post by the door drew my interest. Was he worried that we might bolt?

“Dan’s coming over,” Michael whispered to me.

“You didn’t have to call him,” I whispered back. “They won’t find anything incriminating here.”

“It’s for your protection.”

“You seem to be doing a lot of that lately.”

“What?”

“Looking out for me.”

“Somebody has to.”

I read more than friendship in his eyes and broke our gaze.

Moreau left his post and sat down on the other sofa. Maybe he was reassured we wouldn't make a run for it. Without so much as a glance in our direction, he opened his notebook and slowly flipped through the pages.

For lack of anything better to do—and perhaps because my respect for the man was dwindling with each successive encounter—I assessed him with a critical eye.

His tweed jacket—the same one he wore the first time we met—would be outlawed in any corporate boardroom, today or even ten years back. Ditto for those flashy ties, no doubt inherited from a retired circus clown. His bowed head revealed twenty-six strands of mousy-brown hair flipped over from right to left, edging their way down his forehead. Once in a while, he'd set these strands back in place with a pass of the hand, then pat them down onto an egg-shaped dome that nature had deserted years ago.

The old green couch in my grandmother's living room came to mind. As kids, my cousin and I would pull out loose fibers from the back of the couch when no one was watching. We made a game out of it. By the time our mothers appeared from the kitchen to say the visit was over, whoever had the bigger ball of “yarn” was the winner. Sadly, Grandma got rid of the couch before we could finish it off.

The doorbell rang.

I made a move to get up, but the detective was already on his feet. He pressed the buzzer, then opened the door and remained at his former post. I got the impression I was a prisoner in my own home.

Dan breezed through the open door. “Detective.” He gave Moreau a polite nod and hurried up to Michael and me. “I left as soon as I could. Why did you let them in? They didn't have a search warrant.” He yanked out a hankie from his suit and mopped his brow, then sat down across from us.

“I let them in because I have nothing to hide,” I said, loud enough for Moreau to hear. “If they want to waste their time—”

“Lieutenant.” Duchaine appeared with an evidence bag in hand. He conferred with Moreau in muted tones, but it was obvious from the detective’s raised eyebrows that Duchaine had located an item of significance.

Holding a transparent bag containing a slip of white paper, Moreau hastened toward us. “Madame Scott, can you explain how you came to have this item in your possession?” He flipped the bag around so I could see its contents.

It was the photo of Pam and Tom sitting outdoors at Pueblo’s and the envelope it had arrived in with the fake Sunny Watering Hole return address. I’d tucked it in the top drawer of my dresser beneath my underwear and planned to show it to Tom when he returned from his trip. But as often happens when life gets hectic, I’d forgotten all about it.

Moreau was waiting for me to answer.

“One of Tom’s friends sent me the photo as a joke,” I said.

“A joke?” the detective repeated.

My explanation sounded out of place in the aftermath of the murders. I tried to clarify it. “Tom and his friends used to play tricks on one another. I assumed one of them sent me this photo to get back at Tom for a birthday joke he’d played on him. I meant to show it to Tom, but I forgot about it.”

“What is the name of the person who sent it?”

“I don’t know, but the envelope has a fake return address. That was part of the joke too.”

Dan stood up. “May I see it?”

The detective handed him the plastic bag, then said to me, “It appears as though someone took this photo through the window of a car. Correct, Madame Scott?”

I wasn’t going to fall for his trap. He expected me to admit I’d taken the picture. “I wouldn’t know.”

“Detective, anyone could have taken this picture,” Dan said.

Moreau squinted, as if he were trying to come up with another question, one I might trip over in my haste to answer. “Madame Scott, can you tell me the names of the people your husband socialized with.”

I mentioned Peter, Greg, and other BOTCOR marketing staff I’d met at

company events. “He socialized with clients too, but I don’t know their names.”

Moreau nodded. “*Très bien*. Very well.”

The topic died on his lips, but his expression revealed a lot more. Like contempt. Or was it pity? Was he speculating—as I was now—whether Tom had used his meetings with clients as an excuse to see Pam?

Dan pursued his argument about the photo. “No purpose in exploiting this photo,” he said, handing it back to the detective. “It can be construed as circumstantial evidence.”

“It is the envelope that interests me more, Monsieur Cummings.”

Duchaine reappeared in the hallway. “Lieutenant, I found this.” He held a white garbage bag in a gloved hand.

I stared at him, questioning what he’d found so captivating about the garbage bag I kept under the sink.

Moreau went up to him and peered inside the bag. “Remove the item, please.”

Duchaine pulled out a white shirt. It had a red stain on the collar.

“Can you explain this, Madame Scott?” Moreau pointed to the shirt.

From where I was sitting, it looked like tomato sauce or blood. I walked over to examine it closer. It was lipstick...a familiar shade of red lipstick...Pam’s.

“It’s Tom’s shirt,” I said, not offering any additional details.

Moreau turned to Duchaine. “Where did you find it?”

“Behind the dryer in the laundry room,” he said.

Moreau raised an eyebrow.

“I don’t know how it got there,” I said to him.

“Perhaps you hid it there,” he said.

“I did no such thing.”

“Is it your lipstick on the shirt, Madame Scott?”

Dan cut in before I could answer. “Detective, you have no right to interrogate my client. Moreover, the shirt is hardly incriminating evidence regarding the murders.”

“I disagree.” Moreau ordered Duchaine, “Process it for DNA.”

Police inspection of my apartment soon came to an end. Nothing else

surfaced that had the potential to incriminate me. Small wonder.

But Moreau wasn't done with us.

"We would like to search your hotel suite next, Monsieur Elliott," the detective announced.

Dan stepped in. "Michael, I must counsel you—"

"It's okay, Dan, let's get it over with." Michael stood up. "Be my guest," he said to Moreau. "You won't find anything."

The detectives waited by the front door with Dan and Michael while I poked around in my purse for the house keys. I didn't believe in trends when it came to purse size. I bought purses that could hold everything I needed them to hold. Because I put their size to good use, they were hard on the shoulder but so much more practical than those miniature purses that held nothing more than a lipstick and mirror. The disadvantage to a large purse was trying to find something at the bottom of it.

Moreau extended his hand. "Madame Scott, may I have your handbag, please?"

Had I misunderstood him? "Excuse me?"

He pointed to my purse. "Your handbag. May I have it, please?"

"Give it to him, Megan," Dan said.

"*Merci.*" The detective strode into the living room, holding my purse with both hands as if it contained loose eggs. He placed it on the coffee table and pulled on a pair of latex gloves.

I joined him, my curiosity changing to annoyance as he removed the items from my purse, one by one, as if he were mentally recording the contents. Out came my sunglasses, a hairbrush, an agenda, a wallet, two pens, a notepad, a tiny bag of chocolate almonds, a set of keys, a lipstick, two tampons, facial tissues, and a box of adhesive bandages—all lined up on the table like products displayed in a department store counter. I was mortified and didn't dare glance over my shoulder at the other three men.

When Moreau opened the box of bandages, I found an outlet for my gripe. "You won't find any incriminating evidence in there, Detective. Paper cuts happen a lot in my line of work but not murder."

Michael chuckled.

The detective ignored my sarcasm. He hung onto my agenda, put everything else back into my purse, one by one, and handed it to me. “Thank you. I will keep your agenda for now, if you do not mind.”

Did I have a choice?

“Suit yourself,” I said. If he wanted to labor through minutiae like meeting times, project deadlines, doctor appointments, and other mundane notations I’d inscribed, why should I care? It was his loss of time, not mine.

Then I remembered another entry in my agenda: the Pineview address and notes I’d scribbled from memory after Louise’s initial call. I hadn’t scratched them out, nor had I entered new details to indicate Tom was going to Granite Ridge instead. It seemed useless at the time.

A cold sweat rolled over me. The detective might get a false impression from my notes about Pineview. A gut feeling told me he wouldn’t hesitate to pounce on them. He’d try to use them as evidence against me.

I prayed my slip-up would go unnoticed.



Our entourage rode in an unmarked car to the Elegance Hotel and to what I expected would be a pointless search of Michael’s suite. I was eager to see the look of frustration on Moreau’s face when his efforts turned up empty. His ludicrous charade against us would come to an end—once and for all.

People stared as we crossed the lobby of the Elegance. I wasn’t surprised, what with four men accompanying me—two of them with police badges around their necks. One of the desk clerks greeted Michael by name and nodded at me as we whisked by. I figured he’d recognized me from previous visits.

Upstairs in Michael’s suite, Dan sat in one of the magenta armchairs and studied his notes. Michael and I shared the royal blue sofa near the entrance and within Moreau’s line of sight. Breaking from his earlier decision to stand guard by the door, the detective settled on the matching purple sofa along the opposite wall while Duchaine searched the premises.

Moreau leafed through the pages of my agenda at a slow pace. He'd occasionally stop and frown in an attempt to decipher scribbles or abbreviations I used in my line of work. Sooner or later he'd relent and ask me to come over and explain a notation.

At one point, he asked me to elaborate on CMYK, an abbreviation I'd entered on the July 12. I'd begun to write out the abbreviation in full during one of my anal-retentive moments but stopped after the first word: cyan.

"Cyan is a term used in the printing business," I told him. "I wrote the note in case a co-worker asked me about a specific color correction later."

"It sounds to me like an abbreviation for cyanide." He peered at me.

Dan was at my side in two strides. He glanced at the abbreviation. "An unfair assumption, Detective. The abbreviation CMYK is widely used in the printing business."

"I am merely pointing out the obvious, Monsieur Cummings."

Duchaine had been rummaging through the front closet and now called out, "Lieutenant, I found something."

Moreau set aside my agenda and scurried over.

Dan took off right behind him.

Michael bounded up from the sofa and joined them.

I rushed over, fear rising inside me.

Duchaine was clutching Michael's leather jacket in a gloved hand. In the other gloved hand, he held out a small plastic container. It had a white label affixed to it.

At first I thought it was a bottle of pills, but as I approached, the bold black letters on the label told a different and more ominous story: CYANIDE.

I watched in horror as shock and confusion flashed across Michael's face.

"Is this your jacket, Monsieur Elliott?" Moreau asked, pulling on a pair of latex gloves.

"Yes." Michael stared at me in astonishment. In the next instant, his surprise changed to something else—suspicion.

Did he think I'd planted the cyanide in his jacket?

Unable to move or speak, I remained rooted where I was standing. A barrage

of questions pounded my brain as I tried to make sense of this recent discovery.

Dan's forehead puckered. "Michael, don't say another word. You neither, Megan."

Moreau addressed Duchaine. "Hand me the jacket, please. Place the container in a bag for analysis—gently."

Duchaine pulled out an evidence bag, placed the container in it, and sealed the edge shut.

"Bag the jacket as evidence too," the detective said, handing it back to Duchaine. He turned to Michael and me and read us our rights. "You will come to the police station for questioning. Monsieur Cummings, you are invited to come along."

"Do I continue the search, Lieutenant?" Duchaine asked him.

"Yes. Who knows what else we may find. But first, call two cruisers for transport."



I didn't have a moment to think.

Everything moved so fast after Duchaine discovered the cyanide. Word of the police presence at the Elegance Hotel must have leaked out to the media because reporters and photographers were waiting outside.

With a population of almost four million, Greater Montreal had its fair share of crime, but the chance to interview suspects in a double murder—and one linked to cyanide—was a rare occurrence anywhere. The event was guaranteed to garner media interest, if not a bonus payout, for any leads to the story.

I considered whether one of the desk clerks had called the press—probably the same one who'd said hello to Michael earlier. He might have recognized me and made the link to my photo in the newspaper article about the murders. It would explain how the reporters happened to be in the right place at the right time.

As police officers led us out of the hotel, I wished I'd put on my sunglasses beforehand. It was media frenzy out there. A fringe of bystanders had joined in to see what the commotion was all about, adding to the buzz.

The surge of microphones and cameras gravitating toward us prevented us from advancing more than a few steps at a time toward two police cruisers parked in front. Michael and I followed Dan's advice and didn't say a word in response to reporters' questions. Dan uttered a final "no comment" before he edged his way out and hailed a taxi.

All of a sudden, Duchaine stood like a wall in front of us, his head above the crowd. Reminiscent of Moses parting the waters, he cleared a path for us through the crowd. A stocky officer with a micro haircut guided me into the back seat of a cruiser. Michael, Moreau, and a second officer drove off ahead of us in the other one.

The cruiser made its way down Parthenais Street and into the underground parking of the QPP headquarters—the same building that housed the morgue where I’d last seen Tom. How ironic that I’d return here days later as a suspect in his murder.

The officer escorted me out of the car and into the elevator. On the ride up, I recalled the confused look on Michael’s face when Duchaine had dug the cyanide out of his leather jacket. What horrific thoughts had gone through his mind at that moment? Probably the same mixed messages that had flashed through mine.

The thick soles coating the officer’s shoes squeaked as we moved along a corridor and past an open area where the investigators’ desks were stationed. The scent of spilled coffee on a burner and a concoction of take-out food hung in the air.

A wave of nausea hit me. A definite case of the jitters. I swallowed hard.

My gaze wandered around the open area. There was no sign of Michael, Dan, or Moreau. On my right, three doors were closed. I figured the men were sitting in one of those rooms.

The officer opened the door to Interrogation Room 1 and ushered me in. “Have a seat. Detective Moreau will be in soon.” He shut the door behind me.

A musty smell permeated the air. The room held a wooden table with too many scratches to count and four equally bruised chairs. I pulled out a chair and sat down. Across from me, cut into a wall that begged for a paint job, was a two-way mirror. Was someone peering back at me, observing me, anticipating that somehow I’d betray my guilt? To say that I’d ever felt as isolated and exposed would be an understatement.

I shook off the feeling and swung my attention to the only other object in the room—an oversized clock hanging on the wall to my right. Its thin red hand

ticked away the seconds. One. By. One. Each passing moment reinforced the likelihood that I might be spending my thirty-first birthday—and decades more—in jail.

I closed my eyes and tried to block out my surroundings, but I couldn't stop the awful scenes from playing over and over in my mind:

The police finding the cyanide in Michael's hotel suite.

The stunned expression on Michael's face.

The humiliation of walking out of the hotel under police escort, cameras zooming in on me, microphones shoved in my face.

More humiliation as I got into the back seat of the police cruiser, photographers aiming their lenses at me through the windows.

I shuddered. Nothing made sense anymore. My non-threatening lifestyle had transformed itself into a roller-coaster ride with each pinnacle of chaos outdoing the last. How I'd managed to get into this predicament was beyond my most terrifying nightmare. Gone was my livelihood. Gone were my dreams of owning a home and having a baby. Gone was my freedom.

Confusion and anger swelled inside me.

I wanted to scream.

I wanted to cry.

But I held my own.

Ten minutes had gone by—although I'd have sworn it was an hour—when a female officer popped in. She couldn't have been older than twenty-one, but a thick gun belt and dark brown hair pulled back in a stubby ponytail added an austerity to her uniform and five years to her age. She asked if I'd like a cup of coffee.

I said yes. She nodded and left. I was relieved that someone had remembered I was in the room, though the notion that another officer might be watching me from the other side of the mirror could refute that fact.

My hands were cold. I tucked them under my thighs to warm them up. I was still wearing shorts. Damn! I should have changed into pants before leaving the condo.

But how could I have predicted the absurdity that awaited us at Michael's

hotel suite and that we'd be hauled to a police station afterward?

The female officer returned and placed a plastic cup of coffee on the table in front of me, along with two creamers, two packets of sugar, and a swizzle stick. She gave me a quick nod, then ducked out.

I took a sip. Full-bodied flavor. Not bad for a police station. On the other hand, if one had to judge coffee, who better than the frequent patrons of doughnut shops to pick a premium blend?

My focus swung back to the grim circumstances surrounding my dilemma. On a whim, I entertained denial of what had happened. I envisioned Dan rushing in to say the police had made a terrible mistake, and I was free to go home.

But I was no fool. Storybook endings don't happen in the real world. Common sense dictated that Dan and Michael were battling it out with the detective in another room, which would explain why Dan hadn't come in to see me so far.

I sipped more coffee. I wrapped my hands around the cup and felt the warmth penetrate my cold fingers. I tried to relax. I was innocent. I had nothing to fear. The discovery of cyanide in Michael's hotel room was preposterous. He was a crime reporter, a champion of justice and truth. He couldn't possibly have had anything to do with the murders—

The door flew open and Dan rushed in. His face was flushed and beads of sweat dripped down his forehead. If I didn't know otherwise, I'd have assumed he'd run all the way to the station behind our police cruisers.

"How are you doing, Megan?" He set his leather briefcase down. He yanked out a hankie from his suit and patted his forehead, but no amount of wiping could have erased the anxiety etched into his face. Same case of nerves as me but different climate zones.

"Tell me this is a nightmare and I'll be waking up soon," I said.

Dan tucked his hankie away. "I wish I could, but the police are insinuating suspicion of murder here." He unbuttoned his jacket and maneuvered a chair so that he sat facing me.

His comment shattered whatever hope I had of getting through this minefield with my mental faculties intact. "Are you saying you can't defend me?"

He frowned. "I never said that."

I moved on. "How's Michael?"

"Shaken up. The detective is about to interrogate him in the next room."

"What's taking so long?"

"Duchaine hasn't completed his search at the Elegance. Moreau is waiting, in case he finds more evidence."

"More evidence? Doesn't he see that Michael is being framed?" I waved my hands in the air. "He's innocent. I'm innocent. Moreau is on a bloody witch-hunt!"

Dan's response was guarded. "Depends on how they interpret the discovery of the cyanide."

His response disturbed me. I had doubts about the way things were progressing—or weren't—but I didn't need to hear it from my lawyer. "So what's the next step?" I asked, placing the onus back on him.

"Jane is interviewing witnesses. We're not done."

"How long will Michael and I have to stay here?"

"I don't know."

I debated which was worse: spending time in jail with the most horrible offenders or evading an elusive assassin.

Elusive? Who was I kidding? "Michael told you how someone pushed me into the traffic yesterday, right?"

"Yes," Dan said. "Give me your version."

I briefed him on the incident.

"I'll tell the detective about your close call," Dan said. "Might make a difference."

"With no witnesses? Fat chance." I took it a step further. "The killer knows Michael is staying at the Elegance. He knows where I live. He can track us down no matter where we are. Sooner or later, he's going to succeed in having us convicted for the murders he committed—if he doesn't kill us first." Fear tightened my throat.

Dan must have caught the angst in my voice because he leaned forward and said, "Megan, I'll do whatever it takes to prove you and Michael are innocent."

His words had a determined edge to them, yet the worry lines across his forehead prevailed.

And that troubled me even more.

The door opened and the same female officer appeared. “Mr. Cummings, Detective Moreau is waiting for you in Interrogation Room 2.”

“Thank you.” Dan rose to his feet and picked up his briefcase. “Hang in there, Megan.” He rushed out of the room.

I reflected on Dan’s words, how the outcome of the police search depended on their interpretation of the cyanide in Michael’s suite. I tried to be objective about it.

To begin with, how many deaths by cyanide poisoning had been reported in the country this weekend? Not many, I estimated.

So what were the chances the cyanide found in Michael’s suite had nothing to do with the cyanide that had killed Tom and Pam? One in a hundred million, I’d say.

One thing was certain: If the cyanide was a deliberate drop, the murderer had to have access to Michael’s suite. It meant he either worked at the Elegance Hotel or knew someone who did.

I took my rationale a step further: Maybe the murderer had a motive to kill Tom and Pam but wanted to put the blame on Michael and me for some obscure reason. A double retribution, so to speak. Apart from that, nothing made sense.

Dan returned an hour later. Gloom hung about him like an albatross perched on the bow of a sinking ship.

I braced for the worst.

“**R**ound one is over,” Dan said. “The detective will interrogate you soon.” He unloaded his briefcase on the floor and took a seat on my left.

“Where’s Michael now?” I asked.

“In the interrogation room.” Out came the hankie. He patted his brow, then tucked it away.

“How did it go?”

“He has nothing on him so far.”

“So far?” I echoed. “That’s insane.”

“Megan, I have to caution you. Be careful how you respond to Moreau’s questions. You might inadvertently give him what he’s looking for.”

“I have nothing to hide. I’ll just tell him the truth.”

The door opened and Moreau darted in, a manila folder tucked under his arm. As he took a seat opposite us, the scent of cigarette smoke infused the air. He’d taken a few puffs before coming in. Without as much as a glance in my direction, he opened the folder and scanned the first page.

I was still bristling from the detective’s intrusive search of my purse. For this reason alone, I examined the man with a critical eye once again.

His shoulders arched as he leaned his elbows on the table, causing his neck to all but disappear within his shirt collar. If I had the nerve, I’d have peeked under the table to see if his feet were touching the floor. I’d have bet they

weren't. He passed a hand over his mustache. I'd come to understand that this habit coincided with a theory or a new plan of attack he was contemplating. Either way, it meant bad news for me. If there was anything pleasant about him, I couldn't see it. Maybe because I chose not to.

Moreau switched on the audio video recorder and inched forward to speak into the microphone. He recorded the date, the names of those present, and other mundane details regarding the interrogation. His French-Canadian accent made his words sound forced, almost hostile. When he was finished, he said to me, "Madame Scott, we did a search of your apartment and found a photo of your husband and Pam Strober among your possessions. You said you do not know who took this photo. Is that correct?"

"Yes," I said.

"For the record," the detective said to Dan, "we have found the return address on the envelope to be fictitious. We will verify the fingerprints on the envelope, but we require those of your clients for elimination purposes, as well as a buccal swab for DNA testing."

"Agreed," Dan said.

Moreau leafed through the file. "Madame Scott, I understand you met with a therapist last spring. Dr. Katherine Madison."

The nature of the question stunned me, but I answered it. "Yes, but only for a few sessions."

"*Naturellement*, what is discussed between a psychologist and her patient during these sessions is confidential. However, it leads me to believe you were feeling stress in your life—perhaps due to problems in your marriage. Is that correct, Madame Scott?"

Dan intervened. "My client's sessions with a therapist have no bearing on your investigation."

"I do not agree," the detective said. "The psychological disposition of your client is of critical importance."

Dan paused. "All right, Megan. Go ahead."

"We discussed stress as a reason for my inability to conceive," I said.

A glint appeared in Moreau's eyes. "And you blamed your husband's affair



with another woman for this?”

“Of course not. I didn’t know he’d had an affair until *you* told me.”

Moreau shifted in his chair. “Well...would you say you had a happy marriage?”

Dan intervened again. “Detective, I don’t see the connection.”

“As you know, Monsieur Cummings, deep emotions often breed a motive for murder. Hell hath no fury as a woman scorned, as they say.”

Oddly enough, I understood his logic. The fact that women killed their spouses had become so common as to be stereotypical. Betty Broderick was one publicized example of a woman who felt disgraced when her husband left her for a new wife. She shot and killed them both while they were sleeping. Clara Harris got into her Mercedes and ran over her cheating husband, killing him. Not that I drew any comparisons to these women, but I could see why Moreau would. Because he’d made no attempt to hide his suspicions, it told me he’d already decided I was guilty.

“Detective, are you charging my client with murder?” Dan’s face was flushed. “The last time I looked, this wasn’t a courtroom.”

“I will move on for now.” Moreau switched his gaze to me. “Were you aware of a booking at the Pineview resort the weekend of—” He glanced at the file. “August 10?”

“Yes, but—”

“How did you acquire this information?”

“Louise Kirk from Pineview called Tom at home,” I said. “He was out of town, so I took the message.”

“Did Louise Kirk give you any details about the booking?”

“Yes.”

“Please be specific.”

Although I sensed trouble behind Moreau’s question, I had no choice but to answer it. “She said it was registered under the name Scott. She gave me the date and the address, and said the rental was a cottage with a Jacuzzi.”

“Anything else?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Did you tell your husband about the call?”

“Yes.”

“What did he say?”

“He said his office staff had made a mistake. He wasn’t booked at Pineview.”

“Did you believe your husband?”

Dan cleared his throat. I waited for words of advice to come out of his mouth, but he remained silent. His attention was fixed on the detective, as if he were waiting for him to slip up on a fact or state an unfounded accusation.

“Go on, Madame Scott.”

“Tom told me he was going to Granite Ridge with Peter Ewans and other BOTCOR employees that weekend,” I said.

“Do you have proof?” Moreau’s eyes shone in anticipation.

I was prepared for this one. “After Tom’s death, I confronted Peter. He’d known about Tom’s affair with Pam but never told me. He said he would have lied about Tom going to Pineview if he had to. If Peter hadn’t covered for him, Tom would have fired him.”

The detective raised an eyebrow.

“If you don’t believe me, ask Peter,” I said. “He’ll corroborate our conversation. Tom can’t threaten to fire him anymore.”

Moreau passed a hand over his mustache, then turned to another report in the file. “We have evidence that you shared the information you received from Louise Kirk. We found a note in the hotel suite of Monsieur Michael Elliott. It contains details about Pineview cottage *numéro huit*.” His apparent fervor caused a French translation to slip through. “Number eight,” he corrected himself. “Monsieur Elliott has confirmed it is your handwriting on this note.” He held up a black-and-white photocopy to show me. “Is that correct?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Madame Scott, I am a curious man by nature. Can you tell me how Monsieur Elliott came to possess this information?”

It didn’t take a genius to figure out he’d already asked Michael the same question. How had Michael handled it? Had he told Moreau the truth, or had he tried to cover it up and said he knew nothing about it to protect himself?

I assumed the truth had won out. I resolved to do the same, despite the consequences. “I left it in Michael’s suite by accident when I delivered a manuscript to him. He found the note and showed it to me later.”

“Did you explain to him what it was?”

“No. I crumpled it up and left it with other papers to be discarded.”

“Why?”

“It was useless information.”

“Why useless?”

“I already told you.” I let out an impatient sigh. “Tom said he was going to Granite Ridge. Not Pineview.”

As if he hadn’t heard me, Moreau lifted another report from the file. “Madame Scott, you inserted the word *cyan* in your agenda. We understand it is a term relevant to your work, but we believe it can also be an abbreviation for cyanide.”

I said nothing. I could pretend to be deaf too. Besides, it wasn’t a question.

The detective went on. “We also found a memo in your agenda regarding the weekend of August 10. It included the Pineview address and other details. Since you claim your husband did not go there, I question why you did not write the particulars of Granite Ridge in your agenda instead. Can you explain this, Madame Scott?”

A glitch from my past had returned to haunt me. “I don’t know. It all happened so fast.” I hoped Dan would come to my defense, but he said nothing.

The detective leaned back. “You work as a ghostwriter. Do you not review content for accuracy?”

“Yes.”

“It is unusual for someone in your line of work to miss such a factual error, is it not?”

“It’s an agenda, Detective,” Dan said. “Not a legal document.”

Moreau turned to another page in the file. “Madame Scott, did you know that Pam Strober was having an affair with your husband?”

“No,” I said.

“You confirmed the shirt with the lipstick stain we found in your apartment

belonged to your husband. Do you—or did you—own a lipstick of that shade?”

“No.”

“How did the stain get on the shirt?”

As if I’d make his job easier. “I don’t know.”

“I believe you do know and you acted on it.” The detective’s eyes riveted into me.

“Speculation,” Dan said.

Moreau fingered another report. “There is the matter of the rental car. I question why Monsieur Elliott rented a car just days before the murders.”

“Michael already attested he rented the car for other purposes,” Dan said.

“It has yet to be confirmed, Monsieur Cummings.” Moreau gave me a measured look. “Madame Scott, do you realize this opportunity hints at premeditated murder?”

“Don’t answer that,” Dan warned me.

No sweat. I’d already decided I wouldn’t.

“Madame Scott, would you say that you and Monsieur Elliott are close friends?”

“I must counsel my client—” Dan began.

“It is but a simple question, is it not?” the detective asked, annoyance building in his voice.

Dan complied with a reluctant shrug.

I took Dan’s cue and exercised discretion. “Michael was my client. We had a good working relationship.”

“A good working relationship,” the detective repeated, nodding. “I imagine that two people working so closely would—how shall I put it—discuss matters of a more personal nature.”

“Irrelevant,” Dan said.

“I do not agree,” Moreau said. “Madame Scott had dinner with Monsieur Elliott numerous times during the three weeks before the death of her husband. This fact is quite relevant to our investigation.” The curiosity in his eyes spread, creating a strained expression as he focused on me. “Tell me, Madame Scott, why did you have dinner with Monsieur Elliott? Did you find him interesting?”

Perhaps more interesting than your husband?”

“You’re unduly provoking my client,” Dan said.

Moreau remained silent, watching me, waiting for me to answer.

I was no fool. A candid reply would incriminate me. I wouldn’t admit to anyone how much I enjoyed being with Michael, that there was an easy rapport between us, and that the chance to converse with someone over dinner had filled a gap in my life—a gap that had grown wider with every additional trip Tom had taken.

Determined not to stumble into Moreau’s trap, I calmly said, “Michael was my client. We were on a tight deadline, so we discussed his work over dinner.”

With a single-mindedness that knew no limits, the detective maintained his line of questioning. “Madame Scott, your relationship with Monsieur Elliott was perhaps more intimate than you admit. Was it not?”

“Do you have any proof?” Dan asked him.

“We have testimony from Eloise Speck, a neighbor who resides in the same condominium as Madame Scott,” Moreau said to him. To me, he said, “She saw you and Monsieur Elliott in a warm embrace Friday night, August 10.”

Oh no, not another minefield!

I glimpsed at Dan. His nervousness manifested itself as beads of perspiration building up on his brow. Given the scope of his legal experience, this was not a good sign.

“I was saying goodbye to Michael,” I said, keeping my tone even. “He was going back to Toronto on the weekend.”

“But he did not go back.” Moreau’s eyes remained riveted on me. “Did you leave your apartment again later that night?”

“No.”

“Perhaps to take a walk in the parking lot?”

“Of course not.”

“To repeat, Monsieur Elliott did not return to Toronto on the weekend. Is that correct?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Can you tell me why?”

I waited for guidance from Dan but he remained quiet. I assumed he hadn't told Moreau about Michael's trip to Sainte-Adèle to meet with his informant later that night and neither had Michael.

Frown lines gathered on the detective's brow in a sign of impatience. "Well?"

"Why don't you ask Michael?" I said.

Moreau smoothed out his mustache again, this time in two rapid strokes. "Perhaps he did not want to abandon you in your moment of crisis. Perhaps he decided to stay in Montreal because your relationship had developed into an amorous one."

"That's not true!" I gripped the edge of my chair.

"You're upsetting my client with unfounded accusations, Detective," Dan said, putting a hand on my arm.

"Time will prove them otherwise, Monsieur Cummings."

While Moreau leafed through the file, I struggled to keep calm. Words said in the heat of the moment—especially to a detective who was so intent on proving my guilt—could cause me regret. I had to hang on.

The detective scanned another report. "We are investigating a statement from Emily Saunders, an employee at Bradford Publishing. It is regarding an anonymous call to your office phone—"

"Hearsay," Dan cut him off. "My client is aware of the call. It hasn't been proven to be true or relevant."

"We are working on it, Monsieur Cummings." Moreau fingered the next report. "Madame Scott, did you know your husband named you as sole beneficiary on his life insurance policy?"

"Yes," I said.

"Did you know your husband had requested an increase on his insurance policy several months ago?"

"I wasn't aware," I said.

Dan asked, "What figures are we talking about, Detective?"

"The policy was increased from one hundred thousand to five hundred thousand dollars," Moreau said. "Did you know about this change, Madame

Scott?”

“No,” I said, stunned.

“Why did your husband purchase such a large policy?” Moreau asked.

“How the hell would I know?” I snapped at him. I couldn’t help myself. He was getting on my nerves. Dan stirred in his chair, prompting me to give Moreau’s question a more courteous response. “We were trying to start a family. Maybe Tom wanted to make sure we would be taken care of if anything happened to him.”

“Like what?”

Was he kidding? “Like a plane crash or a car crash. Tom traveled a lot. He was aware of the risks involved.”

The detective slowly closed the folder. The interrogation had come to an end.

I was eager to see Michael and set things straight. Moreau hadn’t said anything about the cyanide. Maybe the vial contained something other than poison, like baby powder or sugar. After all, Dan did say the police had nothing on Michael so far.

But just when I thought the worst was over, Moreau surprised me. “Madame Scott, this is what I believe were the circumstances leading to your husband’s death. You discovered the shirt with the lipstick stain and hid it in a garbage bag. Perhaps you intended to throw it out but you forgot to do so.”

“No, that’s not true,” I said.

“You and Michael Elliott left the city in a rental car Friday evening of August 10.”

“No, we did not.”

“You supplied Michael Elliott with the Pineview address and information—”

“No, I did not.”

“You asked Michael Elliott to help you take revenge against a husband who had been unfaithful to you—to even the score, as they say.”

His insinuation hit me like a slap across the face. “That’s a lie!”

“In French, we call it *un crime passionnel*. A crime of passion.”

I jumped to my feet. “You’re wrong. I loved Tom.” I remained standing, shaking with rage.

“Megan, please.” Dan’s hand on my arm guided me back into the chair.

“How much longer do we have to endure this ridiculous excuse for an interrogation?” I asked Dan, but he didn’t answer.

Moreau stared at me, as if he were contemplating whether or not I’d lunge up again. “Perhaps you had second thoughts about your murderous deed. You needed a safeguard. Perhaps you paid someone to plant the cyanide in Monsieur Elliott’s suite to create doubts about his integrity. Or you put it there yourself.”

“I...did...not,” I said through clenched teeth.

There was a knock at the door and a uniformed police officer entered. He handed Moreau a beige envelope with a police insignia in the top right-hand corner. The way my interrogation was going, I feared that the information in the envelope might worsen the situation.

The detective exchanged hushed words in French with the officer, but they spoke so low that I couldn’t catch the gist of it. The officer stepped out, leaving the door ajar.

Moreau said, “I have asked Monsieur Elliott to join us.”

Michael walked in and shut the door behind him. I tried to catch his eye, but he didn’t look my way and took a seat on the other side of Dan.

The detective opened the envelope and slid out two reports. A stroke of his mustache told me he was about to spring a conclusive bit of information on us of a sort we’d hoped wouldn’t surface. “There is one particular matter of interest left to discuss. We have verified the mileage on the car that Monsieur Elliott rented. It was about one hundred and thirty miles.”

Dan reached into his briefcase and pulled out a folder. He began to flip through its contents in a flurry of activity.

What on earth was he looking for?

Moreau fingered the second report. “We have also confirmed this mileage is about the same distance as a trip to and from the Pineview resort. Interesting, is it not?” His eyebrows went up, as if some hidden revelation had come to light.

And it had.

Dan held up a sheet. “Detective, my clients might have known about the existence of Pineview, but they both affirm they didn’t go there. As a matter of



record, dozens of other resorts are located within the same distance from Montreal. Here's a list of them." He handed it to him.

Moreau took it and gave it a quick once-over. "Yes...well, perhaps your clients will claim they drove around the city in circles all night too. The reality is that they have failed to provide us with solid alibis."

Dan's forehead glistened with perspiration. "Unless you have a legitimate reason to lay murder charges against either of my clients, don't make conjectures about their whereabouts."

His argument reassured me, but his physical unease was playing havoc with my health. My nerves were slowly ripping apart, much like the fine threads of Grandma's old couch.

I stole a glimpse at Michael, anticipating that he'd jump in and defend our position the way he often did on matters that screamed for justice. Instead he gaped at the detective in disbelief.

My heart sank. Michael's silence spoke louder than words ever could. It conveyed the certainty that our worst fears had begun to take shape and that he was losing hope.

There was another knock at the door and the same police officer popped his head in. In French, he apologized for the intrusion and said he needed to speak with the detective right away. Could he leave the room for a moment?

Moreau switched off the recorder. "Please excuse me." He walked out and left the door ajar.

I had the disturbing impression that he was about to call in the troops. I leaned forward and whispered, "Michael, did you tell the detective where you were Friday night?"

"No." He kept his eyes downcast.

"Why not?"

"He would have asked for names," Michael said. "I can't do it. It would break informant confidentiality. Besides, I was trying to prove my alibi." The way he avoided looking at me troubled me more than his reply.

"Keep your answers short," Dan said, his voice low. "It's in both your best interests. They have nothing on either of you to make the charges stick."

“Then why are we here?” I asked him. “Why can’t we just leave?”

“We have to cooperate. It’s a sign of good faith.”

As far as I was concerned, I’d suffered enough in the name of good faith. My legs were numb and my rear end hurt from sitting on a wooden chair for so long. I wanted to leave and go for a long walk. Better yet, I wished the detective would scrap this interrogation, let us go home, and concentrate his efforts on finding the real killer.

I peeked through the open doorway. Moreau was hurrying back to the room, another folder tucked under his arm. As he whizzed by us, I read the tab on the folder. “Scott, Thomas” was printed in large black letters.

More bad news. My heart hammered in my chest.

The detective sat down and turned on the recorder. “Our police laboratory found no fingerprints on the container discovered in your suite.” He observed Michael with the usual caution reserved for a suspected murderer but kept me in his visual range as well. My guess was that he wanted to judge our reactions or hoped one of us would renounce the other. “Did you wear gloves when you handled the cyanide, Monsieur Elliott?”

“For the last time,” Michael said, sounding weary, “I have no idea how the damn stuff got in my jacket. Someone is framing me. Why don’t you believe me?”

“Your innocence is not a question of belief, Monsieur Elliott. The facts speak for—”

“Detective,” Dan cut in, more forceful this time. “We’re prepared to assist you as best we can. However, the evidence you have on my clients is circumstantial at best, and you know it.”

The detective’s left eyebrow arched in disapproval. “I do not agree. As you already know, the evidence in a criminal investigation must be weighed in the light of two key factors—motive and opportunity.”

Dan sat back. “You have neither. You’re grasping at straws. You’re molding insignificant items that your investigators tripped over to fabricate motive and opportunity. You have no concrete proof to implicate my clients in the murders.”

“It is a matter of time before we discover more evidence to prove your

clients are guilty.”

Dan persisted. “You’re losing sight of the big picture, Detective. You’ve become obsessed with your own imaginary scenario. In the interim, this interview is over.” He gathered his files and placed them in his briefcase.

Moreau seemed to be pondering the situation. “*Très bien*. Your clients are free to go for now. Please note that we reserve the right to question them in the future. I suggest they do not leave town.” He turned off the recorder.

Dan stood up, his face flushed, his huge frame bent over the table like an engulfing tidal wave. “Detective, I told you earlier how Megan had a near-brush with death the other day when someone pushed her off the curb. It implies she’s a target. And so is Michael. Why someone wants them out of the way is what the police should be investigating. I strongly suggest you spend your time trying to find the real murderer.” He straightened up.

“It is precisely my intention.” The detective rose and collected his folders. Whether or not he perceived Dan’s deportment as a threat, I couldn’t tell. “Madame Scott, Monsieur Elliott, please wait here. I will make the arrangements for your swab and fingerprints.” He left the room.

Michael stood up. Fatigue and dejection were more apparent now. “Thanks, Dan,” he said. “You bought us some time.”

“Every second counts,” Dan said.

“What’s our next move?” I asked Dan.

“Can’t say. Waiting for info from Jane.”

“I know you’re going to get us out of this, Dan.” Though Michael’s words were hopeful, his voice had a desperate edge to it.

“We haven’t been dealt the last hand yet,” Dan said. “I have a couple of aces up my own sleeve.” He clutched his briefcase. “You still have your suite at the Elegance?”

“I hope so,” Michael said. “Most of my stuff is there. I didn’t check out.”

“All right. After you’re done here, flag a taxi and go back to the hotel—both of you. Stay put until you hear from me.”

**T**he lobby of the Elegance Hotel buzzed with hordes of convention-goers—an ideal smokescreen for Michael and me.

We zigzagged around visitors standing beside luggage tagged with team names that sounded as if they'd been generated during a high-tech brainstorming session: Marketing Maniacs, Disk Dorks, and Web Watchers. Each group member wore a white tag that read: "Hello. My name is..." Loud greetings echoed across the lobby as new arrivals stumbled upon the rest of their team like lost sheep that had found their flock.

Michael and I took the elevator up to the seventh floor in silence, not speaking—just as we'd done on the taxi ride over. Our stressful experience with Moreau at the police station had me pondering the potential repercussions, so conversation didn't matter at this point.

The hours I'd spent under interrogation now made me feel dirty. All I wanted to do was take a shower. I prayed Michael still had access to his suite.

Luck was on our side. His electronic key worked.

We entered his suite to discover an added bonus: Room service had cleaned up and left a supply of fresh linens in the bathroom. They'd also left a trash bin for his discarded papers. Michael let me take a shower first and lent me a clean T-shirt.

On my return to the living room, I found him standing there, a stunned expression on his face.

“You have no idea what crazy messages someone left on my phone,” he said.

“Your cell phone?”

“No, the hotel phone.” He lifted the handset. “You have to hear this.” He hit a button and held the handset inches away from my ear. “Careful. It’s loud.”

“Traitor!” a thick voice bellowed. A click sounded and the line went dead.

“That’s horrible! Can you play it again?”

Michael hit the replay button.

I listened. “I can’t tell if the voice is male or female.”

“The caller used a device to disguise his voice. He left two other messages—the same as this one—about a half hour apart.”

My blood went cold. “It could be the killer.”

“I won’t erase the messages. We’ll tell Dan about it later.” Michael returned the handset to its cradle. “We haven’t had much time to talk about what happened today.”

“I’m ready whenever you are.”

“I’ll go take a shower. We’ll hash things out after.” He disappeared around the corner.

Restless, I wandered over to the window.

Heat waves and smog blurred the Montreal skyline, rendering the towering buildings wavy and hazy. Strange. The weather was as relentless as Moreau. His insinuations prevented me from focusing on anything else but wanting to clear my name. Even though Dan had succeeded in fending off the detective’s incessant badgering today, it was a temporary reprieve at best.

Part of me wanted to run away from the crumbling world around me. The other part craved the truth and told me the only way out of this impasse was to dig up a more worthy suspect—one that would draw closer scrutiny from the police.

I’d once read that almonds helped to clear the thought process. True or not, I often kept a supply on hand—the chocolate-covered ones. I took out the tiny bag of chocolate almonds I’d stashed in my purse. To think that Moreau had almost impounded it earlier. I plucked one out and chewed it slowly, then sat down to begin my analysis of potential suspects.

The most obvious contender was Peter Ewans. The loose tire on the Ford, his former job as a chemical engineer, his easy access to Tom's cottage... That Tom had climbed ahead of him on the corporate ladder at BOTCOR could have been the final blow to Peter's ego. Add the loss of respect from his peers, and you had a recipe for revenge waiting to happen.

I popped another almond into my mouth, letting the chocolate melt away while I put together a second theory. What if Pam was the target? If so, the killer would have had a different motive. I envisioned a jealous lover or a sensitive male that Pam had dumped in her "use them and lose them" fashion. Maybe she'd pushed one too many men over the edge.

And why leave a murderess out of the equation? Since married men had *not* been off limits to Pam, why discount a wife seeking revenge? Tricia Bradford had accused Pam of sleeping with her husband Bill. She could have hired a hit man to get rid of Pam as Michael suggested. Hell, she had enough money to put a whole team into action.

But why stop there? From the collection of trophy gifts in Pam's office, further inquiries might reveal an army of vindictive women who were eager to settle a score against her for having slept with their husbands or boyfriends. Considering Pam's list of conquests, the possibilities were endless.

A surge of optimism swept over me, but I had to remain objective. Dan's investigative process was far from over. Jane was interviewing witnesses and verifying the names in Tom's appointment book. Some of the women he'd slept with might have been furious to discover he was married. It only took one, and she might have gone to great lengths to settle a score.

Another possibility lurked in a corner of my mind—one that I'd ignored because of denial on my part: Michael might have played an active role in the murders.

If he had anything to do with Tom's death, it was my fault. I'd believed our platonic relationship was within the borders of mutual friendship, but maybe it wasn't.

How could I forget his passionate kiss?

I suddenly felt guilty for having developed an interest in another man.

Intellectual adultery, one would call it. While Michael's friendship might have stemmed from a decent place in his heart, his desire for me might have spurred him to take a drastic step—one he believed would set me free to be with him.

What if the decision to delay his trip home was an excuse to hang around and make sure his fatal plan had succeeded?

The absence of food and gas receipts from his trip to Sainte-Adèle Friday night bothered me. Did he conveniently forget to keep them, aware that ambiguous circumstances might work in his favor later on?

Michael had the Pineview information on hand—the crumpled note I'd left in his suite. His trip to Sainte-Adèle had given him the perfect alibi. Had he lied about it and driven to Pineview that night instead?

As for the cyanide, one of Michael's shady contacts could have obtained it for him. With the careless attitude of BOTCOR employees at Pineview, not to mention the non-existent security there, Michael could have slipped into Tom's cottage and planted it himself.

There was my near-fatal plunge into the street to consider. No one would convince me it had been an accident. The notion that Michael might have followed me from Santino's and shoved me into the traffic made my heart pound with fear.

Had I willingly accepted a killer into my life?

With Moreau closing in on us, planting the cyanide in his hotel suite had served Michael's purpose. He knew the police would find it during their search. The mistrust in his eyes had given Moreau a reason to suspect I'd put it there.

Had I been so gullible as to believe Michael was interested in me? I'd been a fool to think he'd kissed me because he cared about me. No, that kiss was his way of diverting my attention. I was vulnerable and insecure, and he knew how to gain my trust. Tom had done it with his lies and I'd believed him.

Reality hit me in the next instant. I hated myself for concocting these horrid theories about Michael. Like he'd once said, whatever happened to “innocent until proven guilty”?

I battled with uncertainty. After all, my suppositions about Michael were based on stretches of the imagination. Not all the pieces fit either. I had no

choice but to give him the benefit of the doubt. The police investigation had yet to run its course.

Michael emerged and peered at me through damp, disheveled hair. A short-sleeved T-shirt showed off muscular biceps and a trim torso. As he approached, the scent of the fresh outdoors after a rainfall permeated the air around us.

I experienced a rush of warmth, felt my cheeks flush.

“Any calls?” he asked.

I gathered my thoughts. “No, nobody called.”

“Hungry? I am.” He smiled. “How about ordering something from downstairs?”

“Okay.” I questioned his carefree attitude. Where was the desperate Michael I’d witnessed at the police station earlier? The cheerful version standing before me aroused my curiosity, if not my apprehension.

After Michael called room service and ordered up a couple of roast beef sandwiches and twelve small bottles of water, he slid into his usual armchair. “Let’s talk. We have some things to clear up.” His demeanor was as relaxed as if we were sitting down to discuss his manuscript.

I stopped the charade in its tracks. “Damn it, Michael,” I said, waving my hands, “how can you be so cool? Moreau almost destroyed our chances of seeing daylight again, yet here you are, acting as if you don’t have a care in the world.”

“I’ve had time to think things through.” He glanced at a point in the distance. “The detective released us because he knew Dan was right. The evidence they have on us is circumstantial.”

“So you’re saying we have nothing to worry about?”

“Not quite. Moreau still suspects us. Problem is, he can’t lay charges against us without substantive proof. Like how we obtained the cyanide, how we entered the Pineview cottage without anyone—”

“He’ll say we paid someone else to do it,” I said.

Michael shook his head. “Dan can refute it. He’ll claim it’s an excuse the cops use for any suspect.”

A chill ran through my body and I shivered.

“What’s wrong?”



“Those phone messages. I can’t shake the feeling the killer has been shadowing us all along...that he might be so close even now.”

“No problem. We’ll get a trace on them and—” Michael’s cell phone rang and he answered. “Okay. See you then.” He hung up. “Dan and Jane are coming over tonight.”

I took a chance and tested one of my theories. “You know what bothers me the most about the police search?”

“What?”

“How the cyanide ended up in your suite.”

“That’s easy. Moreau thinks I put it there.”

“You wouldn’t have so careless as to—I mean—”

Michael’s eyes had a strange intensity to them. Had he caught my allusion? If so, had I put my own safety at risk?

I winged it. “Oh, nothing makes sense anymore.”

“Why don’t you give it a rest, Megan?”

“No, I want closure,” I said. “Since we can’t prove our innocence, our lives depend on finding the real killer. Don’t you agree?”

He nodded, said nothing.

“Michael, don’t you care about anything anymore? Where’s that person you used to be—the gutsy investigative reporter, determined to serve justice and get to the truth?”

He leaned forward and joined his hands, kept his focus on the carpet. “It’s not what you think, Megan. I do care—a lot. After the police found the cyanide in my jacket and took me in for questioning, I began to have doubts...about you.” He looked at me. “I imagined the worst and I’m sorry.”

Guilt raced through me. “But I—”

“Wait. There’s more. I lost hope—something I promised myself I wouldn’t do, no matter how tough life got. When Moreau let us go, I took it as a positive sign. Now nothing is going to stop me from getting through this ordeal. We have to believe that destiny is going to step in and put our lives back on track.”

“Destiny? You’re not getting mushy on me, are you? It’s going to take more than high hopes or wishful thinking to convince Moreau we’re not murderers.”

“We’re not alone in fighting this battle,” he said. “We’ve got Dan. He’s going to do whatever it takes to exonerate us. And I’m going to do everything I can to help him.”

He sounded so sincere, which made me feel worse about having doubted him.

Michael opened up his laptop. “I need to clear my thoughts before Dan arrives...check my notes on a crime story I’m covering.”

I applauded his ability to change gears—something I couldn’t do in the midst of turmoil. Instead I turned on the TV and channel-surfed, hoping it would divert my attention from the murder investigation.

I clicked past a series of shows, then hit a local news channel. A film clip spanned a row of turn-of-the-century homes on a street in a Québec town, one of them destroyed by fire.

I recognized Willie’s house. “Look, Michael. They’re talking about the fire in Sainte-Adèle.”

The reporter announced how a fire had destroyed a home in the resort town. A badly burnt body had been found inside, but police had not confirmed the identity of the victim. Residents believed it was sixty-year-old William Perron who had lived alone for the last thirty years.

“I hope it’s not Willie,” Michael said. “Damn!”

“If it is,” I said, “how are you going to prove your alibi?”

“I’ll have to find a way. I hope Dan has good news in that area.”

While Michael reviewed his notes on the laptop, I turned off the TV and strolled over to the window. The sun was setting on the city core. A blue sky streaked with blurs of red and orange rays provided a superb backdrop to the skyscrapers carved against it. Although it was a breath-taking view, it signified another day of unrelenting heat ahead. Forecasters had predicted the stifling El Niño influence would continue for another week, forcing people to seek air-conditioned places.

Moreau and El Niño—two peas in a pod. The detective’s tenacity in trying to prove my guilt left me gasping for air and waking up in a cold sweat at night at the thought of going to jail. My worst nightmare was that his persistence would

far outlast that of El Niño.

Wednesday evening at nine, Dan set his briefcase by the coffee table in Michael's suite. "Sorry for dropping by this late. Details came in at the last minute." He unbuttoned his jacket and sat in the armchair Michael usually occupied.

"That's right." Jane settled in the other armchair and placed her briefcase at her feet.

Dan pulled out a pile of folders and placed them on the table. He selected a document from a file and handed it to me. "This is a table of the names and schedules from the Elegance Hotel."

Michael peered over my shoulder while we examined the report.

Jane elaborated. "I succeeded in getting the names of the cleaning personnel at the hotel and their work schedules for the past week."

"How did you manage that?" Michael asked her. "Only cops have access to that kind of info."

"It's in hotel management's best interests to prove that every member of their staff is trustworthy," Jane said, looking pleased with herself for having acquired the information.

"It helped that I knew one of the owners." Dan chuckled.

"Works every time," Michael said.

"The highlighted entries on the seventh floor are noteworthy," Jane said, steering our focus back to the document.

“Cleanit Maid Service,” Michael read the heading on the report. “Six staff, all female. You suspect one of the maids unloaded the cyanide in my suite?”

“It’s a premise we’re considering,” Dan said.

“Have you interviewed them?” Michael asked.

“Jane did.” Dan produced another report from the file. “All checked out fine except one. Anita Castillo. A part-time employee in this batch of temp workers.” He handed me the paper.

I read the heading out loud. “Replacement Staff—Cleanit Maid Service. Do the police know about Anita?”

“Yes,” Dan said.

Michael’s face lit up. “Did they bring her in for questioning?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“She vanished. Didn’t show up to collect her paycheck today.”

“Who would work and not want to get paid for it?” I asked no one in particular.

“Someone who’s getting bigger bucks to stash a vial of cyanide in my suite,” Michael said.

Dan shrugged. “Whatever it takes to put food on the table.”

“Do you have a photo of Anita?” I asked him.

Dan opened his mouth to speak but Jane answered. “No photos. Cleanit staff told me she has dark curly hair, brown eyes, and a medium complexion.”

“Will the police keep searching for her?” Michael asked.

“Yes, but they might not find her,” Jane said. “The information she provided was false. Other staff members didn’t know much about her either, except that she waitressed in clubs on her nights off.”

“Which clubs?”

“They don’t know.” She crossed her legs, her short skirt riding higher up her thighs.

Michael didn’t miss a beat. “You’re going to follow up on it? Check out some hotspots?”

“It’s a rather...sensitive situation.” Jane glanced at Dan.

“The police are handling it now,” Dan said. “It’s a fraud case.”

Michael’s eyes widened. “You can’t be serious. We’re giving up on our best witness?”

“Not quite,” Jane said. “We have another lead. Anita gave her employer a timesheet in an envelope last week. The police will do an analysis of fingerprints and DNA.”

“It’s a long shot,” Michael said. “She might not have a criminal record. And there were no fingerprints on the cyanide container. How are they going to provide a match?”

“We haven’t reached that point yet,” Jane said, raising her chin. “We anticipate that Anita’s existence alone will veer police interest in her direction. I suggest we wait and see how they proceed with this new piece of evidence.” She removed her jacket and placed it on the armrest, revealing a sleeveless blue top with a high neckline.

Wearing a turtleneck top in today’s hot temperatures would be stifling, I thought.

“However, there’s a potential downside to Anita,” Dan was saying, making me question if we’d ever see an upside. “It’s possible she’s an illegal alien. Unless the police find her, they might not be able to track down the killer.”

“She might have crossed the border by now,” Jane said, making the situation more dismal.

“It doesn’t matter,” Michael said. “The cops can’t ignore this new lead.”

He was right. Anita’s appearance was a stroke of good luck. More than that, it dissipated any remaining doubts I’d had about Michael’s integrity.

I examined the schedule from the Elegance Hotel and the highlighted names listed under the column marked Floor 7. “Why isn’t Anita’s name listed on the seventh floor?”

“It’s simple, really,” Jane said, her half-smile implying that I’d asked an asinine question. “Each maid gets a set of keys for the rooms she’s assigned to. Anita was one of the maids working on the fifth floor.”

Sure enough, Anita’s name was listed under Floor 5. “She switched with another worker on the seventh floor.”

“That’s right,” Jane said. “It breaks the monotony of cleaning the same rooms.”

“Most of the rooms in the hotel have the same layout and furnishings. What would be the purpose of switching?”

“If I had a job that boring, I’d play musical rooms too.” Despite Jane’s smile, her eyes showed no emotion.

“Moving on to Peter Ewans...” Dan flipped through another file. “Where’s that report?”

“Allow me,” Jane said, getting a nod from Dan. “I confirmed that Peter worked in the chemicals industry for twelve years before he joined the marketing team at BOTCOR. None of the current employees at his previous workplace have heard from him since he left. I’m contacting former staff there. They might prove to be a valid source for cyanide.”

“Maybe Peter has a source we don’t know about,” Michael said. “What then?”

Jane straightened her shoulders. “If it ever comes to that, we’ll deal with it.”

“It might be too late,” Michael said.

“Not by my calculations,” Jane said. “I still have a lot of ground to cover.”

Michael said nothing but clenched his jaw, an indication that her answer didn’t satisfy him. As his ghostwriter, I was familiar with the depth and accuracy of his research. He produced clear and honest facts. Why would he accept her ambiguity?

Michael went on. “Did Peter ever own up to the loose wheel on the Ford?”

“He said he knew nothing about it,” Jane said.

“For obvious reasons,” Michael said with a wry smile.

“In any case,” Dan said, tapping a pen against his notebook, “I filed a report with the police based on your testimony, Megan. It could hurt Peter’s defense if Moreau opts to divert suspicion his way.”

Michael raised his hands in frustration. “What the hell is Moreau waiting for? Can’t he see Peter is a more feasible suspect than Megan or me? He had the motive, the opportunity, and the means to get rid of Tom.” He raised three fingers in the air, one by one, to emphasize his words. “If that doesn’t count for

anything, what does?”

Dan scanned a report. “Something Peter said about Megan—”

“I’ll save you the trouble, Dan,” Jane said, cutting him off. “Megan, I asked Peter about the conversation you had with him. He denied having discussed anything about Granite Ridge with you. In fact, he said he hadn’t heard of the place until I mentioned it.”

“I knew it.” Michael snapped his fingers. “He’s feeling the heat, so he’s passing on the blame.”

“Peter substantiated his statement,” Jane said. “Since he organized the event, he gave Megan’s home phone number to Louise Kirk so she could call to confirm Tom’s weekend stay at Pineview.”

“He’s twisting the facts to cover up his lies. Damn him!” I picked up my purse from the credenza, stormed over to the blue sofa, and sat down. I took out a pen and two folded sheets of canary yellow paper I’d made a habit of carrying around lately. Doodling would soothe my frayed nerves.

Michael joined me on the sofa. “I’d bet Moreau thinks you made up that chat with Peter to support your alibi.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me,” I said. “He tried to read a lot more into my answers during his interrogation at the station too.” I asked Dan, “Why would the police choose to believe Peter rather than me?”

“Your discussion with Peter can be construed as hearsay in court,” Dan said. “Doesn’t matter who said what.” He closed the file.

“I haven’t finished,” Jane said. “There’s more.”

“Oh?” Dan opened up the file again. “I didn’t see anything else in here.”

“It’s off the record,” Jane said. “It’s meant for Megan.” Her eyes shifted to me. “Peter said he couldn’t believe you didn’t know about Tom’s affairs with other women. There were so many.”

“Tom gave me no reason to doubt him,” I said. “It wasn’t until I discovered his appointment book that I realized to what extent he’d betrayed me.”

“Peter confided he didn’t blame you for hating Tom,” she said.

“Peter’s a jerk!” I placed the canary paper on my purse and began to draw tiny circles, then hard squares around my circles.



Michael stood up. “Anyone want water?” At our affirmative replies, he handed out four bottles of water that room service had left. “The cops should be using muscle power to make Peter confess.” He twisted the cap off his bottle with a snap.

Despite the logic behind Michael’s argument, the image of a vindictive Peter hadn’t solidified in my mind. “Peter might have lied and he might have been jealous of Tom, but I’m not convinced he was responsible for the murders. Let’s face it. Peter is a wimp.”

“Pretending to pass out at the murder site doesn’t make him a wimp. It makes him smart.” Michael gripped his bottle so hard that water spurted into the air and landed on the carpet. “No problem. I got it.” He grabbed paper tissues from a box on the credenza.

“I have an explanation for Peter’s state of health,” Jane said. “His wife told me he’s on antidepressants. BOTCOR co-workers said he’d had a lot to drink Friday night at the party. Mixing meds with alcohol could account for his feeling ill.”

“It doesn’t mean he’s not a murderer.” Michael patted the spill, then headed to the bathroom to dispose of the wet tissues.

“Any more witness statements for Peter that I should know about?” Annoyance pinched Dan’s face. He tossed the folder aside.

Jane shifted in her chair. “Neighbors had nothing negative to say about Peter or his family. HR personnel at BOTCOR gave him an excellent job rating, though they did mention one issue.”

Crease lines formed across Dan’s forehead. “What was it?”

“Peter developed anger management problems two years ago. According to HR, he attended the recommended courses and seemed to have the situation under control. That is, until the day he found out Tom got promoted.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“It’s simple,” Jane said. “Peter lost it.”

She was beginning to wear me down.

Dan came to the rescue. “Can you be more specific?”

Jane nodded. “Peter rushed into head office and argued with one of the

bosses. He threatened to sue the company. They almost fired him.”

Michael walked back into the room. “Lucky he didn’t have a gun.”

“A verbal argument is a big leap away from murder,” I said.

“Peter’s at the top of my list,” he said. “Nothing’s going to change that.”

Dan ignored our banter. “All right. Moving on.” As he reached for Tom’s appointment book buried under several folders, a paper slid out and fell to the floor.

Michael picked it up. “Who are these people?” He gave it to Dan.

“Pineview staff that Jane interviewed. Right?” Dan held the paper up so she could see it.

“Yes,” Jane said, then asked Michael, “Why?”

He shrugged. “No reason.” He sat down next to me.

Dan put the paper back into the file. “Jane, any news on the fingerprint eliminations at Pineview?”

“The police completed their investigation,” she said. “They found nothing unusual.”

“Any leads from the names in Tom’s appointment book?” He tapped it with his pen.

“No viable leads,” she said. “The women I contacted had solid alibis.”

“I’ll pass along Tom’s book to Moreau,” Dan said. “It was off site when he searched your home, Megan, so he’ll appreciate our gesture of cooperation.”

“What about Pam?” I asked. “Any leads on the men she dated?”

“Emily came forward,” Dan said. “Gave me a short list of her best bets. Each had a legitimate alibi and no hard feelings.”

“What about their wives or girlfriends?” I was scratching the bottom now.

Dan pursed his lips. “Had to tread lightly. Didn’t want to break up serious relationships or intimidate potential witnesses. Nothing so far.”

“Hold on,” Michael said. “Let’s get back to Anita. If someone hired her to do their dirty work—no pun intended—why would the killer want to pin these murders on me? I never dated Pam, and I had no connection to Tom. I never even met the guy.”

“Based on the attempt on Megan’s life,” Dan said, “it probably has more to

do with your connection to *her*.”

Michael grew silent, thinking. “Okay. The killer couldn’t get into Megan’s condo. So he found a more accessible place to drop off the cyanide—my hotel suite.” His expression tightened. “Something doesn’t add up. I’ve been in and out of my hotel room the last few days. Why did Anita wait so long before planting the cyanide here?”

I stared at him. “What do you mean?”

“I wore my leather jacket Friday evening,” Michael said. “I left it in the car all weekend. After we met with Dan on Monday, I hung it in the hall closet here.”

“That’s right!” I jumped to my feet, almost spilling my bottle of water. “The cyanide couldn’t have been planted before then.”

Dan jotted a note. “Narrows the timeline.”

I picked up the Cleanit staff schedule. “The maid service tidies up the hotel rooms before one o’clock every day. Michael, it was later than that when you hung your jacket in the closet. Anita couldn’t have planted the cyanide until the next day. Tuesday.”

“Or today before the police search,” Jane said. “It might explain why she didn’t pick up her paycheck earlier.”

“Talk about risky,” Michael said. “Why would Anita plant the cyanide hours before the cops visited my suite?”

“You have a point,” Dan said. “Do it, then leave town ASAP.”

“So why did she wait so long?” Michael asked, echoing his train of thought.

A brief silence hung over us.

“I was supposed to have checked out of here Saturday morning,” Michael said.

“Can you imagine what Anita would have done had she found your suite empty?” I let out a nervous giggle.

Michael grinned. “No problem. She’d have found another sucker to pin the murders on.”

“And we wouldn’t be sitting here,” Dan said, snapping us back to reality.

Michael asked, “When did the news of the murders first break?”

“Yesterday morning—Tuesday.” I sat down and went back to doodling triangles.

“Okay, that explains it,” he said. “After the murders hit the news, the killer gave Anita the go-ahead to plant the cyanide in my suite. We all know what happened after.”

“Yes,” I said. “An ugly *paparazzi* scene.”

Dan looked up from his notebook. “Happens often. Someone sees police cars parked out front. They call the press. Get a few bucks.”

“That’s so sick,” I said. “What kind of person takes pleasure in tipping off the media and embarrassing people like that?”

“The killer,” Jane said, as if it were common knowledge.

“Why would you say that?” I asked her.

“It’s simple. He seeks attention and craves the spotlight. In fact, he thrives on it. When it doesn’t happen, he creates it.”

“Plausible,” Dan said. “Though more likely to fit the profile of a serial killer.”

“I’ve got another one,” Michael said. “How did the killer know I was still in town?”

“A call at the front desk would confirm it,” Dan said.

His reply sparked a memory. “The mystery caller!” I blurted.

“What mystery caller?” Dan’s pen froze in mid-air.

“The one who left messages on my hotel phone,” Michael said, heading toward it. “The voice was camouflaged, but the messages were clear. Come listen.”

Dan and Jane took turns listening to the recording, then returned to their seats.

“I’ll request a voice analysis,” Dan said, jotting a note. “The murderer—or someone connected to him—might know you after all, Michael.”

“I’d bet Emily concocted those calls,” Michael said. “It strikes a familiar pattern.”

“You’re just looking for an excuse to drag her into this mess,” I said. “She’s angry and sad about Pam’s death. It doesn’t make her a killer.”

“Oh, what the hell,” he said. “We can always chuck Peter back in if you like.”

“All right,” Dan said. “With the discovery of Anita Castillo, the police investigation might take a different direction. Swing attention away from both of you.”

Convenient, but I wasn’t convinced we were home free. I hadn’t connected all the dots. “Anita, the cyanide, the phone messages... We’re missing evidence that can tie this information together. Dan, do you think Moreau knows something we don’t?”

“It’s doubtful,” he said. “His theory is basic. The killer had a gripe against Tom or Pam. He had a connection to BOTCOR or Bradford. The cyanide found in Michael’s suite is the common link.” He let out a deep breath. “Moreau’s best guess on motive is a romance between Michael and you.”

“I agree,” Jane said. “It’s the simplest deduction.”

I couldn’t tell whether she was explaining Moreau’s rationale or promoting it as her own. It was a waste of time trying to read her. I latched onto Dan’s last comment instead. “The cyanide drop here can’t be traced to anyone at Bradford. They thought Michael was going back home on Saturday. No one knew he was in town except me.”

“Same explanation as before.” Dan sounded weary, as if someone had asked him for directions to the washroom for the tenth time. “All they had to do was —”

“We know, Dan, we know,” Michael said, smiling. “Call the front desk to see if I’d checked out or not.”

“Those words will haunt me forever.” Dan chuckled.

Michael turned to me. “I guess that puts you-know-who back in the running.”

“If she really wanted Pam out of the way,” I said, “she wouldn’t have gone through hell and back to do it.”

“What are you getting at?”

“She would have laced Pam’s cup of coffee with cyanide at the office.”

Michael shook his head. “Too obvious. No one would kill Pam in such a

restricted setting.”

“Excuse me,” Jane said to Michael, a well-poised forefinger in the air. “What makes you think the cottage at Pineview isn’t a restricted setting?”

“An unlimited number of people pass through Pineview at all hours,” Michael said. “Staff, guests, strangers...you name it. The offices at Bradford aren’t as accessible. There would be fewer suspects at Bradford.”

Dire implications zipped through my mind. As far as fewer suspects went, Michael was right about Bradford, and one name rose above the rest. Emily. She merited our consideration, but jealousy couldn’t have been the only motive behind her scheme to do away with Pam. There had to be more to it.

None of our theories explained the killer’s link to Michael and his hotel suite, except the one that involved Emily. She was the only person, aside from Pam and me, who knew Michael’s suite number. I’d considered the likelihood she might have bragged about it to her girlfriends, but I rejected the notion. Emily wouldn’t have shared anything about Michael with the competition.

As I doodled, I tried to grasp the logic behind the anonymous phone call at Bradford. Whether Emily had lied about it or not, the result was the same: She’d diverted Moreau’s suspicions to Michael and me and our so-called affair.

But why?

Sure, she blamed me for interfering with her plans to conquer Michael. Yet I couldn’t imagine she’d acted on a cold shoulder from him to frame us for murder.

In spite of the missing pieces, I raised my suspicions. “Michael, let’s say you-know-who had inside information, came up with the perfect plan, and got away with murder.”

He stared at me. “Are you serious? I was joking back there.”

“Think about it. She was jealous of our friendship. She came on to you and you snubbed her. She lied about our relationship and pointed the police in our direction—”

“Okay, okay, she was pissed off. But murder?”

“You have no idea what a woman scorned is capable of,” I said.

“You actually think she had a hand in this?” Surprise mounted in Michael’s

voice.

“Yes, and she used both of them to push me into the traffic!”

“All right,” Dan said. “Who are we talking about here?”

“Emily Saunders, my alleged stalker,” I said. “Did she have an alibi?”

“Let’s see.” Dan reached for a file in his briefcase and leafed through the pages. “I have a note from another of my team members. It says Emily went to Toronto on the weekend. Alibi not confirmed.”

“Maybe she fibbed,” I said, recalling how often she’d lied about other things.

“I’ll follow up on it.” Dan scribbled a note.

“I remembered something,” Michael said. “I went to Bradford last week to sign a contract in Emily’s office. She took a phone call from a guy in Toronto. She mentioned his name, but I can’t remember it.”

“How did you know he was calling from Toronto?” Dan asked.

“She chatted with him about tickets he’d bought for a baseball game at the Rogers Center,” Michael said. “It sounded as if he wanted her to fly to Toronto and spend the weekend with him.”

“Did she accept?” I asked.

“Yes,” Michael said.

“She used you as a witness for her alibi,” I said. “She could have called him back to cancel, then driven to Pineview instead.”

“The police can validate the phone records,” Dan said, scribbling more notes.

“Dan, you have a lot on your plate,” Jane said. “Do you want me to verify Emily’s alibi for you?”

“I don’t care what her alibi is,” I said. “All the pieces fit. Emily knew Michael’s suite number. She could have come over when he was out, persuaded Anita to let her into his suite, and planted the cyanide herself.”

“Which would prove the vial hadn’t popped up in my hotel suite by fluke,” Michael said.

“Motive?” Dan asked.

It was a weak point, but I offered it anyway. “Emily was jealous of Pam and wanted revenge against Michael.”

“Not enough.” Dan frowned.

“I agree,” Jane said. “My next question is: How did Emily obtain the poison? It’s not sold off the shelf.”

She was right. How would Emily get her hands on a lethal poison like potassium cyanide?

Michael snapped his fingers. “I’ve got it. Before the digital age, potassium cyanide was used in film processing. Maybe her boyfriend Ray Felton got hold of a supply for her.”

A half-smile crept up on Jane’s lips. She was either preparing to ask a bombshell of a question or throw this latest theory out of orbit.

“It’s an intriguing premise,” she said, “but how would you explain Emily’s association with Anita?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“How did the women come to know each other? What would persuade Anita to accept a bribe?”

“Emily spends many nights hopping from club to club,” I said. “Dan mentioned Anita worked in nightclubs. Emily might have met her in one of them. Or like I said before, she approached Anita at the hotel and offered her a bribe.”

Michael picked up the conversation. “Megan could be right. Extra bucks come in handy when you’re living hand to mouth like Anita. Emily made it worth her while.”

“It sounds iffy to me,” Jane said.

“What do you think?” Michael asked Dan.

“It’s possible.” Dan turned to Jane. “What time does the cleaning staff end their shift at Pineview?”

“Four o’clock in the afternoon,” she said.

“The Bradford folder.” Dan retrieved it from his briefcase and thumbed through it until he found the report he was looking for. “No record of what time Emily left the office Friday. Her time frame might be tight.”

“It could work if she arrived before Tom and Pam, or later when they were out,” Michael said, calling up a theory we’d discussed before.

“And walked right in if the cottage door was unlocked,” I said, repeating



another hypothesis I'd flagged earlier.

Dan frowned, didn't seem convinced.

I pressed on. "Emily could well be the most likely suspect."

"My bet's on Emily too," Michael said.

"I thought your bet was on Peter," Dan said.

"Forget Peter," Michael said.

"The fact remains the police investigation is ongoing," Dan said. "They haven't discounted Peter."

"Dan, here's an eye-opener," I said. "Peter never met Michael. He didn't know Michael's suite number, so he couldn't have used Anita for the drop here."

"Way to go, Megan!" Michael said.

The worry lines across Dan's forehead told me I hadn't won him over yet. "Maybe Tom told Peter that you had a client in this hotel."

"I never told Tom I was working with Michael, let alone mention the hotel name," I said.

Dan gave me a curious glance, as if he didn't believe me or was surprised I didn't share client stories with Tom.

"Tom and I hardly discussed our work," I said. "When he came home from his trips, there were more important things to talk about."

"Of course," Dan said.

"It has to be Emily," I said. "She's a liar and a sneak. She learned her scheming ways from the best of them: Pam."

Dan considered my hypothesis. "In theory, her motive is weak. If the police go this route, they'll need to prove premeditation. Show how Emily worked with Ray to obtain the cyanide. Show how she knew about Pam's plans to go to Pineview ahead of time so she could make her move."

"Honestly, Dan," Jane said, laughing, as if it were a preposterous assumption on his part. "I don't know how the police would establish that premise without reading Emily's mind."

"In any case," Dan said, "it's up to the prosecution to prove Emily's guilt. Her unconfirmed alibi does help our situation, though. It has the potential to create doubt in her as a witness if she lied about it." He gathered his files and

placed them in his briefcase. “All right, Jane. We’re done here.”

Jane stood up and slipped into her jacket. “Can we give you a ride home, Megan?”

I didn’t want to divulge that Michael and I had other plans for tonight. “Well, I—”

“It’s okay,” Michael cut in. “I’ll drive Megan home later.”

“Oh...okay.” Jane picked up her briefcase.

“I’ll call tomorrow with an update,” Dan said, leading the way out.

After Michael had shut the door behind them, he said to me, “You realize we’re on our own. We have to find concrete evidence to prove Emily is the killer or we’re done.”

“I have an idea,” I said. “Want to go to Bradford Publishing with me tomorrow night?”

“To do what?”

“Come and you’ll see.”

“Would it involve a search for cyanide, by any chance?”

“And more,” I said. “Want to work on our plans for Emily now?”

“Yes, but I’ll call room service first.”

Michael ordered a pot of coffee and muffins, then we sat down to put pen to paper.

We gradually built a framework of the strategic steps, resources, and timelines that Emily might have adopted in her efforts to pull off the murders and get away with the perfect crime. At last we had a feasible theory. Best of all, we had hope—lots of it—as the prospect of closure loomed ahead.



On the drive back to my condo, Michael announced, “I’m going to Pineview tomorrow.”

“Why? Jane already interviewed everyone there,” I said.

“Remember the paper that dropped out of Dan’s file?”

“Yes. It was a list of the staff who worked there. So?”

“I recognized a name. Robert Gingras.”

“That’s a very common name. How can you be sure it’s the same man you know?”

“I don’t,” Michael said. “That’s why I loaded a photo of him on my cell to show the Pineview owner.” He reached for his phone and retrieved the photo.

I peered at a round and unshaven face. Eyes that revealed a mix of anger and desolation. Unkempt hair that hadn’t been washed in days. The photo resembled a mug shot.

“How do you know Gingras?” I asked.

“Remember the court case I attended in Montreal when I first met Jane?”

“Yes.”

“It involved Robert Gingras. He was arrested for petty theft and drug possession. Willie had given me a lead on Gingras and his drug dealing. I wanted to see how it played out, so I attended every court session. But the charges didn’t stick. Gingras was acquitted.”

“If Jane knew about Gingras, why didn’t she mention him to you?”

“I doubt she’d remember the case,” Michael said. “She popped in on the last day of the trial. She sat next to me and introduced herself, said she had some time to kill. We chatted for a few minutes. I told her about my work, she talked about her job—casual stuff. When her cell phone vibrated, she left to take the call. I didn’t see her again until two months ago.”

“The police must have a file on Gingras,” I said.

“He might have requested that his criminal record be erased. That’s why Jane didn’t find anything in his background check. I’d bet a clean slate got him the job at Pineview too.”

“And why do you want to go to Pineview again?”

“A gut feeling. Gingras might know something about the double murders at Pineview. Maybe he didn’t come forward because of his history with the cops. I want to talk to him. See if I get any bad vibes.”

“I’m going with you,” I said.

“It’s not a good idea,” Michael said.

“Why? Because Tom died there, and you’re afraid I might get upset?”

He shrugged, said nothing.

“I’m beyond that point, Michael. I just want to prove I’m innocent so I can get on with my life.”

“Makes two of us.”

**B**y nine o'clock Thursday morning, Michael and I were driving south along Highway 243 toward Knowlton in the Eastern Townships. Our destination was the Pineview resort.

The sizzling heat and high humidity had extended into this late August day. Luckily, the air conditioning in the Mustang Coupe made breathing easier and added to the comfort of our shorts and T-shirts.

Situated on Brome Lake, Knowlton was sometimes called the Knamptons (a combination of Knowlton and the Hamptons) because many residents owned multi-million-dollar country homes. The charming village had boutiques, antique stores, cafés, restaurants, and B & Bs. Although many buildings displayed New England style architecture, the French influence was apparent in the store names.

Michael suggested we stop at Chocolaterie Raphaël to pick up some chocolates to snack on later. Who was I to argue?

“My parents used to live around here before they moved to a three-story home in Westmount,” he said as we drove through town. “They own sixty acres of waterfront land on Brome Lake.”

“Did they begin their retirement here?” I asked.

“No, my Dad worked for a high-tech company in the area.”

“Odd location for high-tech. What kind of work did he do?”

“Something with semiconductor technology.”

“And your mother?”

“She never worked. Didn’t have to.”

I was glad he was finally opening up about his family. “How are they doing?”

“I don’t know.” Michael hesitated. “We’re not that close. We had a falling out years back. I haven’t spoken to them in a while.”

I couldn’t imagine not calling my mother whenever I wanted to. “That’s too bad.”

“There’s not much to it,” he said. “Dad got angry when I told him I wanted to study investigative journalism. He thought it was a waste of time. So I left home.”

“What did your mother say?”

“She doesn’t like arguments. She stayed out of it.”

“So you ran off to Toronto.”

“I didn’t run off,” he said, annoyance filtering through. “I went there to pursue my studies. My grandmother suggested I go live with her and I accepted. At least *she* supported my career choice.” He stared ahead and said nothing more—a sign of closure to the topic.

I’d pushed it too far.



Minutes out of Knowlton, we turned off the main road and drove up a gravel path that led to the Pineview resort. The charm and tranquility of the Victorian-style cottages snuggled in a thick forest negated the fact that two people had been murdered here. It was the last place on earth anyone would imagine as a crime scene.

Michael slowed down as we approached a cottage. From the photo in Dan’s file, I recognized the door with the four glass panels and white trim, the eyelet curtains in a side window, and the wood steps leading up to the front porch. It was the cottage Tom had stayed in. As if to erase any doubts, a piece of yellow crime scene tape was caught in a bush—evidence that a forensics analysis had recently been performed on the premises.

I felt a tug on my heartstrings, followed by deep regret that my marriage to Tom hadn't had the time to blossom. He destroyed what we had when he broke our sacred vows.

*He cheated on me with my best friend!*

My stomach knotted.

Michael cut the engine and turned to me. "Are you okay to do this?"

I took a deep breath. "Yes."

We mounted the front steps. The wood beams creaked under our weight, adding a natural charm to the countryside ambiance while masking the fatal deed that occurred here days earlier. Birds chirped in a fit of frenzy in tree branches, as if we'd invaded their space.

Had they chirped that loudly the day the killer had crept indoors with the cyanide?

Michael peered through the glass in the front door. "They haven't cleaned it up."

Fragments of chinaware littered the floor. Chalk marks outlined the area where Tom and Pam were found— inches from the door. A white powdery substance—probably fingerprint powder residue—covered cabinets and furniture.

Goosebumps rose along my arms. I shivered involuntarily.

Michael put a hand on my shoulder. "Okay. We've seen enough. Let's go."

I didn't argue.

We drove further up the road and around a bend to the main reception building. Michael parked the car in front.

"My turn to take pictures." I stepped out of the car. After I'd taken three photos, I tucked the camera back into the glove compartment and followed Michael inside.

A woman at the front counter greeted us with a smile. "Hello. I'm Louise. How can I help you?"

I detected a slight French-Canadian accent. Her blonde hair was cut in wispy layers to her shoulders—like the Farah Fawcett hairdo of the 1980s. The style might have been outdated, but it softened the wrinkles on her face. A crisp white

cotton shirt and matching shorts showed off a tan and gave her a sporty yet business-like appearance.

I introduced Michael first.

Louise's smile vanished at the mention of my name. "Oh, my goodness. I'm so sorry for your loss, Mrs. Scott. What can I do for you?"

A young man and woman were leafing through the pamphlets in a stand nearby.

"Can we talk privately somewhere?" I asked Louise.

"Certainly. I'll be right back." She left through a side door and reappeared moments later with a man in a blue polo shirt and shorts. He was as tanned as Louise. "This is my husband, Stewart. He can help you."

Stewart shook hands with us. He was slim, though the muscles on his arms told me he lifted weights or played sports. His hair was cut close to the scalp.

"Sorry about your husband," he said to me. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"We'd like to ask you some questions," I said. "Can we talk somewhere more private?"

Stewart's dark eyes shifted to Michael. "Are you with the media? Cause I've got nothing more to say to them."

"I won't lie to you," Michael said. "I'm a reporter, but I promise to keep whatever you say in the strictest confidence. I'm here as Megan's friend."

Stewart thought about it. "Okay. Follow me." He led us into an eating area that held about a dozen tables. At this time of the morning, it was empty except for an older couple sitting by the window. He invited us to sit down at a table close at hand.

A server arrived with a tray holding three glasses of cold water. He set the glasses down and left.

I reached for a glass and took a few sips. "We came here today looking for answers that might explain how my husband died."

"I've told the police all I know," Stewart said. "I'd be happy to help you if I could."

"We need information about a man who works here." Michael showed him



the photo of Gingras on his cell phone.

“Robert Gingras?” Stewart arched an eyebrow. “He doesn’t work here anymore.”

“When did he quit?”

“He didn’t quit. He took off two days ago without a word. Left all his things here.”

“When did he start working here?”

“About two weeks ago.”

“What kind of work did Gingras do?” Michael asked.

“Basic stuff,” Stewart said. “It’s peak season for us. I needed help with cleaning the cottages while I tackled repairs and upgrades.”

“Did he have any references?”

“Nope. He’d been working in a manufacturing plant and was out of work.”

“No offense,” I said to Stewart, “but didn’t you find it odd that he’d leave a manufacturing job to come and work as a janitor here?”

“Sorry, I wasn’t clear about that,” Stewart said. “Gingras told me they’d laid him off.”

“Did he say why?” I asked.

Stewart nodded. “Because of downsizing. He begged me for a job. Said he’d work only for room and board if he had to. The guy had a bad leg. I felt sorry for him. I gave him the job, and what did I get in return? He stole my gun. A 9 mm Beretta.”

“Did you report it to the police?” Michael asked.

“Sure did,” he said.

“Any leads on it?”

“Nope.” Stewart paused while the older couple passed by our table on their way out. “Why are you looking for Gingras. You think he’s involved with the murders here?”

“No, ” I said, not volunteering more information.

“He might be in trouble, though,” Michael said.

“Wouldn’t surprise me,” Stewart said.

“Why not?”

“My employees know they can trust me with anything they tell me,” Stewart said. “But Gingras, he never talked about anything to no one. Kept pretty much to himself. Maybe it’s me, but I thought the guy had something to hide. Like he’d done time on the inside.”



Our return from Knowlton led to a reality check of the contents in my fridge. A box of baking soda. A small bottle of water. A bottle of ketchup. Half a stick of unsalted butter. A carton of milk that expired yesterday. Two eggs.

I refused to drink tap water. It tasted odd and made me question whether the chlorine they dumped into it was a healthier choice or not. I didn’t even want to consider the presence of other unknown substances the water contained after filtration—substances that disintegrated into particles so microscopic that you couldn’t see them with the naked eye.

I reached in and grabbed the bottle of water. “Source water,” the label read. Regardless of the chemicals the plastic itself might contain, at least the water sounded as if it came from a clean starting place. I twisted it open and poured half into a glass, then handed Michael the bottle.

“What are your plans for the rest of the day?” He leaned against the kitchen counter and brought the bottle to his lips.

“To start with, I should pick up some groceries,” I said.

“Can I tag along? Waiting in my hotel room for Dan’s call would drive me batty.”

I suspected Michael’s request was his way of providing an extra layer of protection around me. Regardless, I welcomed the offer of a ride and an extra pair of arms. “Okay, but I’m warning you. I have a string of errands to run.”

“No problem,” he said.

I dug into my purse and retrieved the bag that contained the last two Belgian chocolates from Michael’s purchase in Knowlton. I took one and handed him the other one in the bag. “Better eat up,” I said. “This is lunch.”

Who was I kidding? With an appetite like his, running on empty was unheard

of.

Half an hour later, I was munching on a tuna salad at Burgers & Benedicts. I watched as Michael ingested a mango burger and fries within minutes. Anyone else would have assumed he hadn't eaten in days. When he offered to pay the tab, I didn't refuse. My bank account balance was dwindling, and I was weeks away from receiving a payment from Bradford. Everything I'd recently purchased had gone on my credit card.

We spent the rest of the afternoon dropping off laundry at the cleaners, picking up groceries, and buying basics at the drugstore—errands I'd often run on my own. It was much easier doing them with someone else for a change.

Michael didn't seem to mind either. Anyone who lived out of a suitcase had to have some kind of routine going if they wanted to survive—especially if they didn't have easy access to a fridge, stove, and washing machine.

I watched as he scrutinized the labels on wine bottles at the liquor store. He helped me to select three: a Chardonnay from France, a rosé from Australia, and a Riesling from Germany. Then he paid for them, hinting that any of them would go well with homemade pasta.

I laughed. His presence comforted me and helped me forget our predicament, albeit for a short while. No man with an ounce of common sense would have stuck around to help a woman suspected of murdering her husband and his mistress.

Then again, Michael wasn't just any man. All the more reason I valued our friendship so much. A sinking feeling hit me whenever I remembered Toronto was his home—not Montreal.

Minutes after we'd returned to my apartment, Dan called. "My contact at the Elegance called me with disturbing news," he said over the speakerphone in my office. "They found Anita's body."

My blood went cold. "Oh, my God. Where?"

"In one of the hotel rooms," Dan said.

"How did she die?"

"Possible gunshot wound."

"When?" Michael asked.

“Don’t know,” Dan said. “We’ll find out more after forensics completes their analysis. Okay if we all meet at your place tomorrow morning, Megan?”

Michael nodded yes.

“Sure. See you tomorrow, Dan.” I hung up and said to Michael, “Anita was our last hope. Now what?”

He passed a hand through his hair. “Emily is closing in...getting rid of anyone who might talk. She’s covering her tracks like any murderer would.”

Although we suspected a connection between Emily and the increasing tally of dead bodies in our lives, a doubt nagged at me. “I can’t see Emily pulling the trigger. Do you suppose she—”

“Hired a hit man? Probably a sleazy reference through her nightclub contacts. He’s long gone by now.”

“At least we have a few more hours to gather evidence against her,” I said.

“For what it’s worth.” Michael grimaced.

“What do you mean?”

“If Emily isn’t on Moreau’s short list of suspects, we’ve got one hell of a battle on our hands.”

**A**t eight in the evening, humidity hung heavy in the air with no relief from even the slightest breeze. So much for the cooling trend the meteorologists had predicted. It was a miracle they ever got it right. Which was what Michael and I needed right now.

We'd driven around for half an hour looking for a parking space downtown. Oddly enough, the bike lanes were more congested than the car lanes. We finally found a parking space on Mansfield Street after our fifth try around the block. Michael filled the meter to avoid getting a ticket from the Green Onions, the parking police nicknamed after the color of their uniforms. These checkers sought out empty meters with an enthusiasm that knew no leniency, and they issued a stack of parking tickets to corroborate it every year.

We were heading up Sherbrooke Street to Bradford Publishing when Michael's cell phone rang. He answered it. From the gist of the conversation, the caller wanted to meet with him tonight.

"Fluky or what?" he said to me, slipping the phone back into the pocket of his cargo shorts. "Some guy wants to meet me downtown later. He has information about a drug case I'm following. He spoke French, threw in a couple of words in English. I'm not sure I understood everything. I don't want to misinterpret anything he says. Do you want to come along to translate?"

It might prove interesting. "Okay," I said.

We'd reached the front doors to the building that housed Bradford's offices. I

tapped on the glass door and held up my employee ID card for the security guard to see.

Carlo diverted his attention from a laptop on the reception desk. He smiled when he recognized me and hurried across the lobby, the pant cuffs of his brown uniform gathered over his shoes like the folds of a Chinese Shar-Pei.

“Mrs. Scott, so happy to see you,” he said, opening the door. He gave Michael a wary look.

“It’s okay, Carlo,” I said. “He’s a client.”

Carlo nodded and let us in. He locked the door, his key ring clattering against the metal doorframe. “Please accept my sympathy, Mrs. Scott. Such a young man, your husband. So unfortunate.” English wasn’t the Filipino’s first language, but caring eyes under drooping eyelids conveyed a sadness that words couldn’t express.

“Thank you, Carlo.”

“Catching up on work tonight, Mrs. Scott?” He walked back to his former location and offered me a pen.

“No, I came by to collect personal things from my office.” I signed the visitor’s sheet. “I won’t be long.”

“Take all the time you need, Mrs. Scott,” he said, smiling and nodding as if the building belonged to him.

In a way, it did. He’d worked here for twenty years and made it a point to remember the name of every employee and the company they worked for in the building. No stranger got past his desk without a security check.

Michael and I rode the elevator up to the tenth floor. I fished in my purse for a set of keys and unlocked the oak door to Bradford Publishing.

“You have your own key to the company,” Michael said. “I’m impressed.”

“Since I often met with clients here in the evening, Pam gave me a key,” I said. “Kayla didn’t ask for it back after Bradford cut me off as a supplier, so here we are.”

I flipped the wall switch inside the reception area. A table lamp in a corner lit up. I shut and locked the door behind us but didn’t bother to turn on any other lights. I didn’t have to. The building had a system that programmed every fifth

neon light in the ceiling to stay on after hours on low power—part of a new administrative “green” plan to conserve energy.

“What’s next?” Michael asked.

“We need to get Pam’s agenda from her desk. It might contain clues that could incriminate Emily.”

“Where’s Pam’s office?” He edged toward the corridor, ready to spring into action.

“This is where things get complicated,” I said. “Pam always locked her desk when she was away from the office.”

“You mean we have to break into it?” His eyes twinkled with humor or mischief. I couldn’t tell which one.

“Not exactly. Kayla told me she caught Emily going through Pam’s desk more than once when Pam was away. She suspects Emily had a duplicate key made. We need to find it.”

“Didn’t Kayla question Emily about it?”

“Yes, and Emily said it was okay, that Pam had given her a spare key so she could check her agenda to see if any client meetings had to be re-scheduled. Pam would sometimes forget to tell Emily when she had to go out of town.”

“Did she tell Pam she caught Emily snooping in her desk?”

“No,” I said. “Telling her wouldn’t have changed anything. Pam would have made up an excuse to protect Emily like she always did.”

“Oh, the webs we weave,” Michael said.

“Tell me about it,” I said. “Okay, our first stop is Emily’s office. Follow me.”

Our footsteps padded along the carpeted corridor. The lights hummed above and cast shadows on the walls, adding an eerie ambiance to the stillness in the office.

As we neared Pam’s office, I almost expected to see her sitting at her desk. That image overwhelmed me and I hurried by.

“This place gives me the creeps,” I said. “I’ve spent many evenings working alone here, but I never noticed how spooky it could be.”

Michael had more realistic concerns. “What if the door to Emily’s office is locked?”

“There are no locks on the doors. Company policy. The staff locks their desks instead.”

“Are we going to break into Emily’s desk to find Pam’s key?” He gave me an impish smile again.

“We don’t have to. Emily hides a key under a papier-mâché rabbit on the third shelf of her bookcase. I’m crossing my fingers it’s the one to Pam’s desk.”

“Aha! So you’ve done some snooping around yourself.”

“Not really,” I said. “I happened to see her hide it there once.”

“How do you know it’s not the key to her own desk?”

“Because the key to her own desk is on a keychain with her house keys.”

The door to Emily’s office was ajar. I pushed it open, then reached along the wall for the light switch and flipped it on.

I froze.

The top drawer of Emily’s desk was hanging on its edge, ready to topple. The two side drawers had been yanked out and thrown to the floor. Pens, documents, and dozens of flash drives were scattered everywhere. Books from a five-tiered bookcase lay in another pile on the floor, as if someone had leafed through each one and tossed it aside.

“Damn. Someone beat us to it.” Michael surveyed the scene. “Someone in a big hurry.” He pointed to the bookcase. “The books on the top shelf weren’t touched. Either his search was cut short or he found what he was looking for.”

“As long as he didn’t find what *we’re* looking for.” Amid the stack of books, I spotted the papier-mâché rabbit. I picked it up and placed it on Emily’s desk. “Can you give me a hand, Michael? The key must be somewhere under this mess.”

We removed the books, one by one, and placed them aside. Our efforts proved futile. There was no key in sight.

“What about those?” Michael gestured to the remaining books in the bookcase. “Might as well finish the job.” He flipped through each book, returning them to the shelf. By the time he’d finished, we were no further ahead.

“Maybe she changed her hiding place.” I walked over to Emily’s desk. I pulled out the top drawer and checked it on all sides, hoping to find a key taped



to it. Nothing.

I examined the other drawers. Nothing there either.

I got down on my knees and peeked under the desk. Nothing.

I stood up and let my eyes stray around the room. Aside from the bookcase, Emily's office contained two chairs, a desk, and a computer. No filing cabinets. She had no use for them, she'd claimed. All her work was done on computer and forwarded by email to the client or sent out by messenger in hard copy format.

I took a closer look at the bookcase. There was a narrow space between it and the wall. I peered into the gap. "I see something. It's on the floor, but I can't reach it."

Michael helped me move the bookcase over a few inches. I bent down and picked up what turned out to be photographs held together with a large paperclip. Bill Bradford and Pam were in the first photo. His arm was wrapped around her waist. Scratches across the photo had removed part of Pam's face, but I recognized her from the blonde hair and the low-cut red dress she'd worn that evening. I removed the paperclip and held the photo out for Michael to see. "This picture was taken at the last company Christmas party."

He peered at it. "What's with the scratches?"

"Could be caused by the paperclip." I leafed through the other photos and noticed similar marks on the rest of them but only across Pam's face. "Hold on. They're not scratches. Someone deliberately rubbed out Pam's face."

"Guess who?" Michael grinned.

"Emily. How much more proof do we need?"

"They wouldn't be admissible in court. You can't prove she defaced them. And even if she did, it's not a criminal offense."

"Too bad." I tossed them back behind the bookcase. "A copy of Pam's key has to be in here. We're not leaving until we find it."

I stood back and zoomed in on the huge Boston fern sitting in a ceramic pot in a corner. It was the only thing in the office that had remained untouched.

As I parted the delicate leaves at the bottom, I spotted the key. "It's here!" I plucked it from the soil.

"Maybe it slid off the shelf when the intruder ransacked the place," Michael

said. "Indulge me. Let me try it in Emily's desk first."

I handed it to him.

He picked up the top drawer I'd removed earlier but stopped short of inserting the key. "The intruder jimmied the lock. It's damaged." He gave me back the key.

"That settles it. Let's go get Pam's agenda."

Bold and dynamic when she'd redecorated it months ago, the black-and-white 60s décor of Pam's office now seemed dated and out of place. It was as if her passing had drained the energy out of the room.

Judging from Mrs. Bradford's outburst here the other day, I suspected her husband had authorized Pam's office redo for more personal reasons. After all, it had since come to light that married men were *not* excluded from Pam's game plan. The renovation bills could have aroused Mrs. Bradford's suspicions about goings-on between her husband and Pam.

What did it matter at this point anyway? As far as murder suspects went, I'd already replaced Mrs. Bradford's name with Emily's.

I crossed the checkered floor to Pam's desk and surveyed her trophy knickknacks. Would things have worked out differently had Tom added to her collection instead of inviting her to Pineview for a weekend fling?

I had to stop wondering about the *what ifs*. Destiny had worked its spell in the unique way that only destiny can. It had brought together two people addicted to deception and had sucked the last breath of life out of them. Ruthlessly. Sadistically. Without bias.

"You okay?" I turned to see Michael staring at me.

"Uh? Me? Sure." I circled Pam's desk and tried the key in the top drawer. "It worked!" I removed a couple of contracts, notepads, and loose memos. All that remained were two pens and a box of paper clips. "Her agenda isn't here."

"Moreau must have seized it as evidence," Michael said.

"I'm counting on one other possibility," I said.

"What's that?"

"Moreau doesn't have it." I closed the drawer and locked it.

"Then who does?"

“Kayla.”

“Kayla? Why?”

“I’m guessing she’d had enough of Emily’s snooping. Maybe she decided to put Pam’s agenda in a safe place—like her own desk—after Pam left that last Friday.”

“Wouldn’t Kayla’s desk be locked?”

“Let’s go see,” I said. “Her office is right across the hall.”

A high-back chair in a blend of organic and natural materials hinted at the down-to-earth style of Kayla’s office. So did the tall, leafy plant by the window. Dictionaries, classical novels, and some of her favorite hardbacks filled a mahogany bookcase in a corner. A white board on the wall behind her desk indicated a timeline of Bradford’s projects for the next calendar year. Out of privacy concerns, Kayla used a code number for every client instead of a name.

What stood out from the rest of the furnishings was Kayla’s desk. It resembled Pam’s black lacquered one except it was smaller. Both desks had arrived at the same time, so it was anyone’s guess how Pam had persuaded Kayla to divert from natural to plastic, or even if she’d persuaded Bill Bradford to cover this extra expense.

Holding the duplicate key to Pam’s desk in my hand, I walked over to Kayla’s desk and inserted it into the lock. It worked!

I opened the drawer. The first thing I saw was the faux leopard cover of Pam’s agenda. “It’s here!” I grabbed it. The second thing I saw was a set of keys, which I slipped into my pocket.

“Talk about luck,” Michael said. “How the hell did the cops miss that agenda in their search?”

“They had no reason to search Kayla’s desk,” I said. “Even if they had, they could have assumed it belonged to Kayla. I guess she found a way to control Emily’s snooping problem after all.”

“Don’t keep me in suspense,” he said. “Check it out.”

I flipped through the pages in July, scanning for entries that alluded to Pam’s trip to Pineview. “Here’s a note she wrote two weeks before the trip. The Pineview address is here, the time Tom was going to pick her up…” I turned to

the directory at the back. Names were listed, including Tom's, but like some of the others, it had a line through it. "Okay, we have everything we need to support our case."

"That's great, except for one thing."

"What?"

"How can we prove Emily saw this notation and acted on it?"

"We'll find a way." I shut the drawer and locked it. "I'm hanging onto Pam's agenda for now and the duplicate key from Emily's office. Emily can fret over its disappearance for a while."

"My, my, my," Michael said, grinning. "You're finally showing your ruthless side."

"It's either our heads on the chopping block or someone else's. Right?"

"I've got no problem with that." He surveyed the floor. "Emily is going to have a fit when she sees this mess."

"I'll report it to the security guard downstairs in case he thinks we did it."

Michael shrugged. "Seems to be the pattern these days."

I picked up the phone on Kayla's desk and dialed Carlo's extension. My duty done, I hung up. "He'll report it to administration," I said to Michael. "Are you ready for step two of our plan?"

"Lead the way," he said, with a wide sweep of his hand.

After I shut the lights and locked up, we took the stairs down to the next floor. Taking the elevator would have alerted Carlo that we were traveling between floors and would have raised his suspicions.

"What? No more magic keys?" Michael asked as we stopped at the door to Bradford's graphic arts department.

I reached into my pocket. "You mean these?" I dangled them in the air. "I took—no, borrowed—them from Kayla's desk. Oh, don't look so shocked. I'll put them back later."

"That's the second time you've impressed me tonight," he said. "If you keep this up, I'm going to start feeling inadequate around you."

I laughed. "We're not in the clear. If we get caught breaking into this place with a set of keys that don't belong to us, you might have to eat those words—"

and the keys too.” I unlocked the door.

Moonlight filtered in through horizontal blinds and fell on a hodgepodge of photographic gear, Mac computers, and art tables that Bradford’s photographers, illustrators, and layout artists had abandoned earlier today. Chrome and metal parts glistened in the dim light, giving the illusion they were living apparatus waiting to be assembled and put into action. In a corner, a human persona of sorts seemed to emanate from an umbrella, a studio stand, and a reflector. Even the camera on a tripod appeared lifelike, its lens glinting as we tiptoed by.

I shook off a feeling of being watched and attributed it to guilt from Tom’s passing—and Pam’s too—something I’d have to deal with sooner or later but not now. “It’s dark in here, but I can’t risk switching on the lights.”

“That’s okay,” Michael said, gazing around. “All this metal. Imposing, isn’t it? Like a scene out of *Star Wars*.”

And the battle has just begun.

We came to the end of the floor and turned the corner on the right. Loud rap music reached our ears.

“Someone’s here,” Michael said, his eyes darting to the end of the corridor. The red light over the darkroom door was on.

I glanced around. “Quick. Let’s hide in here.” I led the way into a washroom and shut the door. Big mistake, I realized too late as total darkness cloaked us.

When I was a child, my mother’s old cedar chest in the basement had been my favorite hiding spot—until the day the lock got stuck and I couldn’t get out. I’d almost passed out by the time someone found me. Since then, small, dark spaces affected me horribly, and I avoided them.

My pulse accelerated. So did my breathing.

I opened the bathroom door a crack and breathed in deeply. Much better.

I kept an eye on the red light over the darkroom.

Michael stood behind me, gazing over my head. “This is the digital age,” he whispered. “Bradford still uses darkrooms?”

“The facilities were here when Bill Bradford bought the business decades ago,” I whispered back. “He’s a photography hobbyist and uses the darkroom once in a while. Should we knock at the door?”

“No. I doubt he’d be in there listening to loud rap music. Let’s wait it out.”

The minutes dragged into half an hour. Michael’s bits of conversation calmed me, but as time passed and silence took over, panic welled up inside me again. My chest felt tight and I began to sweat.

I took two deep breaths and focused on the red light over the darkroom door. It was all I could do to keep from rushing out into the corridor, screaming.

Michael sensed my anxiety. “Are you okay, Megan?”

I explained my dilemma.

“If he doesn’t come out in ten seconds,” he said, “I’ll go knock at the door.”

I didn’t have the chance to answer.

The red light went off. The door to the darkroom opened. Rap music blared from inside.

Ray Felton emerged, holding a canister. I expected him to walk past our hiding place, but he stopped as if he’d forgotten something, then returned to the darkroom.

I whispered to Michael, “Did you see anything on the canister?”

“No, it’s too dark.”

The music stopped and Ray reappeared.

As he neared our hiding place, Michael grabbed me by the shoulders and shoved me aside. He didn’t mean to throw me off balance, but I lost my footing and fell.

He charged out of the washroom. “Hey!” he shouted after Ray.

I got to my feet and rushed out in time to see Michael land hard against the wall. I glimpsed Ray’s backside as he rounded the corner.

Michael was doubled up in pain, one arm wrapped around his chest. “Karate kick...I think...he broke my ribs.”

The outer door clicked open, then slammed shut.

“I’ll call the security guard.” I ran to the nearest phone and dialed Carlo’s extension once again. My call was forwarded to his voice mail.

Michael shuffled up to me. “So?”

“Carlo didn’t answer,” I said. “I left a message, but he might not get it in time to stop Ray.”

“Doesn’t matter...could be cyanide inside the canister. One more piece to the puzzle.” He grimaced as he tried to straighten up.

“We might never find out.”

“Do you think...Ray ransacked Emily’s office?” His breathing was strained.

“If he was looking for evidence that might incriminate him.”

“Ray’s connection to Emily...will support our plans.”

I winced with every breath Michael fought to take. “Try not to talk. We’ll deal with Ray later. Right now, I’m going to return the keys to Kayla’s desk. Then I’m taking you to the Royal Victoria Hospital.”

“No...I can’t go there,” Michael said.

I waved my arms. “What are you talking about? You need to see a doctor right away.”

“No way. I have to meet...with my informant.” He checked his watch. “In an hour.”

“Are you out of your mind?”

Meeting with his informant tonight was crucial to Michael's investigative work. Such events didn't occur with frequency, he explained, and a crime reporter had to grab an opportunity when it presented itself. The main challenge was in setting up a rendezvous point that was safe and neutral for both parties.

"I won't get another chance...like this," Michael said, every breath as painful as the last. "I need you...to drive me there."

I pushed the ground level button in the elevator. "You can barely walk, let alone talk."

"I'll...manage."

I battled with my decision for a long moment. "Okay, but we're going straight to the hospital afterward. No ifs or buts."

Carlo was sitting at the front desk when we stepped out of the elevator. When he saw Michael clutching his rib cage, lines deepened across his forehead. "Ray gone," he said. "I check message but too late. So sorry, Mrs. Scott. So sorry." He continued to apologize as he unlocked the front door and let us out.

Michael waited outside the building while I went to get the car. I drove back to pick him up but had to double-park in the no-stopping zone. He spent a full minute getting into the passenger seat. All that groaning and swearing under his breath provided a viable outlet for his pain, and I couldn't help but empathize with him. It was pointless to try to change his mind again about going to the



hospital, so I let it go at that.

A car horn blasted behind us. Another driver honked loudly as he shot past us in the left lane. Montrealers weren't the most patient people when dealing with traffic snags, especially if they occurred on a hot and humid evening.

"Where are you meeting your informant?" I asked Michael.

He grimaced as he buckled up. "Corner of...Saint Catherine Street...and Saint-Laurent Boulevard."

"Are you sure?" I stepped on the gas, ran through a yellow light.

"That's what...the guy said."

"Okay."

"You can wait in the car...if you like."

"Don't you need me to translate for you?"

"Oh...right."

"Does your informant have a name?"

"Goldie."

"How are you going to recognize him?"

"Short blond hair...yellow tank top."

"That's it?"

"Yes."

Saint Catherine and Saint-Laurent. The fact that the streets at this renowned intersection were named after two saints was deceptive, if not paradoxical, given that they crossed in the center of the city's red light district.

Prostitution ranked as old a tradition in Montreal as eating a smoked meat sandwich at Schwartz's, *poutine* at LaFleur, or a steamy hot dog at the Montreal Pool Room. The street trade in the city had dwindled over the decades with the influx of escort services and massage parlors, yet one-third of prostitutes continued to market their wares outdoors.

I drove along Saint-Laurent, also known as The Main to locals. Home to a cosmopolitan mix of restaurants, cafés, clothing stores, theater, summer festivals, and cultural events, its trendy nightclubs and eateries made it a hotspot for the young and hip. True to form, crowds now meandered along the sidewalks in search of a fun night.

I circled the block to discover that all the parking lots were full. I extended my search to a two-block radius, then a three-block radius.

We were now in Lower Main—an area that implied pimps, punks, hookers, drugs, and thieves. People crammed the sidewalks along Saint-Laurent, taking in the bars and explicit strip clubs, sex shops, arcades, and peep shows. Amid the lineup was a sprinkling of concert venues.

I checked the time. With only minutes to get to Michael's rendezvous place, I asked him, "How about I drop you off at your meeting point? After I find a parking space, I'll go meet you there."

"There's no way in hell...I'm going to let you walk alone...on these streets at night," he said, frowning.

I circled the block one more time. Despite the bumper-to-bumper traffic, I got lucky and drove into a vacated spot, grateful that I didn't have to go around the block again.

Michael expended as much grunting and swearing getting out of the car as he had getting into it. But our journey wasn't over. We had to walk two blocks west along Saint Catherine to the rendezvous point.

"Stay close," Michael said, putting his arm through mine.

Perfume and pot mingled in the air and added weight to the humidity.

Neon lights flashed from the façades of clubs and bars.

Bursts of laughter and animated chatter from pedestrians cut into music that boomed from the sky or heaven-knew-where.

Commotion all around.

Michael trudged along beside me. His breathing had worsened, but it did nothing to lessen his determination.

We passed a club that had a sign in large black letters on the door: "No baggy pants or flip-flops." The doorman looked as if he had lifted weights all day or took steroids. He scrutinized the customers waiting in line outside and made a quick selection when someone slipped a few bills into his hand.

Steps ahead, a Paris Hilton lookalike in a tube top, tight skirt, and four-inch heels stood in front of a red door leading to what appeared to be a private club. She smiled at Michael and promised him "a good time, honey."

As we neared our destination, rock music thumped from *Foufounes Électriques*—or Electric Butts. A gigantic black spider hung from the front of the bar-club over alternative music lovers waiting in line to get in. Further up was Metropolis, a concert hall where live bands and artists were featured. Another long lineup.

When we reached the rendezvous point at the corner of the street, Michael leaned against the pillar in front of a Western Union outlet. I stood next to him.

Up the street was a *dépanneur*, a hotel, and an erotica boutique. I suddenly felt conspicuous standing at an intersection known more for its notoriety than anything else. I prayed I wouldn't bump into anyone I knew.

A group of tourists strolled by. Funny how you can tell the visitors from the locals. I watched as they took turns taking pictures against the backdrop of the nightlife before they moved on.

Next up was a slender young couple holding hands and dressed in identical Goth wear—black leather, buckles, lip rings. They had the same haircut and were about the same height.

Three young girls baring midriffs under camisoles giggled as they padded by in their flip-flops, their faces painted up to make them look older. They couldn't have been more than thirteen.

The sun had set but who would have noticed. The neon lights and car headlights lit up the intersection like a sunny day.

I suddenly became aware that my shorts were attracting stares from passersby. Although Michael would be out of my line of sight, I moved to the opposite side of the pillar and within the shadows.

A taxi stopped at the curb and two women stepped out. The blonde wore a short pink dress that clung to her body like paint and revealed enough cleavage to contain a small lake. Her eyeliner was dark and thick. The redhead wore a micro skirt. Her arms had more spiral tattoos than a snake had stripes. Both wore four-inch stilettos. I placed them in their late thirties, early forties. They strolled toward the building and dropped their purses on the ground as if they'd just arrived home.

The blonde noticed me and smiled, then nudged her friend.

The redhead gawked at me. “*Pauvre mignonne*,” she said, then blew me a kiss.

Poor little darling?

In a T-shirt, shorts, and running shoes, I must have passed for a first-year college student working the corner to pay for tuition. A friend of mine had paid her university fees this way but quit turning tricks when she graduated. She’d had no regrets since it had been an easy way to pay the bills—even make a significant down payment on a house. She’d gone on to become a physiotherapist.

When I didn’t react to the women’s antics, the redhead told the blonde it was obvious I was *une anglaise* and I didn’t understand French. With that constraint out of the way, they began to speak in their native tongue and revealed their predicament.

The blonde seemed baffled as she explained to the redhead how she’d solicited *un policier* who had posed as *un client* willing to pay for a good time. How could she have known he was an undercover cop? Her lips formed a pout. She’d seen him drive up to Gigi on other nights and pay up front for services in cash—fifty-dollar bills. Gigi had told her he was *un gentleman*. It was strange, though, that she hadn’t seen Gigi since then.

In what was definitely not Sunday-best French, the redhead cursed at her and blamed her for the *gaffe stupide* that had led to the police hauling them both to jail. Good thing Tony had bailed them out so they didn’t have to spend another night behind bars.

Still arguing, the women picked up their handbags and walked down the block. Every so often, they stood by the curb to wave down motorists.

I glanced at my watch. Goldie was running late. Would he show up? I peeked around the pillar to check on Michael just as someone walked up to him.

“Michael?” the stranger asked him.

“Yes.”

“I am Goldie.”

Michael was supposed to be meeting a man, but I had to stare hard to make certain Goldie fit the bill. A tight-fitting yellow T-shirt revealed small shapely

breasts and a slim build. His hair was white blond, cut high on top, and solidified with a dollop of gel. His skin had that bronze glow you can only get out of a tube and matched his glittering gold eyeshadow. A gold hoop earring dangled from one ear. I pegged him at about twenty, but he could have been thirty.

Goldie gave Michael a quick once-over, then pulled out a slim envelope from his gold shoulder bag and handed it to him. “Willie.”

“Willie? He’s alive? Do you know where he is?”

Goldie squinted, didn’t seem to understand.

“*Une amie*,” Michael said, waving me toward him.

“*Bonjour*.” I told Goldie in French that I was Michael’s translator. I repeated Michael’s questions to him.

Goldie said he knew nothing about Willie. He was told he had to meet Michael and say the envelope was from Willie. “Okay?” His smile was wide and revealed a set of teeth that had benefited from a whitening treatment.

“Okay,” Michael said. “Thank you.”

Another wide smile from Goldie, followed by a slower assessment of Michael from head to foot. He asked if we’d like to go to *Le Village* with him for a drink.

He was referring to The Village located blocks east of the red light district. Gay-friendly establishments were sprinkled throughout the city, but The Village thrived as the hub of gay entertainment and had grown into a popular tourist attraction.

“I can’t go,” Michael said. “I’m busy tonight.”

I translated for Goldie.

“Okay. *Au revoir*.” Goldie gave him a little wave and left.



The steep slope of Pine Avenue along Mount Royal offered a scenic view of the downtown skyline, but I was more focused on getting Michael to the Royal Victoria Hospital further up the road. As a major teaching facility, the “Royal Vic” was a century-old landmark that boasted some of the best doctors in the

country. Michael would be in good hands.

We joined about a dozen people in the hospital ER. Two teens accompanied by their parents had bruises and scrapes to their faces and arms. An elderly couple sat staring at the floor most of the time. A young woman held a baby that cried now and then. Other patients were in various states of discomfort, sporting bandages or slings.

An old Indiana Jones movie was playing on a wall-mounted TV. Scenes where Harrison Ford suffers a series of blows from his attackers drew Michael's attention away from his own pain while we waited for a doctor to examine him.

And wait we did. We had watched most of the movie before Michael's turn came up. It took another hour before they wrapped a bandage around his chest and allowed him to leave.

On our way out, I asked him about the doctor's diagnosis.

"Two broken ribs," Michael said. "No strenuous exercises...or physical activity for a week. Painkillers so I can sleep. Hell, I can barely move...let alone breathe."

I felt responsible for his predicament. Before I realized what I was saying, I suggested he spend the night at my place. "You can use the futon in my office, if you want."

His reaction was predictable, if not amusing. At first he went through the motions of refusing my invitation, claiming he didn't want to be more of a burden to me than he already was, insisting I didn't need the extra work around the house...

I reminded him I'd stocked the fridge earlier today with milk, eggs, cheese, apples, honeydew melon, and strawberries. I promised I'd make him pancakes with maple syrup and apple compote for breakfast the next morning.

He accepted my invitation.

By the time we arrived at the condo, I was exhausted and would have fallen asleep in a wink, but Michael wanted to view the CDs that Goldie had given him. I was about to excuse myself and go to bed when I saw him trying to insert a disc in the CD player. He couldn't. The bindings wrapped around his torso prevented him from bending forward.

I popped the disc in, then settled on the sofa next to him. He'd need my help to pop in the second disc later anyway.

The first CD showed a clip that placed Michael at Willie's gas station in Sainte-Adèle. The film quality wasn't sharp and there was no audio, but it was apparent that it was Michael. He was speaking with a bearded man standing behind the counter.

"Is that Willie?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "That was the last time I saw him."

A date and timestamp at the bottom of the screen confirmed Michael's stopover the night of August 10—the night before Tom's body was discovered.

"Thanks to Willie, you now have an official alibi you can hand over to Moreau."

Michael shook his head. "I can't use this stuff without blowing his cover. He risked his life for me. I owe him that much."

"Willie is dead. What does it matter?"

"We don't know that for sure. If he's alive, I don't want to put him in danger."

"It's your freedom we're talking about, Michael."

He ran a hand through his hair. "Why would someone send me this video out of the blue? It doesn't make sense. Let's sit on it for now. Okay?"

"For now," I said.

The footage on the second CD came as a complete surprise to us. It showed a man in a short jacket entering the same gas station. He was in his thirties, stocky, and short. He kept moving, looking around in a nervous sort of way. He said something to Willie, and Willie shook his head. The man reached over the counter and grabbed Willie by the shirt but let him go when a male customer entered the store.

"I know that guy," Michael said.

"The one who just walked in?"

"No, no, the guy who took hold of Willie. He's Robert Gingras."

"The employee from Pineview?"

"The same one."

“The film quality is poor,” I said. “Are you sure it’s him?”

“Yes,” Michael said. “Same large chest. A slight limp in his right leg. Play it again. You’ll see.”

I clicked the replay button. I noticed the limp this time as Gingras moved about.

“He’s packing,” Michael said. “Can you run the video again?”

I did.

“Right there. Pause it.”

As Gingras stretched over the counter, his jacket inched upward to reveal part of a handgun tucked in his waistband.

“It could be Stewart’s Beretta,” I said.

“I agree,” he said. “It’s starting to make sense now. I’d bet Gingras is involved with illegal drugs in Sainte-Adèle. That’s why Willie sent me this video. It’s a terrific lead.”

I pressed play and watched again as Gingras took hold of Willie. I checked the date and timestamp. “Their meeting took place Tuesday night—the night Willie’s house burnt down. Do you think he found out Willie was an informant?”

“Could be.”

“Maybe Gingras torched Willie’s house later that night.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised. Problem is, where are these guys?”



Dan didn't mince words after Michael and I told him about our excursion to Bradford Publishing. "Have you both gone mad? You could have jeopardized the entire case. Or been killed. You might still end up in jail for a number of infractions." He let his right arm drop against my kitchen table, rattling the coffee cups I'd laid out before he and Jane arrived Friday morning.

"Chill out, buddy," Michael said. "We didn't do anything illegal. We're the bearers of good news." He tried to get comfortable, but the bandages around his ribs hampered his efforts and he grimaced.

"Here's Pam's agenda and the proof we needed." I opened it up on the page with the Pineview notation and handed it to Dan.

"How did you get this?" He accepted it from me.

"With the duplicate key to Pam's desk that Emily hid in her office." I gave him the key.

"Can you prove she used it to get into Pam's desk?" he asked.

"I can do better than that," I said. "I can get you a witness."

"Who?"

"Kayla, Pam's project coordinator. She said Pam locked her desk whenever she left the office. She saw Emily in Pam's office flipping through her agenda whenever Pam was away." I walked over to the counter, picked up the pot of fresh coffee, and began to fill the cups.

"How can you prove that Emily actually saw the Pineview notation in the

agenda?” Jane asked me. “She could have been looking for something else.”

She almost made me feel as if I were on trial and had to defend myself. I milked it for what it was worth. “No one saw who murdered Tom and Pam either, yet the police suspect Michael and me.”

Her hand flew to the bow of her tie neck blouse.

Had I unnerved her?

Jane composed herself. “We should question Emily about her eavesdropping habit,” she said to Dan across the table. She waited, expecting a response, but either he was too busy studying Pam’s agenda or he didn’t feel like answering her.

“Forget it,” Michael said. “She’d deny it.” He leaned forward to reach the sugar bowl but fell short and groaned.

“Here, let me help.” Jane was sitting next to him. “Two cubes, right?” She moved in closer to Michael and stretched over to pick up the cubes with her fingers.

She was wearing a short skirt. He was wearing cargo shorts. I’d have predicted her bare knee would make contact with his thigh and it did.

“There you go.” Jane dropped the cubes in his coffee but did nothing to break the physical contact between them.

“Thanks.” Michael watched as Jane picked up a spoon and stirred his coffee in slow circles. He reached for the cup, leaving Jane holding the spoon in mid-air. “I’ve been taking too many painkillers,” he said. “What was I saying?”

Jane’s flirting with Michael upset me, and I set the coffee pot back on the burner with an unintended clatter. In response to Michael’s question, I said, “You suggested that Emily would deny she peeked in Pam’s agenda. It means she couldn’t have seen the Pineview notation that Pam wrote.”

“Yeah, it would be her word against Kayla’s,” Michael said, getting back on topic. “At least Ray’s connection to cyanide turned out to be more than an illusion.”

“If it can be proven the canister contained cyanide,” Dan said as he continued to leaf through Pam’s agenda.

“I’d bet it did,” Michael said. “Ray’s attack means he’s hiding something.

Moreau should investigate.”

“I’ll see that he does.” Dan peered at a page in the agenda. “Megan, what do you make of this?” He showed me a note Pam had written weeks before her death. It read: *Call from Mrs. B. B. linked to E.S. Fix ASAP.*

“B.B. must be Bill Bradford,” I said. “E.S. is Emily Saunders.” I put it together. “We already know Mrs. Bradford accused Pam of having an affair with her husband. Maybe Pam found out that Emily had leaked word of it to Mrs. Bradford.”

“Easy.” Michael grinned at me as I took a seat next to Dan. “All she had to do was place one of her anonymous phone calls.”

“It can be traced,” Dan said. He jotted something in his notebook before turning his attention back to Pam’s agenda. “Lots of names in the directory at the back. No record of Bill Bradford, though. Are you sure Pam was seeing him?”

“No, but Mrs. Bradford thought so,” I said. “It would explain why she showed up at Pam’s office that day and chewed her out.”

“Didn’t you tell me Pam had denied the affair?” Dan asked.

“Yes,” I said.

Jane stared at me. “Pam lied. It’s what any woman who was having an affair would do under the circumstances, don’t you think?”

Was this about Pam or me?

Michael was gazing into his cup of coffee. Dan’s attention was glued to Pam’s agenda. Neither of them had caught the contempt I’d seen in Jane’s eyes.

“If you’re asking if I’d lie about having an affair,” I said, meeting her glare, “I don’t know. It depends on how much the truth would hurt others.”

Jane smiled like a Cheshire cat and picked up her cup of coffee. If her intention had been to irritate me by implying I’d had an affair with Michael, then she’d succeeded.

I sipped my coffee and turned my thoughts to the alleged affair between Pam and Bill Bradford. My instincts told me Pam was telling the truth—she hadn’t been seeing her boss on the sly. “Dan, can I see Pam’s note again, please?”

Dan flipped back to the page and handed me the agenda.

I examined the spacing between the letters. It was off. “Mmm... I think I

read this wrong. Maybe Pam wrote: *Call from Mrs. B.* Insert a space here. *B. linked to E.S.*”

Michael gaped at me. “Bill Bradford and Emily?”

“Some women prefer dating more sophisticated men,” I said, tongue-in-cheek.

“This is getting juicier by the minute.” Michael grinned. “Dan? Any thoughts on this?”

Dan joined in. “Let’s assume Emily saw this note. Assumed Pam was going to fix things by telling Mrs. Bradford about her. It must have terrified Emily.”

“No kidding,” Michael said. “Everyone knows how the rich handle the slightest threat of a scandal. When a load of money is in the balance, nest disturbers can disappear without a trace. Just like that.” He snapped his fingers.

“I agree,” Jane said. “Money talks. It’s as simple as that.”

“Pam had one good quality,” I said. “She was organized.” I flipped through subsequent pages and found another notation. “Listen to this. On the Monday after the trip to Pineview, she wrote a follow-up memo: *Call Mrs. B. Fire E.S.*”

“The icing on the cake,” Michael said.

“If Emily saw this memo, she could have acted on it.” I kept the agenda open on the page and handed it to Dan.

“Fear of being trapped can make some people desperate,” he said.

“And the fear of alienation can increase it,” Jane said, her tone somber.

I voiced my own theory. “This means Emily could have been desperate enough to commit murder.”

“It’s a solid foundation for motive, isn’t it?” Michael asked Dan.

Dan didn’t answer. He was peering at another page in Pam’s agenda. He flipped back through the pages and forward again. “Another memo. Days after the first Bradford memo, Pam wrote: *Check out Pineview. Emily’s recommended number one hotspot.*”

“So Emily had already visited Pineview herself,” I said.

“Or she casually mentioned she knew someone who had stayed there and enjoyed it,” Jane said, squelching my theory. “Then Pam told Tom about it and he made the arrangements.”

My breath caught in my throat. “What?”

Dan jerked upright. “Jane, I don’t encourage unsubstantiated remarks from my team.”

“None intended,” she said to him. “My comments were simply hypothetical.”

“Moving on,” Dan said, “Pam’s agenda offers valuable leverage if Moreau presses charges and we have to go to court.” He put it aside. “He would have discovered it had the police searched the offices at Bradford, but they would have needed a warrant to do that—which Moreau didn’t request.”

“Because he’s already convinced Megan and I are guilty,” Michael said.

“I’ll pass it along to Moreau after we’re done with it,” Dan said. “It might help your defence by pointing him to another suspect and save you some explaining.” He raised an eyebrow in our direction.

“We didn’t steal it,” Michael said. “We just borrowed it. Like Kayla did.”

“I agree,” I said. “If the police had found Pam’s agenda in Kayla’s desk, Kayla would have had some explaining to do.”

“All right.” Dan opened another folder. “Jane, did you follow up on Peter Ewans?”

“Yes,” she said. “I told him we did a background check on him and his former places of employment, in particular, the chemicals plant. I asked if he was aware of the symptoms of cyanide poisoning. He admitted he was. In fact, he said he suspected as much when he saw Tom and Pam on the floor. It was the reason he hadn’t tried to break into the cottage.”

“It would have been too late anyway,” I said.

“There’s more,” Jane said. “Megan, remember the picture of Tom and Pam that you received in the mail?”

“Yes. What about it?”

“Peter sent it. He owned up when the police asked him for his fingerprints. He thought you should know and asked me to pass along his apologies to you.”

“He was trying to warn me...about Tom.” My voice cracked.

An awkward silence hung in the air.

Michael tinkered with his coffee cup.

Dan cleared his throat. “Anything else, Jane?”

“Peter admitted he tampered with the wheel on Tom’s Ford,” she said.

Michael’s eyes went wide. “What? Do the police know this?”

“It’s not what you think,” Jane said. “He loosened the tire on the Ford because he wanted to kill himself on a back road by racing the car into a tree. Tom spoiled his plans when he asked him to drive it over to the condo. Peter claims he was depressed at the time. He forgot about the loose tire when he drove the car over to your place, Megan.”

“So we can eliminate him as a suspect once and for all,” Michael said, giving me a knowing look.

One thing was for certain: Peter’s elimination as a suspect paved the way to put our secret plans into motion and prove Emily’s guilt.

Dan pulled out another folder. “I personally obtained testimony from the staff at the Elegance regarding Anita’s death.”

Jane blinked. “When did you go there, Dan?”

“Last night,” he said.

“You should have called me or paged me. I would have been happy to interview—”

“You were busy.”

“No, I wasn’t.”

“All right, Jane.” His tone was firmer than usual.

She didn’t say another word. I could almost hear the wheels inside her head come to a screeching halt.

Dan continued. “I spoke with the supervisor of the cleaning staff at the Elegance. She was making the rounds Wednesday when she discovered Anita’s body. Her statement meanders. I’ll paraphrase it.” He glanced down at the report. “Anita was spread out on the bed. Her uniform was torn. She was covered in blood—especially in the stomach area. I couldn’t believe she was dead.” He glanced up. “The unofficial cause of death is a gunshot wound.”

“Did anyone hear any shots?” Michael asked.

“No,” Dan said.

“He could have used a silencer or muffled the shot with a pillow.”

“Possibly.”

“If her uniform was torn, she must have struggled with the killer,” I said.

“Forensics is running DNA tests on her body,” Dan said.

“What about the hotel videotapes?” Michael asked him.

“Under police analysis, I assume. Which reminds me. The voice messages on your hotel phone couldn’t be analyzed. Too few words. Sorry about that.”

Michael held his hands up. “Hey, you win some and you lose some. My gut feeling tells me Emily made those calls.”

“Dan, any news on her alibi?” I asked.

“No.” His cell phone rang. He fished it out of his pocket and answered. “All right. Tell him we’ll be there.” He flipped the phone shut. “Detective Moreau wants to meet with us at the station right away. No idea why.”

My guess was that Anita’s murder had thrown the detective’s investigation out of whack. He’d have a tough time putting the blame for her demise on Michael and me. Thanks to Moreau, we’d learned our lessons the hard way.

We’d kept receipts from every place we’d gone to and every purchase we’d made since the day he started to point the finger at us. If we couldn’t obtain a paper trail, we took photos or videos of ourselves in our surroundings to have a digital record of the date and time they were taken. As a result, we could substantiate our alibis in case any more dead bodies fell across our path.

And Anita’s was all it took.

My spirits soared. We were prepared for any new ramifications Moreau might hurl our way.

Except for one.

**I**t was our good fortune that we weren't escorted to another drab interrogation room to meet with Detective Moreau. But as we stepped into a storage room at the QPP headquarters that functioned as his temporary office, it was apparent an interrogation room would have been a step up.

A wood desk, a table lamp, four different vinyl chairs, and a two-drawer filing cabinet looked as if they'd been collected from other offices in the building and thrown together to provide makeshift facilities for the detective. Cardboard boxes holding archives dating back to the 60s were stacked three rows high and six wide along the back wall.

On my left, Dan was busy reviewing his notes. He hadn't asked Jane to come along. On my right, Michael's breathing was difficult despite the support bandages hugging his chest. He'd told me it was less painful if he moved slowly or not at all—which explained why he sat staring straight ahead and motionless, like an embalmed mummy.

As we waited for Moreau to arrive, I must have checked my watch a dozen times, swearing in silence as the minutes stretched to an hour. Why did he stress the urgency of the meeting, only to keep us waiting in limbo this long?

Red, white, and blue pushpins secured photos of the ten most wanted criminals to a bulletin board on the wall behind the desk. I'd glanced at their faces so often that I was confident I could pick each one of them out of a police lineup with no trouble.



The door finally opened and Moreau stepped into the room. As usual, he didn't say a word or make eye contact with us until he'd taken a seat and turned on the audio recorder.

"I would like to discuss a matter that has come to my attention." The detective's tone was polite for a change. I took it as a sign of weariness in his efforts to find Tom's killer—and now Anita's. "Bradford Publishing has filed a police report concerning damages to the office of Emily Saunders. Your clients were implicated, Monsieur Cummings."

"My clients discovered the intrusion and reported it to the security guard." Dan described Michael's physical confrontation with Ray Felton and his ensuing visit to the hospital. "On behalf of my client, I'm lodging an assault complaint against Ray Felton."

"I regret your misfortune, Monsieur Elliott." Moreau passed a hand over his mustache. "However, I question if the intrusion was intended to be a diversion."

Dan leaned forward. "What are you implying, Detective?"

"Someone is misleading the police on purpose. All is not what it appears to be, as they say. Perhaps your clients caused the disorder at Bradford."

*What?* I bit my tongue.

"Experience has taught me to keep an open mind," Dan said. "Emily Saunders might have staged the break-in to appear victimized. Or someone might have ransacked her office in search of incriminating evidence. Merely assumptions, of course." He sat back.

Moreau asked, "What incriminating evidence?"

"To repeat, my theories are hypothetical."

"Monsieur Cummings, are you telling me how to do my job?"

Dan stiffened. "One thing we both want to avoid is tunnel vision. Another is the possibility of miscarriage of justice. Not to mention costly court cases."

Moreau seemed to contemplate his words. "If your clients are as innocent as you claim, I can only conclude that they seem to invite trouble wherever they go."

Dan had cautioned us against speaking out of turn—if at all. So I held back from asking Moreau if he thought I'd thrown myself into oncoming traffic too.

“My clients are targets,” Dan said. “Until the real killer is found, their lives are at risk.”

The detective turned off the recorder. “New evidence has come to light that will allow us to close in on the perpetrators soon.”

“Are you saying you know who’s responsible for Tom’s murder?” I asked, breaking my silence.

“I cannot reveal information without compromising the investigation,” Moreau said.

“Tom was my husband,” I said. “I have the right to know.”

“I regret, Madame Scott, but I cannot discuss this matter with you.”

“Does Anita Castillo’s alleged murder have anything to do with this?” Dan asked him.

“I regret, but I cannot disclose any more information.” Moreau stood up. “Our meeting is over. Thank you for coming.”

That Moreau hadn’t interrogated Michael and me about Anita was baffling. He obviously had no reason to link us to her murder, though I had to admit we were anticipating the challenge and were more than equipped for it than he could possibly know. We’d brought along receipts and photos to validate our alibis over the past week.

Moreau’s mention of perpetrators threw me off, though. Did he suspect more than one killer was involved?



After our meeting with Moreau, Dan returned to his hotel room to catch up on paperwork. Michael and I took a taxi to the Elegance.

Michael’s cell phone rang minutes after we’d arrived at his suite.

He answered. “Hi, Jane... For dinner? Hang on. I’ll ask Megan.” He put her on hold. “Jane wants to know if we’d like to join her and Dan for dinner at seven tonight.”

I suppressed an urge to laugh out loud. I pictured Jane rolling her eyes when Michael asked her to wait on the line while he checked with me.

My next impulse was to refuse her invitation. Why would I want to sit through dinner with Jane?

I gave her invitation more consideration. At the least, it offered a chance to get to know her better. I might even discover she possessed a warmer, more social side behind that glacial exterior. And Dan would be joining us. Michael would love to spend more time with his best friend and catch up on mutual topics.

“Okay, if you want to,” I said before I was tempted to change my mind.

After Michael ended the call, he went to the bedroom to change his clothes. Since he’d slept at my place the night before, I’d lent him one of Tom’s tops to wear at our meeting with Moreau earlier. He no doubt felt more comfortable wearing his own clothes.

I turned on the TV. The mid-day news broadcast was on.

A reporter was talking about a man whom the provincial police considered a person of interest in an alleged murder. The picture of a bearded man appeared. He looked familiar. Then I recognized the name in the banner at the bottom of the screen: William Perron.

“Michael, come see this,” I shouted. “Willie is on the news. Hurry!”

He rushed from the bedroom to hear the report in progress: “...burnt body discovered in the aftermath of a blaze that destroyed William Perron’s home in Sainte-Adèle this week.” A film clip of Willie’s burnt house played over the reporter’s commentary. “The victim has been identified as Robert Gingras.” A headshot of Gingras appeared next. “The police are investigating and urge anyone with information to contact...”

I turned off the TV. “Now we know what happened to Gingras.”

“It explains a lot,” Michael said. “I’ll bet Gingras went there to kill him. If Willie’s still alive, he’s one lucky guy.” He slipped a navy blue T-shirt over his head with one hand but groaned in pain as he tried to get his arms through the sleeves. He grumbled in exasperation as the T-shirt remained wrapped around his neck. “It was so much easier taking it off.”

I walked over and pulled on his T-shirt so he could get his arms through the sleeves. “I hope they don’t charge Willie with murder.”

“Thanks.” He tugged on his T-shirt, letting it fall over his beige cargo shorts. “I’d bet it was self-defense.” He grew silent, thinking. “Gingras could have had the Beretta on him. Did the news report say anything about finding a gun?”

“No,” I said. “Maybe the police found it and returned it to Stewart Kirk.”

“There’s one way to find out.” Michael dug out his cell phone from a pocket. “I’ll call Pineview.” He waited while the receptionist transferred his call. “Hi, Stewart. It’s Michael Elliott... Yes, I saw the coverage on TV too. Tell me, have the police found your Beretta?... No, nothing new at this end... I will. Okay. Thanks.” He hung up. “No news on the gun. He’ll let me know if it shows up.”

“If the police didn’t find his gun in the fire, maybe Willie has it,” I said.

Michael shrugged. “Could be.”

“The police will be looking for Willie. It doesn’t seem fair.”

“I know,” he said. “Right now, we need to deal with that other urgent matter.”

In the midst of trying to prove our alibis for that critical Friday evening, Michael and I hadn’t lost sight of our impending dilemma. We were still suspects in the Pineview murders until Moreau took us off his list.

The only way out of our quandary was to lure the real killer into a trap. We agreed to keep Dan and Jane completely out of it. They wouldn’t consent to such a risky venture anyway. Above all, we didn’t want to throw away the last chance we had of getting evidence that would clear our names. Emily’s confession would prove crucial to our freedom and to her subsequent arrest.

“Okay, let’s recap our reasons for suspecting Emily before we launch our plan,” Michael said as we sat in our usual places around the coffee table. “We need to make sure we didn’t miss anything.”

I read the notes I’d jotted on my canary yellow notepad out loud. “Emily had a duplicate key to Pam’s desk. Kayla caught her going through Pam’s agenda several times. They were potential occasions for Emily to see Pam’s plans for spending the weekend at Pineview. Pam’s reminder note to tell Mrs. Bradford the truth about Emily’s affair with her husband was the catalyst that triggered the murders. Emily’s fear led to desperation and her decision to get rid of Pam. That Friday night, she drove to Pineview—a place she’d visited before—and slipped

into the cottage to plant the cyanide.”

Michael added to the list. “The anonymous phone calls, here and at your office. All those lies Emily told the police about us. Since Moreau believed we were having an affair, we became his prime suspects.”

Our kiss was still fresh in my mind. I blinked it away. “I have more notes. Emily was one of the few people who knew your room number at the Elegance. She was jealous of our relationship and angry with you because you ignored her, so she sought revenge. She bribed Anita to open up your hotel room so she could plant the cyanide there.”

“Cyanide that Emily got with Ray’s help,” Michael said. “She was clever and covered her tracks. She had Anita killed.”

“I was an obstruction in Emily’s path to you,” I said. “She tried to kill me by shoving me into the traffic.” I put my pen down. “Now tell me how you’re going to approach Emily.”

“I’ll get her to admit she knew about Pam’s trip to Pineview beforehand. If I’m lucky, she’ll reveal other details only the killer would know. Like how she got the cyanide and where she planted it in the cottage.”

“What about the recording equipment?”

“A friend of mine—a real techie nerd—hid a tiny wireless spy camera and receiver in the plant.” He gestured to the potted plant on the credenza. “It’s set up to record and view on my laptop in the bedroom. We’re good to go at the push of a button.”

If I had any misgivings about setting a trap for Emily, it was about personal safety. Not mine, but Michael’s. “You realize you’re putting yourself out there, don’t you?” I said. “If you have any doubts, tell me now. We don’t have to go through with this.”

“We have no choice,” he said. “We’re running out of time. I’m calling Emily right now.” He reached for his phone. When she didn’t answer, he left a message and hung up. “Let’s hope she takes the bait and accepts my invitation for later tonight.”

“She’s a fool if she doesn’t. I mean—” It was too late to take back the words.

Michael smiled at me. “I have something for you.” He walked over to the

credenza and removed a tiny blue jewelry box from behind the plant. “I want you to have this. It belonged to my grandmother.” He handed it to me.

I opened the box. Inside was a diamond pendant. I recognized it as the piece of jewelry Jane had removed from her purse the first time I saw her in his suite. “Michael, I can’t—”

“My grandmother believed it had the power to keep the person who wore it safe. She gave it to me after I got my first job as a reporter. I took it with me when I went to investigate leads. I wasn’t much of a believer in this kind of stuff, but something kept me out of danger every time.”

“What about the day Ray kicked you in the ribs?”

“I didn’t have it with me.” He gave me a sheepish grin. “Please, Megan, wear it for me.”

“Okay.” I held my hair up while he tied the clasp in the back. His hands were gentle on my shoulders as he slowly turned me around to face him. The way he stared at me unnerved me. A familiar feeling fluttered inside me, and my knees went weak. I couldn’t move if I tried.

“Maybe this isn’t the right moment,” he said, “but I’m going to say it anyway. Those weeks we spent working together, the dinners we shared...” He let out a deep breath. “It was so hard to concentrate on my writing and keep my hands off you. But you were married and I respected that.”

So it wasn’t just about having a dinner companion after all.

Michael slid his arms around my waist and held me closer. “I’m tired of pretending you don’t mean anything to me.” He whispered my name and kissed me, obliterating all real and imaginary threats.

My heart waged war with my conscience. How could I deny a bond that felt so right?

I put my hands around his neck and kissed him back, feeling the thrill that only a true connection between two people can bring.

Michael’s cell phone rang but he ignored it.

“It could be Dan,” I said, putting space between us.

He retrieved his phone and checked the display. “Private number. Might be important.” He answered. There was talking at the other end of the line. “Yes,

sure... No problem... Okay.” He hung up and a smile stretched across his face.  
“You’ll never guess who that was.”

“Who?”

“Willie. He wants to meet with me at Berri metro station. Want to come along as my translator?”

It was a short ride along the green line of *Le Metro* to Berri-UQAM—the largest station and hub of the subway service.

The central concourse was a vast open space. In the middle of the open space was a circular black granite bench known as *la rondelle*, or the hockey puck. It was a popular meeting place for the students from *Université du Québec à Montréal*, or UQAM, through two underground corridors that linked the university to this section.

Willie wanted to meet with Michael at the hockey puck.

While we waited, groups of students gathered about, but Willie was nowhere in sight.

“What if he changed his mind?” I said to Michael.

“He’ll show up,” he said.

With each train arrival, crowds of people crisscrossed the central concourse. They rushed through the turnstiles on four sides that led from different lines within the transit system—a continuous hodgepodge of commuters.

I spotted a man in tattered pants, a dark T-shirt with the Québec *fleur-de-lis* on it, and a red baseball cap. He was heading in our direction at a slower pace than other commuters. He had no beard, so I disregarded him.

“That’s him,” Michael said.

Willie’s shoulders were broad but hunched, making his chest appear concave. Muscular arms indicated he was used to physical labor, as did the rough



appearance of his hands. Under a baseball cap, a lazy eye might have given the impression he wasn't as astute as the next person, though I suspected otherwise.

"*Bonjour.*" Willie shook Michael's hand and smiled, revealing a missing tooth on the right side of his mouth.

When Michael introduced me, Willie's expression changed. He looked as if he were going to run off.

"*Une amie,*" Michael said to him. "She's a close friend."

"*Je vais traduire pour Michael et pour vous,*" I said to Willie, hoping to put him at ease by explaining I'd translate for Michael and him.

Willie hesitated for a moment, then nodded okay.

We moved off to a more secluded spot along a wall.

Michael began. "I saw the news on TV," he said to Willie. "I know that Gingras' body was found in the fire that destroyed your home. Did you kill him?"

Willie said no sir, as God was his witness. He proceeded to relate what had happened.

He'd fallen asleep in the living room late that night while watching the news. The back door creaked and woke him up. He'd lived in the same house for thirty years and never locked his doors. Everyone in town knew he had nothing worth stealing. Since his friends don't drop by in the middle of the night, he was certain that whoever had entered the house wanted to do him harm.

The house was pitch black, Willie said, except for an oil lamp that he kept on low flame in the kitchen. He grabbed the flashlight he kept by the armchair in case the lights went out—happened a lot during bad storms. He heard water or some liquid splashing on the wood floor in the hallway. When he smelled gasoline, by God, he knew he was in big trouble.

He turned on the flashlight and saw Gingras. The fool dropped the container of gasoline and pulled out a gun. That's when he jumped on Gingras. They wrestled and the gun went off. Willie wasn't hurt, and he didn't know if a bullet had hit Gingras, but he managed to wrestle the gun away from him.

Gingras slipped away and ran toward the back of the house. In his hurry, he knocked over the oil lamp on the kitchen table, and flames exploded all around

him.

Willie said he had to save himself, so he ran like the devil out the front door. Never ran as fast in his life. He ran all the way to the gas station and hid there until the place opened up in the morning. He called a friend who picked him up and drove him to Montreal. He found out Gingras was dead when he saw the news report today.

“Where’s the gun?” Michael asked him.

Willie said he had the gun. He was going to the police right after our meeting. He had to do what was right.

“It was self-defense,” Michael said to him. “You have nothing to worry about.”

Willie said he hoped the police thought so too.

“I watched the video you sent me—the one with Gingras in it. How did he find out you were my informant?”

Willie said no sir, Gingras didn’t know he was an informant.

“He didn’t? Why did he threaten you at the gas station?”

Willie said Gingras wanted the video from the gas station and promised something very bad would happen if he didn’t hand it over. Willie figured the video must be important if a bum like Gingras wanted it so badly. Earlier that same night, before he left work to go home, he asked a friend to ensure that the video got delivered to Michael.

Michael frowned. “I’m confused. Gingras wanted the video that showed him assaulting you. Right?”

No sir, Willie said. Gingras wanted the other video—the one with Michael in it.

The popular Spaghetti Factory was located on Saint-Paul Street in *Le Vieux-Montréal*. The restaurant shared the area with numerous eateries and boutiques along the narrow cobblestone streets of Old Montreal where the city was born in the mid-1600s.

Michael and I stepped inside. The wood and stone interior was rustic and inviting and reflective of traditional family values, as my mother would say. A delicious aroma of meat sauce and freshly baked bread instantly aroused my appetite, and I couldn't wait to order dinner. I hoped the service was quick. The place was air-conditioned, and I was glad I'd worn a shawl wrap over my cotton sundress.

Jane waved at us from a table off to the side. She'd done her hair in large curls and pinned it up, letting a few strands fall to her shoulders. She looked attractive in the little black dress and chunky three-strand pearl choker. A bit too fancy for dinner here, though.

Was she trying to impress Michael?

"Dan won't be joining us," she said as we sat down opposite her. "He's caught up with a legal case in Toronto. He asked me to convey his apologies."

"Too bad," Michael said. "Not that I don't enjoy the present company." He smiled at Jane and me.

Jane reached for her empty glass. "How about a drink? I could use another one. Any objections to white wine?"

We had no time to reply.

“Waiter!” She called out as one hurried by. After she’d placed an order for a bottle of *Sauvignon Blanc*, she lost no time in getting to the real reason behind her invitation. “So tell me, Michael, what are your plans once the murder investigation blows over?” She smiled as she ran her fingers along her pearl choker, caressing it, openly flirting with him.

“No plans,” he said. “I can’t think that far ahead. Things are still in flux.”

“Oh, come on,” Jane said. “The investigation is almost over. It’s a done deal.” The tone of her voice inspired trust as her eyes rested on Michael.

“How is it a done deal?” I asked. “The last we heard, Moreau still suspects us.”

“It’s simple,” Jane said, switching her gaze to me. “You have to see it from a legal standpoint. Let me explain it to you.” She leaned forward as if I were hearing-impaired as well as dim-witted. “It all comes down to motive. Whoever has the strongest motive for murder gets the detective’s vote.”

“You make it sound like a contest,” I said.

“Trust me. I’ve seen a lot of trials go in unexpected directions all because of motive.” She leaned back.

“Motive,” Michael echoed. “So where do we stand on that basis?”

“It all depends,” Jane said.

“On what?”

“On which suspect they believe had the most to gain.”

She couldn’t possibly be referring to a choice between Michael and me.

I joined her senseless game and played dumb. “I thought we’d agreed Emily had won that round.”

“It doesn’t mean the police have come to the same conclusion, now does it?” Jane gave me a half-smile, which by now I took as a sign she was toying with me.

“I doubt Moreau has another suspect in mind,” Michael said. “We’ve eliminated anyone else who might have had a motive. He must have gone through the same elimination process.”

“A real killer flies under the radar,” Jane said.

“What are you saying? That we’ve made a mistake?”

“It’s possible,” Jane said.

“Dan didn’t seem to have a problem with our reasoning,” I said. “Besides, Emily’s alibi is unconfirmed.”

“Trust me,” Jane said. “Dan is only going through the motions to appease your little fantasy about her.”

“Fantasy?” I repeated. “How can you say that? We have proof that she—”

“Stop.” Jane raised a hand. “We’ve talked shop long enough. This is supposed to be a fun night, right?” Her mouth twitched upward in a forced smile.

I was speechless.

As if another person had just sat down in her place, Jane digressed to a different topic. “Michael, remember the last time we came here for dinner?” Not waiting for an answer, she said to me, “It was about three weeks ago. After dinner, we went to *La Ronde* and watched the most spectacular fireworks. The International Fireworks Competition. Right, Michael?”

“Yes,” he said, his tone even. “We watched the entries from the United States and other countries.”

“They really know how to put on a show,” Jane said. “We had a fantastic time, didn’t we? We’ll have to come back next summer. We can catch a performance by *Cirque du Soleil*.” Her eyes got all dreamy as she waited for him to reply.

Michael gave her a vague nod and looked away as if something or someone had drawn his attention. The tiny muscle on his left jaw pulsed but was visible only to me. He was reaching a breaking point.

The waiter arrived. He uncorked the wine and poured some into Jane’s glass. She took a sip. “It’s fine.”

The waiter proceeded to fill our glasses. “Are you ready to order?” he asked. Good. I was famished.

But Jane had other plans. “Come back in ten minutes.” She motioned him away. “Cheers!” She lifted her glass, prompting Michael and me to clink our glasses with hers.

I took a sip and seized the opportunity to change the subject while she buried

her face in her glass. I feigned ignorance and said, “Jane, Dan spoke very highly of you when he took on our case. He mentioned you were working for another legal firm before you joined his team.”

“Yes, for a big Toronto law firm,” she said.

“The job market is really tough these days. I’ve heard of lawyers who graduated last year who can’t find a job. How did you manage to go from one legal firm to another so quickly?”

“I offered Dan a couple of corporate accounts and the big bucks to go with them. Which reminds me, Michael. Have you decided what you’re going to do about your grandmother’s settlement?”

He lowered his eyes. “I don’t want to get into it right now.”

“Why not? We’re among friends.” She gave me a cursory glance. “Of course, I have a considerable advantage over Megan in that area, but I can be flexible. If you don’t want to talk about it, we can chat about other things, like a special place we could go visit when we get back to Toronto...”

I tuned her out. Her mind games were getting on my nerves. What was she trying to tell me anyway? That she and Michael were close friends? Lovers? And what was her fixation with Michael’s finances?

My stomach was growling. A waiter had just unloaded a tray of pasta dishes at the table next to ours and the aroma was making my mouth water. Other patrons who had been seated at tables at the same time as us were already enjoying their soup or salad entrées. A handful of people were lined up at the front door, waiting to get in.

Hunger overtook annoyance as I scanned the premises for our waiter. I was determined to get his attention the moment I spotted him. To hell with Jane. She could drink herself into oblivion for all I cared. I needed to eat something and soon.

As if hunger pains weren’t causing me enough anguish, it was getting warm in the place, even with the air conditioning on. I removed the wrap I was wearing and hung it on the back of my chair.

“...lots to see and do along the harbor front in August and—” Jane stopped and zoomed in on the diamond pendant I was wearing. She squinted. “Michael,

is that your grandmother's pendant around Megan's neck?"

"Yes," he said.

Her eyes narrowed. "Didn't you tell me your grandmother was special...that one day, you'd give her pendant to someone just as special?"

"I did," he said. "I gave it to Megan."

Jane's lips quivered ever so slightly. "I thought you and I had a special relationship."

"You and I didn't have a relationship."

"We dated in Toronto, didn't we?"

"For a while."

"And then we dated here in Montreal, didn't we?"

He looked down, didn't answer.

Jane raised her voice. "You stayed the night in my hotel room, didn't you?"

Michael shifted in his chair. People were beginning to stare. "Can we drop the subject?" he whispered.

"Oh, I get it. You think I'm not good enough for you. That's why you didn't give *me* the diamond pendant, isn't it?"

The temperature in the place dropped by ten degrees.

Michael remained calm. "Jane, you're blowing this way out of proportion."

"No, I'm not." Her body tensed up. "It's obvious that married women are what you're into these days."

I met her glare of contempt straight on. "What's your problem, Jane?"

"You never cease to amaze me." Anger flashed in her eyes.

Her reaction rattled me more than words ever could, but I held my own. "What are you talking about?"

"How you manage to come across as so innocent."

"Please—" Michael began.

"Excuse me. I have to go powder my nose." Jane clutched her purse and stood up.

She moved from the table so fast that she didn't see him coming and collided with a young waiter carrying a tray of empty glasses. It toppled and crashed to the floor in a clatter.

Applause and cheers exploded from patrons in a gesture of understanding.

Jane wasn't as supportive. Some liquid had landed on her legs and she bent over to wipe it off. "You clumsy idiot," she yelled at the waiter. "Can't you see where the hell you're going?"

The waiter blushed. "I'm sorry, Ma'am."

"Sorry isn't good enough. You should be fired." Jane rushed away in a huff.

The waiter bent down to pick up the pieces of glass on the floor. He placed them on the tray and scurried away, head bent in embarrassment.

I waited until Jane had vanished around the corner. "Now *that's* a mood swing."

"No kidding," Michael said. "I've never seen her like this."

"Well, whatever she's up to, I don't want any part of it." I stood up.

"Makes two of us." He dug out a couple of twenty-dollar bills and flung them on the table. "Let's get out of here."



**O**n the taxi ride back to the Elegance Hotel, I couldn't stop thinking about Jane's strange behavior at the restaurant. It was as if a bizarre aspect of her personality had surfaced out of the blue and taken control of her mind.

Maybe the murder investigation had put too much strain on her. That one of Moreau's prime suspects was Michael—someone she cared about—had put her all the more on edge. Or maybe she blamed me for having dragged him into this mess.

I remembered the hatred in her eyes and the insults that had spewed out of her mouth after she'd noticed the diamond pendant around my neck. Her conduct had stemmed from nothing more than jealousy. She couldn't accept that Michael was no longer interested in her. Worse, that he showed a genuine interest in me.

Humiliated, Jane had struck out in retaliation. She hadn't spared anyone in her immediate vicinity—not even the young waiter she'd rammed into.

As the taxi weaved its way to Sherbrooke Street, Michael stared out the window and said nothing. He was either embarrassed about Jane's disclosure regarding the intimate details of their relationship or smoldering over her comment about the diamond pendant. Or both.

Although I'd have wanted nothing better than to vent my anger over Jane's conduct at the restaurant, I took my cue from him and didn't say a word.

Michael asked the taxi to stop in front of a deli a few doors from the hotel. In

spite of our wacky confrontation with Jane, his appetite was functioning normally—as was mine.

I glanced at my watch. Eight o'clock. That explained it.

Michael ordered two sandwiches for takeout: turkey, Swiss cheese, tomato, and lettuce on baguettes. He paid for both and asked for a receipt.

We walked back to the hotel in silence. The lobby was filled with a fresh batch of convention-goers, their name tags plastered everywhere but on their foreheads. We picked up a bag of ice on the main floor, then rode the elevator up to Michael's suite in silence.

The passage of time had done nothing to quash my anger over Jane's behavior. It had festered inside me like overheated meat sauce in a pressure cooker ever since we'd left the restaurant.

Michael's calm expression hinted that he didn't share my resentment. Or maybe he was too upset to show his feelings.

No matter. I couldn't contain it any longer. I was going to explode if I didn't vent soon.

We moved along the corridor leading up to Michael's suite and passed a housekeeping cart. A maid was tidying up one of the rooms.

Once out of earshot, I let it all out. "Damn it, Michael. I'm going to call Dan and demand that Jane be removed from our case right now."

"It won't make any difference at this point," he said.

"Why not?"

"Her part in the investigation is over. Dan's wrapping things up...waiting for Moreau to make the next move."

"I don't care. Her behavior was rude. Unacceptable. Dan needs to know."

"I agree, but it's a personal matter." He slid his key card in the slot and opened the door to his suite. "Jane thinks I snubbed her. I swear I never gave her a reason to believe we had a serious thing going on between us." He closed the door behind us.

"She obviously thought you did," I said.

"I already told you about Jane's changing moods," Michael said. "She's Jekyll and Hyde in the flesh."

“Don’t make excuses for her.”

“I’m not. Her mood swings make her unpredictable.”

“Tell me about it.”

“The wine doesn’t help, either. Alcohol brings out the worst in her.”

“You’re making more excuses.”

“I’m just stating the facts.” Michael paused. “She once told me how an old boyfriend had cheated on her. She got drunk one night and slashed the leather seats of his expensive sports car. He never found out it was her.”

I remembered how I’d thrown out the bed sheets after I’d found out about Tom and Pam. It wasn’t as violent as Jane’s hatchet job, but it was nevertheless an act of revenge. “I can understand how she might have felt abandoned, insecure—”

“Insecure,” he said. “Problem is she takes it too far.”

“How?”

“She’s clingy...always wants to be with me. In every way.”

I assumed he meant sex. “Oh.”

“Jane mentioned my grandmother’s inheritance,” he said. “I need to explain why. Remember how I told you my grandmother was killed by a drunk teen who had been driving his father’s car?”

“Yes.”

“The kid’s parents offered my family a million-dollar settlement. By inheritance, I would get a quarter of that amount, but I refused it. I have my own reasons. Jane is trying to change my mind about accepting the money.”

He didn’t have to spell it out for me. Jane was a gold-digger. Since I didn’t want to get involved with his family’s legal battles, I steered the discussion back to our current dilemma.

“Dan thinks highly of Jane,” I said, “but I worry that she won’t represent our legal interests fairly. After the insults she’d hurled at us at earlier, who knows how her attitude would influence her work?”

Michael rubbed his brow. “I agree, but let’s get through tonight first. We’ll deal with Jane later.” He placed the ice and deli bags on the coffee table.

“It’s strange that Emily hasn’t called yet,” I said.

“I’ll check again.” He pulled out his cell phone and looked at the display. “No messages.” He slipped the phone back into the pocket of his cargo shorts. “I’ll check the hotel phone.”

In the meantime, I emptied the ice into a bucket and placed a bottle of white Chardonnay in it. It would be the perfect temperature by the time we’d put our plan in motion. I set the bucket on the credenza next to two wine glasses and a dozen bottles of water that Michael had ordered from room service earlier, along with the Chardonnay.

Michael hung up. “No. Emily didn’t leave a message on this phone either.”

“Let’s give her more time. She’ll call out of curiosity. Or she might just pop up.”

He glanced at his watch. “You’re right. It’s only nine. We have an hour till she gets here. Let’s eat.”

He handed me a bottle of water and took one for himself. We sat in the armchairs and devoured our sandwiches in minutes, neither of us saying a word.

Maybe he was right about Jane. Our altercation with her was personal and had nothing to do with the quality of her legal work, which Dan considered above reproach and commendable. Tattling to him about her would be pointless.

Besides, what would I gain by seeking revenge against someone who suffered from severe mood swings? She had enough problems without me dumping another load on her. After the police wrapped up their investigation, Jane would get on with her life and so would I.

As Michael stood up, he toppled his bottle of water. It spilled over his cargo shorts. “I’ll go change. Be right back.”

I gathered the wrappings from our sandwiches and our empty water bottles and discarded them in the trashcan in the bathroom.

Moments later, Michael returned wearing another pair of cargo shorts. He checked the living room to make sure everything was in order. “You should get going,” he said to me.

“Right,” I said.

“What’s the matter?”

We’d agreed from the start that he had a better chance of extracting

information from Emily than I did. My friendship with her had fizzled, but his offered a flicker of hope. What incriminating details would slip through that girl's lips after a few glasses of wine in the company of a "hot" date?

And yet... "I shouldn't have suggested setting up a meeting with Emily," I said. "It's too dangerous. What if something goes wrong? What if she drops poison into your glass when you're not looking? What if she—"

"Don't worry," Michael said, his voice calm. He moved over to the wireless camera we'd concealed in the leafy plant and turned it on. It would capture every sound and movement in the living room from this point on.

"It's not too late," I said. "We haven't put our plan into action. You can change your mind."

He stared at me. "Are you kidding? And waste a perfect chance to catch a killer?"

"What if we're wrong about her?"

"We're not. I'll bet she's feeling the pressure. You'll see. She's going to do herself in."

If he was feeling the least bit on edge, he hid it well, yet his brave front did nothing to quell my anxiety about the situation. He was prepared to risk his life for our freedom and asked nothing in return. I should have been the one comforting him, telling him everything would work out, but I couldn't.

The hotel phone rang.

Michael picked it up. "Hello. Hello." He frowned. "They hung up."

"Maybe Emily is getting cold feet," I said.

"Or she's checking to see if I'm here or not."

"You think she suspects something?"

"She has no reason to."

"What if she doesn't show up? What if our scheme turns out to be one huge, ridiculous mistake?"

"Let me worry about that." He gave me a reassuring smile.

I admired his confidence, but if Emily didn't take the bait, we wouldn't get another chance to get to the truth. Moreau was closing in on us. It could be a matter of days—even hours.

The phone rang again. Michael picked it up. “Hello. Oh...Emily. Good to hear from you.”

He sounded stiff and unnatural, as if he'd rehearsed those words all night and forgotten what they meant. My heart was beating so loudly, I was certain Michael could hear it too.

“Yeah, it's scary,” he said to her, “but I'm in the clear. It's a different story with Megan, though... Okay, if you promise to keep it between us. The cops are one hundred percent sure she did it... Are you kidding? I won't be seeing her anymore. I cut my ties to her and this whole crazy nightmare.”

Silence while Emily went on about something.

“You're right, I didn't give you a fair chance,” he said. “That's why I called. I'm hoping I can make it up to you tonight. We'll enjoy a bit of wine, easy conversation... Yeah, in my suite. It's more private, if you know what I mean...” He laughed at something she said.

Good. He was beginning to sound more relaxed.

“Yeah, a change of scenery is exactly what I need... Sounds wild. We could go there later. See you soon.” He hung up. “Megan, you'd better go. Don't forget. Take the stairs down to the next floor. You can't risk bumping into Emily on her way out of the elevator on this floor. And leave the hotel through—”

“I know. The rear exit and not the lobby. Then take a taxi back to the condo and wait for your phone call.” I slipped my purse over my shoulder but didn't want to leave Michael standing there without an appropriate sendoff. I moved in closer. “Please, Michael. Promise me you'll be careful.”

“I promise.” In spite of the pain from broken ribs on the mend, he held me tight and kissed me.

I remembered the camera was operational and pulled out of his embrace. “I should go.”

Someone knocked at the door.

I froze. “Oh, no! Emily can't be here already.”

“She must have called from the lobby,” Michael whispered. “Quick. Go hide in the bedroom.”

A second, louder knock resonated throughout the suite as I rushed around the

corner and into his bedroom. I left the door slightly ajar so I could overhear their conversation.

Michael's open laptop was on the dresser facing the foot of the bed. I turned off the volume. I didn't want Emily to follow the echo of her voice to the bedroom and find me here.

I sat on the edge of the bed—my front row seat to the live performance about to take place feet away from me. I expected it to be nothing less than a nerve-racking experience.

The live action played out as Michael stepped from the living room into the foyer and disappeared from the screen. I heard him unbolt the door.

There was a moment of hesitation.

“What the—” Michael began.

“We need to talk.” Jane's voice preceded her on-screen debut.

Michael must have been so surprised and confused when he opened the door and saw Jane standing there instead of Emily. To describe her entrance as dramatic would be an understatement.

She'd taken the pins out of her hair and let the curls cascade to her shoulders. Gone was the little black dress. Instead a blue tank top accentuated ample breasts and a slim waist.

Jane crossed the living room on strappy sandals, her wedge heels enhancing the length of her legs. A wraparound skirt showed off trim thighs and threatened to expose even more. A sheer print scarf wrapped around her neck flowed in the air behind her until she came to a stop by the windows where she turned to face Michael.

He'd shut the door and entered the living room but kept more than a cordial distance—including an armchair—between them. He glanced at his watch, no doubt anticipating that Emily would arrive at any moment. “What’s up? Do you have new information about the murder investigation?”

“No,” Jane said. “I came here to say I’m sorry for behaving like a jealous adolescent at the restaurant earlier.”

She had a hard time pronouncing her words. A few of them were slurred. Maybe she'd finished off our glasses of wine after Michael and I had left the restaurant. Or maybe she kept a bottle in her hotel room and had downed a few swigs before coming over.



“You’re sorry?” The skepticism on Michael’s face was authentic. “You’re kidding me, right?”

“No.” Her eyes rested on him. “I should have known better than to insult you like that.”

She didn’t mention me. On purpose.

“It’s too late,” he said. “The damage is done.”

Jane ignored his retort. “I also want to apologize for mentioning your grandmother’s settlement in front of Megan. It was untimely and inappropriate.” Her tone of voice was one you might use when asked what time of day it was.

Michael waved his arms in the air. “Inappropriate? I’ll tell you what was inappropriate. Your insinuations about Megan and me.”

“You have no right to judge me,” she snapped. “You’re no better. You and Megan disappeared from the restaurant without a word, like I had the plague or something. I didn’t know what to think.”

“Can you blame us?”

“Look, I’ve already apologized. We can stop playing the blame game now.”

“Okay. You apologized. Now please leave.” He gestured toward the door.

“Not yet,” Jane said. “I have a proposition for you.”

Michael glanced at his watch again. “I have nothing to discuss with you. I’m busy.”

Her gaze drifted around the room and rested on the coffee table. “You don’t seem busy to me. No laptop, no pens, no papers—”

“I don’t owe you an explanation.”

“What you owe me is the truth. This is about Megan, isn’t it? Are you hiding her in your bedroom?” She pointed toward the corridor at the other end of the floor. “Is that why you’re trying to get rid of me?”

I panicked. Had I left behind a telltale sign, like my bottle of water with a lipstick smudge on it?

No, I’d disposed of our water bottles along with our sandwich bags.

My purse?

No, I had it with me. It was on the bed.

So why was Jane insinuating I was here?

She had to be fishing. Yes, that's all it was. Fishing.

"She's not here," Michael said. "If you don't believe me, go see for yourself." He folded his arms.

I caught my breath as Jane took a few steps forward. She stopped. "Oh, forget it. I don't have time for silly games."

"Makes two of us. Now please leave." He motioned toward the door again.

Good. He was getting rid of her. Emily had to be in the elevator on her way up by now. The last thing we needed was a face-to-face encounter between her and Jane.

But Jane didn't move. She put her hands on her hips and said, "You're in way over your head, Michael Elliott. You can't deny you could use my legal advice."

"The last time I checked, I had a lawyer and you were working for him," he said.

"The kind of advice I'm prepared to offer you goes far beyond Dan's capabilities."

Michael said nothing.

Jane's voice was soft. "Why do you think I came over here tonight? It's because I care so much about you. I want you to have the best legal representation you can get."

"I already do," he said. "I have Dan."

"I couldn't forgive myself if the police charged you with murder."

"Why should they?"

"Because of Dan's inept defense strategy."

"Inept? What the hell are you talking about?"

"Trust me, I know what you're going through, Michael. The police investigation is putting a terrible strain on you. The prospect of going to jail for the rest of your life must be tearing you apart."

"It's not over by a long shot."

"Oh, I'm afraid it is. Hasn't Dan told you?"

"Told me what?"

Jane feigned compassion. "I so hate to be the bearer of bad news, but Dan

has written off every witness as a potential suspect except Megan and you.”

“That’s impossible,” Michael said. “He knows we’re innocent.”

Jane took a shaky step forward and steadied herself by placing a hand on the back of the armchair. “I know how much you’re hurting inside. Let me help you.” She went up to him, touched his face, and ran her fingers through his hair. “I can make the pain go away.”

I cringed at the sound of her voice.

At the way she touched him.

How her body brushed up against his.

Michael didn’t budge. “The cops think I’m a prime suspect. How the hell can you make that go away?”

“It’s simple. I know you couldn’t possibly have committed such an outrageous act, and I can prove it.” She held her chin up high.

“Giving me a character reference won’t cut it.”

“Let me explain my alternative defense strategy. It won’t take long. If you follow my advice, you’ll have nothing to worry about.”

He moved out of her reach and slid into his usual armchair. He leaned forward and joined his hands. “Okay, I’ll hear you out. You already have all the facts in the case, so what have I got to lose?”

*What was he doing? No, Michael, no! You’re wasting precious time!*

I sprang to my feet and was about to rush out of the room to put an end to their conversation, but something held me back. Instinct—not to mention curiosity.

I sat back down on the bed.

Jane settled in the other armchair, her left profile to the camera. “You’re absolutely right. You have nothing to lose and so much more to gain if you trust me.” As she crossed her legs, her wraparound skirt opened up along one side to expose her thigh, but she made no effort to cover it up. Instead, she sat there, an enticing smile on her face.

“How about some music?” Michael walked over to the credenza and turned on the radio. ABBA’s “Take a Chance on Me” was playing. He’d left it on the 70s station catering to his interests.

I pondered this change in our plans. Maybe he'd turned on the radio to hide any noise I might make in the bedroom. It was his way of telling me to stay where I was.

Michael stood rooted to his spot by the credenza for a long moment, as if he were contemplating his next move. Then he reached for the bottle of wine in the ice bucket with one hand and took hold of two glasses with the other.

*What? Had he lost his mind?*

This rapid shift in strategy tugged at the loose ends we'd rolled into a tight plan. Wine, music, a private setting—they'd formed part of our scheme to dupe Emily into revealing information that would incriminate her.

Only now, Michael had placed Jane in center stage instead.

I searched for the logic behind Michael's actions. Whatever Jane was up to, it wasn't based on good intentions. Michael thought so too and was playing along for reasons that, under the circumstances, he was unable to tell me. I had no choice but to trust him.

"It's chilled just the way you like it." Michael twisted the cap off the wine bottle.

Jane eyed him with suspicion. "You were planning on bringing Megan back here after dinner, weren't you? What happened to spoil your plans?"

"You're wrong. It's not like that between us."

"You gave her your grandmother's pendant, didn't you?"

"As a token of friendship." He poured wine into the glasses and held one out to her.

She stood up and accepted it from him. "Cheers." She clinked her glass with his and took a sip. "Mmm...very nice. I see you haven't lost your taste in wine, though you should be more selective in choosing the women you sleep with. To be specific, a certain auburn-haired widow."

"I told you," Michael said calmly. "I'm not sleeping with her."

Jane gazed at him. "You don't know how much I want to believe you."

"Have I ever lied to you?"

"No." She drank some wine. "From the first day I met you, I knew you were an honest man. I also knew we were meant to be together."

“Jane, we’re not—”

“Let me finish. I want to tell you why we belong together.” She took another sip and swayed but managed to steady herself. “You make me feel secure. You always did. You make me value things most people take for granted, like the romantic nights we spent—”

“We dated a few times,” Michael said. “That’s all it was.”

Jane waved a hand in the air. “There you go again, denying we had a strong, intimate bond from the start. We still have that bond. I know it and you know it too. Why do you keep running away from a relationship that’s perfect?”

“For starters, you should be looking for someone with a fatter wallet. It’ll add much more spice to your relationship.”

Her lips curled upward. “That sounds peculiar coming from someone about to acquire a quarter of a million dollars.”

“You know where I stand on that. Nothing’s changed.”

“How can you refuse the settlement? It’s your right.” When he didn’t answer, she went on. “You’re refusing it simply because of some preposterous notion that it’s blood money.”

“It’s reason enough.”

“I wouldn’t let that stop me from enjoying the best things money can buy.” Jane finished up her glass as if it were water and held it out to him.

He refilled it and placed it on the coffee table. “You’re missing the point. I don’t need lots of money to make me happy. There are more important things in life, like loyalty and—”

“Loyalty! Of course. Even if I had all the money in the world, I’d insist on loyalty. You of all people should know how loyal I’ve been to you, Michael.” She drew closer, her lips almost touching his.

“Damn it, Jane.” He stepped away and sat down in his chair. “My life is in the balance, and all you think about is yourself.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You don’t fool me one bit. You’re still the bleeding heart to that pathetic little widow, aren’t you? I’m amazed you fell for her manipulative ways. I thought you were smarter than most men.” She plopped down in her chair and reached for her glass.

“How many times do I have to tell you? There’s nothing between us.”

“Oh, come on. Try this headline for an eye-opener: The frantic young widow whose husband was murdered and the impressionable reporter who came to her rescue. What a farce!” She glared at him. “I see the way you ogle her. What is it about her that turns you on anyway?”

Michael sipped his wine, remained silent while he kept his eyes downcast.

Jane’s insinuations intrigued me. That she persisted in dragging them back into their conversation intrigued me even more.

I remembered how she’d reacted to rumors of an affair between Michael and me during our meetings with Dan. That she’d displayed her attraction to Michael made me assume she was trying to beat out what she perceived to be her competition—me.

Now I understood what churned below that icy façade. It was something vile and ugly—a jealousy that bordered on obsessive.

I stared at the screen, unable to move a muscle as the live scene unfolded steps away from me.

Jane’s tone mellowed. “Remember our moonlight walks along the beach? The long nights we spent together? We had some pretty wild sex, didn’t we?” She laughed.

Michael said nothing, kept looking down.

She kept her eyes on him. “So tell me her secret.”

“Her secret?”

“Was Megan hot in bed? Hotter than me? Remember when...” She went on to describe intimate details of their sexual jaunts, how he satisfied her every whim—no matter where and when—and left her wanting more.

The blood rushed to my face, and I was glad I was alone. I could only imagine how uneasy Michael was feeling.

But he remained composed, impervious to her lurid accounts of their intimate sex life.

As Jane buried her face in her glass, he said, “After what you and I had together, do you honestly think I’d jump into bed with a woman who’d knocked off her husband?”

She laughed. “Then it’s off with her head! It’s one way of getting the diamond pendant, isn’t it?” She raised her glass, spilled some wine on the carpet, and laughed again.

My body temperature plunged. Her response shocked me, such that I half-listened while she reminisced about the time she’d met Michael in a Toronto courthouse months earlier, how they’d gone out for dinner that same night, how they’d tumbled into bed together later, how fantastic the sex was...

What a schemer! She’d say and do anything to hold on to him.

Goosebumps rose along my skin. An eerie pattern emerged, one that I had to consider, no matter how absurd it seemed. Taking into account their obsession with Michael and their manipulative ways, Jane was a good substitute for Emily.

I turned my attention back to the screen.

Michael and Jane continued to play their roles like a couple of professional actors. To the regular viewer, their performance could have passed for a daytime soap opera or made-for-TV movie.

Jane managed to keep her hands off him, but it was just another trick to prove she was serious about getting him a get-out-of-jail-free card. She’d capitalize on something more rewarding once she hooked her claws into him for good.

“So you have a proposition for me,” Michael said, putting their conversation back on track.

“Yes,” Jane said. “It hinges on taking on a different legal approach to your defense.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“The weakest point in Dan’s defense is that you and Megan haven’t been able to provide alibis so far.”

“So?”

“Here’s my angle. It’s simple, really. All you have to do is confess that Megan made up the whole sob story about her husband going to Granite Ridge so she could steer everybody off course. You’ll admit you went to Pineview with her, but you’ll play the innocent victim by putting the entire blame on her.”

I shuddered. The goosebumps were out in full force now.



How could Jane propose such an outrageous idea? She was a paralegal. She wanted to be a lawyer. She represented justice and truth and had the respect of the legal community.

I wanted to rush out and rip her to shreds!

Who was I kidding? I was too terrified to move and too curious to find out where her proposal was heading. I stayed put.

Michael grinned. “You’re kidding me, right?”

“Do I look as if I’m kidding?” Jane’s face showed no emotion.

“Your premise won’t work. The police suspect I had an affair with Megan... that I’m implicated in the murders.”

“They have no proof either way, now do they?” She gulped more wine.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s simple. It’s Megan’s word against yours.”

“Megan isn’t ignorant. If I try to dump the murders on her, she’ll fight me with everything she’s got. Besides, Dan won’t go for it.”

“Leave Dan out of this,” Jane said. “I can get you a much better lawyer.”

“Like who?”

“Trust me. I have top-notch contacts. They would come running at the opportunity to work with me.”

Michael hesitated, seemed to be pondering the matter. “You’re forgetting a key element. The police found cyanide in my suite. What if they convict me? I don’t want to go to jail for a crime I didn’t commit. I’m innocent. I expect freedom. Nothing less. I need a lawyer on my side that I can trust with my life.” Tension raced through his voice.

“I didn’t say it was going to be easy,” Jane said, her words more slurred than before. “You might get a few years of jail time. Before you know it, you’ll be out on good behavior.”

“Forget it.”

“You have to trust me. I know how these things work.”

All the while, Michael had kept pouring wine into their glasses—adding a lot more to hers than to his. I lost count. I hoped that Jane had too, and I silently urged her on with every gulp she wolfed down.

I checked the time. Emily was running late.

As if he'd read my mind, Michael asked, "What about Emily? Has anyone verified her alibi?"

"It's been confirmed," Jane said.

"And?"

"She was playing house with Bill Bradford on the weekend of the murders."

It was a blatant lie! She'd taken that information right out of Pam's agenda and created her own version of it.

Michael persisted. "What about Ray and the canister he took from the lab?"

"Ray wasn't involved in the murders. Trust me on that one." Jane reached for the bottle of wine and filled her glass, ignoring the drops that splattered onto the table. She poured the rest of the wine into Michael's glass and set the bottle down, almost tipping it over.

He didn't touch his glass. "You make it sound as if there's no way out for me but jail."

"With these last persons of interest no longer under suspicion, the police will target you and Megan. You have no choice but to follow my advice. You understand that, don't you?"

Michael said nothing. He'd succeeded in digging deeper and deeper, disclosing Jane's true colors with every layer of deceit he'd peeled away. But his steady focus on the carpet gave the impression that he was still weighing her proposal.

Jane sighed. "What's there to think about, Michael? It's a no-brainer, really it is."

"Anita's dead," he said. "How are we going to prove Megan used her to plant the cyanide in my suite?"

"Questions, questions. What's with all these questions? Don't you trust me to do what's best for you? Why the hell did I bother to come here?" She made a move to get up.

But Michael was faster. He dropped to his knees and placed his hands on her thighs, preventing her from getting up. He said to her, "Please, you have to help me, Jane."

“That’s better.” She smiled. “Think opportunity, Michael. Didn’t Megan visit you here, work with you on your book or whatever it was the two of you were doing?”

“Yes.”

“So when you weren’t looking, she planted the cyanide in your jacket.” She placed a hand under his chin and kissed him on the lips. “You see? It’s simple. She had the motive, means, and opportunity to be a very, very bad girl.”

I gasped in horror.

Oh, Jane was slick. She had all the right answers. Given the chance, she would rewrite Michael’s testimony and blame me for the murders. Thank goodness, it was all on tape. Her arguments might have convinced even the best jury in the world to put me behind bars. I winced, anticipating Dan’s reaction when he’d find out about his “brilliant” protégé.

“So what do you say? Is it a deal?” Jane tried to kiss Michael again, but he slipped out of her reach and retreated to his seat.

He clasped his hands before him. “I’m not sure.”

“Now what’s the matter?”

“The police won’t buy it.”

My heart beat out of control as their conversation took another unexpected turn.

“Of course they will. Poisoning her husband was her idea in the first place.” Jane slurped the last drops of wine in her glass.

Michael remained quiet. He kept his head down and wrung his hands, leaving his reaction open to interpretation.

His approach worked. Jane tried harder. “Michael, I can get you off the hook, but I have to put the entire blame on Megan. If I show she was the instigator, police suspicion will be on her and not on you.”

He ran a hand through his hair and appeared more skeptical than before. “I don’t know. It’s a long shot.”

Jane briefly looked away. “Okay. Let’s explore a different angle. You can say Megan used her feminine ways to coax you into driving her to Pineview that Friday night. You’ll plead ignorance and say you stayed in the car while the little

wife ran into the cottage to sprinkle the sugar bowl with cyanide.”

I drew in a quick breath. The police hadn't disclosed the location of the cyanide. She had to be guessing.

“But I didn't—” Michael began.

Jane slapped her hands against the armrests. “For God's sake, Michael, you don't expect the police to believe you weren't sleeping with her, do you? Do you think Moreau hasn't seen through her phony veneer? I did. That bitch lured you into bed and into this bloody mess. She's to blame for the situation you're in.”

Her words were louder and more garbled than before.

“It's all so confusing,” he said. “I don't know what the hell I'm supposed to think anymore.”

“What do you mean, you don't know?” Her eyes bore into him. “If you admit you went to Pineview as an innocent bystander, it'll keep you out of jail for the most part. What do I have to say to convince you that this is your best defense? I already told you I have a first-rate lawyer standing by to defend you on those grounds.”

I checked my watch. It was quarter past ten. I wrote Emily off as a no-show. I figured Michael had too. It explained why he was playing his role with much more passion than before.

There was a low vibrating sound behind me, and I turned around. The cargo shorts Michael had worn earlier were on the bed. He'd left his phone in a pocket and it was ringing.

I retrieved it. I recognized the name on the display and answered. “Hello,” I whispered. I tiptoed to the other end of the room, as far from the bedroom door as I could.

“Megan,” Dan said. “Is Michael with you?”

“Yes, but he's a little busy.” I kept my voice low. “We missed you at dinner.”

“What dinner?”

“At The Spaghetti Factory.”

“No one told me I was invited.”

Small wonder.

Dan went on. “I have information about Robert Gingras. Michael

remembered the law firm in Montreal that represented Gingras in a drug case last year. I called an associate there. Gingras was arrested but not convicted. He had his non-criminal record expunged. There's nothing on file for him."

Old news. Michael already suspected that much. "Okay. Thanks."

"Hold on. There's more. Jane was working as a paralegal for that same law firm at the time. She was assigned to Gingras' case. I'm surprised she didn't mention it. It probably slipped her mind."

Like hell it did.

"One last thing," Dan said. "Bill Bradford confirmed Emily's alibi. She was with him on a plane to Toronto that Friday after work." Dan heaved a sigh. "It's up to Moreau to make the next move. I'll keep you posted." He hung up.

Emily was innocent. Michael and I had made a terrible mistake. Our plans to snare her evaporated in the next instant.

I had to make things right, but now wasn't the time to do it. It was obvious that Michael didn't want to include me in whatever mind games he and Jane were playing in the other room. I'd have to wait until she left.

Something Dan said in our recent talk nagged at me. He implied that Jane had forgotten about having worked on Gingras' court case. I preferred to believe she omitted to mention it on purpose. But why?

I reviewed the facts, trying to link them as best I could:

Jane and Gingras knew each other.

Gingras stole a gun.

Anita was shot. By Gingras?

Gingras died in a fire in Willie's home.

Willie, who had nothing to do with the Pineview murders, had Gingras' gun and vowed to hand it over to the police.

I couldn't connect the dots. It was like trying to fit a stray piece into the rest of the jigsaw puzzle only because it looked as if it would fit, but it didn't fit no matter which way I tried it.

Frustration took hold of me, such that I was considering once again if Emily could have carried out her plot to kill Pam regardless of a clean alibi.

A crucial piece of information was missing. The one piece of evidence that

connected the murders to Michael and me.

Cyanide!

I picked up Michael's cell phone and called Dan back. "Do you know if Gingras was working at the time of his drug arrest last year?" I whispered.

"Yes." The sound of paper flipping as Dan leafed through reports. "Here it is. He worked at a company in Montreal that manufactures plastic products. Why?"

"Call you back later." I hung up.

Yes! My father had worked for a plastics company where cyanide had been used in the manufacturing process. I'd have to thank my mother later for that tip.

I used Michael's phone to call information. I asked the operator to connect me to the Elegance Hotel. Then I asked the hotel receptionist to ring Michael's room. She had a hard time hearing me because I spoke so low, but she finally put me through.

It was with a weird sense of amusement that I heard the phone ringing in the suite.

Michael excused himself to Jane, then walked over to answer it.

"It's me," I whispered. "Dan called on your cell phone." I gave him the gist of our chat and my assumptions about Gingras, then hung up and went back to view the scene on his laptop.

"Okay. Tomorrow is fine. Thank you." Michael hung up and sat down. "Sorry about that," he said to Jane. "Laundry service. They'd misplaced some of my stuff and found it."

"Listen to me," she said. "This is how we're going to play it. The little wife got desperate after she found out her husband was sleeping around with her best friend. She begged you to help her. So you rented a car and drove her to Pineview. You know the rest."

Jane adjusted the delicate scarf around her neck. Maybe it was the intonation of her voice or her persistence in trying to influence Michael. Regardless, an image of the first time I'd seen her in his suite came to mind...her lingering stance by the coffee table...the way she'd hinted that Michael had another woman in his life...

What was I missing?

As my mother often said, “Sometimes the answer is right in front of our eyes and we don’t see it—or don’t want to see it.”

All at once, it hit me. I understood why Michael was playing along with Jane and what he’d been holding out for all this time. He was waiting for her to reveal the tiniest scrap of evidence that would set us free: She’d seen my note with the Pineview information in Michael’s suite weeks before the murders and acted on it!

The theory alone unnerved me, but why would someone in her reputable line of work commit such a crime? It didn’t make sense.

What did Jane expect to gain from murdering Tom and Pam, two people she didn’t know?

Unless she *thought* she knew them.

**M**y stomach did a somersault. I would have loved to be in Michael's shoes to tell Jane that I saw through her lies and scheming ways, and that every word she'd uttered was recorded.

But that was why he was sitting across from her and I wasn't. He was cool—so cool. He had the innate sense to hold back, knowing that if he didn't, it would destroy the last chance we had of clearing our names.

"What you're suggesting," Michael was saying to Jane in the next room, "would have taken a lot of time and effort to plan."

"Not at all," she said. "From day one, the little wife had every detail planned out."

"Like what?"

"Come on, Michael. Do I have to spell it out for you? The fake alibis, the rental car, the cyanide, everything—right down to the Pineview details she scrawled for you on that canary yellow paper she doodles on all the time."

My blood went cold. Aside from the police, no one except Michael and me had seen the original note, let alone knew I'd written it on canary yellow paper. The police had shown the legal teams a black-and-white copy of it in an evidence bag.

All of a sudden, the pieces of the puzzle fell into place.

If Michael had grasped the implication of Jane's comment, he wasn't showing it. He shrugged. "I guess it could work. Premeditation. Right?"



“Yes,” she said. “Do we have a deal?”

“No way in hell.” He stood up. “I’ll show you why.” He turned off the radio, then pushed a button on the CD player. “The truth is I already have an alibi. A legitimate one.” He grabbed the remote and clicked it. The video of Michael at Willie’s gas station played out.

“Where did you get that?” Jane edged forward.

“From the gas station. Where else?”

“They told me it wasn’t available.” She rose to her feet but was unsteady.

Michael turned and pushed her so hard that she fell back into the chair. “Sit down and stop embarrassing yourself.”

Jane pushed strands of hair off her face. “Oh, we like it rough now, do we?”

He waved a fist at her. “I swear, if you try to get up again, I’ll belt you one.”

She remained seated, smiling.

“I know the truth,” Michael said. “You hired Robert Gingras to get that tape but he failed. In fact, Gingras died while he was on the job for you, but you already know that, don’t you?”

Jane wagged a finger at him. “Poor, poor Michael. You’re letting the pressure get to you. You’re inventing people I’ve never heard of.”

“Nice try, Jane. What I couldn’t figure out was why you wanted me to lie about my alibi. But I get it now. You wanted Megan and me to take the fall for the murders at Pineview—murders that you planned and executed yourself.”

She brought a hand to her neck in a protective gesture. “How dare you accuse me of such a vile act.”

“Don’t play the victim. It doesn’t suit you.”

“Come on, Michael, be logical. Why would I kill two people I don’t know?” She caught herself. “For that matter, why would I kill anyone?”

“Because you were jealous. You saw the Pineview information in my suite and assumed I was going away with another woman that weekend.”

“That’s ridiculous. I didn’t know Megan then.”

“I didn’t say Megan.”

She hesitated. “I just assumed—”

“You assumed wrong—again. The same day you met Megan, you mentioned

you'd seen a newspaper photo of her taken at one of my book-signing events. You were jealous. You even asked me if I had another woman in my life."

Jane laughed. "So what? It doesn't make me a murderer."

Michael went on. "You used your connection to Gingras and had him beg for a job at Pineview. You told him to confirm that the cottage was booked under the name Scott. Any fool could have checked it out, but Gingras was sloppy or lazy or both. He didn't dig far enough to find out more about the occupants—like their first names."

"Poor Michael," she said. "You're daydreaming again."

"You believed Gingras owed you one for getting him off on drug charges last year. You forced him to leave his job at the plastics company but not before he took a supply of cyanide with him. Nothing beats calling in a favor. Right, Jane?"

Jane glared at him. "You're delirious."

"It must have been one hell of a shock to discover you'd had the wrong people bumped off at Pineview. You covered your tracks by planting the cyanide here in my suite to swing suspicion my way."

"Michael, how could you ever suspect—"

"I knew you had personal problems, but who'd have figured you for a cold-blooded murderer?" He turned away from her and clicked on the remote to open up the CD tray.

Faster than I'd have expected from one as drunk, Jane grabbed the empty wine bottle and struck Michael on the head.

He staggered and fell to his knees, bending forward.

"Your biggest mistake was to turn your back on me," she said, "in more ways than one." She grabbed his hair and pulled his head back. "No one is going to take you away from me—ever."

"You don't know what you're doing," he said.

"I know exactly what I'm doing, you traitor!"

My heart skipped a beat.

A loud knock at the door reverberated throughout the suite and everyone froze.

*Oh, my God! Not Emily!*

The door burst open.

Sergeant Claude Duchaine rushed into the living room. “Jane Barlow, you’re under arrest on suspicion of murdering Thomas Scott and Pam Strober.”

“What the hell—” Jane let go of Michael. Waving the broken bottle, she edged toward the foyer. “Get out of my way!” She lashed out at Duchaine who blocked her path.

Duchaine tried to grab her arm but missed.

Jane swung the bottle and slashed his hand.

“Drop that bottle,” Duchaine ordered, his hand spurting blood as he advanced toward her again.

“Go to hell, you bastard!” She kicked him between the legs.

Duchaine doubled over and leaned against the armchair for support.

I had to do it. I prayed I wouldn’t be too late. I swallowed my panic and geared up for a frantic finale.

My heart beat wildly as I raced out of the bedroom and rounded the corner into the living room.

Jane had her back to me.

Michael had placed a hand on the credenza and was trying to pull himself up. He blinked, as if he were dizzy and trying to focus. If he saw me, he didn’t show it.

Jane grabbed him by the hair. “Now I’m going to finish what I started.”

I raced up to her and grasped both ends of the scarf hanging from her back. I yanked hard, but it didn’t have the effect I’d hoped for.

Jane took a few steps backward but didn’t tip over. As she spun around to face me, her scarf loosened to reveal deep scratches on her neck.

I gasped. “Anita scratched you!”

Her eyes took on a crazed expression. “You bitch! I won’t miss you this time.” She lunged at me, the broken bottle aimed at my face like the jaws of a piranha.

I leaped back, slammed into the wall, then ducked sideways as Jane plunged the bottle inches from my head, shattering it against the wall.

Glass flew in all directions.

Blood dripped from Jane's hand, but she didn't seem to notice.

I started to run off, but she grabbed me by the hair and banged my head into the wall.

The room spun for a moment before I hastily seized her arms and stopped her from pounding my head again.

I couldn't hold her off much longer. She was stronger than me.

She hit my head against the wall again.

The room began to spin, go black.

*Was this as far as I could go?*

No, I refused to give up. I had to find the strength to fight back.

It was now or never. I let go of her arms and dug my thumbs into her eyes.

Jane screamed in pain and stumbled backward, putting her hands to her eyes.

Michael tackled her, forcing her to the floor. She punched him in the ribs, breaking his hold on her.

As she rose to her feet, Duchaine jumped in and clutched her in a tight squeeze, just missing her efforts to land another kick. He pinned her to the wall, face first, and cuffed her hands behind her back.

Two uniformed police officers rushed in and took Jane into custody. As they hauled her out, she cursed at them and vowed to sue them for violating her rights. Over her shoulder, she shouted at Michael, "You stinking bastard! It's not over. I'll get you for this."

Michael was bent over, grimacing in pain.

I hurried up to him. "Oh, my God! You almost got yourself killed, you know that?"

"Look who's talking," he said, slowly straightening up.

"I should get you to the hospital."

"Just got the wind...knocked out of me. I'll be fine."

Blood dripped from his forehead. "You're bleeding." I ran to the bathroom and grabbed a clean facecloth and wet it under the tap. I ran back to the living room, dropped a couple of ice cubes into the facecloth, and handed it to Michael. "We should get a doctor to look at that cut in case you need stitches."

He held the ice pack to his head. "This and some TLC should do the trick." He managed a weak smile.

Duchaine cleared his throat. "Detective Moreau would like to see you both immediately. Please come with me." A blood-stained handkerchief was wrapped around his hand.

Michael and I followed the sergeant out into the corridor where another police officer stood guard. I assumed we were going to the station to file a report. I was stunned when Duchaine led us into an adjacent suite instead.

The aroma of brewed coffee reached me as we stepped into Room 786. The suite was identical to Michael's but reversed in layout and had similar furnishings.

The main difference was a nest of computer screens and other electronic equipment set up along the wall at the far end of the floor. A large monitor with a split screen was positioned in front of a technician who sat tapping on a keyboard.

Moreau sauntered up to us.

"What's going on here, Detective?" Michael asked him.

"We installed surveillance equipment in your suite, Monsieur Elliott. We established facilities here so a police team could oversee the situation and move in rapidly if necessary."

I was in awe. That Moreau had organized a covert operation without any of us knowing about it was daunting. That he might have seen Michael and me embracing earlier through the camera lens was even more intimidating.

"Why didn't you tell us about this?" Michael asked him.

"We had to follow procedure," Moreau said. "We could not risk jeopardizing the operation."

"What operation?"

Bushy eyebrows gathered in a frown. "We have had your suite under surveillance lately. It was for your own protection, of course."

I couldn't let his remark slip by. "Detective, you made it quite clear that Michael and I were your key suspects. How can you now claim you were protecting us?"

“What is important is that you surprised us by setting a trap for Emily Saunders,” Moreau said, evading my question.

“We had our reasons,” I said. “Lucky for her, she didn’t show up.”

“Oh, Emily Saunders was here,” the detective said. “I will show you. Please follow me.”

He led us to the back of the floor and gestured toward the monitor. “The right part of the screen captures the living room in Monsieur Elliott’s suite. The left part captures the exterior corridor.” He said a few words in French to the technician who nodded and tapped a few buttons.

A video began to play. Soon Emily came into view. She was walking along the corridor and had almost reached Michael’s suite when Duchaine blocked her path, startling her. When he slid a hand into his jacket, she turned and fled down the corridor. Duchaine chased after her, but I couldn’t see what happened because that part of the corridor extended beyond the camera range.

I checked the date and timestamp on the screen. The video was recorded twenty minutes after Jane had arrived.

“I wish to extend my sincere gratitude to both of you,” Moreau said. “Had it not been for your plans, we would not have captured the alleged suspect—Jane Barlow.”

“It was Megan’s idea to use my hotel suite for our sting operation,” Michael said.

“It was a bizarre twist of fate,” I said. “I can’t take credit for any of it.”

Moreau grinned. “Why not, Madame Scott? Police often fall upon suspected felons by coincidence, or fluke, as they say.”

Twists of fate. Life was full of them. And it wasn’t over yet.

Facts ultimately revealed how a string of seemingly unrelated events had influenced Detective Moreau's actions.

It began when Stewart reported his Beretta had been stolen from Pineview and claimed Gingras was the alleged gun thief. Because the cottage resort fell within Moreau's jurisdiction, the report landed on his desk.

After Anita's body was discovered, Moreau reviewed the videotapes from the Elegance Hotel. The videos showed Michael leaving the hotel Tuesday morning for a jog and returning an hour later. Jane arrived afterward—within minutes of Robert Gingras—but Moreau had no reason to suspect a link between her and Gingras at the time.

Moreau assumed I'd hired Gingras to kill Anita. His theory was that I'd paid her to plant the cyanide in Michael's suite and wanted to eliminate her as a witness. However, the gun used to kill Anita was nowhere to be found, and Gingras had vanished, so Moreau couldn't prove his theory.

On pure speculation, the detective arrived at my condo and asked to search the premises, then followed up with a visit to Michael's suite. Taking possession of evidence that Dan had upheld as circumstantial at best, a relentless Moreau subsequently put Michael and me under police surveillance.

Moreau's assumptions about me evaporated when Gingras' burnt body was identified and Willie turned himself in, along with the Beretta, a copy of the gas station videotape with Gingras in it, and a signed statement corroborating

Gingras' threat on his life and the destruction of his home.

At that point, Moreau hadn't yet made the connection between Gingras and Jane. He continued to survey Michael's suite and listen in on our scheme to ensnare Emily. As luck would have it, Jane walked into our trap instead and supplied Moreau with first-hand evidence that established her guilt and proved our innocence.

Ballistic tests later showed a match between the bullets found in Anita's body and those in the Beretta. DNA tests performed on skin cells under Anita's fingernails confirmed she'd scratched Jane on the neck before meeting her fate. It explained the high-neckline tops, thick necklace, and scarf Jane had worn in the days following their altercation.

I kept picturing how Jane might have stalked Michael and me, how she'd seen him leave his hotel to meet me for dinner so many times. It must have driven her crazy with jealousy.

How fortunate that Michael hadn't opened the door to her that Tuesday before he left to meet me at Santino's. Her state of mind must have been especially unstable minutes after Anita's murder. I trembled at what she might have done to Michael, especially with Gingras at her side holding the Beretta. That she'd pushed me into the traffic was horrific enough to grasp, but our physical confrontation at the hotel would haunt me longer than I'd care to admit to anyone. Anyone except my shrink, Dr. Madison, who helped me to deal with the trauma of it all.



I read Tom's obituary in the weekend newspaper with a peculiar detachment, as if it had been written about someone I didn't know. My indifference lingered right through the funeral service on Monday morning at St. Paul's Church. My mother sat beside me, crying for both of us. For reasons that didn't need an explanation, I couldn't shed a tear.

Michael didn't attend the funeral. We'd agreed it would be in our best interests if he stayed away until the press coverage died down.



My co-workers from Bradford Publishing showed up. The notable absence was Emily. She was on extended sick leave due to “deep personal grief.”

Peter Ewans was there, looking pale and dazed. Ann greeted me warmly, offered her sincere condolences, then took Peter by the arm and led him off.

I placed a white rose at Tom’s gravesite. I forgave him for deceiving me and taking advantage of my tolerant spirit. I finally had closure, so why hold a grudge? He’d have to answer to someone with a lot more influence than I ever had over him.

A final autopsy report revealed that Tom had an inoperable brain tumor. It was difficult to determine how much longer he would have lived. It was only when my clinical tests for STIs and HIV came back negative that I was able to turn the page on this part of my life.



I popped into Bradford Publishing weeks later to meet Kayla for lunch. I owed her a big one for having safeguarded Pam’s agenda. As useless as it had been for our initial purposes, it was the catalyst for the sting that nabbed the real killer.

I didn’t want to complicate matters, so I didn’t mention Pam’s agenda. Kayla probably assumed that Emily had taken it from her desk when she wasn’t looking, but she couldn’t prove it.

Kayla had good news, bad news, and so-so news.

The good news: Kayla had been promoted to Pam’s job. She asked if I would continue to work on contract for the company. I said yes.

The bad news: Ray Felton had been arrested and fired—all on the same day. The police had raided his apartment and found hundreds of digital files of nude women, including Emily. Ray had sold the photos without the women’s consent. He admitted he’d ransacked Emily’s office searching for photos that she’d stolen from the office lab. She’d planned on turning the evidence over to the police, but they’d beaten her to it when they’d raided Ray’s apartment.

The so-so news: Emily quit her job. The fact that Mrs. Bradford had found out about her affair with Bill had driven Emily over the edge. It hadn’t helped

that she'd lied to Mrs. Bradford about Pam and Bill in the first place, then bribed her for a considerable sum of money to keep it "between them."

Emily believed Mrs. Bradford had sent a goon after her when Duchaine stopped her outside Michael's suite. She thought he was a thug reaching for a gun instead of a cop for his badge.

The day Emily left, she confessed to Kayla that she'd snooped in Pam's agenda to keep tabs on her social contacts. Emily swore she only dated the men whose names Pam had crossed out at the back of her agenda to indicate she'd lost interest in them.

When I'd examined the directory in Pam's agenda, I'd noticed she'd drawn a line through Tom's name. She must have had second thoughts and decided to have one last fling with him at Pineview. Emily didn't know how lucky she was.



A year later, Michael and I made our appearance at the courthouse. Even the sun filtering through the clouds on that September morning couldn't defuse my trepidation about seeing Jane face to face again. Although Dan had run us through the process, I was certain I'd pass out from the sheer stress before I even opened my mouth on the witness stand.

The time I spent in court was a blur. I couldn't remember a word I'd said if my life depended on it. It was nature's way of protecting me from the mental and emotional anguish of a murder trial.

Jane had been diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder, but a psychologist and lead witness for the prosecution testified her BPD was at a high-functioning level and didn't impair her work. He also stated that Jane felt no guilt in breaking the law to attain her goals. He explained how Michael's rejection of Jane and his interest in me had amplified her lack of control over him and stirred up a recipe for psychopathic behavior.

After a jury of six women and six men deliberated for two days, Jane's guilty verdict came in. Jane gazed at Michael and gave him a weird smile—the sort that gives you chills and keeps you up at night. Then she puckered her lips and

blew him a kiss before she was escorted out.

Aside from having a hard time dealing with the repercussions from the legal community, Dan had deep regrets about not having picked up on Jane's underhanded ways. He profusely apologized to Michael and me for having exposed us to such a perilous situation. He said goodbye to us and promised to keep in touch after his return from a two-month vacation in Nassau.

The arms of justice extended as far as Sainte-Adèle. The facts that Michael had pooled from his informant Willie helped the police to arrest a drug producer who operated an ecstasy lab there. The lab had evolved into a drug-trafficking operation linked to other criminal conspiracies and to Montreal-area street gangs. Two local newspapers praised Michael for his articles covering the incident.

That I'd implicated Michael in my problems led to occasional pangs of guilt, though trusting him saved my life. As he often pointed out, destiny steps in to deal with matters we can't resolve or refuse to resolve. It was life's way of putting us back on the right track.

Destiny played another role in Michael's life. He had initially refused to accept the monetary offer from the parents of the teenager who had killed his grandmother. He reversed his decision after he found out the teen's parents were doctors and that their only son would live out his life in a wheelchair.

As a condition of his acceptance, Michael donated the proceeds to medical research—two hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

Destiny stepped in again to balance things out. From his grandmother's estate, Michael received his cut—a quarter of a million dollars. He invested the funds and told me it would in no way change his commitment to his day job.

I believed him.



“What should we drink to?” I offered Michael a glass of red wine and sat down next to him on the cushy sofa in our new condo.

“To the future.” He smiled.

I smiled back. “To the future.”

Michael grew silent, as if he were searching for the right words.

I hoped it had nothing to do with marriage, though I couldn’t negate the chemistry that had existed between us from the start. Our love for each other had passed the test of time and survived the dilemmas that had come with it. Michael was everything I wanted in a man and I valued our relationship—as long as there were no strings attached.

In truth, I appreciated my newfound independence now more than ever.

“Have you thought about what you wanted to do in the next while?” Michael asked.

*Uh-oh.* Here it comes.

I fingered the diamond pendant around my neck. “Long-range plans don’t work out well for me.”

“No problem. Then how about going on a short trip?”

Totally unexpected. “Where?”

“Portland, Maine,” he said. “A reporter friend at a newspaper there asked me to fill in for him while he’s out of town.”

I did the math. The proceeds from Tom’s insurance policy gave me the start of a decent nest egg for retirement. I shared the expenses on the condo I co-owned with Michael. I worked my own hours as a ghostwriter for Kayla...

“Traveling is therapeutic,” Michael said. “It gives the soul a freedom of sorts.”

Freedom. Now there’s a worthy destination.

THE END

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Sandra Nikolai is the author of the Megan Scott/Michael Elliott Mystery series. In addition to her novels, Sandra has published a string of short stories, garnering awards along the way.

A graduate of McGill University in Montreal, Sandra held jobs in sales, finance, and high tech before leaving the corporate world to pursue a career in writing. She likes to think that plotting a whodunit reveals the lighter—yet more mysterious—side of her persona.

Visit Sandra's website at [sandranikolai.com](http://sandranikolai.com) to sign up for her exclusive quarterly newsletter and receive free chapters from her books. Your email address will never be shared and you can unsubscribe at any time. Become a fan on [Goodreads](#) or [Facebook](#), or follow Sandra on Twitter [@SandraNikolai](#)

