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Fiction

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Marula Madness

by Sandra Hope Tenney

PRELUDE

The unusually warm, dry winter left the earth thirsting for moisture. Instead of the steady saturation needed by the dry creek beds and shallow lakes, the sudden explosion of intense rain would likely be the cause of flash flooding. The intensity, the fierceness of the storm, was not expected, seemed to come out of nowhere, took even the most sophisticated

meteorologists completely by surprise. The rain started gently enough, but quickly, without warning, built into a crescendo that, just after twilight, exploded into a torrid downpour.

The driver silently began counting as soon as the bolt of lightning streaked across the shimmering, steely, jet-black sky. ...eight, nine, ten, eleven...twelve! The anticipated clap of thunder sounded twelve seconds later. The driver's nerves were rapidly unraveling. No one should be out in this storm. Not driving. Not walking. Not at all. God! It's almost impossible to drive! The wipers are going a thousand miles a minute. It's coming down in sheets. I can barely see more than a dozen feet in front of the headlights. I must be out of my mind for driving in this mess! Thank God I've driven along this road a thousand times because now I'll have to rely on the autopilot in my mind.

The steady motion of the windshield wipers intertwined and synchronized with the barely audible yet mesmerizing and rhythmic sound of breathing. Within the past hour, that sound had become part of a sequence of events, which quickly and abruptly transformed the night into the likes of a surreal dream.

Further down the road, a mile or so ahead of the approaching driver, a single figure was traveling on foot along the dark country road, persevering against the wind while being steadily pelted by the watery bullets of the driving rain. It was a difficult journey for the man as he struggled to get ahead and leaned hard into the wind that continually pushed him back. He had great difficulty trying to keep his balance and wavered as he walked against the wind. If anyone dared to venture out on this horrid night to witness the struggle between man and nature, they would have seen the man caught in the unwitting position of dancing a curious waltz with the wind.

As the man took two or three steps toward his destination, his partner the wind, being the stronger of the two, always prevailed and constantly took the lead. And with each stride forward, the weakened partner was pushed one step back in his staggering dance with the wind.

Chapter 1

ONCE UPON A TIME

"Annie!" Julie shouted into the phone. He sounded out of breath, as though he had been running. Jules Ashton - track star, tennis pro, avid golfer, football hero. Jules, Julie to his friends, should not have been out of breath from running. He was the consummate athlete in college. As he aged, the years were kind to him. He kept his good looks. He worked hard to maintain his athletic physique. As a result, Julie was now in even better shape than he had been while in college.

#

Attorney Jules Ashton was the head of his own firm, which specialized in research. He had followed his childhood friend, The Senator, to the same college, but parted ways when it came to choosing his career. Quiet, serene, contemplative Julie was not one to propel himself into the public eye but was instead content to stay in the background, to dwell behind the scenes in research libraries and Internet files.

After college Julie attended law school. He established his own practice. But instead of actually practicing law, he contracted with other legal firms to supply them with research and information. He specialized in uncovering critical information and helped some of the country's best lawyers win many of their toughest cases. Julie's research firm had grown from a one-man operation to include a dozen other employees. As the years passed, his associates took on more responsibility, leaving Julie plenty of time to play. Tennis, golf, running - a day didn't go by that he wasn't seen playing at the club or jogging in the Parkway. Jules Ashton was not one to be out of breath.

#

It was not normal for Julie to call the private line reserved for The Senator's political colleagues - D.C.'s movers

and shakers. But he knew that, unlike their home phone, in The Senator's absence Annie always answered the private line.

"Annie, I can't find him. He was in a hurry to get home. We finished our drinks. He walked out while I was paying the bill. Just walked out into the storm. Didn't even hear him say good-bye.

"When I got outside, I found his car in the lot - but not him. It has a flat. He was pissed at me, but I don't know why he didn't just come back in and ask me for a ride. He was in a hurry to get home. To talk with you.

"Annie, I don't know where he is. You know how stubborn he can be. The weather's just awful, but he didn't wait. He left without me. I assume he started walking. He must have started walking. But I couldn't see him. The storm...it's too dark...I didn't see him. No busses out here. Who am I kidding? He wouldn't take a bus anyway, and no cabby in his right mind would venture out into this downpour. But I'm rambling...Annie, he shouldn't have taken off by himself. Should've come back inside. It wouldn't have made any difference that we'd had an argument, I still would've driven him home."

#

Annie had been spending a quiet night at home relaxing, resting and lying on a damask sofa in her living room with her back propped against a plush collection of soft pillows. Her legs were stretched out, crossed at the ankles. She was lost in her thoughts, absent-mindedly leafing through a magazine while listening to music. As soon as Annie heard his voice, her thoughts quickly dissolved, were pushed aside and tucked away inside a file folder in her mind for another time - because of the urgency in Julie's voice.

#

"Julie! Slow down! You're talking too fast! Where are you?"

"At the...by..."

"I can't hear you. Damn! Your connection's breaking up! Are you on your cell?"

"No...phone booth...sub shop...can try to call, but my cell...almost dead."

"Which sub shop?"

Julie said nothing. It was quiet. Annie could tell the line was open - but there was no response.

"Julie! Are you still there? Which sub shop?"

"...bottom of Oak Tree."

"Julie, did you say you're at the sub shop on Oak Tree Road?"

"Yes."

"What are you doing out there? I thought the two of you were going to meet in town at the Arches, were supposed to have dinner with the congressman."

"We did, but the congressman...leave early. Decided to have dinner at...Grille. We stayed...long time. But, Senator...in a hurry. Wanted to get home. Didn't wait...I paid our bill. Left before me. But...don't know where he... Car...flat. It's in...Grille's lot. I looked for...drove...but I didn't find... It's so hard...see. The rain...so heavy...so dark."

"Julie! The connection's still breaking up. I can barely understand you. Can you hear me?"

There was nothing but silence. But it was a silence in which Annie sensed Julie was nodding his head in affirmation.

"Julie?"

"Yes."

"Listen to me, Julie. Have you been drinking? Are you drunk? Can you drive back to The Grille?"

The phone was barely audible, breaking up each time Julie spoke.

"Okay, Julie, please listen to me...God! I hope you can hear me! I know the phone is breaking up, but please, please listen to me! Go back to The Grille. Drive carefully. And when you get there, just sit in the parking lot and wait. Wait for me to arrive. And don't leave! Do you hear me, Julie? Don't leave! Just wait for me at The Grille. When I get there, we'll find The Senator together. Please, Julie, please drive carefully. It looks awful out there."

"...Grille...Wait...Okay."

Then there was silence. Dead silence. The connection was lost and Annie was left holding The Senator's private line.

#

Annie left the house within minutes of Julie's call. The storm raging wildly outside her safe and comfortable home made driving terrible. Julie's call had completely interrupted her plans to take a warm bath, and then curl up in bed. Gone was a night alone, steeped in her own thoughts, listening to the storm while she waited for The Senator to return from his dinner engagement. In a perfect world Annie would have spent the

evening as an indoor observer, not as a participant in the midst of such an awful night.

The Senator was not one to waste time. He would have chosen the most direct way home, so Annie turned onto Oak Tree Road, the quickest route to The Grille. She strained to see through the dark, to catch a glimpse of him; squinted her eyes and attempted to see beyond the short beams of light streaming from the car's headlights. Annie was hoping she would see him fighting his way home through the incredibly lousy weather.

The storm was at its height. Visibility was awful. The rain was blowing so hard, it was difficult to see more than a little bit beyond the front of the car, and Annie didn't see him.

Chapter 2

JULIE AT THE GRILLE

As Annie's car skidded from the slick pavement onto the muddy, gravel parking lot of The Country Grille, she saw their cars. Parked close to the old brick building, The Senator's BMW Z8 (his "Bond" car) was right next to Julie's Cadillac DeVille. No wonder he walked, Annie thought. Even in the blinding downpour she could see the "Z" tilting to one side. The left rear tire was flat, and the little car seemed to be sinking into a puddle that was forming a well around the deflated tire.

#

Their cars were much more extravagant than Annie's little VW Bug - not one of the new ones but an original model from 1969. It was an old automatic stick shift, which gave the driver the illusion of being in control of a standard transmission that, in reality, was actually an automatic. The car was Annie's baby. It seemed to her as though she had owned the little Bug all her life. The spunky car was a gift from her grandmother only months before Annie drove off to college and away from home - for the first and final time.

Annie didn't share The Senator's affinity for fast, expensive cars - the reason why, over the years, he had repeatedly indulged her with a multitude of repairs to keep the old Bug going strong. Thanks to extensive bodywork done two years ago, giving it a badly needed facelift, the car was in perfect cosmetic condition. It just needed to be constantly tuned and tweaked to maintain its smooth running condition.

#

Annie was frantic. She didn't see Julie - just his car. She threw open the door of the Bug, ran out into the pouring rain and over to the DeVille. The storm was raging; Annie's red curls were blowing wildly, freely twisting and turning all about her head in the wind.

Annie peered through the rain-soaked, tinted windows. She could barely see inside, but was still able to see Julie. He was slumped over on his side, lying on the front leather bench seat. Julie was motionless. Annie didn't know if he had passed out or had simply fallen asleep.

Julie's phone call, the stormy night and her race to get to The Grille left Annie feeling frantic and confused. She assumed Julie's door was locked. With as much force as she could muster from deep within her lungs, Annie screamed at the unconscious man shielded by the insular luxury interior, "Julie! Open Up!"

Although there wasn't a soul around to hear her, other than the comatose Julie who didn't seem to be hearing anything at the moment, Annie screamed again...

"Julie!"

And he opened his eyes wide and looked right at Annie.

Chapter 3

LOVE AND MARRIAGE

They had run off to get married almost as soon as The Senator and Julie had received their diplomas, thrown their caps into the air and removed their long blue academic gowns. Once their graduation formalities were over, the three friends jumped into Annie's Bug and drove for hours before they found a Justice of the Peace in southern Virginia. They found the ad in a local phone book.

WEDDINGS - 24 HOURS**Don't be Shy!****Just Drive Up & Ring the Bell!**

It was a perfect stereotypical wedding conducted in his in-home chapel by a Justice of the Peace. His wife was a tiny lady dressed in a vision of pink. She wore a pink flowered robe and matching fluffy pink slippers. Her eyeglasses, also in pink, were shaped like cat's eyes. On her head, a tightly-tied mist of netting gently surrounded a perfectly permed hairdo made up of tiny curls that were the exact hue of a box of Blue-Gray #36.

The tiny lady smiled, nodded knowingly and beckoned them to enter - all three of them. Julie was their best man; the prim little lady in pink became Annie's matron of honor. As for the Justice himself, with his short white hair and deep blue eyes, his black rimmed, half spectacles perched halfway down his long, thin, angular nose, he was a perfect caricature of what Annie had imagined a southern Justice of the Peace would be. He wore a full-length black satin bathrobe wrapped around his waist with a matching black sash. The collar of his perfectly starched white cotton pajamas peeked out of the top of his robe. The

matching white pajama pants fell to his ankles, just above feet clad in black leather, backless slippers.

Before Annie knew it, she and The Senator had said their "I Do's," but not until they were accompanied by a traditional musical rendition of "Here Comes the Bride" played on an old upright piano by her matron of honor, the Justice's wife.

The Senator paid their fee. Everyone exchanged hugs and kisses. Julie, the Justice and his wife threw rice as the happy couple ran back to Annie's Bug. In their enthusiastic attempt to make a traditional bride and groom "get-away," they almost left Julie behind. But he caught up with them as they coasted down the long driveway and has been with them ever since. Even though two of the three had just been married, they were still the three musketeers.

Chapter 4

9-1-1

Annie was soaking wet, shaking all over, chilled to the bone. Her teeth were chattering. She had a queasy feeling in her stomach and felt as if she might vomit. But she didn't. She kept her dinner down, still had her wits about her. And knew what to do next.

Like the rest of her body, her hands were shaking, and she could barely hold the phone. But she still managed to make contact with each plastic digit, deliberately pausing to push each one, and got it right on her first attempt: 9 - 1 - 1.

As soon as the dispatcher answered Annie's call, the automatic recording system kicked in. Their conversation was completely captured on tape - word for word.

Dispatcher: "9-1-1"

Annie: "Help us! Please! Are you there? Please, please help us!"

Dispatcher: "Yes Ma'am, calm down. First tell me your name, then tell me what's happened"

Annie: "My name is Annie. A man is lying on the side of the road. I think he might be dead. Oh God! Oh God..."

Dispatcher: "Your last name, Ma'am?"

Annie: "The hell with my last name. You need to get someone here to help him. He's hurt, he's not moving!"

Dispatcher: "Alright Ma'am, I'll forego your last name for the moment. Now, the injured man...where is he?"

Annie: "Oh God, I don't know! Where are we? *Where are we?!*"

Dispatcher: "Calm down, Ma'am. Just think and you can tell me where you are."

Annie: "Calm down, calm down. Okay, I'm trying to be calm. Let me think..."

Annie paused, then closed her eyes, raised her arms and took a deep breath, emulating the ritual she had seen The Senator perform so many times, a ritual that would help him maintain a sense of calm before he gave a speech. After what felt like an eternity, Annie took one more deep breath, then lowered her arms and brought the cell phone back to her ear.

Dispatcher: "Ma'am, Ma'am? Are you still with me? Are you alright?"

Annie: "Yes, I'm back. I'm here. I'm okay now. I think we're on Old Allen Pike."

Dispatcher: "Where on Old Allen Pike, Ma'am. It's a long road. I need some kind of landmark."

Annie: "At The Grille."

Dispatcher: "Do you mean The Country Grille?"

Annie: "Yes! Where the hell do you think I mean?"

Dispatcher: "Ma'am?"

Annie: "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to snap. I'm sorry...yes, The Country Grille. But, no! That's not where he is. He's not at The Grille. He's on Oak Tree Road."

Dispatcher: "Ma'am...Can you remember where he is on Oak Tree?"

Annie: "I'm not sure...I don't know exactly where..."

Dispatcher: "Please try, Ma'am. When you turn onto Oak Tree Road from Old Allen Pike do you think you'd be going north or south to get to him?"

Annie: "I can't think! Wait! North? No...that's not it. Damn! If you turn left onto Oak Tree Road from Old Allen Pike and go back toward Allentown it would be south, wouldn't it? I think he's...south. Yes! That's it! He's south of Old Allen Pike."

Dispatcher: "About how far, Ma'am?"

Annie: "I don't know how far! Oh, God! Please just send someone here!"

Dispatcher: "Calm down, Ma'am. Just take a guess. Ma'am, I've got to let people know where they can find him."

Annie took another deep breath.

Annie: "A guess? Okay, if it's a guess you want...I guess...I guess he's probably about a mile south of The Grille, right by the intersection. Yes, that's it! That's where I think he is."

Dispatcher: "Okay, Ma'am. Now, I've got to keep you on the line. Are you still there? Ma'am? Are you still there?"

Annie: "Yes, yes...I'm here."

Dispatcher: "Ma'am? Do you know who he is?"

Annie: "Who?"

Dispatcher: "The man. The man lying at the side of the road."

Annie: "Of course...yes...I know who he is."

Dispatcher: "Who is he, ma'am?"

Annie: "He's my husband."

Dispatcher: "His name, Ma'am. I've got to get his name."

Annie: "His name?"

Annie's voice began to sound as if she were drifting off, into a world of her own, not quite paying attention to the dispatcher's questions.

Dispatcher: "Ma'am? Are you still there?"

It took a few moments before Annie answered. Her voice was quiet, and when she spoke, she sounded like a little girl.

Annie: "Yes, I'm here."

Dispatcher: "I've got to have his name, Ma'am. What's his name?"

Annie: "My husband's name?"

Dispatcher: "Yes, Ma'am, his name. What is your husband's name?"

Annie answered as though she was surprised the dispatcher didn't already know who her husband was, that he didn't already know his name.

Annie: "My husband's name? Why, my husband is The Senator."

And with Annie's last words, all hell broke loose at the Communications Center.

Chapter 5

HELP ARRIVES

Although it was still dreadful, the storm wasn't as bad as it was earlier in the night. The torrential downpour and high winds that had thrashed throughout the Valley only a short time before had diminished, but it continued to rain steadily with higher winds than usual. Nothing big was soaring through the air as it had been an hour ago at the height of the storm, but anything small that the wind could budge from its normal resting-place, like broken twigs or small stones, moved through the air with ease. Even though the weather had begun to calm down, it was still a rescue team's nightmare.

Two officers, who had just finished their dinner break at a fast food joint a few miles down the road from The Grille, were dispatched as soon as the Communications Center determined Annie's actual location. Being in close proximity, their patrol car reached The Grille's parking lot within minutes of the call. They found Annie standing outside in the rain and Julie still lying motionless on the front seat of the DeVille. One of the officers stayed behind and waited outside Julie's car for backup to arrive. The other officer helped Annie into the back of the patrol car, then continued up the road to where The Senator, like his friend Julie, lay motionless, waiting for help.

Firefighters had reached the accident scene only moments before Annie arrived in the police car. She would have bolted from the car when they came to a stop, but Annie had been locked securely into the vehicle by the police car's automatic locking system.

The spotlights from the fire truck were aimed at the field, illuminating the jet-black night as though it was the middle of a bright sunny day. The sky was so black from the storm that, had it not been for those lights, they would never have found The Senator, who was lying just off the road at the edge of the soggy black field. Yet, even with the lights, The Senator's

body, covered with debris, blended in with his surroundings and was barely visible.

The whole area was in the process of being cordoned off. Firefighters had jammed stakes into the wet ground to serve as anchors for the bright yellow caution tape. They were stringing the tape from stake to stake along the side of the road where The Senator's body had finally come to rest. Luckily, because of the storm and the time of night, emergency personnel didn't have to worry about traffic control. No one else was crazy enough to have ventured out on such a horrendous night.

When the officer finally opened the door to let Annie out of the car, she completely lost control of any composure she may have mustered during her call to 9-1-1. She succumbed to the horror playing out before her eyes, became hysterical and tried to bolt to the edge of the field to reach The Senator.

One of the firemen caught her movement out of the corner of his eye. He quickly broke away from the other rescuers, ran to Annie and grabbed her before she was able to get too far from the cruiser and reach the crowded spot where The Senator's lifeless body now lay. The fireman tried to calm her but she was inconsolable and struggled against him to escape his grasp and run to The Senator. He had no other choice but to pick her

up and carry her to the rescue vehicle. The fireman's actions, picking her up and carrying her like a small child, had a calming affect on Annie and she didn't resist when he lifted her up, placed her inside the back of the truck, climbed in next to her and seated her on the aluminum bench. They sat side-by-side. Annie leaned against his shoulder. Together, they waited while his buddies tended to The Senator.

As the firefighters tried to determine how to get the revered public figure from the edge of the field, into the truck, and on his way to County General, they had to consider how to pick him up and move him without actually killing him in the process.

While Annie and the fireman waited in the dry, warm truck, he kept his arms securely wrapped around her. He held her tightly. She said nothing, just continued to lean against him. As if in a trance, Annie rocked back and forth, and The Senator's wife resembled a small child while she was safely cradled within the fireman's big, burly, comforting arms.

#

The second police car arrived at The Grille with red lights spinning and its siren blaring. An officer aimed the cruiser's spotlight directly at the driver's side window of the DeVille.

Startled awake by the bright light and piercing sound, Julie's mind began to come into focus. He had just begun to realize that the illumination and noise were being emitted from a police car. But before he was fully awake and wholly comprehending what was happening around him, the door opened and he felt himself dragged from the car, then thrown against its hood. His hands were pulled behind his back, then tightly secured with plastic straps rather than traditional metal handcuffs.

Since Julie was still emerging from his stupor, in an out-of-it state-of-mind, and quite confused, the officers, after a few minutes of useless questioning, decided they were getting nowhere. They determined it would take some time before he would be coherent enough to answer any of their inquiries, gave up any hope of questioning him while still in the parking lot of The Grille and chose to wait until they arrived at headquarters. The officers managed to fold the plastic-manacled Julie into the back of their patrol car, then took off with the vehicle's lights flashing. The cruiser had to pass the accident scene and drove by cautiously before taking off at a greater speed, carrying Julie and the officers into town.

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Annie watched out the back window of the rescue truck and saw the police cruiser's flashing lights come toward her. As the vehicle approached, it reduced speed, slowly passed by the whole horrid scene, then picked up speed and continued toward Allentown. Annie could make out a form in the rear seat. His head was leaning back. She knew it was Julie. Annie felt numb. She knew that Julie had just stepped onto a metaphorical tightrope, and she didn't want him to fall. A feeling of desperate reality washed over her. Annie did not want to lose both of them on the same night.

#

The Senator's broken body was finally moved into the rescue truck. He could barely be seen because of the protective measures that had been taken to shield his injuries. He had been tightly wrapped from his neck to his toes with a sterile, white cotton blanket. A thick gray brace was wrapped around his neck. An oxygen mask shielded his face. An intravenous tube was stuck in his arm. And gauzy bandages had been carefully wrapped around his head. He was very, very still. It was hard to tell if he was breathing.

Even though The Senator's wounds were completely covered, Annie could not bear to look, could not bear to bring herself to

gaze at what little could be seen of the man with whom she had lived and shared her life for more than twenty years. Still cradled in the arms of her burly fireman, she sat alongside her husband as the vehicle quickly whisked its inhabitants away from the accident scene and through the storm to County General.

Chapter 6

AT THE SOUND OF THE TONE

Startled by a vaguely familiar sound, she abruptly began her journey down the dark tunnel from blissful sleep to the reality of the screaming phone, loudly beckoning her to its call, threatening to become louder with each successive ring. The shroud of sleep quickly dissipated into what would soon become "last night" as she blinked her eyes and squinted them to ward off the light shining dimly from the alarm clock at the side of her bed. Just as her eyes began to adjust to the light and the clock came into focus, the right digit dropped down from a six to a seven. 3:17. It could only mean one of two things:

either someone had died or - what was more likely - her editor was hot on the trail of a breaking story and needed her to do the actual legwork.

Fumbling with the receiver, she mumbled "hello" into the mouthpiece, then heard the familiar voice. There was no disguising her editor's Brooklyn accent, confirming that the stronger of her two hunches had been correct. She took a split second for a mental sigh of relief and thought to herself, Thank God nobody died. Then she strained to hear the voice at the other end of the line.

"Sammy? Listen to me. I need you to get over to County General right away. There's been an accident. A bad one. Really bad. And you're the only one who can get close enough to the players - to find out what's really going on. Brace yourself, kid."

After their first, formal meeting, Maxie often called her "kid."

"It's The Senator. He's hurt real bad, kid. Just came over the radio a few minutes ago. The unlucky dispatcher who took the call didn't have a chance in hell of hiding it from his voice. Real excited he was, the kind of excited you get when something really, really big happens."

Sammy had to swallow hard and strain to hear him. Her heart was pounding so strongly that she swore she could hear it. Barely making out what Maxie was saying, she briefly thought of Poe's famous "heart," then managed to blurt out in a husky, foreign voice that was still thick with sleep,

"Oh my God! The Senator!"

Even though it seemed that all Maxie was going on about was The Senator, her immediate fear was not really for him, but for Annie.

She then heard herself croak, "Annie?"

"Oh, God! Sorry, kid, didn't mean to scare the hell out of you. Don't worry. He was by himself. Annie wasn't with him. She was at home. She's okay, kid...she's okay, but our contact over at General told us that she's really shook up. She's there now. In the ER waiting room. That's why we need you over there. She won't talk to anyone, not even to the cops. Just keeps asking for "Sammy." Get on it, kid, and get back to me as soon as you can. And stay on it. I'm re-assigning all your other stories until this one's over. Prepare yourself, kid - it could be a while. Oh yeah... be very, very careful, Sammy. The roads are real slick and full of debris. I don't want you to become part of this story too."

True to his nature, Maxie hung up from the call just as abruptly as he began it. And he succeeded in jolting her awake from the first good night's sleep that she'd had in more time than she could remember.

The clock on her bedside table now showed 3:20. She was wide-awake. It had taken only three minutes for Sammy to completely emerge from sleep-induced fog as Maxie blurted out what little he knew of tonight's disaster. Sammy still had no idea what had happened to The Senator - only that there was an accident, that he was badly hurt, that Annie was okay, that she was asking for her and apparently expecting her to show up at the hospital.

Sammy made a mental note. In the future, when Maxie calls late at night, I'll have to remember not to take a sigh of relief until **after** I've heard what he has to say.

#

Looking for something warm to wear, Sammy quickly fumbled through the haphazardly tossed pile of clean and sort-of-clean clothes that were strewn across the top of her dresser. It had been a warm winter, but the nights were still cold and, judging by the muffled sound of water droplets splashing against the

glass panes of the bedroom window, this particular night was not only cold but also damp.

She grabbed her jeans and a sweater, calling out each item to nobody in particular in an attempt to help rid herself of her still sleepy, croaky voice. Sammy lives on the top floor of an old Victorian. Her landlady - kindly, sweet, almost totally deaf - lives downstairs. At times like this Sammy was grateful that any noise emanating from her apartment could only be heard by Ali Cat and her, since they were the only beings in the entire house that could actually hear.

Rushing to get out, Sammy grabbed her hat, gloves and an old raincoat from a hook just inside the closet door. Being summoned, feeling her adrenaline kick in and hurrying to be the first at the scene is a routine she had become accustomed to during her days as a cub reporter. The routine was now as comfortable to her as stepping into an old pair of shoes that, with time, had softly molded to the contours of her feet.

But, that night, as familiar as her routine had become over the years, that night was different. It was not comfortable. As usual, her adrenaline kicked in but then turned mostly into anxiety. On that night, rushing took on a different meaning because Maxie made it clear that Sammy was the only one to have

been summoned at all. Because, on that night, it involved her best friend...Annie.

Sammy turned the key in the ignition. Nothing happened. She tried again - still nothing. This was not the first time the car did not oblige when she turned the key to get it started. Because of the car's history of inconsistent starting, she learned a long time ago to plan for quick getaways. Last night was no exception, and she had parked the old car facing downhill. Like Annie, Sammy just couldn't give up her outdated and stubborn old friend for a newer model. She often dreamed about buying a new car...she'd love a Mercedes or a Porsche. But, on a reporter's salary, the only new car in her future would probably be a Hyundai.

She released the parking break and shifted the car into first gear. As it began to roll down the hill, she popped the clutch. Its engine sputtered, grabbed, then caught as the car picked up momentum - and off Sammy went...peering through her rain-splashed windshield into the proverbial "dark and stormy night."

#

Maxie wasn't one to mince words. Right to the point, he was. But Sammy loved the old curmudgeon. He was a true

newspaperman whose eyes and ears were always open in search of a story. His persistence paid off, and he was never at a loss for a new story. It was no wonder he made editor before he was thirty. Most of the other investigative reporters on the paper's staff lived their lives from one paycheck to the next, usually going on to a more solid position somewhere else. Unlike Sammy, most of The Details' staff was on the young side and very few of them qualified as "forty something."

Sammy. She didn't know where that nickname came from, but somehow it kept resurfacing thanks to one good friend or another. Her real name is Sarina. The irony of her nickname is that she is named for her mom's dad, who really was a Sam. She never knew him because he died when Sammy's mom was just a young girl.

Except for Sammy's mom, everyone in her family called her Sarie. When she became a teenager, Sammy turned Sarie, with an "e" into Sari, without the "e." As a personal flourish, she always drew a little flower or a tiny heart over the "i."

Caitlyn was the first one to call her Sammie. She again personalized the spelling with a little flower or tiny heart drawn over the "i." Sammie had no idea why her friend chose that nickname. She just did. Sammie never really understood

where the nickname came from. She never told any of her friends that she had been named for a Sam - that would have made sense if they had known. If her name had been Samantha - that would have made sense too. But how did Caitlyn derive Sammie from Sarina? How or why her friend had come up with the nickname was something she had given up trying to figure out a long time ago. Somehow it seemed apropos, so Sammie just took it for granted that it was meant to be, that she must have always had an aura about her that cried out "Sammie."

Since Sammie never told Caitlyn that her grandfather's name was Sam, she decided that it was more than a coincidence. The nickname meant something special to Sammie. It made her feel a connection to the man she had never met, a man who her mom had known for too brief a time.

Lynn, Sammie's college roommate, was the next person who, out of the blue, called her Sammie. Again, she made no mention of her grandfather's name. By now she knew it was more than coincidence. She dropped the "ie" for a "y," relegated the little hearts and flowers to the past and became "Sammy." It seemed to be fate to her that one good friend, or another, would decide to ignore her given name of Sarina and rename her Sammy.

Maxie called her Sammy on the first day they met - when George, the reporter who hired her to be a Details intern for the summer just after she graduated from college, took her around to meet the rest of The Details' staff. Maxie's door had been closed. Sammy soon discovered that although Maxie's door was almost always closed, it was always open to his colleagues who needed a few minutes of his time. He just liked to keep the constant buzz that emanated out of the newsroom to a minimum. Shutting his door was his only way of achieving some level of quiet during his time at work.

George knocked three times, then entered Maxie's office. It was a medium-sized room with two large windows. The outside window provided him with a view of the busy street and sidewalk at the base of The Details corporate office tower. Through the inside window, Maxie was able to survey the entire editorial staff, a staff so large that it completely filled the open floor plan of the fourth floor.

Even then, on her very first day at The Details, Maxie's office was cluttered with more piles of old newspapers than Sammy had thought possible - even in an old newspaper man's office. The clutter was enormous but Maxie apparently found it manageable. It was nowhere near as mountainous as the wall-to-

wall newspaper collections that are often amassed by a select and eccentric breed of people - unbelievably large, compact and mountainous collections that, from time to time, find their way into the news or human-interest publications.

"Max Shlisky, meet Sarina Levine."

Sammy would never forget that moment when Maxie looked up from whatever he was working on, gave her a "once over" to size her up, looked her square in the eyes, managed to smile and put out his hand.

"Welcome to our zoo, Sammy."

That was it. Just like that. For the third time in her life, she again became Sammy - completely confirming her intuitive notion that the recurring nickname was much more than coincidence. George had thrown a quick, raised-eyebrow-look her way, but Sammy's responding glance and subtle shake of the head told him to "let it go." So, George didn't correct him. Sammy didn't correct him. From that first moment, Maxie never called her Sarina. Always Sammy. Although no one ever discussed or questioned why Maxie had "renamed" her, in The Details office Maxie's gut-felt nickname stuck. Somehow, it seemed right to her. As though it was supposed to be.

There is an old saying, "three times is a charm." She took her third naming by Maxie as a sign, decided to accept her destiny, and chose to use the name as her professional nom de plume for her newly begun vocation, for her summer internship that turned into a full-time job. She evolved the spelling once more, and although it was still pronounced Sammy, she was professionally christened Sam E. Levine.

Adopting a pseudonym turned out to be a good move. When her career at The Details had just begun, her byline signature of Sam E. Levine provided her with anonymity and an unusual ability that enabled her, if she chose, to leave her work at the office. Before the paper started publishing reporters' photos along with their articles, not many people knew that she was a female Sam E., as opposed to a male Sam E. Only her closest friends and relatives knew and, before the paper betrayed her by printing her real identity in a photographic image, her friends and relatives were all sworn to secrecy, fully knowing that she thought it could make or break her career. They respected that and, to her knowledge, no one ever revealed her true identity.

Now it's a moot point, since her photo frequently runs alongside her writing. Even though it no longer matters whether Sam E. Levine's readers know if she is a man or a woman, she

often finds the rare occasion when it works to her advantage to use Sammy as her professional name and Sarina as her personal name.

#

She turned her focus back to her present task - getting to the hospital and finding Annie. The rain seemed to be letting up. The announcer on the radio indicated that the early morning storm Sammy was driving through was nothing compared to the pummeling that the Valley had been subjected to a few hours before. At the height of the storm she had been blissfully asleep in her warm, comfy bed, completely unaware of what was happening in the world beyond her cozy, dark and incredibly quiet room. All that ended when the phone interrupted her dreams, beckoning her to take Maxie's call.

By the look of the downed limbs, their mangled branches reaching in every direction, she could see it had been a really bad storm. Maneuvering her way around the continuous and treacherous obstacle course of debris, she was relieved when she realized that County General was just around the corner from the next traffic light. Sammy would be there before she knew it.

She chose not to ponder what Maxie had gotten her into. Past experience taught Sammy to take the stance of "wait and

see." Except for Annie, she had no idea who may be waiting for her or what was happening in that emergency room. She tried not to muddle her thoughts and kept pushing away images of Annie, by herself, sitting there anxiously expecting her reporter friend to emerge out of the dank night into the sterile waiting room.

Maxie made it seem as though The Senator was on death's doorstep, so Sammy didn't know what to expect and hadn't a clue about the mental state in which she would find Annie. Experience had taught her not to speculate, to wait until she got to the scene. Her personal involvement in this story challenged all her prior years of training and experience. A chill went up her back at the thought of her best friend waiting and hoping, most likely against all hope. She didn't want to think about what was going through Annie's mind - not knowing what was happening as the doctors tried to release her husband from the hand that fate had dealt him, one that, Maxie had intimated to Sammy, was indubitably a hand of death.

#

Sammy met Annie her first week in town - Allentown, to be precise, the same city made famous by the lyrics, "so I'm living here in Allentown..."

"Kid, I need you to cover this afternoon's fund-raising luncheon for The Senator."

A high profile bill had been introduced that morning and The Senator was unable to leave Washington to campaign in Pennsylvania. The responsibility for hosting the luncheon in Allentown had quickly become Annie's. Sammy was impressed at the ease and finesse with which The Senator's wife managed the luncheon. Once back at The Details, Sammy made an appointment to speak with the honorable candidate's supportive wife.

Although the two women were not at all alike, during that meeting each one found a kindred spirit in the other. Though neither was originally from the Lehigh Valley, both came from small towns and modest economic backgrounds. Their friendship grew. Annie began to call Sammy on an increasingly regular basis. She invited her to lunch at the club. To share dinner at her home. To relax by the side of her pool. Sammy got to know The Senator and Julie too, but not nearly as well as she came to know Annie. Although their friendship had grown, Sammy was aware that she really didn't know very much about Annie's past. She was alertly cautious about the boundaries that she chose to cross during her friendship with The Senator's wife. She was careful not to be "the reporter" but simply to be

Annie's friend. She had been content to accept Annie unconditionally and did not delve into her past. Sammy took her for who she was - who Annie presented herself to be.

Chapter 7

WAITING

"Politicians make strange bedfellows," Annie thought. I don't know who said it, but they must have been a politician - or married to one. Being married to a politician hasn't been easy. On a night like tonight...it's more than I can take.

Annie should know. Not only had she been married to a politician for a very long time, but she was also waiting in the emergency room of the Valley's regional medical center, waiting while doctors tried to save her particular politician.

Annie appeared to be in shock. Yet she sat calmly, patiently waiting, expecting that her husband would not survive.

While she sat, hoping for him to live, but knowing that she was really waiting for him to die, Annie was also waiting for her friend Sammy to arrive.

#

When Sammy walked into the emergency room, it took a few moments for her eyes to adjust to the eerie hospital light, for her shrinking pupils to focus. But, once they adjusted to the brightly-lit room, she quickly spotted Annie. It was fairly easy... Annie was the only one there. She was in the far corner of the room, all scrunched up on one of those hard waiting room chairs. It was difficult for Sammy to determine whether Annie was awake or asleep. Her head was on its side and resting on her knees, which were drawn up tightly under her chin. The heels of her sneakers braced themselves on the edge of the chair seat.

It surprised Sammy that no one else was there. She had assumed The Senator would have some kind of entourage present to protect him - a bodyguard, a secret service man, or at least an aide. But now it appeared that her perception was simply a miscalculation of the importance senators actually hold in our system. It wasn't a matter of The Senator's importance; he just didn't fall into the same category as a president or vice-

president, or even a former president or vice-president. He was well liked and not in the same league as those needing protection from the masses.

Not wanting to startle Annie, she purposely, quietly, cleared her throat. As Sammy suspected she would, Annie heard her, raised her head from her knees and looked sleepily in Sammy's direction. Her red curls were disheveled, scattered loosely around her face. Annie looked exhausted, yet relieved to see her old friend. A bit of a smile drew at the corners of her lips, then flickered and disappeared as quickly as the pinched flame of a newly extinguished candle.

For the first time, in all the years that she'd known her, Annie looked awful. Sammy didn't know if her friend had been examined but, to her untrained eye, it appeared she was definitely showing signs of shock: She seemed confused, dazed and exhausted. Her face was pale. And tiny, thin blue veins were barely visible under her delicate porcelain skin. A slight hint of mascara ran in streaks down her faintly freckled cheeks. Instinct told Sammy the faint, streaky mascara lines were from Annie having been soaked in the rain, not from tears. Annie's eyes didn't strike her as being the eyes of someone who had been crying; instead they were detached and void of expression. They

were as clear as always, the whites completely free of those nasty red veins that always seemed to pop out. Like those that did when Sammy had been crying her eyes out.

It only took Annie a couple of moments before it fully sank in and she knew the person standing on the other side of the cold, barren emergency room was actually her friend, Sammy. Slowly, almost impishly, Annie's face ignited with the sweet, naive smile that Sammy had grown so fond of over the past couple of decades.

In the distance Sammy heard the chiming of a clock. One...two...three...four o'clock. It seems like hours since Maxie first called, Sammy thought, but it's only been, give or take a few minutes, not even an hour.

#

The bright, sterile waiting room was not conducive to talking. Sammy didn't know how long Annie had been sitting in the cold, impersonal surroundings but, however long it had been, her gut told her that she needed to get Annie out of there.

It was when they exited the waiting room and moved into the corridor that Sammy saw the police officer stationed at the door. So much for my first perception that there was a lack of security, she thought. The lonely officer was not quite as

prestigious as the FBI folks Sammy initially thought would have been called to duty.

The officer asked Annie where she was going, glancing at Sammy just long enough to see The Details' I.D. she had habitually tacked onto the lapel of her old raincoat as she rushed through the parking lot to get to the emergency room.

"Excuse me, ma'am...but I can't let you talk with the press."

"Oh, sorry officer, this is my friend Sarina Levine. She can't help it if she makes a living working for the local paper. Don't worry, she works in sales. She always leaves that stupid I.D. pinned to her coat. Please, officer, I really need a cup of coffee. It's been an awful night and I just can't sit in there any longer. I'd rather sit in the cafeteria."

Annie's a lot more composed than I thought she was when I first spotted her in the waiting room. I never thought of her as a particularly strong woman, but so far she seems to be holding her own pretty well. Pretty damned well for a woman whose husband is very close to taking his final trip with the grim reaper, Sammy thought.

The young officer stared at Annie, then at Sammy, then back at Annie again. He didn't respond to Annie's request, but they

could tell he was carefully mulling over whether he should let Sammy continue to the cafeteria with her friend.

"Please, officer, we're only going to get a cup of coffee. And I need to be with my best friend right now. Now that The Senator..."

Annie let her voice drop away, fade just enough to effect the precise reaction she wanted from the young police officer. As she intended, Annie didn't need to finish her sentence. The officer nodded in understanding, then apologized because he took so long to respond. The two women continued on their way and he apologized again because he had to tag along, "to keep an eye on Annie," he said. "You know, you being The Senator's wife and all."

Annie had covered for Sammy, used her real name - Sarina, not letting on that she was publicly known as Sammy Levine. She didn't tell him that her friend was actually a reporter. He obviously had never paid attention to her photo in the paper, or if he had, he didn't recognize her now.

Sammy reflected, thought that it was a good thing her I.D. didn't read Press in big, bold letters. That bit of identification was hidden on the back, along with the address and phone number of The Details - just in case she actually

needed to use it as a press pass. The front of the I.D. merely listed the name of each staff member - in Sammy's case her real name, Sarina Levine.

The I.D. was crafted that way on purpose, to provide professional anonymity for the paper's employees. It made sense that the editors didn't want The Detail's reporters to stand out - just in case they were in the right place at the right time and lucky enough to be "on" to something big. Being with Annie in County General was just one of those times when Sammy didn't want to stand out. She was grateful she didn't have to explain that she was a member of the press - thanks to her simply understated I.D. and to Annie's quick thinking and swift response when the officer challenged Sammy's exit from the ER's waiting room.

Sammy had no clue whether the young police officer was protecting or policing Annie. He was as polite as he could be and stayed out of their way, so she quickly dismissed the "policing" part of her calculations and determined that the officer had probably been dispatched to the emergency room to protect Annie. Unless he had someone watching over him, and Sammy suspected that he did not, The Senator had no federal officers overseeing the activities around him. Yet, ironically,

Annie had one of Allentown's finest making sure that she was okay.

Annie didn't say much at first, just kept her hands clasped tightly around the laminated paper coffee cup Sammy had set down in front of her. She seemed miles away. Her head was bent down. Her eyes were fixed on the steam from the hot cup of coffee, steam that was slowly drifting up, settling in a veil of tiny moist droplets on the red ringlets framing her cool, pale face.

Sammy had no idea what Annie may have been through that night, only knew that her friend absolutely adored The Senator and must be completely stunned, knowing The Senator was lying on some emergency room gurney, most likely fighting a losing battle for his life.

When they sat down, Sammy tried to break the ice.

"Sales?"

Annie shrugged. A small smile flashed across her lips.

"You write stories. Stories sell papers. So, my friend...you are in Sales."

Then Annie became really quiet. The two women sat silently - for what seemed like an eternity. Annie stared down at the table. Sammy fidgeted in her seat, completely uncomfortable

with the silence they had become steeped in - silence that was almost as thick as the rain had been just hours before.

After a while, Annie raised her head and looked Sammy square in the eyes. Her shoulders seemed to straighten; she sat up tall in her seat, took a deep breath and spoke softly.

"Sammy, he looks just awful. He's all broken up. His face..."

Her voice cracked and trailed off. It took her a minute to regain her composure while she stared into the distance. Sammy really didn't know what she was looking at, didn't think she was really looking at anything at all. Annie seemed to be just staring at a space somewhere behind Sammy's back.

When she spoke again her voice was still quiet, but calm and more focused on the emergency she found herself in than she seemed to have been only a few moments before.

"Sammy, they let me go into his room, but I couldn't stand being in there with him. He's all covered up, not at all recognizable. He looks as if he's so close to..."

Annie momentarily drifted away. When she resumed speaking, her voice was full of despair, uttering her friend's name in a quiet whine.

"Sammy. Oh, Sammy, I don't think he'll be around much longer. God, I don't know what I'll do without him."

She looked around the room again, as though she was searching. Then her eyes settled on Sammy's face. Annie reached out her right hand. She gently touched Sammy's left arm, then rested her own arm back on the table.

When she spoke, it was with a voice on the verge of cracking, a voice weak with grief. "I really need your friendship now. Please Sammy, please." Her voice grew weaker as she uttered, "Help me get through this." and then it trailed off.

Sammy gave her friend a chance to recompose herself before she asked, "Annie, have you called Julie?"

Annie quickly shook her head from side to side, her loose bundle of scarlet curls bouncing all around her painstricken face. When she spoke, her voice was very quiet...as though it was a strain for her to speak.

"Oh, God. No. I don't have to. He already knows. At least I think he knows...he's with them."

Sammy gave her a questioning look and asked,

"Them?"

The strength began to come back into Annie's voice when she answered her friend.

"The police. He's with the police. They took Julie with them, back to headquarters. Oh, God...Sammy, I think they might have arrested him."

What she said caught Sammy totally off-guard.

"Annie! You think that they arrested Julie? What the hell happened?"

"I don't know, Sammy. I just don't know. Oh, Sammy. What am I going to do?"

Then Annie lost whatever composure she had been trying to maintain and burst into tears. Sammy pulled the still-full hot coffee cup away from in front of her friend. Just in time. Just before she threw her head down, landing on her arms that were still lying on the table, encircling the area that, until only moments ago, had held her steaming cup of coffee.

Annie sobbed uncontrollably. Sammy felt helpless as she sat across from her friend, unable to do anything - except wait. While Annie cried the tears of a woman whose very heart and soul were being torn apart by grief.

Chapter 8

WHY ALLENTOWN?

Sammy didn't set out to choose Allentown - it chose her. Hooked her and reeled her in. As a Pisces, she found that to be a somewhat apropos, if not a painfully ironic, analogy.

The first "hook?" That one was thrown her way as the words of Billy Joel's song about factory closings in Allentown worked their way in and around her subconscious. A catchy tune with catchy lyrics, Allentown was frequently played on air. It was popular, became famous and was probably given more airtime than most songs played during that decade. Allentown, the city,

had become part of the nation's musical vernacular with the success of its musical namesake. That was the first "hook."

The second "hook?" That one came flying at her during an old episode of the Phil Donohue show. There she was, sitting in the college lounge, trying as hard as she could to take her mind off the bio lab she had just endured. Sammy hated them in high school, hated them in college. In high school she was able to get away with feigning illness on the day her class dissected frogs. Sammy was sure her mom knew what was going on, but since they shared the same distaste of cutting apart dead, formaldehyde-preserved amphibians, her mother let her get away with claiming illness, then sent Sammy back to school the next day with a pretty convincing excuse for her absence. In reality, Sammy and her mom had spent most of their day watching TV and playing Monopoly.

College labs were a different story. Sammy knew she had to get through them with a more mature outlook. So she approached the "den of dissection" from a different angle - basically just forced herself to show up. And got through it without puking her guts out.

Even though she had made it through the dissection ordeal without tossing her cookies, she couldn't rid her hands of the

penetrating and sickly smell of formaldehyde - no matter how many times she scrubbed them with the sterile, antiseptic janitorial-supply soap in the ladies room at the college center. Even though she and her fellow classmates had to wear surgical gloves while working in the lab, the stench seeped through just the same, and Sammy couldn't get the smell of formaldehyde off of her hands and out of her system.

So, there was Sammy, watching Phil Donohue while massaging her hands with lavender-scented hand cream she had picked up in the bookstore (after her bacterial soap-scrubbing endeavor failed miserably to rid them of the offensive formaldehyde scent). While she sat in the lounge trying to replace the scent of formaldehyde with the scent of lavender - there were the Totos, telling their story on national television to Phil Donohue and his millions of viewers.

The Totos were middle-aged lovebirds from Allentown with a unique and rather bizarre relationship twist. She tried to end her marital misery by serving him a loving portion of chicken soup laced with poison - after her bumbling "hit men" bungled his execution by ineffectively shooting him in the head, yet somehow failing to kill him. Her biggest mistake? Probably

hiring a couple of inept employees from Toto's own Allentown pizzeria to do her old man in.

It didn't take Madame Toto very long to realize that pizza delivery guys don't necessarily make expert hit men. As a result, her wounded, bleeding husband was upstairs in their bed, too dazed (or too dense?) to realize he had been shot. And his only complaint? A whopper of a headache! So, what did she do? She served him a portion of "Jewish penicillin," garnished with a savory lacing of sweet poison - to ease his pain and heal his suffering, of course!

Madame Toto had attempted, but miserably failed, to eradicate the old philanderer from the sorry world in which she existed - not to mention the sorry worlds of the many mistresses who prompted her homicidal ministerings in the first place.

Sammy was fascinated by their story, intrigued that it took place in Allentown, a city not so far away from where she attended college in New Jersey. She was intrigued by the romantic irony to their story. He survived. She was arrested. Mrs. Toto was sent to state prison, did her time and was eventually released with an exemplary record of good behavior. Throughout her trial and imprisonment he never stopped loving her, stood by her side, even pleaded for her release. And on the

day she finally gained her freedom - he was just outside the prison gate, waiting for her with open arms, to take her back to Allentown.

So, there they were on national television. Holding hands and looking fondly into each other's eyes on the Phil Donohue show, The Totos were telling their story. As it turned out, the real purpose for their appearance was to promote a film based on their story. It was a black comedy called, appropriately, "I Love You to Death." Intrigued, Sammy saw the film and realized the artistic liberties taken in the interpretation of the humble Allentonians she had observed on Phil Donohue. The actors and their portrayal were completely different from the true-life couple that Sammy had first seen on TV. and occasionally had an opportunity to observe in person since her arrival in Allentown. They were still together. Still married. And still in love.

Who would have thought? Sammy mused to herself as she watched them on television in the college lounge. Sometimes life is stranger than fiction. It was the kind of eccentric story that had always piqued her interest and, perhaps subconsciously, as Sammy viewed the Totos on the Phil Donohue Show that long-ago day in college, she was uncannily drawn to telling her stories in and about Allentown.

The third "hook?" That came Sammy's way right before graduation from college - when she discovered The Details while sitting in the placement office, researching opportunities for a new job. The paper sought a summer intern to work in editorial. She took a chance that it might turn into a full-time position, traveled to Allentown and applied for the job. It was this third and final "hook" that reeled her in for good. And landed her in the city she now calls home.

Allentown was one of the most fascinating, diverse, culturally intense places she had ever been. And that's saying a lot for a girl who grew up in the suburbs of New York City. Sammy is a girl who whet her appetite for journalism as she waited from Sunday to Sunday to get her hands on the only edition of the New York Times that her family could afford to have delivered to their house on a regular basis. She's a girl who religiously read the newspaper's arts and entertainment section. She absorbed as much information as possible and became familiar with New York's arts world. Using information from the Times, she explored New York's museums. She cut her theatre teeth in long lines at the **tkts** booth in Times Square while waiting to purchase two-fers to see any show that was available. Sammy didn't care which shows she got tickets for -

Broadway, Off Broadway, Off-Off Broadway - as long as they were part of the New York theatre scene.

Chapter 9

ANNIE WHO?

Annie is the type of person who always seems to get lost. Not literally "lost and not to be found," but figuratively lost in the "system of life." Annie is always the one left out, or left behind, or just there - waiting. Annie knows that people don't look through her on purpose; they simply don't see her. Not that she's plain or hard on the eyes. Quite the opposite, actually.

She has a knack of speaking up and not being heard. She can wait in line but, when her turn finally comes, clerks bypass

her to acknowledge and wait on another person. She is the one whose car never gets fixed on time because someone else's emergency comes along and her car is pushed aside and forgotten. She is the one who sits alone because nobody saves her a seat. She was the one almost left behind on class trips until some teacher or chaperone remembered her at the last minute and cried out, "Where's Annie?" It didn't take a genius to figure out why Annie dreaded those yearly, inevitable class trips.

It was during one of these "being forgotten by the system of life" episodes that she met The Senator, long before he was The Senator.

It was an unusually hot, late September day. No one was perspiring discretely. It was impossible for anyone to be exempt. Traces of sweat trickled down foreheads and stung eyes. Warm, salty beads dripped slowly from chins. The intense heat made perspiration turn into steamy liquid, which seeped from every pore and created dark circles under arms of shirts. Shirts with sleeves that, when dressing for the day in the crisp morning air, people had not had the foresight to set aside in exchange for lighter, more airy, sleeveless ones.

Hidden by the deceiving mask of the cool morning air, the heat was completely unexpected. Everyone seemed to be agitated.

Tempers were rising just as quickly as the heat so visibly leaving its mark and making all of its victims so unbearably uncomfortable.

It seemed as though Annie had waited for an eternity in the Bursar's office to settle her tuition account. She was the last one in line. Finally, when it was her turn, the lone clerk said she needed a break that couldn't be delayed and asked Annie to sit in the waiting room. She didn't politely make the request but instead barked that she needed a break and yelled at Annie to wait in the next room. The clerk was pregnant. The extra burden she carried had obviously made her miserable, made suffering from the heat much more intense than what was felt by everyone else. Annie intuitively knew the woman simply needed to go to the bathroom and that's "the break" that she could not delay.

She went into the waiting room, took a seat, reached into her backpack and then pulled out a dog-eared textbook, written by an author who presumably had chosen, from all of Shakespeare's plays, his "ten best." Annie just started reading the well-worn copy of the book the day before, which was the beginning of the fall semester of her first year in college.

The text was rumpled and dog-eared, but Annie was pleased because she bought it, at a fraction of its actual cost, as a second-hand text from the student bookstore. By the looks of it, Annie thought, this poor old Shakespeare book is probably more like fourth-or-fifth-hand. But Annie didn't care. It was cheap and still readable. That's all that mattered.

As soon as she began to read, Annie immediately became mesmerized with the ill-fated romance of Romeo and his lady, Juliet. Since she was considering becoming a theatre major, her advisor had recommended Annie take the "Intro to Shakespeare" course offered by the Theatre Department. "Studying Shakespeare might help you decide whether theatre is the path you might wish to pursue," her advisor had told her. Annie knew that, even if she didn't pursue theatre for her degree, "Intro to Shakespeare" was a course that could also be counted as an English requirement. Either way, Annie figured that she was ahead.

Annie didn't know how long she waited. She was absorbed in her book as all the familiar, yet previously unread, scenes about the Montagues and the Capulets played quickly before her eyes. And penetrated her heart and soul. She barely heard the door open and close when another student, who needed to settle his finances, entered the room.

It wasn't until he asked Annie a question (and had actually attempted to ask his question at least two or three times) that she finally looked up and realized he was talking to her. He wanted to know if Annie had been waiting long. She barely looked his way but instead focused on her watch. That's when it slowly sunk in that she had waited much longer than anyone, even an uncomfortable, hot, sweaty pregnant woman, would need to take her "short" break. Almost an hour and twenty minutes had passed, just drifted by, while Annie was caught up in the Renaissance lives that the ill-fated lovers, Romeo and Juliet, had barely begun to live.

Annie looked back at the other student, now fully aware of his presence. Her mind reeled as her eyes focused on his face. He was one of the most handsome, striking boys she had ever seen, or who had probably ever spoken to Annie during her entire life. Not like one of the guys from back home. Definitely nothing like one of them, she thought. She was taken back by his looks. The fact that he noticed her - had actually talked to her - that alone was enough to ignite her senses.

Perhaps it was his handsome looks and boyish grin, or maybe it was because Annie's subconscious was still drifting in the world of Shakespeare's two lovers. For whichever reason, she

just sat there. Annie just sat and looked at him with, most likely, the dumbest look she had ever given anyone throughout her entire eighteen years. His dark black hair was fashionably long, laced with lighter streaks of red that hinted of a summer spent mostly outdoors. He had a shaggy moustache and a hint of a beard, both a shade lighter than his hair and with highlights that were a much more prominent red.

But it wasn't his hair or his moustache or the muscles slightly peeking out from his dampened short-sleeved shirt. It was his eyes. His eyes held Annie in their grasp and captured her for a lifetime.

#

Annie was a small town girl who never had a real boyfriend. She lived a sheltered life, just like everyone she had grown up with. She, and the other children in her community, had been protected and watched over by the entire town.

Her life, and the lives of her friends, could have been taken from the pages of Samuel Clemens' lost in time, lazy, Mississippi River novels about boys with freckled-faces and girls with tight plaited pigtails. Just like the children in those books, Annie and her friends went barefoot, scurrying about town in small packs of laughing, happy, curious kids.

On hot summer days, at any given time, groups of friends could be found swimming in Old Man Tanner's spring-fed pond. It was a place where carefree children jumped off the makeshift wooden diving board or skimmed across the pond at the end of a long, thick rope that was securely knotted to the sturdy old oak tree. Swinging on the rope always ended with an exhilarated, noisy plunge into the center of the pond's shimmering, cool water. No one in or around the pond could escape the splashes caused by those rope drops. Life was idyllic, and most of the children had no idea just how unique to their little town their exquisite excursion through childhood really was.

Their parents never worried about them. It didn't matter where they went or who they were with. There was always an adult within earshot. Invisible eyes of neighbors and townspeople were all around them, protecting the town's smaller residents from the evils that could lure young children away, taint them and break the spell cast upon them by the bliss of simply not knowing. Not knowing what could hurt them, not knowing the influences from a world outside of their town, where children grew up too fast and grownups seemed powerless to protect them. Not knowing about the realities they would face when they went off to college, when they left to live in the

real world outside of their safe, innocent little town. Annie lived a simple, idyllic and perfect life growing up in that small town full of doting caretakers. And she was always only a hop, skip and jump away from the refreshing water in Old Man Tanner's pond.

So Annie showed up at college having grown up in a world that, in reality, no longer exists. At college, once again, she was almost immediately protected - encompassed by the love and comfort she found as she began her relationship with The Senator. Annie was equally enveloped by the friendship that Julie so generously offered her. Like the townspeople back home, The Senator and Julie continued to protect Annie, shelter her, care for her and love her. She never dated anyone else. Annie never looked beyond their happy threesome, never realized that, beyond her fairy tale existence was a world that she would not discover for many, many years.

Chapter 10

INSIDE LOOKING OUT

Julie opened his eyes. It was the morning after the accident. At first he had no clue where he was. But, by the looks of his surroundings, he was positive he wasn't home in his condo or in his own bed. Julie's memory was a bit foggy, but it didn't take long for the surreal nature of where he was to sink in.

Julie had been in this place before, but under different circumstances. Although still somewhat in a fog and not quite knowing how he got there or what he was doing there, Julie saw

the irony in his situation and asked himself, How many times have I been on the other side, looking in?

It had been more than enough times to know that he wouldn't last long if he had to remain there much longer. This time, the feeling was different. In the past, every time Julie found himself in this place, he felt smug and confident. After all, he was smart and successful.

Julie had always felt superior when visiting this place since he was the one on the outside and it was the person he visited who had done something stupid and landed himself on the inside.

But this time it was Julie who was on the inside. Somehow, the tables had inexplicably been turned. Now it was he, the smart, smug one, who was on the inside looking out.

Julie's wrists were sore and bruised where the straps from the night before had been tightly wrapped. His head hurt and his sinuses were stuffed, yet he could still smell the pungent scent of his own body odor mixed with the musty smell of wet, dirty wool and cold, damp cement block walls.

His trousers were damp. Once structured and pressed, they were now limp and wrinkled. The cuffs were soiled and scruffy. They were completely ruined. It appeared to Julie that he must

have been out in the rain for a long time - at least long enough for his trousers to become completely soaked. His "hosts" probably removed his jacket and tie when he "checked in" to his "luxury" accommodations.

Julie was completely sore. He felt as though he had been in a struggle, but that wasn't his style. Looking over at the hard metal cot with the thin, bare, stained mattress, Julie decided that his sore body was due more to that filthy archaic bed rather than his having taken on the role of successful attorney turned street fighter. Just looking around at his surroundings made his skin crawl.

What the hell did I do to be thrown in here? Julie thought.

Last thing I remember, The Senator and I were having dinner at The Grille. Everything after that...shit! It's like my memory is caught somewhere in a hazy fog. I can almost see images in my mind, but in actuality, I can see nothing at all. I remember the rain. I remember being upset. But I don't recall why. And I remember Annie's voice. But that's it.

I'll need a massive jumpstart to figure out where I've been and what I was doing since last night's dinner at The Grille. At least I think it was last night. Julie looked around his

cell. No Daytimer, no cell phone, no handheld. My watch and ring must have been confiscated along with my jacket and tie. No way to know what day it is, what time it is, no way to know how long I've been here, been out of commission - away from my own reality. Hopefully, the next person I see will hold the key to what seems to be a real dilemma. What have I gotten myself into?

With that final thought, the locking mechanism of the big steel door at the end of the small cellblock corridor lurched noisily and slowly began to turn.

#

Ink smudged his fingertips. Spots flashed before his eyes. It was official. Having just been charged with hit and run, Julie had become County Prisoner, Number 210254. He had no idea whether he would be granted bail or how high it might be. He had no idea what really happened. Just that there was an accident with his car. And it was an accident that had involved The Senator.

With me driving. They said I was behind the wheel, Julie thought to himself, but I can't remember a damn thing! Schuyler should be here soon. He should be able to clear things up, get

me out of this place. He looked down at his ink-smudged fingertips. And get me home so I can take a hot shower.

#

Schuyler Barnes was the first attorney who came to mind when Julie was asked if he had his own representation or if he needed a public defender. The two attorneys were old friends. Julie often provided research for Schuyler's firm and, over the years, had helped him win more cases than he could count on a dozen hands. Schuyler often complimented him by saying it was Julie's research that would make or break a case. More often than not, it was Schuyler's case that was made.

#

It wasn't long before Schuyler showed up, anxious to help his long-time friend and colleague get out of the cramped, cold jail cell and back into his own secure environment. He waited for the guard to leave, to give him and his client some privacy, to shut the door of the interrogation room.

"Julie! What the hell happened?"

Julie was astutely aware of just how bad he must look - and smell. Schuyler was impeccably dressed, coifed. Even with his stuffed sinuses, Julie could detect the subtle, lingering fragrance of shower wash still hovering lightly about Schuyler.

Julie shifted uneasily in his seat. Although Schuyler tried not to show it, Julie was acutely aware that Schuyler's senses had been heightened to the ripely aromatic aura surrounding his tired, dirty and aching body.

"I don't know, Schuyler. I can't remember a damn thing. I wish I could talk with The Senator. But they told me, as if I didn't already know, that I was only allowed one call. Could you do that for me, Schuyler? Will you give him a call? Please? See if he's all right? I have no idea what happened to him. I have no idea how he is."

Julie could tell by Schuyler's demeanor that something was wrong - that something was terribly wrong.

"What is it, Schuyler? Has he been hurt? They said I was being charged with a hit and run...OH MY GOD! I've been so out of it, it hadn't even crossed my mind! Please don't tell me it was The Senator! Please tell me that he's okay! Schuyler, do you know? Do you have any clue whether he's all right? No one has told me...no one will tell me anything...Oh God, Oh God!"

"Calm down, Julie, just relax and try to calm down. I don't know anything yet. I'll take care of it as soon as I leave here. I'll try to get the facts. But right now Julie, well, right now I'm more concerned about you and how you're

doing in here. Geez! You'd think they'd give you some clean clothes. Give you a shower. Let you get out of those molting trousers and into something clean. And dry. I'll work on that too. I don't know when your hearing will be set up with the court. I hope you get Judge Aiken since she's always fair. Given your past history - or actual lack of history - she should let you free on a reasonable amount of bail."

"What's reasonable?" Julie asked.

Even though he was a lawyer, Julie didn't typically "practice" and was pretty rusty when it came to court (and incarceration) protocol.

"Don't worry, Julie. I should be able to get you out of here and into your own hot bath well before nightfall."

Schuyler promised to get back to him as quickly as he could and then left to begin the process of getting Julie out of jail. Once the guard escorted him back to his cell and he was once again alone, Julie's mind, now clearer than it had been in hours, began careening about like a bull in a china shop.

How the hell did I get into this mess? And what will I do if The Senator is really hurt? What will we both do? Me. And Annie. If he's been hurt, Annie must be devastated. If I'm the one responsible, then I don't know whether Annie will want to

see me. And I wouldn't blame her if she just wished I would rot
in this miserable, horrible place.

Chapter 11

SOME REST FOR THE WEARY

While Julie waited in his cell, Annie and Sammy rested at Annie's house. Even though light streamed through the loosely drawn, semi-sheer curtains, Annie slept soundly - thanks to the sedative that an emergency room doctor had given her, insisted she take *before* they left the hospital. The clock on Annie's bureau claimed it was 1:23.

P.M.

The storm had faded into last night, and it was now early in the afternoon of the day after. Although they didn't get to

bed until well after dawn, Sammy only slept for three or four hours. She was now wide-awake, but too comfortable to move out from under the afghan she assumed Ellie, Annie's maid, had draped over her at some point during her deep, albeit brief, slumber.

Looking around the room, and at the sleeping Annie, divulged not one shred of evidence about what was happening in their lives. There was absolutely no clue that life had taken a turn and twisted down a steep and dangerous road - a literally dangerous road for The Senator. One that had irrevocably impacted his life's destiny and the destinies of those around him.

Sammy made a mental note - nothing in the room seemed to be out of place. In fact, compared to her own disorganized, thrown together apartment (or thrown apart, depending on your frame of reference,) Annie's room was immaculately pieced together. Each element had been carefully chosen and placed to create an overall desired effect. Fresh flowers absorbed water from within a crystal vase on a small table by the window. A large sculpture was placed, just so, next to the chaise lounge where Sammy now lazed. Tiffany lamps were on either side of the bed -

each lamp different, yet undeniably complementary to one another. On The Senator's side was the dragonfly and on Annie's, the daffodils. Annie's bureau. The Senator's highboy. Only hints of their owner's possessions were placed neatly on top of each. Neither piece of furniture showed signs of rummaging, or hastily placed items left behind, or drawers left open as their owners rushed off to leave the room.

Sammy's eyes were drawn back to Annie. She seemed so peaceful, so at rest with the world, her world that had come apart at the seams only a dozen hours before. Sammy then realized that she was actually much more tired than she initially thought on waking. She readjusted herself and curled up on the chaise, pulled the afghan tightly around her tired body and breathed in the faint, soothing scent of lily of the valley - a scent that always wafted about all of Annie's clothes and textiles. Sammy laid her head down on the pillow, and her eyes drifted down toward the brocade rug at the side of Annie's bed.

Then she saw it. Wedged between the bed leg and the wall behind the bed was a crumpled and tightly balled-up piece of yellow paper. It was a paper that Ellie would not have noticed

as she routinely made the bed and quickly ran the vacuum underneath. It was in an odd place. Where no one else would have seen it. Unless they happened to be lying on their side to look under the bed. Lacking any inquisitive energy that was required for an investigative reporter like herself to even wonder what that crumpled ball contained, Sammy shut her eyes. And went back to sleep.

#

Sammy opened her eyes to a more dimly lit room than the one she had drifted away from when she had fallen back to sleep. She wasn't really rested, but it was time to stay awake.

Rays of sun cast slim, long shadows onto the floor in front of the windows. The large four-poster bed was now empty, looking pristinely made, as though Annie had never slumbered between the layers of fine woven cotton sheets and its soft, downy comforter. The clock at the bedside quietly chimed the time. It was now 5:30. Momentarily confused, Sammy didn't know whether the hazy rays coming through the window meant that it was a.m. or p.m. But a hasty glance at the florescent green, stick numbers on the face of her digital watch quickly brought

Sammy into the right timeframe. The numbers had just changed. It was now 5:31.

P.M.

She could hear water running from Annie's shower. Sammy's mind paused for a moment, wondering if Annie was so meticulous that she made the bed before going off to her shower. Or did Ellie come in, as if on cue. As soon as Annie made her way from the bed to the shower?

Sammy peeled the warm afghan from her prone body, rose and then stretched. It felt good to reach into the air, extending her arms up as far as they could reach.

Sammy's jeans and sweater, which she had tossed on the floor in a damp heap the night before, were now clean, dried, folded and neatly placed on the bench at the end of Annie's bed. She pulled The Senator's long-sleeved white shirt over her head. The newly-shed shirt now showed only a vague resemblance to the one that Annie had given her the night before. It was now completely wrinkled from having been slept in by Sammy, its most unanticipated wearer. She wasn't sure any of The Senator's clothes had ever, before today that is, been wrinkled. Most

certainly not one of his crisp, white, "go to legislative meetings and state dinners" shirts.

She quickly slipped into her own clothes. But then pangs of domestic guilt suddenly rose from somewhere deep inside. Sammy paused, put herself into a slower mode, took the time to fold the afghan and then placed it "just so" over the arm of the chaise. She laid The Senator's shirt on the bench where her own clothes had only moments before sat, in a neat pile, waiting for her. She tried her best to fold the shirt. But, when she was finished, it didn't really look much different than a wrinkled mass of white cotton. It was the crumpled shirt that reminded her, rekindled her curiosity, returned Sammy's focus to the balled-up yellow paper underneath the bed.

Sammy lay on the floor at the side of the bed, positioned herself flat on her stomach, and then stretched her arm out as far as she could until she was able to reach behind the bed leg. At first glance, it appeared to be the type of yellow paper that would have been torn away from a legal pad. Somehow it found its way into Annie's meticulously kept room and it was now wedged between the wall and the bed leg of the perfectly dressed, neatly-made four-poster bed. It was only by chance, by

literally being in the "right place at the right time" that Sammy found it. No wonder no one else saw it, Sammy thought. Not even Ellie. Even though she straightens the room and runs the vacuum over the rug and under the bed on a daily basis.

Sammy only had a moment to begin to wonder how long the crumpled ball had been there - tucked away, out of sight. Waiting for her, the nosy reporter, to discover its obscure resting-place. The sound of water flowing from the shower ceased. Sammy could hear Annie beginning to ready herself so that she could return to the bedroom. Reflexivity took over and, without thinking; Sammy shoved the ball of paper into her jeans' pocket. It would have to wait until later. But she forgot about it as soon as Annie entered the room.

#

They had slept most of the day, so Ellie served the two friends breakfast, rather than a more timely dinner meal. Sammy's appetite was much healthier than Annie's, and she did not resist a second helping of Ellie's homemade mocha muffins. They sat at the dining room table in silence, each woman quietly contemplating what had brought them to this day -

wondering about the future, yet trying not to think about what seemed to be so inevitable.

Annie instructed Ellie to retrieve a bottle of Amarula from the refrigerator and bring it to the table. Ellie complied, then poured a tiny bit of the cool, creamy liquid into two small crystal cordial glasses. She placed one in front of Sammy, the other in front of Annie, before retreating to the kitchen. And back to her chores.

Left alone in the large dining room, sitting adjacent to each other at one corner of the long, polished mahogany table, the two women raised their glasses as if to declare a toast. But words did not leave their lips, and they could only nod to each other before taking their first sip. As they drank their toast, Sammy thought, *"This is so strange. But, for some reason, today it seems so natural...to be eating breakfast and drinking Amarula in the new shadows of early evening."*

For a long time, compliments of the South African ambassador, Annie's house was the only place in town where one could be sure to find an elephant-adorned bottle of Amarula. Sammy tasted the creamy liqueur for the first time when she and Jules had been invited to welcome the senator home from a

conference in South Africa. Among the souvenirs he brought back, complements of the South African ambassador, was a single brown bottle of Amarula.

When Sammy had taken a sip from the small glass that the senator had handed her, she discovered its contents flowed over her tongue as smoothly as its name...Amarula. The pleasing liqueur was unlike anything Sammy had ever tasted. Once its initial, slightly burning, tongue tingling burst of alcohol subsided, she found her taste buds had been aroused to a cornucopia of unexpected flavors. Mixed with sweet African cream, the essence of the Marula nectar mingled flavors of tropical and citrus fruits with hints of chocolate and caramel. Adding to the unusual taste of the liqueur was its surprising suggestion of toasted marshmallows - reminiscent of those gooey confections Sammy savored as a child during family camping trips. Its blended flavors met all her taste buds' desires and, from her very first sip of Amarula, Sammy was hooked on South Africa's liquid ambrosia.

On that long-ago night, while they indulged in the luxury of their newly discovered creamy Amarula liqueur, the senator entertained them with stories about its source.

"Once the fruit of the Marula tree ripens and then begins to ferment," the senator told his guests, "gentle African breezes swiftly convey its aromatic scent across the plains. When South Africa's elephants catch a whiff of the Marula fruit's sweet, fragrant aroma..."

Sammy remembered that the senator smiled and his eyes twinkled as he looked around the room at his guests. And then, making her feel a tiny bit uncomfortable, he had winked at Sammy before he continued.

"...it beckons them as though the tree and her fruits were a tantalizing mistress. You see," said the senator, "elephants become overpowered by their desire to find the aroma's source, and, en masse, mesmerized by the scent of the fruit, the herd begins their trek."

The senator told his guests that elephants would continue to follow the compelling fragrance, often for miles, until it leads them directly to the site where the Marula trees grow.

"What..." the senator asked his guests, "what do you think happens when elephants, completely entranced by the scent that beckoned them to seek out its source, finally reach the enticing aroma, but then find themselves unable to grasp the ripe fruit from the trees' upper limbs?"

The senator had visually surveyed his captive audience. He knew they didn't have the answer, so he quickly continued his story.

"I'll tell you what happens" he said, "but first, you should know...once South African elephants are caught by the enchanting spell of ripe, fermenting Marula fruit...and are conquered by its mesmerizing scent..." the senator looked around the room at his wife and friends and his tone became very serious, "...they are overcome by something that, for the sake of having a name, I'll call Marula madness."

"When elephants, hypnotized into the state of Marula madness, realize they cannot easily pull the Marula tree's branches down to harvest the sweet, ripe, fermenting fruit," he told his friends, "they zealously attack the trees...pull the branches down...destroy the very source that created their euphoric state. In doing so," the senator said, "South African elephants often blindly obliterate the very source of the precious fruit they cannot resist. And that..."

Sammy remembered how the senator, being the skilled speaker he was, had paused before he looked at Annie, then at her, and, finally, at Jules. Then, with his eyes still fixed on Jules,

the senator continued, "that, my dear friends, that is Marula madness."

Sammy remembered the twinkle in his eyes and his mischievous grin as the senator's demeanor lightened and he continued the story for his wife and friends, "African tribes also believe the Marula's fruit is a strong aphrodisiac. And," he said, "they use the tree and its fruit as a focal point in fertility rites and in wedding ceremonies."

The senator shared his experiences from a traditional tribal wedding he had attended as the South African ambassador's guest. He told of the bride and groom, in colorful wedding attire, accompanied by their families and tribal community. He brought to life images of wedding guests, breathing in the enticing aroma of the fragrant ripe fruit as they stood under the lush, leafy boughs of the Marula tree, as they witnessed the bride and her groom vow to love one another for a lifetime.

The senator told them he and every adult at the wedding took turns sipping the sweet and unusual juice of the Marula fruit from a ceremonial cup. As the celebration progressed, he watched the new couple and each set of lovers dance.

"Encouraged by ritualistic beliefs, and spiritually and emotionally intoxicated from the festivities and sips of Marula

juice," he told his closest friends, "the dancing became more and more provocative. And one by one," he said, "the wedding guests quietly left for their own homes with anticipation of mingling in their shared beds."

Sammy remembered how the senator had looked on that long-ago night. His expression was filled with longing when he stared deep into Annie's eyes and said "I'm sure that everyone who indulged in the pleasing Marula elixir during that wedding desired a night of romance - not only for the bride and groom, but for themselves. And," he finished with a twinkle in his eyes, "I was told that everyone hoped...the newly married couple would announce an expected baby in months to come."

Sammy hadn't thought back to that night, when she first tasted Amarula, in a long time. "*I remember,*" she thought, "*how much I had envied Annie and the senator on that night - especially because of his mischievous demeanor and obvious sexual curiosity as he told us about the Marula's use as an aphrodisiac...I'll never forget how he looked into her eyes. I knew, back on that night, he and Annie were the only ones in the room who would be able to attest to the true effects of Amarula. Because,*" she thought, "*out of the four of us who had*

been treated to that first elephant-embossed bottle, Jules and I both fell into the categories of 'unattached,' 'uninvolved' and, basically, 'out-of-luck'."

Sammy knew the images the senator had verbally painted on the night of that, now long-ago, dinner party would always remain with her. His descriptions of beauty and sensuality piqued all their imaginations, stimulated their senses and made the sweet elixir of Amarula taste that much sweeter.

#

The ringing of the phone brought Sammy back to reality. It was the anticipated call from the hospital. The nurse on the other end informed Annie that The Senator had been transferred to Intensive Care. She described his condition as "stable." Sammy knew the term actually meant he was in very bad shape, just not getting worse - and not getting better.

Sammy drove her friend back to the hospital. Annie's car had not yet been retrieved from The Grille's parking lot, where she had left it the night before. The ride was quick and uneventful because most of the debris had been swept to the side of the road by the pummeling of the previous night's rain.

Sammy walked Annie into the hospital, rode the elevator up to the seventh floor, the coveted "penthouse floor," and left

her friend at The Senator's door. Besides Annie and the police guards stationed in the hall, no other visitors had been authorized. Sammy didn't want to go in anyway. Maxie may have assigned her to the story but, up until now, she was with Annie as her friend, not as one of The Detail's best investigative reporters.

Still tired, Sammy plopped herself down in a huge comfy chair in the visitors' lounge and waited for Annie to return. She was leafing through a magazine she had absentmindedly grabbed from an end table, but barely got through the first page of How to Make Your Man Long for Bedtime. Sensing that Annie was about to return, Sammy looked up. As usual, her intuition was right on the mark. Annie had just entered the lounge and was scanning the room, trying to find her friend.

They left the hospital, then Sammy drove Annie directly to The Grille to retrieve her Bug. It was all that remained in the lot. The Senator's car had already been removed earlier that morning and Julie's car had been impounded and towed away by the police.

The two women were in a physical state that went beyond "being tired." They didn't have much to say to each other so they simply parted with a hug and echoed each other in a

perfunctory, "I'll call you later." Annie exited Sammy's car, got into her Bug and pulled out of The Grille's lot onto Old Allen Pike. Sammy followed right behind Annie. Initially, both women drove their cars in the same direction and only parted ways at the intersection where Park Lane separates from Old Allen Pike. Annie's destination was back home to Allentown's residential North End, while Sammy took the road leading into Allentown's downtown business district.

Chapter 12

JULIE - FRESH OUT OF JAIL

As soon as Schuyler dropped Julie off at his condo, he headed straight to the bathroom and turned on the shower with a generous twist of the "hot" water handle. Julie peeled off his clothes, then threw everything, including his shoes, in a plastic bag and tied it shut with a knot. It was pointless to try to salvage what was left of the outfit he had worn the previous night. There was no hope of rehabilitating the ruined suit, and the shoes had been destroyed from becoming waterlogged and muddy. The bag would be put outside for tomorrow's garbage collection.

Even though he scrubbed himself in hot water, and the scent of his bath soap had replaced the recent stench that permeated his body, Julie couldn't get the stink of prison to flow from his nostrils - no matter how many times he blew his nose or breathed in the fragrant steam from his shower. The stench persistently lingered in his olfactory memory and in his pores. Yet it was an odor that common sense told him wasn't obvious or apparent to anyone but himself.

Julie pulled the collar of his terry robe closer around his neck, mentally trying to protect his newly washed body from losing the heat of the shower and scent of the wash. He was hoping that, if he kept himself bound tightly in his robe, his pores, newly opened from the steam of the shower, would absorb soap scent for prison stink.

It was only late afternoon, yet shadows from passing cars played on the dark walls of Julie's condo. The lights were off. He didn't want them turned on. He just wanted to lie down on his bed and watch the glow of a scented candle dance on the bedroom ceiling. Darkness felt good. Julie felt secure in his cocoon. It was almost as if his hazy memories of last night were nothing but a bad dream - but he knew they weren't.

Schuyler had filled him in on the ride from the prison to his condo. Julie knew The Senator was lying broken and comatose in County General. He knew Annie had found him, that Annie had found both of them. Julie knew Annie must be devastated. But he didn't know whether Annie would want to see him. He wouldn't blame her if she didn't. He wouldn't blame her if she decided to sever their relationship. He wouldn't blame her if she just walked away and he was forced to live alone with guilt, for the rest of his life, as a result of the miserable, horrible circumstances that he seemed to have gotten himself into.

Julie's memories were foggy. Only bits and pieces had come back. With each passing hour, tiny pieces of the puzzle had been darting and floating around in his mind. There was no obvious pattern, no logic, no way to really understand the meaning or the importance of each hazy fragment. He hoped that later, when he could sort them out, piece them together and glue the parts into a whole, it would all come together and make some sense. But Julie wasn't really sure that he would be able to sort them out. He wasn't sure if he could ever glue them back.

I remember meeting The Senator for dinner. No, I remember that we both met the Congressman first - before we had dinner. Okay, that's a start. I can vaguely remember the call to Annie,

but I can't remember a damn thing about how we transitioned from meeting the Congressman to having dinner at The Grille.

Thinking about the whole mess was driving him crazy. Talking to himself made it somehow easier for Julie to work out his facts, or at least the facts he did remember.

This is so goddamned frustrating! Not being able to recall how The Senator and I got into this mess. Not being able to remember what happened. Not being able to put the pieces together.

For a top research attorney, I'm doing a really crappy job of remembering, figuring out what happened, understanding the history that will help Schuyler get me off of whatever other charges they end up heaving against me.

Shit! I've been manacled and thrown in prison, fingerprinted, questioned and charged with hit and run. But I know that they're really waiting. Waiting to see what happens to The Senator. Waiting to decide what to do with me.

As he progressed with his solitary dialogue, Julie's thoughts turned from himself to his friend - and then to her.

God! How did we end up here? What caused today to become our reality - rather than the type of day that we had anticipated to be our tomorrow? What happened to bring The

Senator and me to a desolate spot on a dark road on a stormy night? And how the hell did he end up landing in that muddy wet field?

The cadence of the flickering abruptly changed. The still, quiet room seemed, for a moment, to have altered its dense calm to one of quick movement. Julie blinked and everything returned to be as it had been only moments before. He knew he was tired, knew he was imagining things. Julie was so exhausted and at the same time so wide awake. It was then that he remembered the sleeping pills in the top drawer of his nightstand. He wasn't in the habit of taking anything to help him rest. But he knew, given his state of mind, that he wouldn't get sleep at all if he tried to drift off on his own.

Last night, once Julie arrived at the police station and had been "processed," he couldn't stay awake and had no problem going back to sleep. But he didn't wake up rested and, if he didn't know better, Julie would have assumed that he had slept the sleep of an inebriated man. Yet, somehow, the cloudiness from the night before now had a strangely sobering effect on Julie - both physically and mentally. Tonight Julie felt that he needed help to sleep so that he could heal, could take the

pieces of the puzzle floating around in his mind, find the niche for each one and fit them together.

So that I can begin to understand. So that I can help defend myself against God knows what. And so that I can face Annie.

Chapter 13

ROOM 762

The Senator showed no movement at all - except for his eyelids, which occasionally moved slightly, almost imperceptibly. He looked awful. His skin was pale, almost gray. Tubes ran up his nose, into his mouth and from both arms. His left forefinger was capped with an E.T.-like casing that glowed in the dimly lit room, its cord attached to the heart monitor at the side of his bed.

His face was almost entirely bandaged. The tip of his nose, his swollen scabbed lips and his closed bruised eyelids were the only features that peeked out from the white gauze that

had been carefully wrapped around his face. His once beautiful salt and pepper hair had been shaved. His head was swollen, giving an impression that the bandages surrounding the bare scalp had been wrapped tightly to hold his skull together - or, more morbidly, hold his brains in. The wrappings resembled the skin of an orange that holds a cluster of swollen segments bursting with rich juice waiting to erupt from their captive peel.

His legs were in traction. His torso, encased in a mummified shell that surrounded his shattered body, was wrapped as tightly as his head. His sarcophagus was the hospital bed with its sides raised to hold him in place. The guards standing at the door were stoically erect, as had been the cats that once carefully and dutifully guarded King Tut's tomb.

With no one there, the glowing light at the tip of the casing on his finger slowly faded, flickered once, flickered twice, then ceased. The formerly vigorous shell of a man swiftly and quietly passed to a place that only our ancestors are privy to know.

The elevator doors opened and Sammy stepped out - out onto the seventh floor.

#

Annie had called ahead, cleared it with the staff, left word with the guards and made all the arrangements that would allow Sammy to visit The Senator. Annie was exhausted. The past two days had taken their toll. She didn't have the energy to go to the hospital herself, so she asked Sammy to visit, to keep him company.

"Be a friendly face - in case he wakes up."

But timing is everything, and Sammy's visit came too late. He didn't wake up, was destined to never wake up again. He had gone to sleep for the very last time.

Sammy was the first to reach him. The police guards held the door for her and she walked into his room just in time to see the light from his fingertip monitor fade from red to black. A Code Blue had summoned the rest of the staff to a room just a few doors down from The Senator's. The lone nurse monitoring the many gauges that linked the nurse's station to all of the patients' rooms simply had not yet noticed the change in The Senator's vital signs. They had not witnessed his monitor's cessation. In all the confusion and noise resulting from the sounding of Code Blue, The Senator's alarm had gone unnoticed. So, while nurses and doctors were occupied with saving another life, the man who lived in the limelight of Washington's

political frenzy had, only moments before, quietly slipped away without anyone to wave him off as he left for his final destination.

Sammy had visited enough patients in hospital rooms to know that the finger-casing monitor should not have wavered from a bright, glowing red. She didn't approach the bed but instead turned on her heels and immediately notified the guards. They took a quick look inside and then ran for help. Sammy and The Senator were left completely alone. All she could do was stand there and stare. The Senator was gone. She knew they wouldn't revive him. Annie had told her his living will specifically instructed "no resuscitation, no intervention."

Little by little, they began to file quietly into the dimly lit room. They came to simply pay their respects to the man who they, along with the rest of the nation, had adored. Sammy watched in silence, putting aside her reporter's hat for the hat of a friend. She was tired. Her energy had been drained away and she realized life would never be the same for Annie.

Sammy took the stairs and headed down to the lobby. Somehow it seemed easier than waiting for the elevator. She called Maxie as she made her way down. The presses would soon be ready to roll for tonight's edition and her call reached him

just in time to rearrange The Details' front page and change the headline. The Senator's obituary had already been written, most likely years ago. It was pulled from the files after his accident, had been updated and on hold, waiting for this day to come - not unusual for someone of his importance and notoriety.

Sammy dreaded the short trip to Annie's house. Ironically, the one time she wouldn't have cared if her car didn't start right away, the engine actually caught at the first turn of the key. But it did start right away and she was off, on her way to Annie's house, to tell her best friend that her husband of more than twenty years had passed away. It didn't take much for her to convince The Senator's doctors to let her be the one to tell Annie he had passed. They all agreed it would be for the best. They had watched Annie's anguish grow with each visit while The Senator lied comatose in his hospital bed, ultimately just waiting to die.

Everyone at County General had agreed to be discreet, to be silent - until Sammy called and gave the heads up that she had reached Annie. Luckily her house was close enough to the hospital that Sammy was able to talk with her, console her - well before the paper hit the street. But once it did, the news of The Senator's passing traveled quickly.

It was much easier than Sammy had anticipated. Over the past two days, Annie had prepared herself for the worst. She opened the door, took one look at Sammy's face - and she knew. Sammy didn't have to say a word. It took only moments and, before Sammy could fully process what was happening, Annie grabbed a jacket, said something about "Julie," and they were in Sammy's car, on the way to his house.

When Julie opened the door, he had no idea he would be facing Annie. He had no idea his ordeal was about to take a turn for the worse.

Sammy wasn't sure who was more upset - Annie or Julie. They both took it pretty hard. But then, their grief was not unexpected. She stayed for a while, but it soon became completely apparent to her that she was the third wheel in their shared grief. It was very, very hard for Sammy to sit by as an observer. She was enormously uncomfortable. Her intuition told her Annie may eventually need her, but now just wasn't the right time. She shut the door quietly as the two old friends, cuddled in each other's arms, consoled one another for the loss of their friend and lover.

#

Sammy was exhausted, yet wide-awake. She didn't want to be alone, yet she didn't want to be anywhere with a lot of friendly, happy people. The most logical place for her to go was to the office. Her gut told her Maxie would still be there, pouring over the many stories that had been written about The Senator, deciding which ones to run in the morning edition. As soon as she stepped off the elevator onto the fourth floor and saw his dimly lit office, she knew she was right.

Maxie, a predictable soul, was sitting at his desk, weeding through stories as they flashed by on the monitor that flickering and glowing in front of him. He was so engrossed that he didn't hear her enter the room, didn't hear Sammy clear her throat and almost didn't hear her whisper his name.

She hadn't wanted to startle him. He was still leery, still wasn't accustomed to using technology, wished that everyone still used pencils, pens and papers. He missed the shuffling, the paper cuts, the tactical satisfaction of holding stories in his hands, each unique and the authors clearly identified by the handwriting that flowed across the pages.

It worked. He didn't startle, didn't lose his notes into the computer's "no-man's land" of lost files. Maxie leaned back

in his chair, pulled his reading glasses from the tip of his nose and placed them, glass side down on his desk

Just can't teach an old dog new tricks! Sammy thought.

"So, Sammy, can't go home, can you?"

"No, Maxie, don't think I can sleep, don't want to be alone."

"How's Annie taking it, kid?"

"I'm not sure. I left her at Julie's. The two of them were pretty distraught. Decided it was best for me to get out of there and let them work through it without me. You remember, Maxie? Julie and The Senator grew up together. But he's also known Annie since the day The Senator brought her back to their dorm room to introduce them. The same day Annie and The Senator met."

Maxie was quiet. Thinking. Sammy could tell his "wheels" were turning, knew he was cooking something up. She had no idea where he was going, what his ingredients were.

"Sammy. How much do you really know about The Senator? About Julie? About when they were kids? Where they grew up?"

"I don't know. Probably just as much as you do, Maxie. You've read all the same press that I've seen about The Senator. Grew up in Jersey, I think. Don't know very much about Julie

though - like I said...only that they've been friends since they were kids. Why?"

"Well, Sammy, I think its time for you to do some digging."

Her reflexes took over and, without thinking, she threw Maxie a dirty look.

"Okay, okay. You don't have to look at me that way. I know, The Senator just kicked the bucket and all."

She gave him another dirty look.

"Sorry, Sammy. But, you know. Well...you know, a good reporter...a good reporter has to keep on the story, has to put personal feelings aside."

Her face softened. After all, she had found her way back to The Details, came back to work, shown up in his office. Maxie was just trying to get her to do her job.

"So what are you telling me Maxie?" She said softly. "You want me to go further, to find out more? Do more of a bio? Dig up something that no one else knows?"

"That's it, kid. You got it!"

He couldn't control his enthusiasm. He was in his element and he knew she was too.

"With your connection to The Senator, you just may stumble onto an exclusive that no one else can get! I want you to give

George a call too. He may be retired, but he's still pretty feisty when it comes to research. You know, rooting out info, getting to the bottom of things."

Then, Maxie - in his abrupt and familiar way - kicked Sammy out of his office, told her to go home and get some sleep. She's no fool, so it didn't take Maxie more than once to get her out the door and on her way home. Besides, he was right. She was tired.

#

She couldn't wait to get into her own bed and curl up with Ali Cat. Sammy knew that Maxie wouldn't call her to come into work the next day. He would leave her alone until she was good and ready to get back to her cubicle at The Details. Knowing that, she was prepared to take full advantage of her situation. Since her assignment had no time constraint, she decided to sit it out for a couple of days. She needed to get her strength back to get on with the task at hand and begin digging for a story that was going to be one of the hardest she had ever written - because it was about her best friend's husband.

Chapter 14

ANNIE AND JULIE

For the longest time, Annie and Julie just sat there, his arms circling her tightly, her hands resting on his chest, finding solace in their familiarity and comfort of being close and holding on to one another. But then it was time for them to separate, to begin talking about the awful turn of events with which their lives had so suddenly collided.

The Senator's fate had been sealed two nights before. They both knew then that it was only a matter of time until he passed. Anyone who had seen The Senator after his accident had instinctively known the inevitable outcome.

Now that The Senator was gone, both Annie and Julie feared his bail would be revoked. Each of them thought that, at any moment, there would be a knock on the door and Julie would be dragged back to the county jail.

They both felt despair and, at that moment in time, believed they would be lost without the glue of The Senator holding them together. But the reality is that they now needed each other more than they ever had before, in all the years they had known each other, had been friends with each other and had relied on each other to be there for The Senator.

Each of them knew The Senator was made whole by the addition of the other two-thirds, by his connection to both Julie and to Annie. Now, with the one-third that was The Senator gone, Julie and Annie had to figure out how to remake their two thirds into two halves, two halves that they each needed to become one whole.

They talked for hours - yet didn't really talk. Mostly they consoled each other and murmured soothing words to calm the other's fears and sorrow. And each cried until there were no more tears to cry. Neither was ready to delve into the "whys" and "what ifs" of what had happened. Julie knew Annie's presence in his home so quickly after The Senator's passing

meant she didn't hate him, didn't blame him for what had happened. And he was immensely relieved.

They finally fell asleep on Julie's big sofa. Lying lengthwise from one end to the other, he rested his head against the armrest while she, lying alongside him, rested her head on his chest, her curls settling just below his chin. Their bodies were wracked with unbearable pain, yet each of them knew they needed to work through their anguish before either one of them could begin to pick themselves up and live out the rest of their lives. Each knew they needed the other, and they were both deeply afraid of what their futures held.

While Julie could only remember bits and pieces, Annie's memory was becoming more and more clouded. The Senator never did wake from his comatose state, never was able to tell his part of the puzzle. Now it was for the investigators and the court to decide what had happened. It was time for Julie and Annie to come to terms with the events of the past two days, to make peace with each other and to try to understand the roles they played during The Senator's last hours of his life.

Neither of them was ready to speak to anyone else. Julie had taken his phone off the hook as soon as he had returned home from his previous night's "luxury" accommodations. His

answering machine was full, yet he had no intention of listening. He didn't really care to find out who had called and he didn't want to listen to anything that anyone had to say. It just didn't matter. No one mattered to him right now more than Annie did. No one else's opinions and comments were important. Besides, any person who would be apt to leave a message on his machine wouldn't be someone Julie would have chosen to talk with anyway. Anyone who really needed to get in touch with him, like Schuyler, would have his cell phone number and could leave a message on his voice mail. He would listen to those later, when he was feeling up to facing the world once again.

As The Senator's wife, Annie couldn't be so cavalier about ignoring callers. But she was fortunate to have the luxury of a housekeeper to answer her phone. She also knew that her answering machine wouldn't be capable of recording the number of calls she anticipated receiving. While she was hiding from the world, ensconced in Julie's condo, the calls had been coming in steadily from Washington, from Harrisburg, from virtually every state in the nation - and from The Senator's good friend, the South African Ambassador. Ellie would get those calls, take messages and get back to them when all the plans had been set.

They finally woke and Julie made a pot of coffee. He returned to the living room, then sat in a chair across from Annie, who was still half lying, half sitting on the sofa. They just sat there for a while, looking at each other yet not really looking at each other. His eyes were not focused on her, her eyes were not focused on him. And both sets of eyes sought some far off place beyond the realm of reality. Each dealt with despair and grief in his and her own way.

Time passed. Their coffee still sat where Julie had placed the cups - untouched and now cooled to room temperature. Their first challenge was to bring themselves to speak to each other. Julie finally felt the time was right, braved the silence and began.

"Annie..."

And then he wailed.

"Oh God!"

It seemed like minutes before he continued to speak.

"Annie, I'm so sorry. I know how much you loved him, how much he loved you. I can't believe he's gone! I can't believe what happened...that I may have had something to do with it."

He looked around the room as if he was seeking something, trying to pull something out of thin air.

"Annie...it's just so horrible."

They looked at each other for a long time, searched each other's eyes, each other's faces. When Annie spoke, her voice was very soft.

"I know Julie. I know. God, I can't believe it either. It's a nightmare that I keep hoping will end."

She paused, looked around the room, picked up her cup of cold coffee and then put it back down on the table.

"It's a nightmare I keep hoping will go away. Keep hoping is just a bad dream and that tomorrow, tomorrow I'll wake up...with him next to me, all warm and glowing from a restful night's sleep. But you, Julie...you've known him all your life. I know you're just as heartbroken as me. I know how strong your friendship is...was, how deeply you'll miss him. Oh, Julie! Oh God!"

With that, Annie, who thought she had cried all the tears she could shed, began to cry once more. It was a quiet, sad, forlorn sobbing. Julie rose from his chair, crossed to the sofa and once again, took her in his arms to comfort her, her head resting against his chest. Slowly, the tears started running down his face too, dropping one by one from his chin to Annie's hair. Each of his teardrops clung, then slowly broke free and

singularly traveled down the red spirals - finally disappearing
and becoming lost in the tangle of Annie's hair.

Chapter 15

ONCE UPON A TIME

Sammy woke late in the morning. She had slept, but not well. Today was the day she needed to begin her assignment, start jotting down notes that will eventually help her write her story, The Senator's story.

Choosing words - that's what Sammy does for a living. Yet, it wasn't until she was in college that she began to realize her true love for writing. Sammy found herself looking forward to those long term papers that everyone else in her dorm seemed to dread. Unlike her friends, researching and writing came easy to Sammy. She found that she completely enjoyed becoming immersed

in whatever topic she had been assigned, whatever topic she chose to explore. Her friends always bitched and moaned about the overwhelming task of writing their own papers. But not Sammy. Each paper gave her a new opportunity to spend hours in the library, steeped in research, sifting through dozens of books and, often musty, periodicals. She always stayed until one of the librarians indicated the building was about to close and it was time for her to leave, go back to her dorm and get some sleep.

Once her research was finished, all she had to do was mix it together and her literary "cake" was done. To Sammy, after she pulled all the information together, putting everything down on paper was, well - just like spreading icing on the cake.

As writing became her passion, Sammy realized part of what she loved most about writing was finding just the right words to intricately craft and tell a story. Over the years, she had learned to trust her instincts - to hone in on the core, the guts, and to find the real reason for writing a story. She had trained herself to take a story, look beyond its facade and unwrap the trimmings. She had learned to trust her intuition so she could go beyond the obvious, could ask "why?" and could

determine which angle she wanted to pursue. That's what Sammy does, what she has always done and what she does well.

As a kid, whether she was playing a game, putting together a puzzle, or trying to figure out a "who done it" mystery, her tenacity never wavered. As an adult, when Sammy becomes intrigued by a story she immerses herself until she discovers why something, something that may seem really mundane to others, has baited her and won't let her go. She perseveres until she has grasped the key that will unlock the door, or breaks through the surface to discover what has been lurking underneath.

But this time the story is too personal. This time she is so closely connected to her story that Sammy doesn't know whether she can see beyond its façade, get to the core, discover the truth. But she really has no choice. Because that's what she does. That's what she's good at and that's what she has been told she does best. And because that's what people are counting on her to do, Sammy can't, won't, let them down.

Sammy knows that, throughout any given assignment, she cannot, will not, let herself down. She is driven to do the very best she can. It's her responsibility to find the soul of the story and bare it for all to read. But this time she isn't as sure about herself and her skill to be impartial. She's not

even sure she will be able to reach in and pull out what may not be obvious to the untrained eye. Sammy isn't convinced she will have the ability to be able to see beyond the surface, get to the truth and bare the facts - even to herself. But, regardless of how she feels, how unsure she is of being impartial, Maxie has still challenged her with this particular story.

Until she begins, until she sees it to the end, Sammy will never know.

Chapter 16

"WE CAN'T COME TO THE PHONE RIGHT NOW"

George wasn't in when Sammy called, so she left a message on his machine. At least she assumed he wasn't there because the machine answered. He didn't. Sammy had known George since he hired her as a summer intern right after her graduation from college. Besides Maxie, George Williams was the most influential person in Sammy's career.

As time went on, and she became part of The Details' team, Sammy became more experienced. She came to view Maxie as the backbone of the paper and perceived George to be its heart and soul. To her, Maxie has always been a lovable curmudgeon who

barks out assignments and makes sure all of his reporters keep on task. He's the strong backbone that supports and holds each of them together as a whole, as a working team.

It was George who showed Sammy the intricacies of being a reporter. He taught her the daily ins-and-outs of working in a newsroom, showed her how to research, how to put herself in her subject's shoes so she could feel a kinship for, and camaraderie with, the people she would write about. He taught her to write not only from within her inquisitive mind, but also to write from her heart.

George taught Sammy with the passion of a man who loves his craft, and he taught her well. Sammy absorbed everything he offered her, and she became an expert at writing completely thought out, well-written articles. George taught her how to write so her readers could envision themselves as participants in her stories. He showed her how to write so her stories grabbed at her readers' minds, hearts and souls.

Sammy worked with George for the first ten years she spent at the paper. He was her mentor. But when he turned 55 he qualified for an early retirement and decided to move to Sedona, Arizona so he and his wife could spend the rest of their lives living nearer to their kids and young grandchildren.

Sammy visited George in Arizona, but only once, about five years ago. His home is high on a hill overlooking its magnificent surroundings - the red rock formations of Sedona.

Given the time difference, Sammy decided she would wait to call George again, would try to reach him some time later in the evening, would make the call closer to his Arizona dinnertime.

While Sammy waited for the hours to pass, she got out her laptop. Now that the time had come to buckle down and begin to write, she knew this was sure to be one of the hardest stories she would ever have to begin.

Sammy began outlining everything that had happened in the last forty-eight hours. She wrote quickly, only stopping to feed the cat when her incessant meowing finally broke through Sammy's intense concentration. When she was done, Sammy had only a half dozen pages, far less than she had anticipated she would complete. She looked at the meager number of pages on her laptop. Is that it? All I know about The Senator? All I know about Annie? All I know about Julie?

Given that Annie is her best friend, Sammy was surprised to realize she knew far less about Annie and her past than she thought she did. She had known Annie for almost twenty years,

but now Sammy was questioning how much she really knew about Annie's past - before the two of them became friends.

Her basic knowledge of the three - The Senator, Annie, Julie - was really limited to what Sammy had either read or the little they shared with her during the many times she spent socializing with them. Sammy knew they met in college. That The Senator and Julie were childhood friends. That both had been driven to make their marks on the world. She knew Annie grew up in a small town - the kind of place that most people only read about, a place where a child's life is an idyllic blend of freedom, adventure, good friends, loving family and a caring community. Besides those limited facts, what did Sammy really know about her friend, or her husband, or their friend, Julie? Sammy realized what she knew, the basic facts that she really knew, could literally fit tightly into the palm of her hand.

The phone rang. It startled her out of trying to wrack her brain for more information about the people whom she now realized were barely more than acquaintances.

"Hey, girl! I got your message that you called. It's been a long time!"

"George! It's great to hear your voice! How's it going out there in the land of magnificent red rocks?"

They talked for almost an hour, at first schmoozing about old times and catching up on each other's lives before finally getting down to the business at hand. As soon as Sammy told him that Maxie suggested she call, that she needed his help with getting her research done, she could hear the excitement pop into his voice. Her request seemed to give him a resurgence of that old energy he had when he was hot on the trail of one story or another. By the time the two of them hung up, George had agreed to help her out, to immediately begin his favorite pastime - research. He promised to find out all he could about The Senator, about Annie, and about Julie.

Sammy felt as though the weight of the world had been lifted from her shoulders. In some strange way, she felt that if George did the research, if something odd was revealed, she wouldn't be placed in the position of betraying her friends. As much as Sammy loved to do her own research, she was having trouble distancing herself from this particular assignment.

She was absolutely and completely drained from the past few days. Even though she had slept the night before, Sammy still felt the need to get more rest, to sleep as long as she could.

But before she dragged herself off to her comfortable, mussed bed, she placed one more call. This time to Maxie - to tell him that she needed a couple more days off.

He took a few moments before he answered her request.

"Okay, kid. This isn't a usual situation and I know this has got to be a tough one for you. Take the rest of the week off. I'll see you back here on Monday."

She was about to hang up when Maxie's voice boomed out of the receiver.

"And remember to take care of yourself too. The story won't get written if my top reporter is too tired! Or too emotional to get it done."

Before she could respond, Maxie, in his usual style, abruptly hung up.

Sammy took a long, hot bath. She didn't know how long - she just lay there, breathing in the steam until the warm mist dissipated and the water began to get chilly. She got out, toweled off, brushed her teeth, pulled back her hair and threw on her most comfy pair of pajamas, which had been hanging on the back of the bathroom door.

Sammy pulled the cord of her clock radio from the outlet. Since she had never figured out how to turn off her alarm, it

was just easier to unplug the whole thing. She switched her answering machine so it would pick up without making the phone ring and pushed the mute button so she wouldn't be startled awake by someone leaving a message. She twisted the stick hanging down from the top left of her blinds to close them, then pulled the drapes tightly over the blinds. When she was finished with her routine, she mused to herself,

There! No alarm to wake me. No phone to wake me. No sun streaming in my window before I'm ready to get up again and face the world.

The cat had followed Sammy into her room, expecting to share her bed and the restful environment her mistress had just painstakingly pieced together.

Ali Cat had already turned three times and settled smack in the middle of the bed, exactly where Sammy liked to sleep. Sammy picked her up and cuddled the cat in her arms, kissed her on her pink, wet nose and took the bundle of cuddly, purring fur into the kitchen. She put her down on the floor, filled the cat's bowls with food and water, and then shut the kitchen door.

Sammy's old apartment has the kind of kitchen door that swings in and out. She knew that Ali Cat wasn't strong enough to push the door open. But, just to make sure, she placed a

chair in front of the door to keep it shut and to keep the cat in the kitchen. There, Ali Cat had everything she needed - even access to the powder room in the back hall entrance to the kitchen. Ali Cat isn't that domesticated, that's just where her litter box is kept.

Sammy turned out all the lights and went back to her bedroom. She lit her favorite vanilla-scented candle and eagerly crawled under her soft, sumptuous, ruffled comforter. The flickering of the candle and the subtle scent created a calming, mystical feeling. As Sammy began to relax, began to drift off to sleep, Maxie's words surfaced from the recesses of her brain. They began to repeat over and over again, as if they were a gentle, soothing, lovely mantra - relaxing her soul and whisking Sammy off to sleep.

My top reporter...my top reporter...my top reporter...

For the first time in a long time, Sammy slept soundly. Wrapped in a dream world that, fortunately, had nothing to do with the events of the past few days. Like most of her dreams, she couldn't remember what they had been about after waking the next day. She just knew that, when she did rise from her slumber, she was fairly rested, her spirits were lifted, and she felt unusually happy.

#

Sammy didn't need Maxie to tell her she was one of the best, his "top reporter." She appreciated his praise, but she already knew she was good. Sammy was now in her forties. Just like Maxie, she had outlasted most of the others who began at The Details at the same age as her, fresh out of college. Those who chose to go on did so because they thought they were going on to better pastures, ripe with stories just ready for their plucking.

Allentown, actually the entire Lehigh Valley, suited Sammy just fine. Its stories were plentiful. Longtime citizens exhibited peculiar eccentricities and newcomers brought baggage that, when opened, often provided murders and mysteries that could outdo any found in a juicy "who done it."

Sammy had covered her share of the unspeakably grisly: sons who murdered parents and siblings, a daughter who tossed her unexpected newborn baby out with the trash, a rapist who went after old women and young boys and then killed them when he was finished with his debauchery. A recent influx of gang members from crack houses as far away as Hell's Kitchen, the Bronx, Philadelphia and Atlanta had introduced, and eventually expanded, local drug killings.

One of the most bizarre, interesting and terribly sad stories was about a Voodoo Man who was unintentionally slain by a client who found his magic to be inadequate. It was definitely a story straight out of island myth or the French Quarter of New Orleans. It was a foreign topic for Allentonians, yet vastly intriguing to Sammy and her investigative reporter's curiosity.

Paramedics arrived within minutes - only to find the injured man gasping his last breath, lying in a pool of his own blood. The Voodoo Man's life source, quickly flowing from the tiny wound, was magnetically drawn back to the earth as it drained out of his lifeless body onto the sidewalk. The blood swept rhythmically around his body into a puddle that trickled in a rich ruby stream and became a small moat in front of his store, a store filled with now useless ingredients for magic potions and secret incantations.

The police found the murderer later that day. It wasn't hard to discover who he was. Everyone knew him. Witnesses, all neighbors of the Voodoo Man, unanimously identified him. The "accidental killer" was a young man who had been rejected by the one he loved. His heart had been broken so he had turned to the magic of potions and spells to gain back the object of his

affections - only to find that the spells and potions didn't work. The harder he tried, the more the girl rejected him. Unbeknownst to him, she had protected her emotions with her own source of magic. She had engaged a Voodoo Woman to weave her own spells, which, unfortunately for the young man, successfully averted the magic of the Voodoo Man.

Positive that his Voodoo Man could have and should have done better, the young man's plan was to scare the purveyor of magic into making a better potion. He wanted him to chant a more entrancing spell, to ultimately entice his desired love and win her affection.

The young man decided to scare the Voodoo Man, to threaten a stab at his leg with a small, sharp paring knife. He only wanted to put the fear of one of the Gods into the Voodoo Man, to scare him into granting his wishes, to persuade him to try once more to help him woo his love. He had no intention of really hurting him, never imagined he would actually inflict a fatal wound. For without the Voodoo Man and his magic, he knew his true love would be forever lost.

The young man had no idea the Voodoo Man would not easily scare. It never crossed his mind that he would take his warning lightly, that he would taunt the young man, dare him to make

good on his threat to cut him. The young man could not have envisioned that his tiny stab might cut the main artery in the man's leg. He never imagined that he would accidentally find the precise point of entry for the very conduit that brings the ebb and flow of precious blood to and from a person's heart.

The young man's consuming passion ultimately led to two deaths. When they finally found him on his Auntie's property, he was hanging from a large beam in her garage. The small, sharp paring knife was taped to his right hand, the hand that did the dirty deed. A dead, bloody chicken lay below his feet. An eerie circle of lit candles surrounded the circumference of the dead chicken and the recently hung young man.

That murder and the tragedy that followed gave Sammy a glimpse into black magic and the power our minds and bodies have over us. The tragedy that followed? The girl, the young man's consuming and, ultimately, self-consuming love, fled Allentown as quickly as her family could get her away and back to her small Jamaican village. It was rumored that the girl's family believed the tragedy was ultimately her fault because she artfully coerced the Voodoo Woman to insure her rejection of the young man would not waver. Her family convinced her the tragedy was her responsibility, and she must repent. They forced her to

join a convent, to live the remainder of her life in piety, with purity of heart and in an everlasting state of repentance. The last Sammy heard, the girl obeyed and lived a cloistered life to repent for those who lost their lives because of the young man's compulsive love for her.

Sammy never had an opportunity to meet or interview the girl, the final lost life in the triangle that fell, like human dominoes, when tapped by the impulsive actions of a rejected young lover. Sammy had made it clear to Maxie that she would love to visit the girl, to see how she is faring as she lives out the rest of the days of her life. Sammy wanted to talk with her, to write about her, to finish her story. It would be the end of a tale of love and loss; of incantations, spells and potions; and of hope, then frustration. It was a story of anger and action, of life and death. This was a story, an interview, she would attempt to convince Maxie to let her pursue in the future. It was a story that Sammy would like to complete because she liked to follow all her stories until they are played out to the very end.

Chapter 17

ASHES TO ASHES

A long black limousine brought Annie, Sammy and Julie to the church on the morning of The Senator's funeral. They arrived early, before the formalities began, and sat together at the front of the church. Quietly, introspectively, and patiently, they waited for others to begin filing in, to pay their last respects, to help them say "good-bye."

Julie had not been thrown back in prison after The Senator's death. He was a respected member of the community, had no previous record and was The Senator's loyal and trusted friend. He still had no recollection of what had happened, how

The Senator had been hit or how he had ended up in that soggy field. Julie had shown so much grief and remorse, the court decided to agree with Schuyler's request to allow Julie to be free on minimal bail. The court also ordered Julie not to leave the city while he waited for his upcoming trial.

For The Senator's funeral service Annie had chosen a serene setting, a very old church steeped in history and located in the historic district of the city. The original structure had been a log cabin built just before the Revolutionary War in 1762. The newer structure, built to replace the log cabin, was completed in 1886. The arched mahogany ceilings prominently displayed latticework edging that embellished its graceful curves. Tall stained glass windows invited outside light into the interior, then projected its rays and cast shimmering rainbows in a kaleidoscope of colors onto the beautifully polished, old, stately mahogany pews. In front of the pews, on either side of the building-wide pulpit, were massive pipe organs with gleaming, brass pipes that filled two identical ceiling-high arches. The Senator's love of history had drawn him to the church when he and Annie first began to call the city their home. It had been his favorite place to go for respite, soul-searching and spiritual rejuvenation.

The trio sat in the first pew in the center of the church directly across from the minister's podium. The Senator's plain, modest oak casket, draped with an American flag, rested on the pulpit, just to their right. Annie, Sammy and Julie had no idea who was entering the church. Not until the mourners presented themselves to Annie to pay their respects, did it become a parade of familiar and famous faces of the well-known and not so well-known. Local politicians. State Representatives. U.S. Senators. Federal notables. Friends. Neighbors. Constituents. They all came. The building filled to capacity, and a substantial number of mourners overflowed down the steps and out onto the sidewalk in front of the church.

The Vice-President arrived as the President's emissary, attending The Senator's funeral on behalf of the White House. He and his secret service bodyguards, who were literally glued to his side, sat in the front row next to Julie, to Annie's left. Sammy sat to her right. It was tight, it was uncomfortable, but Sammy felt safe and protected by the masses around them - and by the invisible weapons, hidden beneath expensive, tailored suit jackets only an arm's distance from her side, just on the other side of Annie.

The eulogies were many and lengthy, extending the ritual of passage to more than two hours. There were lots of tears, lots of laughs, lots of knowing sighs. The Senator had many friends, no enemies. He was truly one of the most beloved and revered politicians of his time. He had done what he had intended to do, made his mark on the world and made a difference in other people's lives. During his eulogy, the minister proclaimed, "What more can a person want in life than to reach their goals, live with their love, be mourned and missed when their time is up - when it is their time to be separated from the human flock and shepherded out of this world? The only thing left that one can hope for is to grow old and die a peaceful death - a luxury that, for The Senator, has been taken away and is now eternally out of his reach."

Annie was composed, yet cried softly throughout the entire service. Julie held her hand tightly, and she held back. Sammy's instinct was to hold her as well, but sitting wedged against her friend, tightly packed into that front row, she was only physically able to give Annie an occasional pat on her arm, most of which was wedged tightly against Sammy's side.

The speeches were finished and homage was paid. It was over. First, the pallbearers carried The Senator's coffin to

the hearse. Then, the undertaker escorted Annie, Julie and Sammy to the waiting limousine. Sammy observed that most in attendance held damp, rumpled tissues or handkerchiefs in their hands. Eyes were red and lids were puffy from crying. Noses were runny. It seemed to Sammy that everyone in attendance was truly mourning the passing of a man whom they loved and respected. They weren't there just for show or because of any political sense of duty or obligation. They were there because they *wanted* to be there, to simply say "goodbye."

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With the hearse leading the way to the cemetery, the cars created a long procession that wound snakelike through the city and onto country roads to their final destination - the memorial park where Annie had chosen to place her husband for the rest of earth's existence. As they passed through the gates, elegant fountains greeted the multitude of passengers occupying the interiors of the long line of cars. Trees and floral beds scattered about the landscape were barren, waiting for spring to come. The grass, greener than normal at this time of year because of the warm winter and recent rain, still appeared to be manicured from the previous fall.

Stylish sculptures were placed in prominent places, and benches scattered in quiet, serene, peaceful spots throughout the grounds gave mourners and visitors a place to rest and contemplate. They provided places for people to reflect on lives, which had ceased to be. They were areas where people could take time to remember the physical hosts that had been lovingly placed to rest under their respective markers sprinkled on the hillside.

The memorial park was beautiful and would be even prettier when spring finally arrived. It was a peaceful place where time stood still. It was truly a piece of God's country, a bit of heaven on earth. Annie had chosen well. It was an appropriately fitting final resting-place for The Senator.

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It only took about twenty minutes for the first limousines to reach the memorial park, but it took an additional forty minutes for the entire caravan of mourners to arrive.

The Senator's simple casket had been placed parallel to a newly-dug, gaping hole. Located on top of a hill, his final resting site had an impressive view of the entire valley. The three friends waited patiently for the others to arrive. Situated in a place of honor at the edge of The Senator's grave,

they sat on comfortable, high back, upholstered chairs, which were draped with red, white and blue bunting. The trio was on their own, as the Vice-President and his entourage had already gone to the airport to board Air Force One and go back to D.C.

Unlike the church service, the graveside formalities were simple and brief. Just a few prayers. No speeches. No eulogies. Before they knew it, it was over. The crowd began to disperse, the mourners stayed just long enough to pay their last respects to Annie before they walked down the hill, to the waiting cars and limousines, to leave and return to their own lives - and to the imagined invulnerability of their own families.

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Sammy didn't notice him until the others had already gone. Not until Annie, Julie and she had tossed handfuls of dirt onto The Senator's coffin, said their own "goodbyes," and then walked down the grassy hill back to the waiting limousine. She was surprised that she hadn't seen him before. The throng of people encircling the gravesite must have shielded him from her view.

His appearance was unique, so different from the other mourners. His casual dress and the vivid, colorful clothes were what first caught Sammy's attention. The man wore a print shirt

in a tropical design that was paired with baggy dark orange trousers. His face was tan, framed by long, dark curly hair pulled back into a ponytail. A small hoop earring, looped through the pierced lobe of his left ear, glinted as it reflected the rays of the midday sun. If his looks hadn't caught Sammy's eye, his actions surely would have roused her curiosity and prompted her to turn away from the limousine, to look back at The Senator's burial site.

Annie had already been ushered into the back seat of the limousine, waiting for Julie & Sammy to join her. Sammy was just about to ease herself into the left side of the car when she heard his wail. Not loud, but deafening just the same. It was a forlorn, heart-wrenching whine that pierced her inner being and sent chills down her spine. As Sammy watched the man, he fell to his knees, then prostrated himself at the edge of the grave. He was sobbing, grieving and obviously in pain. Julie, who had been holding the door open for Sammy, also heard the man and turned at the same time she did, in time to witness his display of emotion at The Senator's grave. It all happened so quickly - her noticing his presence at the site and his unexpected behavior. Sammy turned to Julie. Their eyes met. Julie didn't say a word, but his eyes spoke loudly as if they

were saying, "Sammy - let it go! Please, please just let it go!"

The look on Julie's face seemed to be a blend of grief, fear and surprise - like a deer caught in the headlights. That was it. Julie and Sammy had no more time to react as the anxious limousine driver stood impatiently waiting, holding the door open for them, clearing his throat, eager to deliver each of them to their individual destinations so that he could leave work for the day and go home.

Once inside the car they sat in complete silence. Annie was in her own world. She was exhausted, lost in grief and contemplation, not knowing what her two friends had witnessed just before they entered the limousine to join her for the ride home. Annie had no idea that anything unusual had happened before they left the memorial park and was completely unaware that anything had passed between her two friends. Sammy was thinking about the man's puzzling appearance, his actions and Julie's response.

They drove for a few minutes before Sammy felt she could look at Julie. Her gut told her he held the key that would identify the puzzling appearance by The Senator's graveside of the unfamiliar man in tropical clothes. Julie's face was void

of expression. Sensing her stare, he glanced at Sammy. His eyes again implored her to remain silent, to let it go, his head nodding slightly in Annie's direction, a clear indication to Sammy that Julie didn't want Annie to know.

Sammy nodded back in assent, deciding that whatever Julie knew about the mysterious and intriguing man could wait until another time when Annie wasn't present. Then, perhaps, Julie might feel comfortable enough to confide in Sammy and tell her what he knew about the mysterious man who was so painfully and vividly moved by The Senator's death.

Chapter 18

AND TO YOU I BEQUEST

The three friends waited in Schuyler's office - not only Julie's first choice for attorney, but also The Senator's. Annie asked Sammy to join her and Julie, and now they waited to be formally presented with The Senator's last will and testament. Sammy didn't anticipate that the reading would take very long since she imagined The Senator would have left just about everything to Annie.

Schuyler had been unavoidably detained at the courthouse. His secretary had already come into the office twice to inform

them he was running late, and each time she smiled politely and assured them that Schuyler would "be here soon."

Sammy assumed Schuyler's office had been professionally decorated. It was masculine, sophisticated and lathered with various hues of burgundy and gray. An intricately designed Burmese carpet lay at their feet. A mahogany desk and chair waited for Schuyler's return. A pair of deep burgundy, paisley-patterned, brocade-covered loveseats had been placed across from each other, in front of the desk. A mahogany coffee table had been centered between them, giving the feeling of a small, plush, sitting room rather than an imposing legal office. Sammy sat on one loveseat; Julie and Annie sat across from her on the other. The two of them held hands while waiting for Schuyler to make his entrance.

When Schuyler finally and swiftly entered the room, his secretary followed on his heels. She claimed an empty chair placed next to Schuyler's desk, just to his right. Schuyler took a couple minutes to go over a few notes, quickly read through his phone messages, then sat back and made himself comfortable in his swivel chair just behind the massive desk.

"This won't take long. The Senator was pretty brief. You know, he wouldn't have bothered to formally set his wishes down

in writing if I hadn't pestered him to do so. Didn't object to having a living will, but for some reason he balked at writing this one."

The trio just stared at Schuyler, not quite sure why he had to "pester" The Senator to make out a will.

"You know...all those flights, always in the limelight, barely out of the public eye. Don't get me wrong. He was loved. But...as a politician, well, you never know when some nut will decide to seek his 15 minutes of fame...or when a plane could..."

Schuyler paused, suddenly acutely aware of the delicate nerve he had just touched, since it was unclear exactly what had led to The Senator's death. Barring the fact that Julie had been charged with the death of his friend, no one in Schuyler's office had any idea whether someone was out there, having done exactly what Schuyler had implied, yet was cowering from his incriminating fifteen minutes of fame.

"Forget I said that, I think you know what I mean. I think you get the picture...Sorry, I just wanted him to be prepared. To make sure you would be taken care of..."

Schuyler directed his remarks at Annie, and both of them were visibly uncomfortable with where he had chosen to go with

his words. There was a pregnant pause where Schuyler and Annie quickly looked into each other's eyes, searching for closure to the images he had just put before them. Then Annie looked down, focused on the monogrammed handkerchief that she held so very tightly in her hand resting on her lap. The handkerchief, the monogram - they were both his. That richly embroidered piece of soft cloth would give Annie strength to get through today and the days ahead. It was almost as if she were still holding onto him, gleaning strength from within his seemingly inexhaustible reserve.

The Senator was gone, but his possessions were still tangible reminders of the time he spent on earth. It was Schuyler's job to reveal just how those possessions had been allocated. He took a few moments to regain his focus, then pulled The Senator's file from the top of the neatly piled and labeled stack on his desk. His secretary readied her memo pad and waited, poised for the official portion of the meeting to begin.

The rest of the group just sat there - completely quiet and completely uncomfortable. Annie held onto The Senator's handkerchief with her right hand and clasped Julie's right hand with her left. Sammy felt like a third wheel, didn't really

know why Annie asked her along, and was anxious to get the reading over with so she could get the hell out of Schuyler's office.

Just months before, none of them would have imagined they would be spending time sitting together in an attorney's office, waiting uncomfortably for The Senator's will to be revealed and his worldly goods to be distributed.

Schuyler poured himself a glass of ice water from the clear glass pitcher perched toward the corner of his desk. He then offered the rest of his guests glasses of their own, but they politely refused. Schuyler loosened his tie, took a drink, sat back and then began. When he finally spoke, his tone softened and he was more sympathetic to the task at hand.

"Well, Annie," he said looking at her. "This is it. Are you ready?"

Annie nodded - tentatively. A nervous look passed quickly between her and Julie. She then looked at Sammy who could see the fear in Annie's eyes, but only briefly, because Annie quickly changed her focus. Her eyes now rested on Schuyler and, almost as if she couldn't find her voice, she nodded slightly. Schuyler knew she was as ready as she would ever be.

It took only a few minutes for Schuyler to read the will. The Senator had been brief, concise and to-the-point. The house, the cars, the Georgetown townhouse and all its contents - all of them, if they didn't already belong to her, predictably went to Annie. To Julie, he left the Key West property. That particular asset seemed to be old news to Annie and Julie, but came as a complete surprise to Sammy, who tried not to appear too intrigued. The reading of the will was not the time or place to act like an inquisitive reporter or a nosy friend. Sammy made a mental note to ask Annie about that property as soon as she could, but not today. It would have to wait until some other time when Annie wasn't so preoccupied with the sobering reality of today.

Sammy watched Annie. Her face was drained of color, her eyes were sad, she looked forlorn and lost. For Annie to hear the will read, no matter how simple and brief it was, must have been like feeling the last bit of wind leaving the sails that had enabled her to glide so easily on the sea of her life. It was a sea that had remained calm until a storm rose on the night of The Senator's accident, a sea on which Annie had once so smoothly sailed.

As quickly as he had begun, Schuyler was finished. It was over. He rose, shook their hands and said goodbye. Schuyler reminded Julie of their pending appointment and then his secretary gently escorted the trio to the outer office and graciously told them to "have a nice day." As the door to Schuyler's office shut behind them, he had already efficiently moved on to the next task of his day and was on the phone trying to reach another client.

The reading was done, their appointment was finished, The Senator's affairs were complete. It now felt official and, by the look on Annie's face, she appeared to be reeling from the finality that had just transpired in such a civil, matter-of-fact "you get this and you get that" manner. Julie didn't look any better. And Sammy was feeling a hollow emptiness and empathy for her friend in this final ritual of life that follows death.

Waiting for Schuyler's arrival and the anticipation of what would soon transpire had actually taken longer than the reading of the will itself. Although it had been brief, its finality had taken a toll on everyone in the room. Months had passed since they had buried The Senator, yet Annie was still in the beginning throes of mourning.

Sammy spent as much time with her friend as she could. But it seemed that, with The Senator's passing, Annie and Julie were growing closer than they had ever been. It was apparent to Sammy...Annie had begun to prefer Julie's company to her own. The comfort level was understandable; after all, they had grown together from teens to adults. They had a history that went back as far as Annie's and The Senator's history - only now their's would continue into the future - a luxury that had been irrevocably denied to Annie and The Senator.

Once they were outside Schuyler's office, after obligatory hugs and exchanges of promises to "keep in touch," Sammy said her good-byes and left for her apartment. Julie escorted Annie to his car, then the two of them drove to her home in silence - back to the big house she had shared with The Senator. The house that was now, as it had always been, owned solely by Annie.

It wasn't until Sammy got home that she focused her attention and began to absorb and think about what had transpired in Schuyler's office.

The reading went as she would have expected. But where did the Key West property come from? It appeared that Annie and Julie seemed to anticipate each portion of the reading of The

Senator's will. Their reactions to "who gets this and who gets that" had been nonchalant; the reading appeared to have concealed no hidden surprises for either of them. Sammy was the only one who apparently knew nothing about the mysterious Florida property.

When Schuyler read The Senator's instruction, that Julie take possession of the Key West property, Sammy had to maintain her composure and not act completely surprised. It was of obvious importance and undoubtedly a prominent, significant asset of The Senator's estate. Yet, it had never been mentioned. Not by The Senator. Not by Annie. And not by Julie.

I can understand that The Senator and Julie would have had no reason to tell me about the property. But Annie? For her to not have mentioned a family asset like a Key West property to me, her best friend...that was really odd - if not mysterious. How did it escape mention in any of the thousands of articles written about such a popular Senator? How could I not have read anything about it? How could I not have noticed it?

Chapter 19

GEORGE

He answered on the first ring.

"Williams here."

"Hey George! How's the magnificent red rock country doing?"

"Sammy! Hey girl! What's up? How're things back there in Dutchland?"

Ever since George moved to Arizona and Sammy began to call his new home "red rock country," he had taken to calling the Lehigh Valley "Dutchland." It was a reference to the large population of Pennsylvania "Dutch" who live in the Valley - not

Dutch from Holland, but people who are actually of German heritage. Over the years the word for German, Deutsche, had become Americanized into the easier pronounced and spelled "Dutch." It was a bit confusing for Sammy when she first moved to Allentown, as she thought the classification "Pennsylvania Dutch" solely referred to Amish people - like the ones she had seen portrayed in the movie, Witness starring Harrison Ford - people who drive buggies, live on farms and shun modern conveniences.

"Just came back from the reading of The Senator's will."

"How was it, kid? That had to be tough on Annie"

"Yeah, it was. For both Annie and Julie."

"Anything interesting in the will?"

"It was mostly predictable, but there was one thing that was new to me, something I never heard about before today. Something I'd like to ask you to check out for me."

"What's that, kid?"

"A property...and you won't believe where it is!"

"So...give. Tell me. Where is it?"

"On Key West."

"Key West! Whew, that is a real kicker. In all the articles I've seen about him, I don't recall The Senator being connected to a Key West property."

"Yeah, me neither, George. But that isn't even what pushed my mind into gear and now has it running at full-speed. You see, everything went to Annie - just as I thought, just as I assumed it would. But then, out of the blue - well, at least out of the blue to me, but apparently not to them - Julie was given the Key West property.

"George...you should've been there to see it. Neither one of them flinched...not so much as a blink. And they both seemed to expect it! Hell, I thought Julie might have gotten one of The Senator's cars or the Georgetown townhouse. But a property on Key West? That one caught me off guard...it was a total surprise."

"I can see how that would be, kid. I never heard of it before. Never read anything about it. Besides you, the two of them and their attorney...well, I'd bet my last dollar that you're probably now part of a select few who even know that property exists."

"You know, George, its funny. But, over the years, I thought I knew her. Thought we shared just about everything

that two friends could share. But now I'm realizing I probably don't know much about her after all. Geez! A property on Key West? She never mentioned it. Not a word. I don't think she even went there. Not as long as I've known her. And as far as I know, The Senator never went there either. But the way things look right now...well, I suspect that I apparently don't really know as much as I had thought. Don't really know very much about him. Or her. Or even Julie, for that matter."

Sammy stopped to catch her breath, then continued on, getting to the point.

"So, that's it, George. That's where I need your help. I need to find out more about that property. And I'd like you to add it to the list of things for you to check out. Could you do that, George? Could you go there? Find out where it came from? How long they've owned it? Can you come up with a good reason why we never heard of it before? Why Annie never mentioned it?"

"A Key West property? And you're asking me to check it out? Whoa! Thanks, kid! You know I always wanted to get down to the Keys, spend some time there. Check out Papa's home too. But up until now, other than wanting to, I never had a good excuse to go. Kid, you've just given me an opportunity I can't pass up! Of course I'll go there and check it out!"

Sammy giggled at her old friend's exuberance. She knew she had him as soon as she mentioned Key West. Her old friend would have followed the lead without her even having had to ask.

"Thanks, George. Knew I could count on you. Let me know when you're going - let me know when you get back. And don't worry, I'll clear it with Maxie in the morning. Just use that company card that I know you've still got."

She didn't wait for him to answer, to try to protest. She knew he had that card and he couldn't get away with feigning that he didn't. Before he could say another word, she continued.

"Hey! You and Maxie didn't think the two of you could pull a fast one on me, did you? I know he let you keep the card for times he would authorize you to help me...or someone else. When one of us finally broke down and admitted that we still need you to do a little footwork for us."

George chuckled and Sammy knew her guess had been right on the mark. It was just a hunch, but it made sense to her that Maxie would keep George equipped with what he would need to get research done. Checking out a story doesn't often come cheap and she suspected that Maxie knew his old right-hand-man would eventually be needed to help out from time to time - even if he

was happily retired and living a carefree life out in "red rock country."

The two old friends talked for a little while longer, said their good-byes and were both off - Sammy to ponder the "Key West property," George making plans to head out of town, filled with anticipation and excitement about checking out Sammy's lead.

Sammy was satisfied. She would learn more after George reported back, after he finally got to visit the Keys - courtesy of Maxie and The Details.

Chapter 20

THE OLD MAN AND THE KEYS

By the time George arrived at the B&B it was seven-thirty at night. If it hadn't been for the adrenaline rush he experienced while thinking about the purpose of his fact-finding expedition, George probably would have been completely exhausted. Instead, he was energized because he knew he would soon, hopefully, discover the story behind the newly revealed Key West property.

As soon as George unpacked, he took off to explore the neighborhood now comfortably nestled within the vivid, glowing

onset of twilight - a twilight that was quickly and increasingly turning into the dark of night.

It had been a lifelong dream, yet George had never been to Key West. The little he knew about the island came from reading old biographies about Hemingway. It was Papa's favorite retreat. His island home, now a museum, was one place George definitely intended to visit before he departed back to the mainland.

His stroll throughout the neighborhood, which surrounded the B&B on The Key, his temporary place of residence, treated George to a soothing symphony of pleasurable sensations. The sweet scent of Hibiscus drifted through the air and intertwined with other tantalizing odors - odors that emanated from dinners being prepared on backyard grills and from open windows belonging to kitchens of tiny open-air bistros sprinkled throughout the quiet, soothing, tropical neighborhood. The salt-air breeze felt refreshing to George as it wended its way among the palm fronds gently swishing in the tropical air and softly muffling the sounds of neighbors chatting and diners socializing. The feel of the breeze around his body, the smells in the air, the unique architecture and tropical foliage - all

of them mingled together and provided George with a completely pleasurable, most satisfying, multi-sensory experience.

It was getting late and tomorrow was a new day. Finding The Senator's property, now Julie's property, would have to wait until tomorrow, after George had searched the public records to find out its exact location. Sammy had no idea where it was, hadn't felt comfortable broaching the subject with either Annie or Julie. The Key West property - nothing more specific than that had been divulged during the reading of The Senator's will. That's all she knew, so that's all George knew - at least until tomorrow when he would begin digging through the records in Key West's City Hall. George didn't expect it would be too hard, since The Senator was somewhat of a political celebrity. He was confident someone would be able to quickly guide him in the right direction.

But now, George's appetite made him forget (at least temporarily) about the reason for his trip to this particular tropical island paradise and probably the most famous of the Keys. As he turned the corner, George spotted yet another quiet bistro, almost hidden behind a front yard filled with both small and tall palms, lilting vines and a huge variety of flowering, heavenly scented, voluminous tropical plants. George had found

his destination. He turned into the lush entranceway, was promptly greeted, then escorted to a quiet table situated in the middle of fragrant foliage.

At the end of his meal, George was glad he had decided to wend his way through the serene jungle of plants that almost obscured the facade of the small, tranquil house of Epicurean delights. Satiated by a delicious meal, and completely content from his entire sensory-stimulating experience, he walked back to the B&B, ready to rest up for tomorrow's task.

George had no trouble sleeping to the tune of the ceiling fan's steady, gentle whir. The day had been an exhausting one, yet at the same time, exhilarating. It had been a day that turned his blood back into that of a younger man - one who is on a fact-finding mission - a man who can instinctively sense when he is teetering on the verge of a major find.

Chapter 21

A to Z...OR...Z to A

George's assumption, that it would be easy for him to learn about The Senator's property, was mistaken. Inexplicably, the folks he talked with at City Hall were clueless when he inquired about The Senator and his property. Apparently The Senator's mainland popularity and notoriety had stayed just there - on the mainland.

Although the staff couldn't give him any information about The Senator or his Key West home, they were kind enough to let him access public records, even provided him with a computer so he could search the island's property listings. Being the

seasoned researcher that he is, George decided to begin with the Z's and work his way backwards through the alphabet until he found something to trigger his instinctive antennae, something that would lead him to the property The Senator had left to Julie.

That's where George made his mistake - beginning with the Z's. He diligently poured over each and every property listing as if he were using a fine-toothed comb. George took notes, wrote down a few possible addresses for property listings owned by folks with D.C. addresses. None of their names rang a bell, but then George wasn't really "up" on the political scene as he had been during his days at The Details. Even though Key West is not a very large island, the listings were fairly numerous. Lots of folks had been drawn to its tropical beauty and, as its popularity grew early in the twentieth century, so did its housing stock. George's gut feeling was that many of the vast properties, from island days now long gone, had gradually been sold off and subdivided to make room for builders to insert smaller bungalows and cottages.

He started his search at ten, made it through until just after eleven-thirty, then decided to take a break because he was getting hungry. Thinking about his next meal actually took

George by surprise as he had, only a short time ago, consumed an ample breakfast - just before eight, at the B&B. George hadn't planned to eat again until dinner. But, almost on cue, his stomach told him lunchtime was nearing. The tug of war between head and stomach was finally won and George decided to take a break, to roam the streets, to look for a nice place to relax and take in a light lunch.

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It felt good to stretch his legs and walk around the neighborhood surrounding Key West's City Hall. But he was a bit frustrated. George had hoped to find all he needed on the Key West property as soon as possible because he yearned for some free time - to enjoy his short visit to the island, to get some sightseeing in and, ultimately, to visit Hemingway's cottage. But what George didn't know, as he strolled, looking for his next place of repast, was that his afternoon would end up being far more interesting than even he could have planned.

His hunger pangs finally satisfied by a light lunch, George quickly returned to City Hall where he was again given access to the computer that stored all the information on the Key's property listings. Although he was going from one computer

screen to another at a pretty fast clip, it was still taking more time than he had initially anticipated.

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None of the property holders' names looked remotely familiar. Nothing rang a bell. But finally, just shortly after two o'clock - he found what he had been looking for. It took him by such surprise that he had to laugh. George had outdone himself this time - hampered by his own strategic plan to begin with the Z's. It turned out that he could have saved himself a lot of time and eyestrain if he had actually put aside his old research trick and began where most people would have begun. Because it was right there, right at the beginning - right there in the A's.

Property: 21 Key View Lane
14 rms, 2.5 stories, 5.2 acres

Owner: Ashton, Jules B.
1433 North Arbor Avenue
Allentown PA 18104

Recorded: November 18, 2004

He was thrilled to finally discover what he had come to Key West to find, but what George found had completely surprised him.

"Well I'll be damned! It was already in Julie's name!"

The secretary on the other side of the counter looked up from her work. George hadn't realized he voiced his thoughts out loud. The house, although seemingly having just been transferred to Julie after Schuyler's reading of The Senator's will, had actually been listed in Julie's name for quite some time. George was sure there was a story lurking behind that unpublicized property transaction.

He thanked the clerks at City Hall for their help and left with a printout of the property listing. George was pumped. He couldn't wait to see the property. A surge of adrenaline rushed through his veins and, just like the "good old days," George was off and running with the vigor of a much younger man. Once outside City Hall, he hailed a cab and, within minutes, was on his way to the Key West property.

It should be a pretty good-sized house. Must have around ten or eleven bedrooms. Key View Lane? Well, George thought, if I had to guess, it's probably right on the ocean. And he guessed right.

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George emerged from the cab at the entrance to the property. To get to the house he would have to travel down an old sand road that led to the property from the main road, Beachside Avenue. The entrance from Beachside was marked by turquoise pilasters, which sat on yellow bases and were topped with yellow capitals. There was no number - only the street name was inscribed on a brass nameplate and mounted on one of the turquoise pillars:

Key View Lane - PRIVATE

George hadn't yet figured out exactly what he was going to say if anyone was there. He was pretty sure the house would be vacant. Julie was back in Allentown, mandated by strict orders not to leave town. The possibility that the property might be rented to a snowbird, or an elusive figure needing a quiet retreat, did cross his mind, but George thought those chances were slim. He reasoned that, if he happened upon anyone, he'd just play dumb and start asking questions. George came up with a couple of scenarios. He could disguise his visit as though he might be interested in renting the property. Or, he could use

the guise of working as a location scout for a magazine that wants to do a spread about Key West homes, or even better...a swimsuit photo shoot in a secluded tropical paradise. He smiled. Was actually a bit partial to the last scenario. But George knew he didn't need to do anything about a story right away. He decided to wait, to see if he needed to pull any of those seemingly plausible scenarios out of his cap.

Mentally ready for whatever he might encounter, George set off to find the house. He walked for about a half mile on the sandy lane beneath an arched canopy that had been carved out from the tropical foliage. When he emerged from the cool, shaded canopy into the bright sun, he saw the house for the first time. It was about one hundred yards from where the lane emerged from the shade. The colors of the house mirrored those of the pillars that marked the entrance to the property from the main road. It was painted a shade of pale turquoise and festooned in hues of brighter turquoise and brilliant yellow. It had yellow shutters, a yellow door and was surrounded by a landscaped array of brightly colored flowers.

When George got closer to the house, he spotted a moped parked alongside the front steps. As he made a cursory appraisal of the house, he almost missed seeing the bike because

its frame, also turquoise, almost completely blended into the façade of the house. The reflection off its wheels is what caught George's eye, uncovered its turquoise camouflage and revealed the bike's presence by the front stairs.

Beyond the house was a vast, impeccably manicured lawn that was intersected by a cobbled walkway leading to the edge of the beach. The emerald lawn merged onto the white sands of the beach by a narrow boardwalk that smoothly segued from the path in the lawn to the sands of the beach. Hibiscus plants of varied hues flanked both sides of the boardwalk, which then continued for about thirty feet over the clear, white sand. The boardwalk ended, by George's estimate, about fifty yards from the foamy, white waves that swirled up from the clear blue sea and onto the sparkling, sandy shore.

The sky was a brilliant blue. A few puffy, cumulous clouds hovered in the sky almost just above the horizon that bordered on the sea. A few sailboats drifted effortlessly on the calm, serene waters surrounding the island. Two of them were ablaze with brightly colored rainbow sails. The third, the largest of the three boats, sported crisp, white, pristine sails.

The open, uncrowded property leading onto the vast (and what George assumed to be private) beach was in complete

contrast with the neat little bungalows situated among the crowded, quaint streets in the middle of Key West. George was in heaven! Although he loved living among the red rocks of Sedona, he still yearned to be near the sea, to feel the ocean breeze on his face, to lick his lips and taste the residue from the salt air on his tongue.

The view took George's breath away. He stopped and just stared. It was picture perfect! Its beauty was spellbinding and he temporarily forgot how and why he happened to be in such a beautiful place. For just seconds in time, the Key West property assignment was momentarily and conveniently forgotten.

It was during his temporary lapse that, without thinking, George took the camera hanging around his neck and began to take photos to bring back home and show everyone what a wonderful paradise he had been privy to find. He was only suffering from a temporary lapse of purpose. It was still there, in the back of his mind, even as he became absorbed with taking photos of the beautiful vista before him. Besides, the pictures wouldn't just be for his viewing, because George knew he needed to bring back some kind of tangible proof, a souvenir that he had actually found the mysterious Key West property.

And he found it in such a magnificent way! George knew he needed to show his photos to Sammy. He knew she would be amazed when she saw the phenomenal property that was now spread out in front of him - and would soon be depicted in his photos. It was the property that she never knew existed until the reading of The Senator's will.

Chapter 22

CHARLES THOMAS CORDELAY

George was actually more surprised than startled when he heard the throaty "eh-hem" emitted from just behind him. He didn't drop the camera, didn't lose his cool. Instead, he just lowered his arm to his side and put the camera in his left hand. He turned slowly, extended his right arm and hand, and then gave (what he hoped to be) his warmest smile to the man now standing about three feet across from him.

"George Williams, here."

At first the man looked cautiously at George. He looked him up and down, trying to figure out what to do with an old man

who was trespassing on private property. It took nearly half a minute before he decided to return George's gesture. Then the man solemnly reached out his arm, firmly grasped George's hand and slowly began to pump it up and down.

"Charles...Charles Cordelay. Sir, don't you know this is private property? And how the heck did you get here anyway? I don't mean to be rude sir, but it seems to me like a man of your age...well, if you'll pardon me for saying...a man your age just shouldn't be out walking around in this hot afternoon sun.

"Come on, sir...you said your name was Williams, right? Well Mr. Williams, we'd better get you out of this here heat and into a cooler place. Don't want you having a stroke on me. This being private property...I just wouldn't know how to explain your presence here, you being a stranger to me and all."

Mr. Cordelay grinned a most definite grin of welcome, put his arm around George's shoulders and guided him from the edge of the beach. He steered him back toward and then up and onto the rear veranda - past the hot tub, past the barbecue, and past the bright white table and chairs. A yellow and turquoise striped awning kept the dining area shaded and shielded the huge leaded-glass French doors that led from the deck to the inside of the house. As Charles Cordelay ushered him quickly through a

den toward the kitchen, George didn't get much of a chance to look around. He only saw what appeared to be a few family photos on a table pushed up against the back of a long, white sofa. When they reached the kitchen, it was large, bright, airy and cool. Although the house was old, it was most definitely, and most comfortably, air-conditioned.

Mr. Cordelay grabbed a couple of large glasses from one of the cabinets, then walked over and reached into the refrigerator for a large pitcher of what appeared to be freshly-made "from-scratch" lemonade. Thinly sliced cross-sections of the yellow orbs floated on top of the icy liquid. After he served George his drink, Mr. Cordelay repeated the process for himself, then sat across from George, placing his own glass of lemonade on the table in front of him. The way George was being treated; one wouldn't know that he was actually a trespasser. Mr. Cordelay truly seemed to be enjoying the unexpected surprise of George's company.

Charles Cordelay left "well enough" alone. There were no questions or suspicions about what George was doing on the property when he found George in the middle of his private, self-absorbed, photo session.

Charles Cordelay did ask George how long he had been in Key West, if he'd ever been there before, where he was staying, where he had taken his meals, what sights he had seen, what sights he wanted to see. George found his host to be quite cordial and entertaining, with an intriguing, eccentric appearance that fit in so well with the other island inhabitants. It occurred to George that the younger man sitting across from him might have been born and bred on this tropical paradise.

Mr. Cordelay wore a loose-fitting, short-sleeved, button down shirt - a tropical foliage print with brightly-colored parrots nestled among the greenery. Khaki shorts and leather sandals completed his attire. He wasn't very tall - probably about 5'9". He had a full head of curly, mostly dark (but definitely graying) hair that was tightly pulled back. His ponytail, tied at the nape of his neck, fell to just above the middle of his back in springy ringlets. His mustache, still mostly black, but also turning gray, was curled into tiny ringlets at the ends - miniature replications of those that sprang free from the bounds of his pony tail's elastic. His skin was tanned to the color of light cocoa and little crinkly laugh lines framed his bright blue eyes. The small hoop in his

left earlobe completed his rakish look and, along with his curly hair, mustache and cocoa tan, Charles Cordelay's image reminded George of the pirates that once debarked on this very island to stash their bounty in the (then) uninhabited jungle paradise.

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They talked. George told him mostly the truth, leaving out The Senator, Julie and Annie - and how he ended up following Sammy's final will and testament lead. George told him he lived with his family in Sedona, how he had always wanted to visit Key West and about his fascination with the island having been home, haven and literary inspiration to Ernest Hemingway. George didn't get much beyond that because it was his last comment that elicited excitement from Mr. Cordelay and cemented the foundation of their new friendship. Without waiting for George to continue telling him about his own life on the mainland, Charles Cordelay began to tell George all about himself.

He was an island native. In fact, he was named in honor of the Charles Thomas who became one of Mr. Hemingway's best friends when "Papa" and his second wife, Pauline, moved to Key West in the late 1920's. It turned out that Mr. Cordelay's mother, like George, was fascinated by the literary genius. She was also somehow remotely related to the elderly Mr. Thomas,

therefore drawing on his name when it was time to christen her newborn son.

"My full name is actually Charles Thomas Cordelay. My father was Giles Cordelay. He began his career as a popular New Orleans restaurateur. He originally traveled to Key West in exploration of opening another eatery - in addition to the one he already owned in New Orleans.

"But when he met my mother, the most beautiful Eleina Rollins, he was spellbound. I'm told," he said with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes, "that they had a passionate, fervent and envied love affair. That they were inseparable.

"And when she found that she was with child (he winked one of his twinkly blue eyes and smiled a sly grin), they immediately married and he never went back to the mainland. Mr. Williams, they loved each other deeply and, years later, when my father died of typhoid fever, she followed his path and left this world within a few days.

"No," Mr. Cordelay continued shaking his head, "she wasn't sick, hadn't caught his fever. She didn't commit suicide. But I'm sure that she simply just couldn't stand the thought of living without him. I remember how sad she was. How devastated she was. I was at a loss too, but didn't understand the

complete ramification of losing one's parent at such a young age. You see, I was only nine when they passed on."

He looked down at the table, then reached for the glass before him and took a long, slow drink of his cold lemonade. He put the glass down, paused for a moment to reflect, and then continued.

"Mr. Williams, every night - when she thought I was asleep and that I didn't know she was there - well, every night my mother would crawl into bed with me. She did that for a week straight after my father died. She would leave my bed before I woke in the morning, so I'm sure she thought I didn't know, but I knew. She would cuddle up next to me, put her arms around me, kiss me on my forehead and my neck. And then she would softly cry herself to sleep. I woke up one morning and she was gone. Not physically, but spiritually. You know, I think I'll always remember how beautiful she was, gently lying there, right next to me. Her eyes closed. Her face serene. And her lips turned up into the slightest, sweet, most happy and contented smile that I've ever seen. A look that I thought I'd never see again until...well, that's another story."

He stopped to reflect on what he had just said. His expression was one of melancholy. Then he took another long

drink of his lemonade. This time he turned his head and looked to his left, out the large bay window, which flanked the table and chairs and provided diners with a splendid view of the sea. His reverie didn't last long and, when he turned to face George, the twinkle in his eyes was back.

"You see Mr. Williams, I know he came and got her - took her away with him. That look on her face...well, that was the same look she had when he was still alive, filling her life with love and joy. They were madly in love and, even though I was a young boy of nine, I could feel how powerful their love was."

He turned to George, showed him the slightest mark on the right side of the nape of his neck. Although he was tan, George could make out a small crimson mark, a mark that could almost be distinguished as one made by the gentle caress of soft, loving lips against the tender, vulnerable skin at the nape.

"This here is my proof. You see this mark, Mr. Williams? When I crawled into bed, the night that she died...well, it wasn't there. This mark...well, I know, with all my heart, that it was made by my mother, just before her soul took leave and followed my father to the other side. So, Mr. Williams, I will always believe, to my very own dying day, that my father, Giles Cordelay, came that night. And because of his undying love for

her, he asked my mother to join him. I don't think he even knew that he was no longer of this world. He just knew he missed her so much that he couldn't spend another moment of eternity without her. And no matter how much she loved me, she was drawn to him, couldn't resist his offer. For theirs was a love that rendered the single soul incomplete without the other.

"I believe with all my heart that she, not caring whether he was of this world or that, well, she said "yes," kissed me one more time right here on my neck, and then followed him to the next realm, the place where they are now. Together. Happy. The place where one day...well, where I expect that I'll get to see them again. Get to know them. Get to thank them for having been created by their love for each other, which they consummated for all to see by bringing me into this world."

Again, he looked toward the sea. He took a minute or so to contemplate the picture he had just painted of his parents' love and his mother's sad and anguished soul that simply died without the human presence of her lover. George was moved to tears. Mr. Cordelay's story was so touching, so melancholy - yet somehow a happy one. Both men, the old newspaperman and the younger man from the Keys, sat in contemplation and silence for a long time.

It was George who finally broke the silence. He spoke in a gentle tone, yet not abruptly, because he didn't want to startle his host.

"So, what happened next, Mr. Cordelay? Where did you go? Who brought you up?"

"Why, Mr. Williams, I didn't go anywhere. You see...I stayed right here. Right in this very house. And, except for an occasional jaunt off the Key, I've never left. Been here ever since."

Chapter 23

HOLLAND HOUSE THREE

According to Mr. Cordelay the house was named in honor of the fortuitous circumstance that provided the basis for the family's fortune. Curiously, the house had never belonged to The Senator's grandfather, the man who had purchased the property and had the house built. And it was not passed down to The Senator's father. Until last fall, the property had not even been formally transferred to The Senator, but it had been his all the same.

George didn't prompt Mr. Cordelay into telling him about The Senator's connection to the house. It seemed as if he knew

that George was familiar with the family who owned the home, although George hadn't said a word about his own circuitous ties to The Senator and why he was on the island.

"You see, sir, the old patriarch of The Senator's family...his grandfather? Well, after he struck it big, he made a very unusual promise to his wife. And his son...The Senator's father? Well, sir, he followed that example and didn't relinquish the tradition created by the old man. You see, although the men were the ones who amassed the family fortune through real estate, it was actually their wives who owned the family properties."

A look of surprise must have passed over George's face so Charles Cordelay stopped and gave him a chance to break in.

"That was pretty progressive for someone back near the turn of the century, wasn't it?" George asked.

"Yes, sir, it was most definitely progressive. And his peers thought it a bit crazed too. You see, the old man reasoned that property had been the key to his wealth. So, he did it to show his love for his wife, The Senator's grandmother. It originated as a symbolic gesture. Because he knew that it was just his dumb luck to have fallen into economic security because of property ownership. He knew that he made his fortune

because he had been in the right place at the right time. Well, because of that dumb luck, he willed that no husband in his family would ever own property again.

"You see, Mr. Williams, the old man thought it would give his wife security if she knew that she owned the very thing that made him a rich man. And, sir, as you can see by these surroundings (his arms gesturing to encircle the room and beyond), the old man became rich enough to provide handsomely for his family. But with The Senator that tradition came to an end. The Senator's mama...well, sir, she chose to break tradition, left the house to him...and not to that pretty wife of his."

Mr. Cordelay paused, reflected, and then swallowed some of his lemonade. While he broke from telling his story, George looked around the room and, just moments before Charles Cordelay resumed his tale, George spotted a bottle of the same liqueur that he knew Sammy liked - Amarula. There it was, sitting behind glass cabinet doors on the top shelf - the brown bottle with a gold tassel around its neck and an elephant on the label. George thought it was pretty good stuff too, but hadn't taken a drink of the rich, creamy ambrosia in a long time. He made a mental note to ask Sammy for a glass when he reached Allentown.

George's thoughts were then interrupted by the melodic voice of the man who had so graciously become his host only a short time after finding him roaming about the property as a common, uninvited trespasser.

"Now for the name, Holland House Three. Well, the old lady...you see, rather than give any of their homes their family name, which was the custom at the time - you know, like The Robie House..."

George must have look confused. He didn't know much about houses or their names, or who designed and built them. He didn't know much about that subject at all, so his host went on to explain.

"The Robie House? Well, sir, that was the name of one of the most famous houses of the early 1900's, created by the master architect of his time, Mr. Frank Lloyd Wright. He, sir...he was commissioned, then designed and built the house in the suburbs of Chicago for the Robie family. Anyway, getting back to this here house...instead of using their family name, the grandmother called all her houses Holland House - every last one of them. You know? After that New York City landmark connecting the island of Manhattan with its New Jersey neighbor across the river. Well, Mr. Williams, you see...that tunnel is

now accessed from the exact spot where their very first property had once been. Yes, sir...I'm talking about none other than the Holland Tunnel.

"Anyway, this house? Well this one is Holland House Three. Why Holland House Three you ask? (George grinned at Charles Cordelay's intuitive question, then nodded in affirmation.) You see, Mr. Williams, she called her first upscale home in Montclair, New Jersey, Holland House One and her summer home in Deal, New Jersey? Yup, you guessed it - that one was Holland House Too. That's t-o-o Mr. Williams. Seems the old gal liked the irony of using the word too as a kind of play on words for two, that's t-w-o. Anyway, the last of the women to own this house, The Senator's mother, well, she only died within the past year. Did you know that, sir?"

"No, Mr. Cordelay, I did not. Had no idea."

"Well, she did. The poor thing had Alzheimer's disease and just wasted away, mentally. Until it got to the point where The Senator found it necessary to put her in a home. Didn't want to, but he had to. And it was putting her in a home that finally did her in. Her internal sense of order, direction and innate understanding of her surroundings were shattered once she was in that home. Poor lady...she completely lost it. Decided

that she had been kidnapped. Thought her daddy had been called for a ransom and that he never came to rescue her.

"The Senator's mother took her imaginary kidnapping very, very hard. She was real upset, ranted to all the other residents and staff that her daddy had deserted her. Told them she was going home, was intent on getting away from them. The poor old lady was delusional. Blamed all those other poor old people for her own situation and misery. Well, she became ornery, she did. Real ornery. She pushed them, hit them and knocked them off their chairs. Right in the middle of their dinners. You see, she thought they were all her kidnappers. Every last one of them.

"Then, one night, sometime in the middle of the night, she ran away. Tried to find this place. She almost made it too. Which is pretty amazing considering age and agility and that the home The Senator had placed her in was, oh...it was about a mile inland from here. Anyway, that night...she was real close to here, but not close enough. Made it all the way down Key View Lane. But she got confused, completely missed the house and ended up traveling another half mile up the lane, past this here house and all the way down to the beach.

"We found her early the next morning, shortly after the home figured out that she had escaped and called to say they had discovered she was missing. When we found her...well, she was lying there, still as could be. But the thing about it, Mr. Williams. Well, when we got to her, all I could see was her smile. And it was so similar to the one that my own mother had when I woke up next to her lifeless body. It was such a long time ago, but I'll never forget my mother's smile. The Senator's mother...well, she had that same smile. And I knew she was at peace. I truly believe that before she died, she knew what she was doing, somehow experienced clarity of mind, immensely enjoyed being in a place she had loved so much - for one last time.

"But the oddest thing about her death was how we found her. Curled up on her side. No clothes, naked as the day she was born. In fact that's how we spotted the beginning of the trail where she entered the beach. She had begun removing garments on Key View Lane. Started peeling them off right in front of this house. Dropped them every fifteen, twenty feet or so. First her sweater. Then the nightgown. Her slippers were the last things she removed. They just sat there at the break between the vegetation on land and the sand at the beginning of the

trail down to the beach, just sat there - right at the defining line, right at the sand's edge. Next to each other they were. Seemed to us she had carefully placed them there, right before she stepped onto the sand and headed towards the water."

"Had she drowned?"

"No sir, she didn't. That's what was really odd about it. We could tell she'd been swimming, but she didn't drown. Had always been a good swimmer. Guess that's one thing she didn't forget. You know, the Alzheimers? I guess maybe it's kind of like riding a bike. Anyway, when we found her lying there, she still had droplets of water clinging to her hair. I told you we found her nude?"

George nodded his head.

"Well, you'd think it would be a strange sight for a grown man to find his mother in the all-together - right there on the beach. But it wasn't strange to him. Or to any of us. She was beautiful. Yeah, she was old. Her breasts had sagged, the supple curves were gone and she was wrinkled from head to toe. It was a little old lady's body. There was no mistaking that. But it was what she had done after she came out of the water that made her look so remarkably beautiful. We could see her

footprints going towards the water and then coming back onto the shore.

"Well, after she came out of the water and had walked back up onto the beach, she laid down in the sand. We could plainly see where she had done it, where she rolled around in the sand until she was completely covered. And when we found her, well sir, the only part of her body that was free from the white crystalline granules was her face.

"Then, we could see that she got up, walked further along the shoreline and finally laid down. Came to rest in the spot where she died. But, before she died, she did something remarkable. Something that we would do when we were kids. Something just like what us island kids heard that our northern counterparts did in the snow. You see, sir, she laid down on her back and she made an angel in the sand."

"She made an angel in the sand? Well, I'll be. Back up north we call them snow angels."

"And down here we call them sand angels. But she didn't die on her back after she made her sand angel. Instead, she was curled in the middle of her "angel," and was lying on her left side, her head resting on her hands. And her hands, they were

clasped together, in a prayer-like position, lying under the left side of her cheek.

"When the paramedics arrived and put her on a stretcher to take her to the morgue, her hands moved apart and out dropped her locket. Inside we found photos of her and The Senator's father on their wedding day. Young, beautiful and happy. And there it was again."

"What? What was there again?"

"That smile. That same sweet, innocent smile as the one that graced her face at the very moment which she died. The smile that reminded me so much of my own mother's smile just before she left this earth. Well, sir, that same smile that was on the old woman's face, it had been captured in the photo of her young face, on her wedding day, as she looked up into the eyes of her new husband.

"Anyway, Mr. Williams, that was just last summer. Her will was read in the fall, and that's when Holland House Three was put into The Senator's name. And it was the first time in three generations that this house was not destined to be in a woman's name. The first time in three generations that any of their houses would not be in the wife's name."

#

George had been mesmerized throughout Mr. Cordelay's storytelling. Yet, because of his research earlier in the day he was privy to one detail that had been left out - The Senator didn't keep the house in his name after his mother's will was read. Instead, he transferred it to Julie. If George had to guess, he would have bet that none of the stateside properties had ever been deeded in The Senator's name either, most likely they were always in Annie's name. She probably already owned everything that he had just willed to her - but something told George that she probably didn't even know.

It was getting late and it was already dark. Mr. Cordelay apologized for not being able to entertain George for dinner, but he had other plans and needed to get ready for the evening. He called George a cab because the only mode of transportation he had at Holland House Three was the moped George had seen earlier in the day, the one parked alongside the front steps to the house.

When the cab came, they said their good-byes. They had already made tentative plans to get together the next day. Mr. Cordelay promised to give George a proper Key West tour - in a cab, not on the back of his bike. It would be a tour that

George had been anticipating for a long, long time because Mr. Cordelay promised it would include Papa's house.

#

When George returned to the B&B, he was exhausted and couldn't even think about going out to eat. His hosts inquired whether they could make him an evening reservation at their favorite café, but he declined - thanked them profusely, told them he was just too tired to make his way there and back. He said he'd try their recommended eating-place on another night of his stay. Besides, after spending just about all day in the company of Mr. Cordelay, he really didn't feel like going out and eating alone.

Just as George was getting settled, beginning to write up some notes about the extraordinary day he had just spent at Holland House Three, he heard a timid knock at his door. When George opened the door, he found a tray at his feet, complete with a gardenia in a vase. Turkey sandwich. Bottle of cola. A fresh fruit plate. Brownie for dessert. Nobody was waiting in the hall to see if he had come to the door, opened it and discovered the tray.

George ate, put the vase on his bedside table where he could take in the heavenly scent of gardenia as he slept. He

placed the tray back into the corridor, right in front of the door, just where he found it. Within five minutes, George heard footsteps that stopped in front of his room, paused, then returned downstairs. What true southern hospitality! If there was ever going to be a next trip to Key West, George would be sure to return to the same B&B. He made a mental note to definitely recommend this place to anyone I know who might want to travel to the Keys!

Chapter 24

PAPA'S HOUSE

True to his word, Mr. Cordelay met George at the B&B the next morning, punctually at ten o'clock, right on the dot. George was as excited as a little kid. He had always dreamed of visiting Hemingway's Florida home, but never before had an opportunity to travel to Key West. It was hard for George to believe he was still in the United States. It felt as though he was really on a tropical island belonging to a foreign Caribbean country. For a split second, he envied The Senator and Charles Cordelay for having been privileged to spend some, if not all, of their childhood on such a beautiful, carefree island.

The old newspaperman and his ponytailed guide toured around in a cab that Mr. Cordelay had rented for the morning. It was a great way to have a personalized tour of the island, as Mr. Cordelay was able to ignore the driving, he completely threw himself into recanting stories, legends and facts about his island home.

The island is roughly four miles long by two miles wide, so by the time they had finished their tour it was close to noon. The only destination remaining on their agenda was Hemingway's house. But, before they visited that landmark, the two men decided to grab a bite to eat. They found an outdoor restaurant with lots of hanging baskets and ornate cages with tropical birds scattered throughout the grounds. The weather was perfect. George couldn't imagine wanting to eat anywhere but outside.

The host seated the two men in a small white gazebo right in the center of the property. Mr. Cordelay took the liberty of ordering for both of them. A short time later the waiter returned with two large, frosted glasses filled with an unnamed, cool, refreshing non-alcoholic concoction. Each glass was topped off with a wedge of lime and a slice of fresh pineapple hugging its rim.

Lunch went quickly. They dined on conch salad and fresh croissants, then topped the meal off with mango ice cream served in small silver dishes. When he finished his meal, George picked up the linen napkin from his lap, wiped off his mouth, placed it on the table and said with a smile, "I'm in heaven! The only other thing that'll make my day complete is my long anticipated visit to Papa's island abode."

#

The house was a short walk from the restaurant - not too much of a hike for an old guy like George. They were there before he knew it. The place looked just like its photos, just as he had imagined. He had read so much about it, felt as though he knew it like the back of his hand.

A desk here, a picture on the wall there - everything was just as the images he had seen in books and documentaries. George was not disappointed. When they finished their tour, they exited the house and entered the garden. As decorators prepared the grounds for an upcoming weekend wedding, the caretaker was in the process of rounding up the many descendants of Hemingway's famous polydactyl cats - cats with extra toes. George noticed a few of the cats with extra toes. They appeared to be wearing mittens. Others didn't seem to have any extra

toes at all. George was reminded of the children's poem about the three little kittens who lost their mittens.

Rather than meander through the gardens and get in the way of the "cat roundup," they briefly walked around and then stopped by the gift shop before they left. George picked up a few trinkets for the grandkids, a journal for Sammy and a book about Hemingway's home for him and the wife. It would be a great read for George and a handsome coffee table book for everyone else. When he had his purchases rung up, he commented to the cashier - a nice lady with bluish hair - that the caretaker seemed to be having a "heck of a time gathering together all those cats." She reminded George that the Ernest Hemingway Home and Museum is home to approximately sixty cats.

Their visit to Papa's house was complete, they grabbed another cab and Mr. Cordelay dropped George off at the B&B before he headed back to Holland House Three. George watched the cab, with Charles Cordelay grinning and waving furiously from the back window, as it disappeared around the corner. And that was the last George saw of his new friend before traveling back to the mainland early the next morning.

#

George had lots to tell Sammy and lots of great memories for himself. Too bad Maxie didn't send him on jaunts like this when he was still on The Details' payroll. But, to Maxie's credit, he had picked up the entire tab for this trip.

Good old Maxie! George thought, he gave me a chance to once again experience the thrill of being an investigative reporter. Who knows? At my age it could be the last time, but I sure had a ball while it lasted!

Chapter 25

IN THE BEGINNING

It didn't take long before Sammy spotted George's white Sun Devils cap with its Sparky logo among the other passengers' bobbing heads as they descended the ramp leading from the plane to the runway. Allentown's airport is midsize, somewhat sophisticated. Yet, like some smaller airports, many of its incoming flights don't hook up to the terminal with connecting walkways, but simply deplane passengers on the tarmac. No trams, no vast crowded rooms to quickly and cautiously maneuver through. It's an easy airport to navigate and not so large that people are compelled to appear as though they know where they're

going. It is small enough that no one has to anxiously act as if they have been in the terminal a hundred times before when, in reality, they might have just entered for the first time.

George and Sammy hadn't talked since before he took off for Key West and, just like George, instead of calling or faxing or e-mailing, he sent Sammy a cryptic note that only arrived in yesterday's office mail:

Will be arriving at ABE on Delta Flight 326.

This Saturday. ETA - 14:23. Make sure you bring a company car. That old clunker you insist on driving just won't cut it!

Love, George

Sammy had no idea what George was up to. She cleared it with Maxie, left her "old clunker" in the company parking deck, signed out one of The Details' newer models, then took off to meet Delta Flight 326.

Sammy was ecstatic. She missed George and it was great to see him again after all these years. Once they hugged and said their "hellos," they walked to her car for the short ride into town and to her apartment. She had it all worked out. George

could stay in the spare room until he was ready to return back home to the "land of the red rocks." At least that's what she thought they were doing and where she assumed they were going. Unbeknownst to her, George had other plans.

"Don't worry, kid. I cleared it with Maxie. He knows you're with me. Knows you'll be gone for a few days. Even arranged for your landlady to feed the cat."

"But, I..."

"Nope, no buts. And don't even try to tell me you have to go home to pack a few things. Everyone at The Details knows you keep an overnight bag in your trunk, all packed and ready for quick getaways!"

She should have known he had an ulterior motive for asking her to pick him up in one of The Details' company cars. Her first impulse was to be really angry because George and Maxie had secretly worked out some sort of arrangement for her time, especially on a weekend that she hadn't been scheduled to work. But Sammy didn't get angry. George was right about her habits, and the bag in the trunk was there, just as he knew it would be. Sammy had taken it out of her car and thrown it into the trunk of the company car just before she left The Details' parking deck. The bag contained a few T-shirts, a sweater, a pair of

jeans, pajamas, sneakers and toiletries. She even kept a skirt, blouse and a pair of flats in the bag - just in case she had to appear "professional."

#

Rather than head in the direction of home - which would have meant turning west on Route 22 - they turned east and headed toward the Delaware River and New Jersey. George chatted about his family, the grandkids, Sedona, the Sun Devils, everything except what he had traveled all the way to Pennsylvania to discuss. Sammy was anxious to learn what George discovered while visiting Key West. But, she knew better than to rush him. He'd get to it in his own time. Since he had mentioned they'd be gone a few days, she was sure he would have plenty of time to get to the point.

They crossed the Delaware. Once in New Jersey, George instructed her to take Route 78 to the Garden State Parkway. When they reached the Parkway, he told her to head north, and when the sign announcing the exit for Montclair appeared, George told Sammy to exit the highway. In Montclair he guided her to a suites hotel where he had reserved a two-bedroom, two-bathroom unit for the night. At least she thought it was for a night. She really couldn't be sure. George still hadn't told her what

they were up to or where their final destination might be. Sammy sensed he wanted to get settled in for the night before his plans were up for discussion. And before he would get to the point.

#

They each claimed a bedroom into which they placed their respective belongings, freshened up, then left the hotel in search of dinner. On the recommendation of the front desk clerk, they made their way to a small Italian bistro, a cute little place just off the main drag. The tiny restaurant was an apparent favorite of the locals. It was packed.

Most of the evening was pretty predictable. Small talk. Drinks. Dinner. They finally returned to their hotel around 9:30. When they let themselves into their suite, George made a beeline to the kitchenette, pulled a bottle of White Zinfandel from the refrigerator and beckoned Sammy to take a seat at the small dinette set. It was finally time for them to talk. Now that the socializing was over, they were getting down to business.

Sammy didn't rush her old friend - even though she was quite curious about what he had found and why it was so important that it warranted all this secrecy. She knew from the

past that he would savor telling each bit of the story, which he had begun to compile from his research. George was always precise in his storytelling, always began at the beginning and always kept each piece a secret until its rightful place in the story.

Sammy was patient. Normally, she would want a storyteller to jump into the reason for the story. But this time, because the story involved her friends, she was willing to wait, to sit it out, to soak in all the details so that she, just as much as George, knew the hows, whens and whys of his story.

George told the story at his own speed and at his own pace. Sammy listened, and waited, knowing it would all come together. She knew she would eventually find out why he was compelled to come to the East Coast to explain what he found in Key West. Sammy knew she would discover why he had literally (along with her boss' help) kidnapped her from her life and then whisked her out of state to accompany him to New Jersey.

George didn't begin by telling Sammy about his visit to Key West. Instead, he told her that this wasn't the first time he had paid a visit to this part of New Jersey. It turned out he had visited the area just before he took off for the Keys. The thorough researcher, George knew exactly where he was taking

her. He had already done his homework and was now ready to divulge what he had learned.

George began his tutorial by explaining a little of Montclair's history. He had learned that many of the wealthy Victorian-era industrialists from New York City fell in love with the clean New Jersey countryside and the small hamlet of Montclair. When the opportunity arose, many of them chose the tiny town as the location in which they would build their country homes. They knew first-hand that Montclair was a great place to vacation, was a wonderful place to watch their children play. Their overindulged wives thrived and were happy, while breathing in the clean air and enjoying the pretty countryside.

As Montclair's popularity rose, its town fathers enticed representatives from various train lines to visit, welcomed them, gave them the royal treatment and invited them to build a station in their little "berg." The seduction was a success, and the railroads quickly began to set tracks in the direction of Montclair. Trains made travel more accessible and, ultimately, made Montclair more appealing to wealthy New Yorkers who were already enchanted with Montclair as a summer retreat.

It was an easy train ride from New York. Montclair became popular with its visitors, and real estate investments grew

quickly. Weekend and summer getaway cottages eventually expanded into permanent homes. The growing ease for people to reach the little town of Montclair, coupled with its popularity as a country vacation destination, soon segued into an easy, daily commute back and forth from New York City.

George told Sammy that his interest in Montclair, why he had brought her to the New Jersey town, was because it was where the story of The Senator and Julie had begun - when they were young boys playing among the mansions their grandfathers built in the first quarter of the twentieth century.

"Both were from wealthy families. Both were from good families. And the two men grew up only a short drive from where we're staying."

George had researched old Montclair newspapers and, in doing so, he discovered Julie's paternal grandfather had made his wealth in the textile business.

"Julie's grandfather, Sol, was a first generation American, the only son of immigrant Jews. He had grown up in the tenements of New York's Lower East Side. They weren't a religious family, but a close-knit, hardworking family. His immigrant father worked as a butcher in the city's stockyards, a skill he'd learned while working for his own father in Prague.

Sol's mother took in mending and eventually began a small tailoring business out of their small, cramped, one bedroom apartment.

"Sol studied hard but never made it past the 9th grade. His parents had hoped he could continue in school, but that wasn't possible because they needed Sol to contribute to the family's income and help pay their bills. After dropping out of school, Sol became an apprentice to the Lower East Side's most successful ragman. As a boy, he helped the old man by running errands and using his youthful strength to push the ragman's cart from street to street, from customer to customer.

"Sol was a smart boy who usually picked things up on his first try and he remembered everything. After a couple of years, the old ragman retired. By this time Sol knew the rag business inside and out. He had saved a little money of his own and was able to buy the cart. And the rags.

"Meanwhile, Sol had become a strong, handsome young man with an engaging smile. And let me tell you, kid, from what I read, he had a real knack for selling cloth to all the neighborhood women and their teenage daughters. With that humble start, Sol's business and experience grew. He eventually graduated from the rag business, to building one of the most

lucrative textile factories of his time. Just across the river in Hoboken.

"And when he met a young woman who caught his fancy, and captured his heart, he took Julia Goldman as his bride. But they didn't settle in Hoboken, rather in what was then the countryside."

Sammy knew where George was going, but before she could say a word, he kept telling his story.

"You guessed it," George nodded in affirmation, "in the little town of Montclair.

"And it was there that Sol and Julia raised a family and continued to live until death-us-do-part.

George picked up his wineglass from the table and took a long sip before he continued his story.

"Now, The Senator. His grandfather, like Julie's grandfather, was also a hard-working immigrant.

"He was a man who had begun with meager earnings, yet managed to budget his income and make wise business choices that enabled him to save enough so that his son, The Senator's father, could go to a good college. So that his son would become an educated man. Hard work paid off, and the grandfather did all right for himself - and his family. He was a naturally

astute businessman who early in his career took a calculated risk by investing in real estate. The Senator's grandfather innately knew that real estate was the way to make his fortune. He began by picking up a few small properties way down on Canal Street. On the East Side - over near the Hudson River. Properties nobody wanted. Ones people were willing to give away for a small price.

"He built a reputation as an honest, fair landlord. He always kept his places up real nice - so he always had tenants who paid on time and took good care of the properties they rented from him. And it was because of his reputation as a fair and honest landlord that he never had trouble renting out any of his properties. He was a simple man who made an honest, dependable, living - which more than adequately supported his happy family.

"There was no way The Senator's grandfather could have envisioned or perceived he would ever turn those meager income-producing properties into an overnight fortune. But he did.

"In 1924 his modest, simple, properties quickly became a virtual gold mine. That was the year the City of New York decided to buy up land near the Hudson. So that they could develop an entrance for the Holland Tunnel. The Tunnel had been

designed and was scheduled to open in 1927. As luck would have it, The Senator's grandfather's impeccably cared-for properties just happened to be on the precise piece of land the city wished to purchase. And New York was willing to pay him a good price too, to get its "hands" on his coveted piece of property situated just at the edge of the Hudson River.

"With a sizeable fortune from that land sale, The Senator's grandfather, just like Julie's grandfather, moved his family across the river to New Jersey and temporarily settled down in an apartment in Newark. They commissioned some famous architect of the day - I don't remember the guy's name - to design their dream home. They only lived in Newark long enough for the house to be built. In the simple country town of Montclair.

"In those days Montclair was a weekend retreat for only the wealthy, so it was a place The Senator's ancestors never dreamed they could afford. But with their newfound wealth, they were drawn to the affluent community. And they chose to build their home in one of the town's newest, prestigious and undeniably beautiful neighborhoods.

"So, you see, kid, Julie's family enjoyed the rewards from their textile business. And The Senator's family's wealth was completely due to his grandfather's dumb luck at picking

properties. Properties that were simply in the right place, at the right time. And they both ended up right here. In Montclair. And living in the same neighborhood."

#

George clued Sammy in on his plans for the next day - they would drive around, check out The Senator's and Julie's old neighborhood. Empty wineglasses were placed into the sink, each bid the other "good night," and they retired to their respective rooms.

What Sammy doesn't yet know, George thought as he closed his bedroom door behind him, is I'm pretty sure I've discovered something that would be enough to knock the wind out of half the people in D.C. - and force them to quickly sit down on their big political asses!

Chapter 26

MONTCLAIR

The next morning, after the obligatory continental breakfast in the hotel's lounge, George and Sammy checked out and took off to visit the mansion district of Upper Montclair. It was located in an area that surrounds, and includes, New Jersey's Montclair State University. They parked the car in a visitor lot at the University, then strolled among stately mansions and, what the tourist brochures rightfully claimed to be, "charming parks."

The Senator's family home was easy to find. It was one of the largest of the grand mansions on the main road. Covered

with ivy, the brick building was accessed by a circular drive that entered and exited the property through immense, padlocked, iron gates. The three-tiered fountain in the center of the circle was flowing gently, surrounded by pink impatiens that encircled the gurgling fountain like a pretty, tulle tutu.

Julie's was a little bit harder to find, but George knew exactly where it was. Smaller than The Senator's family home, yet still of mansion proportions, it was unmistakably done in the style of Frank Lloyd Wright, if not actually by the man himself. Most of the lower level windows had been changed to clear, contemporary, easy-to-clean glass. But, still remaining on the upper floor were the original and undeniably Wright signature windows that were configured from geometric stained glass. Horizontal lines, about four inches from the top and bottom of each pane, were done in a sage green. Vertical lines of golden yellow ran up the side of each window and symmetrically bisected the green horizontals. The vertical lines, set about four inches into the glass, gave a criss-cross effect of green with gold at each corner of the glass panes. Finally, a small, almost inconspicuous, yet highly detectable red square, the "signature" of the master himself, was placed

exactly halfway up (or down) in the middle of each window - in the center of each vertical gold line.

The entrance to the house was not quite as formal as the one to the home that The Senator's family had built. There were no large gates and no fence, just a sprawling lawn that ran from the front steps right up to the edge of the sidewalk. George and Sammy walked along, passed about five or six other large, magnificent homes and took the opportunity to enjoy their mansion "tour."

As they turned to go back to the car, Sammy could see the top of The Senator's house peeking over the trees. Until then she hadn't realized that The Senator's and Julie's childhood homes were situated on slightly adjoining properties. And one corner of each touched the other. But because of the sheer size of each property, the homes were not really close to one another.

She stopped in her tracks and stared at the homes, imagining how the two little boys had traveled back and forth from one yard to another. Playing. Becoming fast friends. Planning their futures.

George was grinning at Sammy as she took in her surroundings. Entranced and captivated, she stared at the homes

rising from their lush, green surroundings. George had showed Sammy where two little boys found each other as companions. Where their friendship had begun. And where they played and ran in a neighborhood of towering, vast houses and pristine sprawling lawns.

Before Sammy knew it, she and George had arrived back at the car. And then they were off on the next segment of their journey. To where? She had no idea.

Chapter 27

DEAL

As they left Montclair George instructed Sammy to head back to the Garden State Parkway.

"Drive south," he said. Still secretive, George would not tell her where they were going or what their destination was to be, only that he'd let her know when it was time to exit the highway and approach their next stop.

Sammy passed the exit for Route 78, the one she would have taken if they had been headed back to Pennsylvania. Sammy had lots of memories from growing up in Jersey and they popping up as she traveled south on the Parkway. They went by the exits

for Garfield, Clark and Woodbridge. Sammy remembered a catchy tune she heard a few years back at a folk festival. Written by one of her favorite Jersey musicians, David Kleiner, it was a cute play on words about the very same Parkway exits she had just driven by.

They crossed the Parkway's Driscoll Bridge over the Raritan River. More memories. The old Route 9 Edison Bridge, the same bridge that was used for the "fatal" car crash in the film Eddie & the Cruisers, was to their left, on the east.

Because it was a somewhat cool day, certainly not a typical beach day, the sparse traffic made for easy driving down the Parkway. The Arts Center (now named after one bank or another) posted signs luring patrons to buy tickets to its season's entertainment.

George and Sammy continued on their drive in silence. She was thinking. He was resting - just looking out the window, occasionally checking the map he had folded into a long, thin accordion now resting on his lap. When the roadside signs indicated they were approaching Exit 102 for Asbury Park, George startled Sammy out of her quiet concentration. She was so lost in her thoughts, he had to repeat "we're getting off at the next exit" a number of times. When she finally heard him, they were

quickly approaching the exit, and she had just enough time and space to maneuver the car into the exit lane. Luckily, there were no cars behind her.

"So, George, Asbury Park is it?"

"Yup."

"Yup? Is that it, all you have to say? Yup? Come on George...pleeese..."

"Pleeese...George, pleeese...give me a hint..."

She didn't catch herself until it was too late. She had whined. Sammy hated whiners and became annoyed when she found herself using that particular pattern of speech.

George said nothing, just looked straight ahead.

"C'mon George! Where exactly are you taking me today?"

But George just smiled and gave Sammy a quick pat on her right shoulder.

"Soon, kid, soon. And you can cut out the whining. We're almost there."

She grimaced, annoyed that she had whined, but even more ticked off that he had caught her in a whine. But George knew her long enough to know she was only whining out of frustration. Because she was anxious to learn why and where he was taking her.

Sammy knew they were getting close to Asbury Park because they were heading right into her old stomping grounds - and more memories. She hadn't been back to Asbury Park in years, probably not since she was in her early twenties. Sammy had heard the old place was run-down and had become pretty seedy. But she had never taken the time to go back. To check it out for herself.

#

Sammy's mind drifted into her past, remembering her teen years when, on weekends, she used to get a ride down to the shore with the neighbor's kids. After a day spent baking in the sun, they would ultimately end up at The Stone Pony. Even back then, most of the town was pretty quiet. But not The Stone Pony. The place was always alive with fresh, new talent. All hoping to make it big. And then, one finally did.

Sammy was one of thousands of Jersey kids who had seen him before he became famous. Before anybody would have thought to get his autograph, or have a photo taken with him or, for that matter, the rest of his band. Bruce and his band were friends who joined together and all made it big. And it all began at the small and intimate Stone Pony.

While Sammy sat at one of the café tables in front of the small stage inside the Pony and watched the band, the young men probably only dreamed and hoped for the fame and fortune that she was sure they would find. Yeah! Those were the days, Sammy thought, when I partied with Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band.

The Pony was a place where, if you planned it right, you could brush elbows with Bruce or Max or Clarence or Stevie while they took a break at the bar. Before she and the other fans knew it, the group had catapulted out of playing at the Pony in Asbury Park and landed right in the middle of the spotlight. The small band from New Jersey toured the country and then toured the world.

New Jersey's homegrown band had made it big. They even played on the opening night of New Jersey's Meadowlands Arena. Their lives became public property. Their marriages, divorces and babies all became front-page news for the tabloids.

The band members grew older, became actors, became recluses and became solo performers. Still, after all these years, Sammy couldn't separate Bruce Springsteen from the E Street Band. She knew she was lucky enough to have seen them before they made

their mark on the rest of the world, when they were only "want-to-be's" in a small, unknown little band from New Jersey.

#

Sammy and George headed east from the Parkway, toward the shore. They passed under Route 18, then followed Asbury Avenue straight into Asbury Park. As far as they could go. Right to the edge of the Jersey shore.

What they found was not even close to being a shadow of the Asbury Park that had flourished from the turn of the century until the late sixties. It was a virtual ghost town. And Sammy though it felt scary. It made her want to lock the doors, to have her cell phone at hand so she could immediately dial 9-1-1. But she resisted the urge, didn't lock the doors and didn't grab for her phone. Because, without a doubt in her mind, she knew she and George were the only ones around. Theirs was the only car driving on the desolate streets that had once belonged to the grand lady of the Jersey shore. The only activity she could observe was a slight breeze in the air and, at the gentlest provocation, an occasional piece of dirty, raggedy paper would flutter in the air or drift across the road.

When Asbury Avenue reached the boardwalk, it made a sharp left turn and headed north. The old carousel building, at the

intersection of the boardwalk and Asbury Avenue, looked run down, abandoned and seedy - but not unsalvageable. Once Sammy turned north, they traveled parallel to the boardwalk through the skeletal remains of the silent dinosaur by the sea. Glass windows were dirty and broken or boarded up. They drove about halfway through Asbury Park before they reached the intersection where The Stone Pony continued to claim its place across from the boardwalk. It was the only building with any neon lights and, although they weren't turned on, the sight of them gave Sammy just a glimmer of hope that there may actually be people hiding behind the façade of the deserted town.

Encouraged by the neon lights of The Stone Pony, Sammy thought perhaps old Asbury Park wasn't as dead, or dying, as it seemed. Rumor was there had been a slow influx of New York's gay community filtering into town. They were buying old houses, renovating them, making patches of neighborhoods respectable once again. It would take time, but Sammy knew revitalization would eventually make its way to the boardwalk and the dilapidated old business district just to its west.

She often thought that would be the way for her to get a shore house. She could buy a rundown house, fix it up. Encourage her friends to do the same. She figured real estate

was probably about as cheap as it would ever be in this tarnished old gem by the sea. That's the same conclusion the town's new homeowners had reached. It certainly beat the alternative of six figure prices on homes further south on the Jersey shore, or way out on Long Island's Fire Island or Montauk Point.

As they drove along, Sammy and George could see that the Convention Hall, the public bathhouses, the Casino (not a gambling casino, but a place for games of chance, Skeeball and other carnival games) were all deserted. It felt spooky to Sammy. The only other sign of life they saw that day in Asbury Park was birds, not just seagulls, but pigeons which, just like their human counterparts, had been drawn from the big cities to the seaside and the fresh saltwater air.

Sammy and George opened their windows to share the air with the birds. It was a beautiful day. The sun was shining, the cool air refreshing. The ambiance was less than desirable, but Sammy took a deep breath and reminded herself that she was lucky to be spending a day driving alongside the Jersey shore - her old shore - while working "on the clock." They continued on, still going north along the boardwalk. By the time they reached the old Howard Johnson's Restaurant at the northern end of the

boardwalk, Sammy wasn't surprised that it had, at one point, changed names and was no longer part of the Howard Johnson's chain. The restaurant, where they could barely see chairs piled on top of tables through the dirty, gray film on the windows, was now just as seedy and run-down as the rest of the oceanside town.

As they approached Deal Lake they both marveled at the seeming mirage. There, on the other side of the lake, across from its broken and neglected neighbor of Asbury Park, was a thriving, elegant, exquisite and exclusive community. Driving over the bridge, they continued north for a few blocks on Ocean Avenue before George asked Sammy to pull over, down one of the side streets leading to the beach.

#

The houses were so majestic and awesome that, momentarily, Sammy wished she had been born into wealth - or stumbled onto some great stock market find. But the moment was fleeting, and Sammy quickly came back to reality, remembering she was a poor reporter who had been whisked away on assignment by her good old friend, George.

"Sam E, see that house at the end of the street...the one with the widow's walk? That's it. Right there. In that house. That's where The Senator spent most of his summers."

"Incredible! I knew he was from money. But to see this, to actually see where he lived in Montclair and now to see where he spent his summers too. This is amazing! Annie never mentioned. Never told me. Never..."

Sammy stopped short as she once again realized there was so much she didn't know about her friend and her friend's husband, or even Julie. Then it struck her...

"George, could it be possible that Annie didn't know? Didn't know about the family history, the house in Montclair, this house at the beach? How could Annie not know such fundamental things about her own husband? George, how could Annie not know?"

George didn't answer her questions. Instead, he directed Sammy to pull over, to park the car. As they walked toward the house, each of them let their imaginations run wild and fantasized about what it must be like to be among the wealthy living in mansions at the shore. Then they walked passed the house and onto the beach. It was a perfect, cool, sunny day - not a beach day, but a perfect day for walking. It was the kind

of day where Sammy just wanted to kick off her shoes, stroll along the beach and watch the white foam jaggedly edge the surf line before it slowly flowed down the glossy, wet sand back into the sea.

They walked along the shore for at least a mile. Even though they were on assignment, they had lots of catching up to do, enjoyed each other's company and - for a while - just took in a beautiful day on a deserted beach. Each in the company of a good old friend.

Before they knew it, the squawking of the gulls had subsided, and the sun began to go down over the houses to the west of the shore. They walked back to the car on The Senator's still deserted and beautiful street - a daydream away from Sammy's reporter's wages.

The two old friends were exhausted from the sun, the sea air, from running after a story and from the exhilaration of the chase. George suggested they drive north along the coast on Ocean Drive. Starving, they reached Long Branch and were happy to find that The Windmill was still there and was open for business. A quaint restaurant, the building had been designed to look just like its name indicated - a windmill. The specialty of the house? Hot dogs.

Sammy and George each ordered two dogs "with the works," then carried their order from the counter and climbed the circular stairs to sit on the rooftop porch. There, on top of the Windmill, they ate silently and drank their sodas in between mouthfuls of spicy "dogs" loaded with sauerkraut, mustard, onions and relish.

After eating, they returned to the car and headed west toward the Parkway. George had figured the day would be tiring and, leave it to him, had made reservations at another chain of suites hotels, just east of Parkway entrance #105.

They didn't take time to talk on that night. Both wanted to retire to their respective rooms, get some rest and go to sleep. Sammy took a hot bath, then settled in for the night. But after lying in bed for some time, she realized her mind was racing with the past two days' discoveries. She was amazed to have learned she knew relatively little about The Senator's history, other than what she had been spoon-fed by his public relations people. It wasn't a surprise she knew nothing about Julie. He had always been "just" The Senator's friend, "just" Annie's friend. He was no one in particular that Sammy would have researched and, before now, she had no reason to have looked into his past.

It seemed logical that The Senator came from money. His appearance, his mannerisms, his elocution - all reflected culture and training that only money can buy. Julie, like The Senator, presented himself in an elegant, polished manner. But it had never crossed Sammy's mind that he was also the product of a privileged background. Julie was handsome, intelligent and well spoken. He didn't give an impression of wealth, only that he was a hard worker who was well compensated for his skills and services.

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Sammy began to scribble notes into her journal. She felt compelled to put all of yesterday's and today's discoveries down on paper before she forgot them. She had to write about her feelings and emotions, had to make sure she didn't forget one iota about the day she just spent with George and her amazement at what he had shown her.

So, they came from money. So, they lived in big houses.
So, they probably played with the rich and famous. So what?
Sammy thought. What George found really wasn't all that
surprising. But what is extraordinary is the fact that their
upbringings haven't before been discovered or exposed by anyone.
I'm not sure where he's going with all this, but George seems to

have latched onto something...something he wants to make sure I understand.

What was it? Sammy still didn't know, still had no clue. She still didn't know where George was going with all of this. After writing everything down, she decided she'd had all she could take for one night. She was finally tired enough to let her thoughts drift away so she could fall asleep. Sammy put away her journal, went to bed and quickly fell into the sound, restful kind of sleep that she always experienced following a day spent at the shore.

Chapter 28

BACK TO SCHOOL

George is a "need to know" type of guy who doesn't divulge or "go there" unless he deems the information timely or pertinent.

Sammy thought their tour was finished once they left New Jersey and drove west on 22, back into the Lehigh Valley. But as they came closer to her exit, George directed her to continue, to take the next exit and then head north toward Penn Allen College. Sammy knew the small, elite, private school at Allentown's northern boundary was where Annie met The Senator and Julie, where the three had become intertwined for the rest

of their lives. But what Sammy didn't know was that, with a little digging, George had found a perfect source of information to help them piece together the beginnings of the trio's decades-long relationship.

George had arranged for the two of them to stay overnight on campus. As Sammy drove the car through the gated entrance of Penn Allen's meticulously kept grounds, he had another surprise in store for her. Not only were they going to stay on campus, but they were going to stay in the dorm, actually in the very suite of rooms, where Julie and The Senator spent four years of their lives - the first two on their own and the last two with Annie.

They registered at the visitors' center in the administration building, were given their keys and then a young student guided them to the dorm where they were to spend the night. George had also arranged to secure an invitation for cocktails and dinner with Alexander Gilden, the president of Penn Allen College. He had also been promised one of President Gilden's staff members would give them a complete tour of the campus in the morning.

After they tossed their belongings into their newest quarters, freshened up and changed their clothes, they set out

to keep their dinner date. George quickly briefed Sammy while they walked on the brick path leading to President Gilden's campus home. In his typical "oh, by the way" manner, George told Sammy that Alexander Gilden was also an alumni of the college and had graduated in the same class as did The Senator and Julie.

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The home was stately and beautiful, built and decorated in a style appropriate for the home of a president at such an elite, private college. The hospitality they were shown was completely in keeping with the ambiance of the home. It was definitely an atmosphere that demanded formality. Cocktails were served in the solarium, dinner in the formal dining room, and dessert and coffee were taken in the library.

No one broached the topic of The Senator during dinner. It was only after they had finished eating, the dishes were cleared, and they adjourned to the library, that George began to ask their host any questions about his college days and The Senator.

George and Alexander Gilden did the talking. Sammy listened, taking everything in. For the most part, what she and George discovered wasn't earth shattering or unexpected. It was

pretty standard stuff about how The Senator, Julie and Annie spent their days on campus. What Sammy did learn was that Annie never graduated from college. Instead, right after her sophomore year, and just after his graduation, Annie and The Senator ran off to get married.

President Gilden hadn't been extremely close with the trio but he knew them well enough to recall The Senator and Annie had become serious about each other from almost the very first day they met. He told them she and The Senator, along with Julie, had been an inseparable trio - well-known on campus, well-respected and loved by everyone who knew them. President Gilden remembered that right after their graduation, the three of them drove somewhere down south, and The Senator and Annie had been married by a Justice of the Peace. It was the perfect fairy tale ending to a two-year campus romance.

President Gilden remembered they were only gone a day, then came right back to campus, packed up what little belongings they had left in their dorm and immediately moved into a house in the city. It was a house The Senator had purchased for Annie sometime during his junior year in college. He, Annie and Julie had spent weekends and college breaks renovating the house until it was finished and ready to move into as soon as The Senator

and Julie graduated. It was that property which established all of their permanent residencies in Allentown and enabled The Senator to register and run in that spring's state primary for a seat in Pennsylvania's House of Representatives.

President Gilden remembered that everything seemed to take off for the trio in a whirlwind sort of way. The Senator had been campaigning diligently all during the winter of his senior year. His engaging looks and charming demeanor won over most of the voters of Lehigh County. When he graduated in May, The Senator had already won April's primary and was ready to completely focus all of his attention on his campaign.

He won by a landslide in the fall, beating the older, time-tested, worn-out incumbent by seventy-five percent. The Senator and Annie kept the large Victorian twin house in the historic district so that, during those early years as a state representative, he was able to commute between Harrisburg and Allentown.

President Gilden told George and Sammy that he remembered The Senator did quite well in his quest to climb the state ladder of political success. He served a couple of terms as a state representative, then moved on to become state senator. As state senator, he served a few terms until he was ready to move

onto the national scene. By then, The Senator was thirty-seven years old and finally past the legal age required for his coveted and anticipated run for the U.S. Senate.

The president of Penn Allen College recalled The Senator's national political victory, like all the others before it, came with ease. He attained his goal at the earliest age possible and had done it with overwhelming support from his constituents.

Over the years, President Gilden had been intrigued with The Senator's political career and his effortless victories each election. He told George and Sammy that, after winning the U.S. seat, The Senator and Annie closed up the Allentown house and moved to Washington.

President Gilden sat back in his chair, re-lit his pipe and filled the room with small clouds of cherry-scented smoke. To Sammy, this nasty habit was the only disagreeable part of their entire evening's visit.

George then turned the conversation to Julie. He wondered what he was like in school and what the president knew about Julie's life after graduation. President Gilden seemed surprised, took in another puff of the fragrant pipe tobacco, leaned forward, rested the padded elbows of his tweed jacket on the arms of the big Queen Anne style chair and spoke to George.

"Don't you know? He stayed with them, lived in their Allentown house, traveled back and forth to Temple University to study law, from where he eventually received his Juris Doctor. Then, when The Senator won his first national election, Julie moved with them to Washington. While The Senator worked on Capitol Hill and Annie took care of their Georgetown home, Julie perfected his skill for research and worked as an associate professor for Georgetown University Law Center."

President Gilden took another puff from his pipe. Other than the nasty clouds of smoke, the tobacco's sweet, pungent odor had actually begun to grow on Sammy

"You know, George, I don't think The Senator, Julie and Annie ever parted company. They were always together. We used to tease them, tell them they were tighter-knit, closer than the characters created by Alexandre Dumas in The Three Musketeers. They lived together on campus, partied together, traveled together. We were all used to them, didn't think anything of it. So when Julie took off for D.C. at the same time as The Senator and Annie, well...it wasn't out of the ordinary and pretty much expected."

George shot Sammy a quick look. Nothing telling. No emotion. No surprise. Nothing. Just a look she couldn't

really "read" and didn't really comprehend. It was a look she needed to ask him about later - after they'd left their host's and gone back to the dorm.

Chapter 29

"THEIR" DORM

Sammy knew not to rush him. She let him get settled and waited until he was ready to talk. Then, when George finally indicated he wanted to sit down and review their travels from the past few days, Sammy had all she could do to sit calmly. She was anxious to hear what he had to say. Instinct told her there was something he was holding back.

It took a while as they talked about the two families - their migration to Montclair from New York City, the summer home in Deal, the friendship that had lasted a lifetime. Then George filled in a few more details he had not yet shared with Sammy.

"The Senator and Julie attended the same private boarding school somewhere in the Princeton area. The school burned down years ago, taking its records and memories with it into the ashes. I don't think it's worth the time and effort to pursue. The records simply aren't there. There's no point in trying to find the other men who had attended the private school. I suspect a search won't reveal anything more than what I've already discovered."

In all his research, his probing, George found not one person who had a bad thing to say about either The Senator or Julie. They were both from good, hardworking, successful families. They were honest and reliable. People they knew had always depended on them to "do the right thing," and their friends and acquaintances hadn't been disappointed. The Senator and Julie had gained peoples' respect because they were kind, honest people who truly always "did the right thing."

"So, kid, what exactly do you know about Annie?"

"Not much more than you do, George. Annie didn't come from wealth but had lived an idyllic childhood in a small town in a rural section of southwestern Pennsylvania. She came from good, honest folks."

There was no blight on any of their family backgrounds or reputations; that was no surprise to Sammy. Then George finally hit her with his big news. The news that Sammy's instinct had told her he was holding out on her.

"One thing," he told her, "that was so out of character for any member of the trio led me to believe there was an even deeper and completely unexpected element to their story than I had imagined. And then I found it in Key West."

"It's about time you said something to me, George! For a moment there, back at President Gilden's house...I thought you gave me a look...plus, well, I've been waiting for you to tell me about your trip to Florida."

"Okay, kid, hold your horses! It's like this. I was doing my research from home in Sedona...really couldn't find anything out of the ordinary on any of them - The Senator, Julie, Annie. So, kid, just when I thought I hadn't found anything but the Georgetown, Allentown and New Jersey properties - you call me. You had discovered it. The property in Key West. Now, that was intriguing!

"So anyway, kid, you telling me about the property...well, it made me get to thinking...what if everything wasn't really as it appeared. Why didn't I, or you, or anyone else for that

matter, find out or know about that property? What if one of them, or all of them, had something to hide? And why were they all hiding, or at least why did they all appear to be hiding, that property? So I asked myself...why would any of them have wanted to keep a desirable, or at least what I figured would be desirable, property a secret? Well, maybe it wasn't a secret, but it certainly didn't seem to be open for public information.

"Nothing...absolutely nothing that I ever read about The Senator mentioned, or gave any hint, of a property in Key West. So, when I went down there, I knew that I had to head straight to City Hall. And there I found it: a property that had been in The Senator's family since the late 1920's - not just any property, but one with beautiful, sprawling grounds and a grand old home. Sammy, can you believe it? God! His family...they were actually there at the very same time that Hemingway spent time in the Keys! They probably even rubbed elbows with him...he might have been a guest in their home!"

Sammy shot him a look. She knew all about his passion for Hemingway and, if she didn't put a stop to it, George would continue down that road and completely forget where he had been going before Hemingway sidetracked him and sent him off on a detour from the story she had been waiting so long to hear.

Her look made George pause, and he quickly realized he had begun to get caught up in his zeal for his favorite author. With a fleeting smile at Sammy, in recognition of her ability to get him back on track, George quickly returned to the topic at hand.

"Okay, okay, I know...I digress. Back to The Senator's property. You see, kid...I searched through all the property listings. Thought it would be a cinch, but it took more than half a day."

Then George gave her a sheepish grin.

"Outfoxed myself too, kid. Thought I'd find it fast because I used my old trick of starting with the Z's. You know...the way I like to work my way backward through the alphabet instead of starting with A? Well, this time...this time it worked against me. You see, kid, what I wanted to find was actually near the beginning of the alphabet.

"Anyway, it turned out that no one in City Hall was really familiar with The Senator or his property. You see, the property had simply been in his family for so long that they were able to blend in, not be noticed. Plus, the property is so far off the beaten path, if you didn't know it was there, you just wouldn't find it. Down a private road. Off by itself.

Nothing around but tropical paradise and a crystalline, white, sandy beach blending into the clear ocean water surrounding the Key."

"So, George? What's the catch? Lots of rich people buy property all over this country. Some even buy it on Key West. After seeing the other properties you and I looked at in the past couple of days, it doesn't surprise me that there was another property. And it even makes sense that a northeastern family would want to have a winter get-away as far south from the snow and ice as they could get - and still be in the States."

"I know Sammy, I know. But the kicker...when I finally found the property transaction listing for Key West...well, you see, kid, I didn't find it in The Senator's name. And I didn't find it in Annie's name. Because, kid...it was already in Julie's name."

"No! Get out! That must have been a mistake. How could that be? He just willed it to him. And I don't think anyone knew what was going to be in his will. In fact, Annie was even surprised that he actually had one. The Senator had never been one to think of his mortality."

Sammy took a moment to ponder the facts George just plopped in her lap.

"Are you sure George? Are you really sure it wasn't some kind of mistake? Some clerical error?"

"Yeah Sammy, I'm sure. Really sure. Even checked it out with the department that oversees the filing of the Key's deeds. You see, The Senator transferred the property to Julie when he was still alive. Back in November. Way back before he met his maker. The paperwork had The Senator's signature. Julie's signature. And...just like you, I found it to be really curious. Completely strange. We can be sure The Senator didn't know he was on his way out. Didn't plan for that car to hit him. So, I was understandably puzzled. And decided to go out to the house. Check things out for myself."

"So, did you, George? Did you actually see the property?"

"I did more than that, kid! I actually spent time in the house."

"No way! You didn't!"

George beamed at her, his blue eyes twinkling.

"I sure did! And it could almost be a twin to the house we just saw in Deal - even the widow's walk. Except for the colors...the veranda out back...the awnings...a little different

placement here and there. But it had the same general appearance in structure, a "signature" that it was designed by the same architect. But even better than seeing, than being in the actual house...well, brace yourself, kid...you're not going to believe this one...I actually got to be friends with the caretaker."

"No!"

"Yep, spent a day on the town with him too. He even took me to see Hemingway's house! We had a wonderful time. It was just like all the photos, all the descriptions I'd read. But this time...I was there! And I could touch and feel the same railings, the same doorknobs - got to see some of those polydactyl cats too. Sammy..I walked the same path...I breathed the same air as Hemingway!"

Sammy shot him another look.

"Okay, okay, you caught me again. I know, I know...I digress. I'll have to tell you all about that another time. Got you a souvenir too...don't let me forget to give it to you before I head back to Sedona. Anyway, Mr. Cordelay - that's his name - he's known The Senator all his life. And he actually grew up in that very same house on Key West."

Sammy's eyes grew wide with excitement.

"Yep, spent time with The Senator when they were both kids. He knows Julie pretty well too. Turns out that Julie's family also wintered on Key West - didn't have a home of their own. Always spent time at The Senator's house. Or at their club in the center of town. Anyway, the three boys spent a lot of days playing on the beach, sailing on the waters around Key West. Once The Senator had grown, his parents spent most of their time on the island, and they depended on Mr. Cordelay to help them take care of the place. After The Senator's parents died and the house passed down to The Senator, he just kept his friend on as the property's caretaker and official year-round resident."

Sammy was dumbfounded. She could only continue to stare at George with wide, questioning, almost disbelieving, eyes.

"Yep, kiddo, Mr. Cordelay has basically lived in that Key West house his whole life."

Sammy shot him another questioning look.

"Okay, kid...I'll explain. You see, his mother was their maid. And she was a woman with a romance story all her own. One I'll have to tell you when I've got some more time. Anyway, when she passed on - she was really young, and he was only nine - they just kept him there. He had nowhere else to go, and The Senator's family wasn't about to put the little tyke into an

orphanage. Even if they had wanted, they wouldn't have been able to - as there wasn't an orphanage to be found anywhere on Key West. They would have had to ship him up to the mainland. But he'd never been off the island and, as he tells it, they figured sending him away after he lost his mama would have been too much for him to take."

"So they decided to keep him on and raise him as their own?"

"Yep, that's exactly what they did. Tried to give him a normal life too. That's if you call leaving him behind in the Keys with their caretaker while they went back to Jersey in the summer normal, then that was normal for him. So, you see Sammy, even though The Senator was an only child, and Mr. Cordelay was an only child, circumstances brought the two of them together and enabled them to grow up as close as any two brothers I've ever met.

"And what a character he is Sammy! You should see him! Meet him too. I think you'd really like him. He's an intelligent, charming man who...well, who in some ways reminded me of a tanned pirate from the Caribbean with his long curly ponytail and a hoop in his ear."

It was then that Sammy remembered the day of The Senator's funeral, the cemetery...and the fleeting image of the distraught man who was conspicuously dressed with tropical flair. The man who didn't fit in with all the dignitaries and politicians. The man who waited for everyone else to leave before he could openly grieve by The Senator's grave. She quickly went from dumbfounded to animated.

"Oh my God! Wait a minute, George! Repeat that! What did this guy, this Mr. Cordelay, what did he look like?"

George described Charles Thomas Cordelay, and Sammy instinctively knew she was right - that he must be the same man from The Senator's funeral.

Sammy told George she was positive she had already seen him that day at the cemetery and how his presence had so intrigued her. She told him Julie and she were the only ones to have seen him there and how Julie's look had implored her to go no further, to just leave it alone. She told him how, with everything else on her mind, she had done just that - had left it alone, didn't give it a further thought, had put it to rest, actually completely forgotten about him - until now.

Chapter 30

THE TRIAL

It was shortly after Sammy's Jersey jaunt with George that Julie's day in court finally arrived. What Sammy found to be most unusual about the trial was the civility of the whole thing.

The surreal quality of all the players.

The politeness of the proceedings.

The calm manner with which each attorney interacted with the other.

The detached demeanor of the judge.

The emotionless faces of the jurors.

The crisp suits with the sharply creased seams.

The coifed hair.

The leather briefcases.

And the business-like impersonal air that permeated the courtroom.

Julie sat next to Schuyler, and the two of them looked very professional in their obviously expensive designer suits. Julie looked cool, calm and collected. If he was concerned, he didn't show it. He hid it well. His face was void of any signs that would have indicated otherwise.

The only modicum of emotion in the courtroom throughout the entire proceedings came from Annie who was seated directly behind Julie. With the passing of each day, of each week, Annie's face became more and more drawn and pale. It often lacked emotion. But every now and then, something would strike a chord within her. It would reach down, deep inside of her, then pull out the grief she had concealed from the world for all the months following The Senator's accident. At those times, tears would slowly trickle and slide, leaving wet tracks running down her cheeks. Her quiet sorrow had an overpowering effect of a silent scream, which was as audible in that courtroom as if she were sobbing loudly.

Annie had stayed by Julie's side throughout his whole ordeal - throughout their ordeal. If she was upset or angry with Julie, she didn't show it but continually remained his faithful friend. Although The Senator was gone, the bond he had with Annie and Julie held the two of them together like a strong epoxy. Inseparable, they needed each other to play through the hand they had been dealt. They relied on each other, not only for support, but also to ensure their memories of The Senator remained strong. In some strange way, by becoming closer, they kept him alive.

#

The trial dragged on. The days went by slowly. The D.A.'s case relied mostly on conjecture and supposition about what actually took place on the night of The Senator's accident. Unless Schuyler was holding some bit of information that would definitely win Julie's freedom, his case was no stronger than the D.A.'s. It appeared he was relying on the fact that the prosecution had no witnesses. Schuyler had argued that the dent in Julie's car was purely coincidental. He pointed out it could have come from a shopping cart in the parking lot of a local supermarket. He surmised it most likely came from some large bit of debris that flew through the air in the raging storm as

the car sat in The Grille's parking lot on the night of The Senator's accident.

The forensic specialists had gone over the car with tooth and comb but they had failed to find any hard evidence - of something, of anything - not even a smudge that would link the small dent in the fender to The Senator's accident. If there had been any evidence, it had most likely been eroded by the storm as it ferociously whipped its way through the Valley.

The District Attorney used the reverse of Schuyler's defense, pointing out that the tiny dent in the fender, although not actually fitting the form of The Senator's torso, was close enough to where he had deduced The Senator would have made impact. The District Attorney tried to make the case that the little dent should be enough for the jury to find Julie guilty of hit and run. If they found him guilty of hit and run, he was hoping they would find him guilty of manslaughter.

As the weeks went by, Sammy sat in the back of the courtroom. Although she was assigned to report on the case, she didn't want to appear to be overly interested. She sat far enough away to ensure Annie would not observe her taking copious notes, or see her try to sort out the facts and suppositions as

the words criss-crossed each other in the courtroom after being voiced by either the District Attorney or by Schuyler.

After about a week into the trial, a heatwave hit the Lehigh Valley and settled over it like a damp, wool blanket. Sammy found the courtroom unbearably hot, but it seemed to her that everyone else managed to act as though they had successfully eluded the heat. Although she was hot and uncomfortable, Sammy remained in the courtroom, unable to tear herself away, as she wanted to completely observe and take in everything.

On the third day of the intense heatwave, shortly after the trial had begun, the judge also reached his saturation point. The courtroom was so steamy he directed the maintenance staff to adjust the air conditioning in an attempt to counteract the unusually warm, waning days of September. Allentown had not experienced such heat since late summer. The air conditioning reached its limit and didn't seem to be able to cool the building. Sammy, along with everyone else at the trial, was getting hotter instead of cooler as the morning slowly moved in tandem with the second hand of the courtroom's clock. Sammy sat in the back, close to the door - just in case she needed to escape the stifling air in Courtroom Number Three. Sammy's spot

near the door was perfect for her. She was relieved to be out of Annie's field of vision.

#

The air conditioning never did relieve the courtroom's muggy heat. It became so unbearable that the judge finally stopped the proceedings and called a recess until the next day or until the air conditioning system was fixed.

"Whichever comes first," he said as he banged his gavel on the judge's stand. Then the judge rose and abruptly retreated to his chambers to tear off his robe and wipe the salty beads away from his brow.

Sammy emerged from the courthouse into the blinding sun, stopped and rested against one of the high, cool marble columns that flanked both sides of the steps. Her right hand held her briefcase and she shaded her eyes with her left hand, squinting to keep the scorching sun out of her vision while she surveyed the crowd for Annie. It didn't take Sammy very long to find her.

Annie was speaking quietly with Schuyler. They were sitting on a bench under the old oak tree in front of the courthouse, their heads bowed in intimate conversation. Julie's

hand rested on the back of the bench, just behind Annie. He was also part of the conversation, just not sitting down.

Sammy had planned to wait, wanted to offer Annie a ride home. She thought it would be a good way to spend some time with her. Except for seeing her from a distance at the trial, the two old friends hadn't spent any time together, and their paths were beginning to drift apart. Since the reading of The Senator's will late last spring, Sammy hadn't really seen Annie or had any real chance to talk with her. But Annie and the two men looked as though they were having an intense discussion. She didn't want to disturb them, so she got into her old car, but had no idea where she was going.

#

Sammy often found herself heading to the Rose Gardens when she had something on her mind. She wasn't surprised when she found her car independently driving in a mindless, automatic beeline toward the parking lot just behind the old red barn.

She still had her official "dress-up reporter shoes" on. It was a good thing she always carried her trusty overnight bag in the trunk because it included a grungy old pair of sneakers, which were just perfect for roaming around the Rose Gardens.

She smiled. Maxie and George can tease me about my get-away bag all they want. But when I need to change my shoes, or my clothes, or take off for a quick trip out of town, it's always there, waiting for me in the trunk of my old car.

It felt good to get out, stretch her legs and walk. Somehow the heat didn't seem as intensely uncomfortable in the park as it had been in Courtroom Number Three. The porous stucco walls of the courtroom seemed to have soaked up and retained the heat just as easily as living sponges - hand plucked by trained divers from their beds in the Florida Gulf off the shores of Tarpon Springs - would have quickly become saturated with moisture.

Sammy's walk through the familiar gardens took her in the direction of the series of small ponds hidden out of sight from the main road by an 18th century stone farmhouse. Her ultimate destination was the shaded bench at the side of her favorite pond - the kidney-shaped one with the sculpture of a bottle-shaped latticework basket. The sculpture had been artistically placed so that it would appear to be floating easily on the surface of the pond. The lily pads were more abundant than they had been in past years, and the water was very, very still. As light hit the surface of the pond, its contents, which appeared

to be lying easily on the water, were perfectly reflected in its mirrored surface.

Now, if only I had my camera...

Chapter 31

MIRROR, MIRROR

Julie entered his condo and headed straight to the air conditioner. He had turned it off before he left for the trial, and his home was almost as unbearably hot as the courtroom. He kept up the appearance of being cool and calm, but his suit was stifling and his tie was constricting. Julie took off his jacket, loosened the knot of his tie, unbuttoned his shirt and went into the bedroom to peel off the rest of his clothes as quickly as he could, then tossed them onto the bed.

Clad only in his boxers, Julie left the bedroom, headed toward the kitchen to pour himself a cold glass of tea from the

container in his refrigerator. Passing by the full-length mirror, Julie was oblivious to the image that reflected back. He was in perfect physical condition. His body was no less taut than the eighteen year-old boy he had not been for more than twenty years.

Julie leaned back on the sofa, rested his head against the wall, closed his eyes and listened to the soft jazz emanating from the disc that he had moments before inserted into his CD player. The room was cooling down, and Julie's temperature was stabilizing from the combination of air conditioning on the outside and iced tea on the inside. As Julie's temperate comfort zone stabilized, his thoughts turned to the trial. Actually, his thoughts never turned away from the trial. It was always with him - during the day in the courthouse, during the night in his dreams.

As far as he could tell, it was going exactly the way Schuyler had predicted it would. The prosecution didn't seem to have a case. Even though Julie still had no concrete recollection of the night of the accident, Schuyler had reassured him that, in the end, it really wouldn't matter. As long as he didn't have to refute any evidence brought forward by

the prosecution, Julie was in a good position and should soon be acquitted.

But it mattered to Julie. The fact that he didn't know, couldn't remember what had happened to his friend, was troubling and unsettling. His best friend was gone, and Julie had no clue whether he was really the one who should be held responsible. If Julie hadn't run his friend off the road, then who did?

Julie got up, switched the air conditioner to low, then turned to take his empty glass back to the kitchen. He hadn't noticed before, but his answering machine had a new message waiting for him.

"Hi. It's me. Just wanted to check in and make sure you're doing okay tonight. The heat got to me, so I'm going to take a cool shower and get to bed early. Not even hungry tonight. And I let Ellie go early. No point in her staying. I've got everything I need and didn't need her to fix anything for dinner. Well...I'll see you tomorrow. Schuyler said he's picking me up at eight. Said we'd pick you up after me. That is, unless the judge postpones because they don't get the air conditioning fixed. So...I guess I'll see you in the morning. Oh...I already said that, didn't I? Take care, love. Try to get a good night's rest. And Jules...I've got a feeling it's

almost over. Keep your chin up. We'll get through this. Just like everything else over the past couple of decades. We'll make it. Cause you know what, love? You and me...well, you and me - we're survivors. We both know that he wouldn't have wanted it any other way. I know, we haven't talked about him much lately...but he's always with us. You know he is. And as long as you and I stay together, as long as you and I are a team, well...then he's still with us. Still part of us. Still the third musketeer. Okay, okay, I know...I've said enough. I'm tired and I'm rambling. Night Jules. Sleep tight."

Annie. Good old Annie. I don't know what I would have done if she had deserted me during this whole ordeal. I don't know who, except Schuyler, would have stuck by my side and believed in me. God! If only The Senator were still around. He'd be so proud of Annie. She's grown so strong over the past ten months.

Julie was grateful that she was still his friend, that she still loved him.

Even though...Julie didn't want to think about the ramifications of "even though." He didn't want to go there. If he wasn't innocent then "even though" meant he was guilty. If he was guilty, he would never be able to live with himself,

would never be able to admit to anyone that being guilty meant he had destroyed his best friend, the person whom he had known longer than anyone else in his life. Being guilty would mean that Julie would probably lose his second oldest, dearest friend in the entire world, as Annie would probably hate him. If he lost Annie, then any connection he had left to The Senator would be completely gone.

Julie was exhausted. Although Annie's message gave him the reassurance of her intention to remain his true friend, he still felt an emptiness that had been there ever since he woke up in jail the day after The Senator's accident. Even though Annie was continually reassuring Julie in some way or another that she would be there, wouldn't abandon him, or blame him, Julie knew he would feel the emptiness left by the loss of The Senator for the rest of his life.

He walked down the hall to his bedroom, passing the mirror one more time. This time he caught his reflection and paused to stop and take a good look at his image staring back at him. Even though he would agree his body looked as good as it had when he was a kid, the face looking back was that of an older, experienced, more serious man - not a man who had years of expectation ahead of him. Instead it was the reflection of a

man who had probably achieved all of his goals and left the best years of his life behind him. Julie took a long, deep breath, nodded to the reflection that looked more like his father than himself, then retired to the bedroom for another restless night.

As Julie reached over and turned off the light, he paused and said out loud, "Good night Annie...and good night Senator."

Chapter 32

GETTING CLOSE TO THE FINISH LINE

The trial dragged on much longer than anyone had anticipated. But finally, the afternoon before court broke for Columbus Day weekend, both attorneys presented their summations to the jury. The jurors had not been sequestered for the trial, and a barely visible sigh of relief passed over their faces when the judge released them for the three-day weekend. He directed them to return to court the following Tuesday to commence with their deliberations.

Sammy tried to catch Annie's eye as she left with Julie, but the two of them were whisked out with Schuyler before she

could pack her bag and get out of the courtroom. Sammy rushed, but by the time she reached the front steps of the courthouse, their limousine was just easing away from the curb.

#

Sammy really needed a break and it was perfect for her that the trial was recessed for Columbus Day weekend. Even the weather cooperated and the next day she awoke early to a beautiful, sunny Saturday morning. A slight breeze was in the air. The temperature was not as hot as it had been during the previous week. It was a perfect fall day for Sammy to get away.

Sitting in the stuffy courtroom for long periods of time had taken its toll on Sammy - not just the heat and humidity, but also the stress. She found it excruciatingly hard to sit still for hours on end as courtroom protocol demanded. Except for George, she really didn't have anyone to talk with about the trial. Although Annie was her closest friend, Annie was so involved with Julie that she and Sammy had lost touch and stopped taking time to confide in each other. Sammy knew Annie needed her the night of the accident and when The Senator died. But as time passed, Annie had drifted from Sammy to Julie, and it became apparent that Julie needed Annie even more than Annie needed Sammy

The energy accumulated in Sammy's as each day in the courtroom passed had reached its capacity and lay dormant - waiting for its chance to escape. On this particular Saturday morning it was churning inside her, begging for release. She knew she needed to find a way to let it out, and she knew just how - and where. She flew into gear and took off for the bus station - just in time to make it onto the first bus that was headed to Manhattan.

Her regular jaunts to the park were always good for a quick fix, a quick get-away while she was still in Allentown. But running off to the big city was her way of really escaping and refreshing her spirit. New York was always a place where she could burn off the ball of energy now desperately begging to be released.

#

As the bus crawled down the ramp toward the tunnel, the shiny facade of the familiar skyline reflected the day's bright rays of sun back into the clear blue sky. Sammy was as excited as Dorothy had been at her first glimpse of the Emerald City. Although she had traveled into New York hundreds of times, each visit was just as titillating as her first. Each visit was pregnant with unlimited possibilities and new discoveries. To

Sammy, anything was possible in New York. In the back of her mind, she always hoped and expected that one day, like Dorothy in the Emerald City, she too would turn a corner and find her own "horse of many colors."

Sammy hadn't really planned her day much beyond getting into the city, but when she left Port Authority, without even thinking, she found herself headed toward Times Square and the **tkts** booth. Sammy wasn't surprised when she realized that, out of habit, she was walking into Times Square. She knew that's where she wanted to be because the theatre district was where she always liked to begin her New York adventures.

The line at the **tkts** booth was very long and Sammy decided not to wait. Besides, there was nothing she wanted to see during matinee time and if she wanted to see an evening show, she would have to wait until 3:00 p.m. to buy her ticket. Rather than wait, she pulled out her cell phone, dialed her favorite theatre in Greenwich Village and reserved a seat for the evening show. She loved the theatre - Broadway, Off-Broadway, Off-Off Broadway, local amateur productions. It didn't matter the venue; she was simply and completely hooked, a secret thespian at heart.

Her reservation made for the Off-Off Broadway show, Sammy took off toward lower Manhattan. Her plan was to keep walking as long as she wanted to, as long as she could, until taking some form of transportation became much more appealing than slowly wearing down the soles of her shoes. Time always passed quickly for her when she wandered around New York, taking in the sounds, the people - even the smells. Good or bad, they're still the smells of New York, and the city wouldn't be the same place without them.

Lost in her thoughts, Sammy walked from the **tkts** booth, through Times Square and then up 42nd Street. It was a beautiful day for walking, and it only seemed to take minutes before she found herself approaching the corner of 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue. When she turned the corner onto Fifth Avenue, she was directly in front of the New York Public Library's main entrance. The two massive concrete statues of Leo I and Leo II (as Sammy liked to call them) were stoically and eternally guarding each side of the wide steps leading up to the Library. Sammy hadn't been inside in ages, and within moments of realizing where she was, she found herself drawn up the stairs and inside the palatial portals of information and fantasy. To

Sammy, the building had always been, and will always be, an irresistible literary magnet.

She walked through the entrance, up another set of stairs and into the large, quiet and serene reading room. The smell of the library and its books brought Sammy back to her teen years and old memories of time spent going through volumes and volumes of old leather-bound books filled with fact, fiction, wisdom and fantasy. Mysterious, thought-provoking worlds were all hidden tightly between the bound, dusty, word-laden pages that had fueled Sammy's imagination and made her lust for the written word.

If you can begin to envision the immensity of information, power and beauty that can be found in the written words in all the volumes in the New York Public Library, then you can begin to discover who Sammy is. You can begin to understand how and why she was drawn to being an artist of the pen, a mistress of the keys, a writer to the core.

#

Sammy left the Library after almost an hour. She left behind the books, but took with her cherished memories of this day and all the others she had spent in the Library. Once she descended the steps, Sammy turned right and continued on her

trek toward Greenwich Village. It was a great day for walking and it didn't matter to her how much or how far she actually had to travel.

Sammy continued walking straight down Fifth Avenue toward lower Manhattan. As she approached Washington Square Park, the grand arch at the entrance to the park became larger and larger until it towered over her as she passed through it. The park was crowded, and Sammy wended her way around the other people who, similarly, were out enjoying a beautiful early fall day in New York. She found herself gravitating toward the circle in the center of the park, which is often used as an arena for aspiring artists from nearby NYU.

A crowd was gathered, sitting on the circular wall, their eyes focused on a young juggler wearing a top hat who had situated himself as the center of attraction in the middle of the ring. It was a good place for Sammy to stop and take a rest. She had walked a long way. Because she was enjoying her adventure, she hadn't noticed, until now, but her feet were getting tired and beginning to hurt. She needed to sit down, to rest, and was certain that the young juggler's routine would be a refreshing diversion.

Sammy spotted an opening among the "wall-sitters," took her seat and immediately became mesmerized by the performance that was now in full swing. She found the young juggler's charm and wit to be unexpected, delightful and entertaining. The atmosphere of the surrounding university permeated the air, lending its own excitement to the scenario unfolding all around her in the park that was so full of life. Besides the juggler and his audience, old men playing chess around the perimeter of the park moved their kings and pawns across checkered gameboards painted on concrete tabletops permanently mounted in place on cement columns. The sound of a flute drifted from the southern edge of the park, and a guitar joined in from the north near the base of the arch. The lyrical voices of the two instruments met in the air and blended smoothly together in an eclectic, lilting tune.

Families with young children, teenage skate boarders and at least half a dozen sets of young lovers were scattered around the park. College students, taking a break from their studies of the new term, were spending some quiet time on a beautiful, warm fall day. The young people were just beginning to celebrate a weekend away from classes and, just like the Shad that swim upstream in the Delaware River, as it grew dark they

would began to migrate with other students into the streets of Greenwich Village. There, they would follow the old collegiate leisure time tradition and keep one step ahead of officials as they, mostly under aged, sampled an array of concoctions and ales offered by the various taverns and pubs scattered throughout the Village.

As he skillfully juggled a trio of fire batons, the young man's performance reached its crescendo. It quickly came to a smoky end when he swiftly plunged the fiery trio into a waiting bucket of water. "Oohs" and "ahs" filled the air and, as his performance ended, the crowd clapped heartily and rose to their feet. The response was just the aesthetic award the young juggler had been seeking. He doffed his top hat and bowed multiple times to each sector of the standing circle of happy spectators.

The skilled, and now very popular, performer thanked the crowd. "You can show your appreciation for my performance by contributing whatever bills you can," he said. "Of course," he added with a grin, "if you can afford more than a one or a five, a twenty or higher is preferable." The crowd laughed and began reaching into pockets and purses to find a suitable reward. The formality of asking for a handout done, he then held out his top

hat and announced with bravado, "And if you want to throw in an extra bill, you should know that today is my birthday."

The young man began to make his way around the circle to collect his token gifts. When he reached Sammy she added a "ten" to his substantially growing pile of bills, returned his enthusiastic, contagious grin and then watched as he moved on to the next group of onlookers. It wasn't until he had made his way around two-thirds of the audience that she decided his unique and creative ploy, telling the crowd it was his birthday, was surely his way of ensuring a good take for that day's tips. By making the day seem not only special for his audience, but also for himself, she knew the young man was sure to collect far more substantial contributions than he would have if he had simply treated this day as any other. Sammy decided that, in actuality, whether or not it was his birthday was a moot point. The kid had charisma, charm, and she wished him well.

The crowd dispersed. The young juggler collected his belongings and went on his way. Soon Sammy was the only one remaining on the round concrete wall circling the permanent concrete performance area. She loved her infrequent visits to the park, for she never knew what kind of performance would be presented to the "wall-sitters." Today's was one of the better

shows she had seen, and it had lifted her spirits. Sammy's trip to New York was turning into the successful stress-reliever she had hoped it would be.

#

Three o'clock. It would be more than three hours before she needed to show up at the Off-Off Broadway theatre for the show she'd selected earlier in the day. It was a lot of time to be on one's own waiting for curtain time, but there was no lack of shops to explore, restaurants in which to dine and people to watch.

Before it became too close to curtain time, Sammy wanted to make sure she knew exactly where the theatre was. She thought she knew how to get there and what direction she needed to walk, but Sammy had not been to this theatre in many years and she wasn't sure exactly where it was located. From her past experience, the further away from Broadway, the harder the theatre was to find - often hidden on an upper floor of an unassuming old loft or warehouse. It was important for Sammy to confirm where she was headed because she knew panic would set in if she waited until the last minute and then couldn't locate the theatre.

She walked onto Bleeker Street and quickly remembered her way. Memory served her right and the theatre was actually easier to find than she thought it might be. Located on a tiny, winding cobblestone lane just off Bleeker Street, its sign was small and unassuming, but at the same time unmistakable as her final destination. Having found the theatre, she decided to find a place to eat.

#

Sammy wasn't particularly interested in the meal itself, but instead was focused on the ambiance the restaurant would provide. After about an hour of wandering around the Village, she turned a corner and discovered a unique restaurant she had never before encountered. Tree branches showed above a high, ivy-covered concrete wall, surrounding what appeared to be an outdoor courtyard. Sammy perused the menu posted at the entrance and determined it was the right choice for her. Before she even walked through the door, she knew she would order the spicy Tai salad with grilled salmon. Once seated, Sammy took a moment to scan the menu and her eyes skipped down to the dessert offerings. When her eyes lit on chocolate mousse it aroused her craving for the rich, creamy, lighter than air, French

indulgence - but she'd wait until after her meal to see if it held the same appeal.

After perusing the menu for a few moments, a waiter appeared and jotted down Sammy's order in a small black notebook. Once the formalities of ordering her meal were completed, she sat back, relaxed and took in her surroundings. She was seated at a small table in the middle of the courtyard, in a lush garden with flowering plants, a lilting fountain, a variety of fully-grown trees - and she was only a few feet away from the blacktopped streets and concrete sidewalks of New York. That's what Sammy loved about the city; she never knew what surprise she would find while exploring its sometimes-unassuming nooks and crannies.

Twilight set in and the tiny white lights strung throughout the courtyard's trees slowly became illuminated as the sky became darker. While she sipped her White Zinfandel, Sammy relaxed and absorbed herself in her surroundings. A slight breeze fluttered the leaves of the trees and made the strings of lights sway gently from side to side. At the far side of the garden was a wooden swing hanging from a tree. A little girl with sandy brown hair plaited into braids giggled happily as her grandfather lightly pushed her into the air. A young couple sat

at a remote table near the outdoor bar. Their arms extended across the tabletop and their hands were intertwined. The couple, oblivious to their surroundings, leaned toward each other, absorbed in quiet, intimate conversation. An old man, sitting alone at a table next to the ivy-covered wall, read The New York Times as he sipped his beer. Since it was early for dinner in New York, other than the handful of people in the restaurant, no one else in the world was lucky enough to enjoy the delights of Sammy's newly discovered hidden garden.

Chapter 33

BACK TO REALITY

The trip into New York did the trick. Sammy arrived back home around two on Sunday morning - tired, sleepy, yet refreshed from her jaunt into a world so different from Allentown and Julie's trial.

When she opened the door, Ali Cat greeted her with a whiny meow and rubbed up against Sammy's right leg, winding her way around to rub against the outside of Sammy's left leg. She tossed her backpack on the table by the door and stooped to pick up the cat. It felt wonderful to hold the purring heap of soft, cuddly fur in her arms. She leaned her face down to nuzzle the

cat's nose. In return, the cat swiped a gentle lick across Sammy's cheek.

This is what it must be like to be a mom. Sammy thought. Unconditional love. Only my particular form of unconditional love comes from my feline friend rather than a bouncy baby.

Sammy deposited Ali Cat in the kitchen after opening a new can of food and emptying it into her dish. She left the cat purring contentedly, noisily nibbling away at her fresh meal.

Exhausted, happy and mentally refreshed, Sammy dropped into bed. The trial was the furthest thing from her mind. She felt free from the stresses of the past ten months and was ready to go on. She quickly fell into a deep sleep - and it would be the best night's sleep she had slept since the night of The Senator's accident.

She didn't remember the dreams, only that they were happy and peaceful. When she finally woke, around noon, she felt refreshed and renewed. All through the trial Sammy had worked hard to impartially report on each day's proceedings. She set aside her feelings as Annie's friend and completely immersed herself in the role of reporter. Sammy sensed that, when the verdict came in and she learned what destiny the jury determined

for Julie, she would be ready to tackle her story - one that Maxie had been more than patiently waiting for her to write.

The trial actually turned out not to be as interesting as Sammy had first thought it might be. Everyone was cool, calm and collected. Julie's professional demeanor and slight detachment didn't provide any real story because it was unchangeable, completely the same each day of the trial. Annie's occasional, almost silent, outbursts were to be expected. No story there either. Each day Sammy simply wrote a summary of that day's proceedings, not her usual investigative fare but she was following through with her assignment just as Maxie had instructed in the early morning hours following The Senator's accident.

Sammy was sure she would soon be giving him the significant story she knew he expected from her. Unlike any teasing she may make about Maxie's "get on it!" nature, she knew he was no slavedriver. Sammy knew he recognized that this story was too close to home for her to be completely comfortable. Sammy also knew he gave her the story because he was confident she could rise above her personal involvement, to be impartial and just report the facts. Sammy knew Maxie understood the fine line she was walking.

Her readers were most likely bored and probably surprised. Sammy Levine's reporting was not up to par and they knew it. Their e-mails told her so. They didn't understand why this story had less "oomph" than the others she had covered over her years at The Details. Sammy respectfully answered each one of them. She told them she was simply reporting the facts, that the trial had been mostly uneventful, that she was doing her best. Most of her readers wrote back and said they understood but couldn't wait for her to craft a juicy story that would leave them sitting on the edge of their seats. Being loyal readers, most of them said they were content to wait.

The actual trial was anticlimactic to the horrific reality that took place on the night of The Senator's death. Even then, in the beginning, right after the accident, Sammy only reported the facts and simply retold the information listed in the police and emergency services' reports from the night of the accident. Maxie made it clear he was more than satisfied and completely confident that Sammy could remain unprejudiced by her own small involvement and friendship with Annie. He kept her on the story because he knew she was good and because he thought it would be good therapy for her to analyze what was happening to her best friend on a day-by-day basis. Sammy knew all the reasons why

she would have felt better if someone else had been put on this particular assignment, yet she knew all the reasons why she needed to follow it through. Although it was a difficult assignment for her, she instinctively knew why it was better for everyone involved that Maxie had thrown the assignment her way.

#

Sammy brewed a pot of coffee and made herself comfortable. She read The Details, then spent most of the day reading The Sunday New York Times and doing its crossword puzzle. It was late at night, around eleven-thirty, but it was time. She needed to get started. Sammy had lots of notes to go through, lots of memories to rehash from both before and after The Senator's accident.

She sat cross-legged on her sofa, her computer resting on her lap, her cup of coffee in her hands. She stared into space for what seemed like hours, just thinking and remembering. Then Sammy remembered what she had found when she stayed at Annie's house on the night The Senator had been hit.

The coffee was now ice cold and she put it down on the table in front of the sofa. She pushed her laptop off to the side, leapt to her feet and ran to her room in search of the

piece of crumpled-up yellow paper that she had finally remembered after all these months.

#

When she found what she had done with the crumpled up ball of long yellow legal paper, it was right where she left it - in the pocket of her jeans. Sammy unraveled the ball and found it was actually two sheets still stuck together by the thin strip of glue from the top of the legal pad. There was small, precise handwriting on both sides. She returned to her living room, sat back down on her sofa, placed the pages on her coffee table and smoothed them until they evolved from a tightly crumpled mass into two very wrinkled sheets of paper. Sammy read the handwritten document, let it seep into her brain. Then it hit her like a ton of bricks! What the papers contained was information she had not known, had not even imagined existed until this point in time. And she was positive it was something not many other people in the nation knew either.

Sammy thought about what George had discovered during his trip to the Keys and, as her mind quickly began to process everything, she began to put the puzzle together. All the pieces fell into place in rapid succession. Sammy finally understood the relationships between The Senator, and Annie, and

Julie. Their relationships were truly more unique than anyone had guessed. What Sammy finally realized was...it was Annie, not Julie, who was the third wheel.

Sammy couldn't believe what she had found and knew she would burst if she didn't talk about it with someone. Without a moment's hesitation, Sammy reached for the phone and called George in Arizona.

"Yeah. Williams here."

"Oh my God! George! I think you got it!"

It was truly "by George" that she actually did get it, that she finally realized why he had been dropping hints, yet was so secretive during his recent trip to Allentown. George had done his best to make Sammy understand where the two men had come from, how they got to be who they were, how they rose to their positions in life and how Annie fit into the picture.

Sammy figured out that Annie was the person who enabled The Senator to achieve his dreams, enabled him to live the life he desired. Annie was the key The Senator used to gain entry to the respectability he perceived would be necessary to open doors and eventually enable him to win his coveted seat in the Senate - over and over again.

"Okay, okay, you got what, Sammy? Calm down! I can still hear, kid. I'm not that old you know."

"Sorry, George, I didn't mean to shout. But you're not going to believe it! I just found the final piece of the puzzle and I couldn't wait. I just had to talk with you now!"

"Kid, do you know what time it is here?"

"Yeah, it's seven. Oh my God! I'm so sorry! I pulled an all-nighter, and it's seven a.m. here! That means it's..."

"Yep, four in the morning my time. That's okay. Us old people like to get up earlier and earlier as we age."

Sammy couldn't tell whether he was teasing her or just using a sarcastic tone of voice to make her feel guilty about getting him out of bed.

"I'll call you back in a minute, kid. Just want to empty my bladder. And I need to go talk with you from the kitchen. Don't want to wake up the wife. She had a long day with the grandkids and needs her beauty sleep."

Sammy waited while George made his way through his house from his bedroom, to the bathroom, to the kitchen. Since she had spent time in his home, Sammy knew the "route" he would take by heart. After he visited the bathroom, he'd have to walk down a long corridor before he would pass through the ell-shaped

living room. Then he'd continue on through the dining room before he finally walked into the kitchen. She remembered his house well and her mental journey took about as long as he did to physically get from one end to the other. Before Sammy knew it, her phone rang only a few moments after she had mentally reached George's kitchen.

He must have hurried for both of them to have "arrived" in her mental and his physical kitchen at the same time. She figured it was because he could probably tell by the excitement in her voice that she had found something big. Before she picked up the phone, Sammy thought, I must have kicked the old guy's adrenaline into high gear!

"Okay, Sammy, I'm here. I'm here. And I'm sitting down. Now, what's this news that couldn't wait until the morning, at least until it was my time in the morning here in Arizona, when normal people take phone calls?"

No sarcasm, he was now wide awake and teasing her about old people getting up early and when normal people use the phone.

"Oh, God, I am SO sorry, George. I didn't mean to wake you. I've been up all night. I just didn't realize...anyway, I was so immersed in what I found that I absolutely just lost

track of the time, picked up the phone to call you without even thinking."

"That's okay, kid, that's okay. Now, give it here. George is listening."

"Okay, it's like this...for weeks now, well, you know...I've been at the trial. It's almost over, by the way. Just waiting for the verdict. Anyway, late last night, it finally hit me. You know those legal pads that lawyers use?"

She imagined that George nodded "yes" so she just kept on talking.

"Well, ever since the trial started, I've sat in the back row, feeling like there was something about the trial, something about the courtroom, that reminded me of - well, for lack of a better word - something. Didn't know what it was. Then, a little while ago it suddenly hit me. It was those damned legal pads that they've been writing on, waving about for emphasis."

"Legal pads?"

"Yeah George, legal pads. You see, it was those long yellow legal pads that jogged my memory, that reminded me about a piece of paper from one of those pads that I had stashed somewhere in my apartment. A crumpled up ball of yellow legal

paper that had been tossed away, that I found in Annie's bedroom the day after The Senator's accident."

Sammy then told George about the crumpled up ball of paper, how she had found it, just where it had fallen, or been shoved - behind the bed leg, wedged against the wall, in a place where Ellie hadn't found it, probably would never have found it, when she straightened up the room each day.

"Once I remembered it, it took me a while to find it. For the life of me I couldn't remember what the hell I had done with it, only that I knew it didn't get tossed out with the trash. You know me - I still don't throw anything out. Anyway, George, you see...I had completely forgotten about about that piece of paper. Until last night. Until so many weeks of visual reminders at the trial finally kicked a hole into my thick skull, jogged my memory and made me remember the paper."

"So, where'd you find it, kid?"

He could almost hear a hint of embarrassment, the blush in her voice.

"In my jeans pocket. Right there...still shoved deep inside the pocket. Just like I left it the day I found it. Haven't worn those jeans since that night. But, you know me, George; I don't always put things where they belong. Took me a

while, but I finally found the jeans mixed in with a box of sweaters I hadn't worn since last spring."

"So, kid...don't keep me in suspense...what's on that paper that's gotten you excited enough to abruptly wake an old codger like me before the sun comes up."

Sammy ignored his jab and just went on with her story.

"It's a letter. A letter that The Senator had written to Annie. By hand. On the yellow legal paper. A letter that I'm not sure we'll ever know - well, ever know whether or not Annie actually read it."

"Okay, kid. Enough of the suspense. Let's hear it."

So Sammy read the letter to George. From beginning to end.

My Dearest Annie,

As I write this, I wonder how much you have guessed, how much you really know, how much you decided you didn't really want to know. The last twenty-five years, well, to me, they've been wonderful. I couldn't have become the man I am without your help. But then, I don't think that you can really know what a key part you played in my life. Even years before I met

you, I knew I had to find you. You were the most important part of my dreams, because you were the one who enabled me to make them come true. And without you, Annie, I would have been nothing.

Remember the first day we met? In the Bursar's office? I can remember it like it was yesterday. I knew then, right away, that you were the one. Even before we spoke, I knew you were the innocent, sweet, understanding girl who would become my wife. The girl who would grow to love me so much that she would mold herself into the woman, into the woman who I needed to provide me with unconditional love, complete trust, with unending support. A woman who would take my arm and proudly attend political functions from barbecues with backwater bands to state dinners with politicians right out of Washington's list of "who's who." Whether or not you believe me Annie, I knew from the very first moment that you were the girl, who was destined to become the woman, who would enable me to pursue my dreams - without question, with complete trust, and with adoration.

By now, by this point in our lives, I assume you must have realized that things have not been what they first seemed to

be. Yet, you have stayed in character, always remained by my side - faithful and trusting. And you haven't shown any overt perception to our somewhat, well, I think you'll agree, somewhat unusual and unique situation.

But, Annie, in my heart, I know that you must know something is not right between us, has never been "right" in the sense that is generally accepted by society as a whole. And, although I truly believe that you know, you have never been terse, have never been any less loving toward me, have always been supportive of me as my friend, my confidant and my wife.

Please Annie, please, please don't misunderstand me. Whether you believe it or not, I love you more deeply now than I have ever loved you. And this is why the time has finally come. It's precisely because of this love that I must now let you go, that I must now give you your freedom. And that I must now ask you to let me go too.

Everything is yours. The house in Allentown. The townhouse in Georgetown. The cars. The bank accounts. And all I ask of you is to please let me go. In return, I'm not asking for anything from you, except for my freedom - a freedom

that will allow me to disappear, to fade away, to retire from public life and to achieve anonymity. With me gone, you'll be able to rediscover who you are, who you can become outside of the context of being "The Senator's wife."

Annie, please understand, it isn't freedom from you that I am seeking, rather it is freedom to be myself. You see, Annie, I yearn and I crave to live a life where I can crawl out from under this shroud of duplicity and deceit. You are the only one who can ultimately make it possible for me to take on a veil of invisibility. And it is you who will provide the opportunity that will allow both of us to live the rest of our lives free from the lies and deception that I have so unfairly brought you into as an unknowing third party.

Annie, I must be...no, I have to be, honest with you now. You may wonder why I now refer to your involvement with me as a "third party." Oh God! This is so hard...but I think you already know. I don't know if writing it down will make it any easier for you to understand or make it any easier to dull the pain that I know I must now be causing you, to make it less harsh than I can only imagine it will be. You may not now believe me, but I too, I am also feeling pain. Any change can

be painful. And a change of this magnitude, with all the ramifications it will bring, with all the shame I imagine you may feel - that you MUST NOT FEEL - a change like this is bound to be heart-wrenching, confusing, debilitating.

Please, Annie, I beg you, please don't hate me, don't let this change that I am forcing on you destroy the very fiber of your being. Please don't let this change harden your heart to any possibility of future happiness, of future love, of future trust.

I know, I know. I'm avoiding the inevitable. I know I must spell it all out for you. It's just so much harder than I had imagined - all those years ago, when the thought first crossed my mind, when the plan took shape and was first set into motion. But I didn't know then just how much you would ultimately mean to me now, how much your loving, trusting nature would capture me and hold me close to you for all these years. I didn't know how much we would love you, and trust you, and make you such a large, cherished, part of our lives.

Oh, God! Annie, this is so hard. I thought it would be easier than this - writing it down so nice and neat in a letter. To be sealed in an envelope and left by your bedside

while you still slept and I stealthily slipped out of the house, out of your life, out of town and out of the public eye. You see, Annie, all these years, from before you met me, or met Julie, we knew that we would meet you. We knew you would be the one to enable me to reach my goals, that you would be the one to give me entrée to politics, to D.C., to its social scene. We knew if I was going to make it that you were essential to our existence - so that I could become a senator, so that I would be trusted, and so that I would be showered with respect. You would enable me to be a husband, a man to be trusted. Without that image, I believed I would not be elected, time after time, to the seat in the Senate that I so coveted.

You see, even before we met you, we devised a plan. You, Annie, well...you were the most important part of our plan. It was so easy. You made it too easy. We both fell in love with you and for a time I even thought we would all live happily ever after, in compliance with our wedding vows taken in that quaint little chapel - "till death do us part."

But the plan remains the same and the time has now come. Now we need to make the break. It's been part of the plan for

so long that I have always taken it for granted. But the
horrible thing I have done is to keep it from you, to have lied
to you, to have not given you the opportunity to understand, to
know, to be able to take control of your own fate. Oh Annie!
I feel so awful about this. But it has to be done. I can't
treat you this way any longer. I am not being fair to you. Or
to me. Or to Julie.

Yes, Julie. I think you've known almost from the
beginning. We have always been so careful to keep you from
knowing, to keep you from experiencing any embarrassment, to
keep you from being involved in any scandal. But now, well,
now my dearest Annie, now Julie and I must

"That's it, George. The letter just ends. He barely blurted it out and then he stopped. I'm not sure that she actually knows anything, that she ever saw this letter. That she even knows it exists. Because...well, remember George? I found these pages crumpled up into a tight ball and wedged behind the bed leg. On his side of the bed too, I think. God! Besides Julie, I may be the only one who has any idea of what The Senator was going to tell her. Shit! George...what am I going to do?"

There was a momentary lapse in conversation. But, when he started to talk, there didn't seem to be the same level of awestruck, dumbfounded, sense of surprise in his voice that had been in Sammy's when she first called him.

"Whew! Sammy...this letter you found...it's something else all right. Kiddo, you've got to know that you found the motherlode when it comes to this story. It's the kind of documentation that reporters kill for. But, Sammy, even though the letter is a shocker....well, it doesn't really take me by surprise."

Sammy said nothing. There she was, holding something really powerful in her hand. It was the kind of powerful information that, if it were turned into a story, would be splattered in bold print and full color across the front page of every newspaper from New York to L.A. It would be the highlight of every tabloid sold at supermarket checkouts. It would be the topic of every news show and every talk show on every television network. It was a newsbreaking human-interest story of a lifelong entanglement between a married United States senator and his best friend. His lover. What was Sammy going to do?

George didn't allow her silence, her need to think, throw him off. He just kept on going.

"I had a hunch that this is the way the story was headed. Wondered when you would piece it together, kid. Given your friendship with Annie, your connection to this story, I figured it would take longer than this. Had no idea that any real tangible piece of the puzzle outside of Key West actually even existed. Heck, I wasn't even sure about the whole thing myself. I was only going on vague hints and a few visuals from Key West. Mostly amounted to assumptions on my part. Gut instinct. An old reporter's hunch. Didn't want to share my suspicions with you because I didn't want to muddle the facts. Or put any ideas in your pretty little head. And I wanted you to be able to come to your own conclusion.

"The facts...well, I shared most of those with you. As you probably figured out by now, what I left out about my trip to the Keys...well, what I left out was my assumptions. I just kept them, well I just clammed up and kept them all to myself. Didn't want to look like an old fool if I was wrong. Didn't think I was, but...well, kid, you know what they say about people who assume?"

He was referring to the old joke, one of his favorite old sayings, the one claiming not to want to "make an ass out of u and me." George's lame, although well intended, attempt at

humor broke the ice. Sammy couldn't help herself and she giggled at his old joke, but then quickly went back to being serious. She couldn't help but think about Annie.

"Oh my God! George, do you think she knows?"

"I don't know, Sammy. I really, really don't know. If she does, she's been a pretty good actress all these years. And if she doesn't, well...I wouldn't be surprised at that either. In fact, given her upbringing in a closed-knit, protective community that just, well...the kind of community with Aunt Bea, and Opie, and Barney...well, it's just that she grew up in a place that really doesn't exist in this country anymore. Anyway, given her past, I wouldn't be surprised if we find out that she truly just doesn't know."

"Oh...My...God!"

And that's all Sammy could say. She needed to digest The Senator's letter, her conversation with George, the last ten months. She needed to think it all over.

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How could I have been so stupid? And how did everyone else not see it either. They were good. Really, really good. But why? Why did they develop or continue with the charade? Or was it really a charade?

Sammy had always been under the impression The Senator adored Annie and that he was there when she needed him.

But then, didn't Annie tell me that he spent a lot of time away from home? With his being a senator, I always took it for granted that his trips were due to one official function or another.

She knew he spent time at the townhouse in Georgetown because he needed to be near his office in D.C., that he was obligated by those perfunctory trips, meetings, social commitments and political gatherings.

Annie never wanted to talk about why they didn't have kids. Sammy always thought it was some kind of medical problem. As a friend, she had never asked, never pried, never put Annie through the "so, when are you gonna have kids" shtick - the way insensitive, nosy, busybody kinds of people are obnoxiously prone to do. She was not one of those people who think they have the God-given right to pry and ask questions better left alone about other people's private lives. Every once in a while, Annie had dropped hints leading Sammy to believe she was disappointed she never had kids. But, since they were hints, Sammy never pursued them. Annie always brought the discussion to an end right after she rationalized that, given The Senator's

schedule and his public commitments, it would have been tough to have had and raised kids.

And Julie, Sammy thought. Didn't he truly love and respect his best friend's wife? Hadn't he always treated her with kindness and caring? Wasn't he always at Annie's beck and call?

After the initial shock, Sammy realized it wasn't any real surprise that Julie loved The Senator and that The Senator loved Julie. She was positive they both loved Annie and that Annie loved them back. But they never gave any clues and she never remotely dreamed it was more than a deep, committed friendship. If what Sammy had found out, if what she was thinking was true, she had discovered a well-guarded secret that, to her knowledge, no one else had ever stumbled upon.

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"George, you still there?"

"Still here, kid."

"No wonder Julie never settled down. Or took a woman out more than a few times before he called it quits. Before he returned to his solitary routine. Somehow, George, God knows how, he always managed to stay in the good graces of all the women he saw. Always managed to be a good friend to each of them. God! I had seen him and The Senator out in public dozens

of times. Not once did they even remotely appear to be anything to each other but good friends. Not once! You know, George. They had all of us fooled. They were good. Very, very good!"

Now that it was all out on the table, George and Sammy talked for a very long time. He told her about the photo he saw when he was whisked through the den in the house on Key West. It was sitting on a sofa table. He had passed it so quickly - he couldn't be sure - but now that Sammy found the letter, he was positive he knew what he had seen. In that photo, smiling back at the photographer, were The Senator and Julie - arm in arm, the ocean and clear blue sky as their backdrop. When George saw the photo, he recognized that the two friends were standing on the deck he had just crossed over, the one attached to the house on Key West.

"It was only a photo of two good friends, but paired with that letter you just found..."

They continued talking until it was mid-morning in Allentown. At one point George told her the sun was coming up, and Sammy's imagination drifted to the beautiful Arizona sun.

"Okay, George. I don't know how I'm doing it, but I'm getting through this. But I've gotta tell you...I think that

I'm in shock. I never expected, never anticipated, never in a million years would have imagined..."

"I know, kid. They were good. They took a lifetime to plan it out and carefully disguised the truth about their relationship. So that no one would get it. So that no one would ever suspect. Not you. Not me. Not Annie. And not anyone else."

Sammy took a deep breath. There was a lot to digest but it had always been there - in front of not only her, but also the whole nation. And, yet, no one seemed to suspect or to know.

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And why? Why did The Senator, in this day and age, feel so compelled to present a facade that was so false, so contrary to his true nature?

Sammy thought she knew, could understand just how hard it is for people her age, maybe any age, to give up what they've worked and struggled for throughout their entire lives. It seemed only natural to Sammy that The Senator, having grown up in a conservative and very wealthy family, would have felt compelled to keep his secret in the closet. Sammy was certain The Senator thought he would have been forced to give everything up had he been forthcoming about this major aspect of his

persona...everything he had worked so hard to achieve, including the immense respect bestowed upon him by his colleagues and friends.

And Annie? Why did they perpetuate a fabrication that involved Annie? Sammy couldn't stop wondering how much Annie actually knew. After all these years, did Annie really care? Did they do this to her, or did she actually do it to herself? Was she an unwilling partner or part of a practiced trio of deceivers?

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Sammy and George had been on the phone for hours. Now it was time to for her to begin to come to terms, to decide how to handle this unsettling information, which had so abruptly changed her world as she knew it.

"George, I better get going. I really, really need time to think. To unwind. You know me...I've got to get out for a walk. Got to get my emotions under control. Figure out what to do. Maxie's entrusted me...I just need to sort it out so I can think straight. But I'll get back to you. Give me an hour? Maybe two? Maybe tomorrow? Can you just be there for me, old friend?"

Even though Sammy couldn't see him, she knew George nodded yes to each of her questions. She knew he would be there waiting when she was ready to call him again.

Chapter 34

WALKING, THINKING, UNDERSTANDING

It was Columbus Day, another cool morning perfect for brisk walking. The quicker Sammy walked, the easier it was to funnel her newly-found energy created by what she knew was somewhat of a shock and an absolutely incredible surprise. In all the years she had known Annie, Sammy could never have imagined what George's expert, meticulous, research would produce. Or how one crumpled up ball of paper would have made all the pieces of George's research pull together and solidify into a once unimaginable tale of love, concealment and deceit.

After a while, Sammy slowed her pace and took in the cool October air. As she walked and let the clean, crisp air fill her lungs, she realized how great it felt to be alive. Her thoughts began to flow in a more orderly and less hysterical manner about the scenario involving The Senator, Julie and Annie. All Sammy's questions quickly began to fall into place.

What will happen if I confront Annie? Does she know the true nature of the life she's been living? Will Annie admit to such an unusual relationship?

Sammy had no idea what basis Annie might even have for determining whether her life and her marriage were anything other than "normal."

The questions continued to formulate themselves. How will I approach Julie? Do I even want to confront him? Do I really want to know the nature and the extent of his relationship with The Senator? How long have they been involved? Was he part of The Senator's plan to involve Annie? Do I really want to ask what my gut tells me I already know?

In her usual fashion, Sammy began to sort her thoughts, to talk out loud.

"The Senator is gone. Julie and Annie are the only ones left. But...the property in Key West...sure, Annie's lack of

surprise in Schuyler's office seems to be a sign she already knew about it. But why didn't she ever mention it and why didn't anyone learn about the property before The Senator's death?

"Shit! If my husband owned a magnificent property in the Keys, wouldn't I want to visit it once in a while? Wouldn't I want to tell my best friend about a fabulous vacation property? Maybe even offer to take her there? Ugh! Who am I kidding? I probably wouldn't have gone there even if she had invited me. I haven't gone anywhere in the last couple of years unless I was working on a story."

Sammy had a lot of questions, most she knew would never be asked, never be answered. She knew where she was headed, knew what she had to do and knew that whatever remained of her friendship with Annie and Julie had to come first on this story. Her gut feelings told her she needed to throw away her reporter's hat and simply be a friend to Annie and Julie. She needed to assure them, in some way, that her profession was no real threat to them. She needed to assure them without letting them know how much she had learned about their lives, their friendship and their love. And with those thoughts in mind,

Sammy returned to her apartment - to wait for the verdict and to wait until the time was right to pen her story.

Chapter 35

THE VERDICT

It was around three the following afternoon when her phone rang. Sammy instinctively knew it was time, took a look at the caller ID and didn't even bother to answer the phone. She grabbed her stuff, ran outside, jumped in the car and coaxed the old girl down the hill and into the center of town. Her destination? The courthouse.

The jury hadn't yet been summoned into the courtroom. The judge's aide was waiting for everyone else to arrive, to take a seat. Sammy claimed her usual spot in the back row near the door. Still uncomfortable with her recent discovery, she

purposely avoided any eye contact with Annie. Sammy would also do her best to avoid any eye contact with Julie when he arrived in the courtroom. She didn't know how long it would take to get used to the idea that Annie's and Julie's and The Senator's relationship wasn't what it had appeared to be on the surface. As she had been on the night Maxie called her to tell her about The Senator's accident, Sammy was still torn between being a good reporter or a good friend.

Since neither Julie nor Schuyler had arrived, Sammy's guess was that Schuyler had orchestrated a grand entrance, typical for an attorney of his caliber. In many ways, it was all part of a grand show, a judicial theatrical experience.

Within a short time, the door opened. Just as Sammy predicted, Julie and Schuyler made their grand entrance, quickly gliding past her on their way to the front of the courtroom to take their respective places at the defendant's table. The prosecutor, looking completely haggard compared to Schuyler's rested and cool demeanor, tossed Schuyler a look that was part glare, part insecurity. He hadn't been forceful throughout the trial and now the prosecutor seemed to regret his inadequacy at being able to make a strong case against Julie.

In the end, the information appeared to be mostly circumstantial. No one had seen Julie behind the wheel of the car. No one had seen him driving away from The Grille. No one had seen him driving down Oak Tree Road. Even the clerk at the sub shop hadn't noticed Julie pull into the lot - or try to use the phone in the booth at the edge of the property. Although there was a record of a call made from the phone at the sub shop to The Senator's personal hotline, no one could prove it was Julie who really made the call. For all anyone knew, it was The Senator himself who had actually made that call.

Annie's testimony had been worthless. She fell apart on the stand, only sobbed and repeated The Senator's name as she reached out toward Julie. Ultimately, her testimony could not be used by either the prosecution or the defense, since the judge ruled her hysteria on the stand be stricken from the record. The jury could not consider anything Annie said or did on the stand and it was as though she had never been called. It was as if her testimony had never taken place, it had become lost in the system of life.

Schuyler couldn't have orchestrated a more perfect defense if he had tried. No one could actually place Julie at the scene. The policemen who met Julie and Annie at The Grille

could only testify he was sound asleep, lying on the front seat of his car, oblivious to the tragedy that had quickly been unfolding all around him.

The bartender from The Grille could only testify he thought Julie's car was in the exact same place where it had been parked earlier in the evening. His testimony told how the storm quickly took hold of the Valley, pummeled down on the tin roof of The Grille and sounded so awful that he had been prompted to take a minute away from his work to look outside, to see how bad it really was. When the prosecutor questioned him, the bartender testified that when he left for the evening, he thought both The Senator's and Julie's cars were parked in the same spots as they had been when he looked out at the onset of the storm.

But the real kicker? The bartender testified he had only poured Julie one drink. During that evening, the entire two hours that he and The Senator sat at the little table in The Grille, Julie had only been served one glass of wine. This was certainly not enough to make him drunk, enough to cause impairment of judgment, not enough to make him pass out.

Julie's doctor testified that the warm winter had brought on an early onslaught of pollen and the tiny allergy-causing

microbes made Julie feel miserable. His doctor told the court he had prescribed a new allergy medication for Julie. Julie had taken that medicine for only the second time, right before he left The Grille, just about forty minutes before The Senator's accident.

"You see," the doctor said from his seat in the witness stand, "Mr. Ashton is a very methodical person. For all the years I've been treating him, as far as I know, he hasn't once deviated from a routine. And as far as I can tell from his bloodwork that was done the night of the accident, Mr. Ashton took that allergy pill at the same time he had taken it the previous night, when he took it for the very first time. Granted, it wasn't the smartest thing to take that pill while he was drinking wine, but I'm sure he took it without thinking. Probably had other things on his mind and just took it at the same time as he had the night before.

"Drinking the one glass of wine that evening wouldn't in itself have made him groggy. Wouldn't have made him drunk. But once he added the pill to the wine...well, Mr. Ashton...he's sensitive to most medications. And what doesn't make most people groggy often just plain puts him out. That pill, mixed

with one small glass of wine, was more than Mr. Ashton's sensitive system could tolerate."

If the bartender's testimony was the "kicker," then the doctor's disclosure was the "clincher." Julie was not inebriated on the night of The Senator's accident. According to his doctor's testimony, it was his sensitivity to medications and the little white pill that was actually responsible for Julie's apparent drunken stupor. Theoretically, and with a high degree of probability, Julie had been capable of staying awake only long enough to drive down Oak Tree Road, call Annie and then get back to The Grille to await her arrival. According to his doctor, Julie would have been in complete control of his actions until the exact time the pill kicked in. Julie, according to his doctor, was no more capable of driving impaired than he was of staying awake long enough to have run down The Senator.

The doctor then dropped the bombshell that Schuyler had counted on: the timing of Julie's reaction to the pill and the estimated time of The Senator's accident were off by about twenty minutes. By his doctor's estimate, Julie should have been out cold when The Senator was propelled into the field and into eternity.

After the doctor's testimony you could have heard a pin drop in the courtroom. No wonder the poor prosecutor looked so forlorn. In an attempt to make the charges stick, he had been pulling at straws.

Chapter 36

GETTING CLOSER

Although Annie did not project the same facade of assurance as Julie and Schuyler did during the trial, she appeared to be calmer than the prosecutor. Her loyalty to Julie during the trial was undeniable. Her visibility was constant. From the first day all the players in Julie's trial entered Courtroom Number Three to take their places, Annie always gravitated to the same seat - right behind Julie and Schuyler - and she had remained there throughout the trial. From the seat in the rear of the courtroom, which Sammy claimed for her own at the start

of the trial, she had a great view of the defendant's table, the judge, the jury and of Annie.

When the trial first began, Annie made eye contact with Sammy on a regular basis. Annie's eyes were ones that reflected Sammy's friendship, pleaded for her allegiance, relayed her sorrow. But as the days went on, Annie turned to look toward her friend less frequently. Their eyes met less often, and Annie began to avoid Sammy's gaze. Sammy felt their friendship was slipping away. It hurt, but Sammy understood. Her job and her friendship with Annie were in conflict. Instinct told her they would grow apart and Sammy innately knew this was the expected sequence of events. She didn't need Annie the same way Julie needed Annie. Throughout his trial, Julie's need for Annie's friendship and loyalty outweighed and surpassed Annie's need for Sammy. Nothing could ever change the sequence of events that had taken place. Annie had lost The Senator, but her loss was also Julie's loss. Their shared loss had drawn them closer to each other, bonded them together, even stronger than they had been before The Senator's accident.

Sammy knew it was Annie's nature to put her loss aside and tend to the immediate needs of the ones she loved. Annie didn't realize it, but she was a very strong woman and Julie's

predicament brought out her strength. Although she may have been sobbing for her loss throughout the trial, she was there to show her unconditional support for Julie. The entire courtroom knew it, and most importantly, the jury knew it. If Julie were to be acquitted, it would hinge on his doctor's testimony. But, ultimately, Annie's loyalty, her constant presence in the courtroom and her unwavering commitment to her friend, could have a positive influence on the jurors who would determine the fate of the man accused of killing her husband. It was just the kind of loyalty Schuyler was counting on.

"All rise."

The filled-to-capacity courtroom of observers and participants had become accustomed to hearing that particular command throughout the trial. Today was no exception. Everyone rose as the judge entered the courtroom. He settled into his chair, brought his gavel down, then indicated the jury had reached a verdict. They were summoned into the room, and Julie was asked to stand. He and Schuyler rose in synchronization, which, if you didn't know was purely coincidental, couldn't have been planned any better if the whole courtroom scene had been choreographed.

The next few minutes were a blur, even to a trained reporter like Sammy. All she could remember was hearing "not guilty." As soon as the verdict was uttered, Annie screamed, jumped from her seat, ran around the railing that separated her from the front of the room and then threw herself into Julie's arms. The two hugged for what seemed like an eternity, tears streaming down both their faces - tears of happiness, tears of relief, tears of sadness. It was over as quickly as the early morning phone call Sammy had received from Maxie in the middle of that terrible, stormy night.

With a stream of reporters and photographers following in their footsteps, Schuyler whisked the two friends out of the courtroom, down the front steps and into the waiting limousine. Sammy reached the top of the steps just in time to see cameras flashing around them as they quickly made their exit. She watched the three of them slip into the long black car and stood there as it wended its way cautiously through the crowd, finally picking up speed when it swiftly disappeared around the corner.

That was it. It was over. Julie won. Annie was obviously relieved. Sammy had followed through. She had her story. She knew she had lost her friend, but the loss of their friendship

had been a gradual process, one which Sammy had actually anticipated.

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She barely felt the touch of a hand on her elbow, yet quickly turned to see who had approached her from behind, and then reached out to touch her. When she turned, Sammy came face to face with the young detective who had investigated Julie's case, but had been unable to discover anything of value for the prosecutor to use in his endeavor to convict Julie. For the first time since the trial began, she was struck by how ruggedly handsome he was.

"How about a cup of coffee?"

Sammy was tempted to decline, but her curiosity got the best of her. She nodded yes and he steered her toward the coffee shop just around the corner from the courthouse. Gently cupping her elbow in his hand, he guided her through the door to an isolated booth in the back. The place was empty. With the conclusion of Julie's trial, everyone had gone home. The entertainment, the three-ring circus, which comes into town with each new trial, was finished. Now that it was over, people would soon forget and eventually move on to the next chapter in their own curious lives.

When the waitress arrived, the detective ordered two cups of decaf without asking what Sammy wanted. He simply ordered for the two of them - a bit presumptuous of him, but rather uncanny - since that's exactly what Sammy would have ordered if she had been given a chance. Within minutes, the efficient waitress returned with the dark liquid steaming from inside two plain, white, diner-style, porcelain cups in saucers.

Sammy and the detective sat quietly for a few minutes. Neither one said a word, just went about fixing their individual cups of coffee to suit their particular tastes.

"So, Ms. Levine, off..."

"You can drop the Ms. Levine - just call me Sammy"

"All right. Sammy"

The handsome detective grinned as he reached for his own steaming cup of decaf, took a sip, then put it back into its saucer.

"Great. Sammy, it is. So...off the record, Sammy, what do you think about Mr. Ashton's acquittal?"

"What do I think? You're asking me...I mean...you want me to talk with you? Off the record? Mr..."

"Oh, yeah...sorry. That was rude of me. Henry, Henry Stein. But, please...just call me Hank."

He extended his hand across the table. She looked up from gazing at her steaming cup of coffee, searched his face to decide whether she could trust him, see if she wanted to continue sitting across from him, continue this conversation with him - off the record. Sammy decided to take a chance, then followed his lead and extended her palm, reaching out toward his. Palm meeting palm, they shook hands and made it official.

"Nice to meet you, Hank."

Then she stopped, averted her eyes and looked down at her coffee. She didn't continue. He recognized the source of her reluctance, and her pause was understood. He knew she needed time to decide whether she could trust him, whether or not she would discuss anything "off the record."

"Look, I hope you decide that you can trust me and talk with me. I'd just like you to be straight with me. No strings attached. Completely between you and me. You see...I've got a few things that I want to run by you. Off the record."

"Okay, off the record..."

Before she finished her thought, Sammy sat up in her seat, looked directly into his eyes and continued.

"Okay, Hank...off the record...if I can have your assurance that what we say will stay between us, then I'll tell you what I think."

Before he could jump in, Sammy continued.

"Okay, here goes...I think that the D.A. didn't have a chance in hell. That he didn't have enough to convict him. Hadn't been provided with any real evidence. And in the end, it was all circumstantial."

He flashed her an unexpected grin. This was not at all what she expected after, in no uncertain terms, she had just told him he had not done his job, not found enough evidence to pass on to the District Attorney. She basically told him he had not provided the state with a decent case against Julie.

"Yeah! You're right about that." He flashed her a bright smile. "You got it, Ms. Levine...sorry...Sammy. Not enough to convict him. All of it was circumstantial. Lots of supposition. Nothing tangible to throw at him."

He leaned forward and Sammy, without thinking, instinctively reciprocated and leaned toward him. Then, in a softer voice, Hank said,

"We had nothing on him. I could find nothing on him to give to the D.A. Because he didn't do it."

Sammy sat back almost as abruptly as she had earlier agreed to share a cup of coffee with the handsome young detective. She was stunned. He had just told her, matter-of-factly, that he knew Julie was innocent, that he didn't commit the crime and that he wasn't responsible for leaving The Senator's broken body at the edge of the field on that awful rainy night.

"So, if Julie didn't do it, Hank...who the hell did?"

As the words came out of her mouth, she already knew the answer he would give. She knew it was something she had suspected, something that was lurking in the back of her mind, yet it was something she was unable to admit, even to herself.

"She did."

Sammy felt sick to her stomach because she instinctively knew he was referring to Annie. Even with her recent discovery of The Senator's crumpled up letter, she hadn't wanted to think about the horrible possibility that Annie ran down The Senator. Sammy knew Annie had a motive, was out driving in that horrible storm and knew it was possible she had done it. If she had actually killed him, Annie more than likely had gotten away with it. Even after reading the letter, knowing Annie had a motive, Sammy hadn't been able to let her mind "go there."

As she thought, Hank continued to speak in his very "confidential-between-you-and-me" voice.

"You see, Sammy...you don't have to worry that I'm going to blab my thoughts to the world. You and I both know there's no way I could prove it, no way anyone would ever believe me. The whole city, the whole county. Hell, for that matter the rest of the state, the entire country and the whole world. I bet I couldn't find anyone who would believe me. No one. Except maybe you."

Sammy just stared back at him, knowing he was completely earnest in his suspicions.

"You see, Sammy, if I told anyone else what I think, I'd be ridiculed and I know I'd end up losing whatever reputation I might have earned up to now for being a good cop. It would just be too hard for anyone to believe...that it was she who did it. She...and not Julie."

Sammy stared back in disbelief. She couldn't speak and her right hand was now as cold as ice, yet still wrapped around the warm cup sitting on the table in front of her.

"So you see, Sammy, off the record...well...off the record, I've got a feeling you might just agree with me. That, as her friend, you might actually hold the key to what made her do it.

My instinct tells me that you might have a clue to her motive. I thought you might know something about her, or about her relationship with The Senator - something that no one else in the world knows or even suspects.

"So, what do you say, Sammy? Off the record...do you have anything that might at least make me feel like I can tuck this one behind me and finally get a good night's sleep without losing any wondering if I'm right. Or will you tell me if you think I'm completely and utterly out of my mind?"

She didn't have an answer for him. Sammy sat there in silence. Then, not being able to stand the sincerity of his gaze any longer, she lowered her eyes and again focused on the cup of coffee in front of her.

"Okay," he said softly, "I didn't mean to put you on the spot. I understand. I really do. I know you follow a reporter's code of ethics, that you wouldn't give anything away, wouldn't betray a source...or a friend. I figured that you probably wouldn't let on, couldn't tell me what you think."

Then he changed his tone, changed the subject.

"Plus, I've been watching you...did you know I was watching you throughout the trial? Did you have any idea?"

Startled, Sammy shook her head from side to side. She was taken completely by surprise with his change of topic, completely overwhelmed and shocked by his admission that he had been watching her at the trial.

He didn't wait for her response.

"Yeah, I was watching you."

Sammy thought she saw a tinge of blush creep up his neck and into his face, wished he wouldn't notice the flush she could feel rising into her own cheeks.

"You see, Sammy, I've grown to respect your integrity. Have read your articles for more years than I can remember. I know that, no matter what, you wouldn't compromise your integrity, that you wouldn't give up anyone's confidence. In fact, I would bet my last dollar that you wouldn't even betray your most vicious adversary."

Sammy was speechless. She couldn't look up. She didn't want him to see she was becoming flustered. She didn't want to betray the unexpected feelings quickly seeping into her entire being.

Not waiting for her to answer, Hank leaned closer to Sammy. The table between them seemed to become smaller and smaller. Then, in a whisper that Sammy could barely hear, he said,

"But most especially, because you're her friend, I knew that you wouldn't betray her."

He leaned back and spoke again, no longer in a whisper.

"Heck, even if you did - no one would believe you either. I'm right, aren't I?"

He waited a bit, cognizant Sammy wouldn't answer him but giving her time to reply just the same.

"Never mind, you don't have to say anything. I already know the answer."

The sick feeling lurched back into Sammy's stomach.

"Its okay. Don't worry, Sammy. Your secret's safe with me. Anyway, there's no point in letting the cat out of the bag. That would just create more grief, more scandal. For everyone involved. And I've got nothing to go on anyway. Nothing but what I feel in here."

Hank put his hand on his chest, right over his heart.

"I know what I feel. And I trust what I feel. But no matter what we might think or feel...well, it just doesn't matter one damn bit. The world has gone on. The Senator has passed. He can't be brought back. He's been memorialized as an American hero. His reputation isn't stained. And his wife can go on to play the part of the pitied, grieving widow. Until she

gets beyond that role, begins to live her life again - without being in the spotlight. And, Mr. Ashton...well...he too, can begin to go about his daily business again, start living his life without a tainted reputation. Without having been convicted of killing his friend."

Hank paused and Sammy felt compelled to look up. He stared directly into her eyes and repeated himself - only this time with a slightly different intonation in his voice.

"Without having been convicted of killing his friend."

Sammy finally found her voice after realizing what the detective was intimating. She knew she had to say something. She felt that she couldn't just sit there looking completely dumb, being completely mute. Hank could tell she wanted to talk and he gave her time to begin. When she began, her voice was tinted with irritation - or defense - he couldn't really tell.

"First of all, Mr. Stein..."

Before he could interrupt her, she caught herself, then continued.

"Hank. Look - I'm not agreeing or disagreeing with you. Second of all, what guarantee do I have that you'll end your investigation here?"

Hank grinned at Sammy. Looked at her in a way that a man hadn't looked at her in a while. Looked at her in a way that triggered an emotion she hadn't expected...and it caught her off guard. Once again, she felt the flush rise from her neck into her cheeks.

"Well, Miss Sammy Levine. The only guarantee I can give you is my word. That's it. Just my word. But, I'll tell you this, if I give you my word, you can trust what I say."

He rose from the table, pulled out his wallet, flipped it open so that Sammy could see his badge, lifted out a few dollars and tossed them on the table. He took a long, good look at Sammy and then reached back into his wallet once again, took out his business card, reached over and placed it in front of her.

His expression changed. He became serious.

"Here. If you ever want to talk...give me a call. And don't worry, I don't bite."

Hank folded the wallet and returned it to his back pocket, took off his jacket and loosened his tie. Before he left, he gave her another long look, not as flirtatious as the one that had brought blush to her cheeks, but a look that was kind, gentle and serious. Then he winked, turned, walked away from their table and out of the coffee shop.

Sammy just sat there, numb from what had taken place and still feeling sick to her stomach. She picked up his card, read it over a couple of times, then shoved it into her bag. She made a mental note to save it for a "rainy day," then rose from the table, crossed the room and strode out the door - feeling light-headed and a bit confused as she walked to her car on that glorious fall day.

#

Breathing in the fresh fall air made her feel better, not as sick as she had felt only minutes before. Sammy headed toward her car. The crowds had dissipated, the sidewalks were clear. It had become a virtual ghost town. She was the only one left and hers was the only car parked in the courthouse lot. The old girl complied and started up right away. And Sammy drove home to finish her story, to put it to rest - for once and for all.

Chapter 37

TIME TO BEGIN

Once she reached her apartment, Sammy put the handsome detective, his unsettling implication, and her own awful suspicion, out of her mind. She had to separate herself from the unthinkable. She had other things to deal with - a story to finish, a deadline to meet.

Sammy thought back to the first day after The Senator's accident. Who would have guessed, back on that winter day as Julie sat in prison, that he would actually win in court? Not Sammy. Not her readers. Not The Senator's adoring public. The odds had seemed overwhelmingly stacked against poor Julie.

No one, except possibly Sammy, knew just how loyal a friend Annie would be to Julie throughout the entire ordeal. Sammy was sure most people assumed Annie would not have stuck by Julie's side the way she had. In fact, right after The Senator's death, most of Sammy's co-workers and the e-mails she received from her readers, supposed Annie would never forgive Julie, presumed she would blame him for The Senator's untimely death. But throughout the trial, she was there for him every single day, showing support, standing by his side.

In the end, the prosecutor's weak case didn't prove anything and, according to the laws of the land, a jury of Julie's peers declared he was innocent of any wrongdoing. The jury had spoken. They had reasonable doubt and believed Julie had done nothing criminal. The case was closed. He was free to go on with his life and Annie was granted the return of her friend. At the end of the trial, it seemed the only real loser turned out to be The Senator. But, he had passed from this world at the height of his career, achieving the status of greatness and legend both by his earthly deeds and his untimely death. In the end, it's quite possible The Senator found peace through his death.

The time had now come for Sammy to complete her assignment. First, she had to write and send her account of today's verdict to The Details. Then, she had to decide how to tie the whole story up in one final neat and tidy article. The account of today's verdict? An e-mail to Maxie would be on its way within the hour. The whole story? For that she'd have to ask Maxie to give her a couple of days. It was time that she was sure her boss would grant her. After all, he wanted Sammy to get it right, finish her task in style, provide a follow up to the past ten months that would be professional, polished and as interesting as possible. If she needed time, it would be time he would give her.

Her report of the verdict ran in the next day's edition of The Details:

Prominent Attorney Acquitted of Manslaughter

Chapter 38

UNTIL WE MEET AGAIN

Sammy was sifting through dozens of notes. Since the day before, she and George had spoken a couple of times. She needed to get his "take" on how she should connect the pieces of the story, to see if he could help her decide how to write her summation of the past ten months. It was while Sammy was in the process of putting it all together, before she had figured out exactly what approach to take, how to tie everything up for Maxie, that she received the call from Annie.

It was a call that took Sammy by surprise, yet at the same time it didn't take her by surprise at all, didn't really catch

her off-guard. After the past ten months, Sammy began to think nothing could ever again take her by surprise. But she was wrong.

Her perception of Annie's world, and the flux it was in, had prepared Sammy for almost anything. A year ago she never would have suspected there was something odd about Annie's seemingly perfect life. She thought her senses had become dulled to anything unusual regarding her friend, but Sammy was wrong. Annie had one more surprise in store, another puzzle piece Sammy hadn't expected to receive. It was a puzzle piece that, until yesterday, would have come out of left field and taken Sammy's breath away.

Annie told Sammy that she called to say good-bye, that she was going to be starting over and leaving everything behind within a couple of hours. Schuyler was going to tie up all the loose ends for her: the house in Allentown, the townhouse in Georgetown, the furniture, the cars. Everything would be sold, except her Bug. Annie told her friend she had directed Schuyler to have it serviced, then make sure it was delivered to Sammy's door. Schuyler would contact Sammy to take care of the paperwork and the title would then be transferred to her name

and then left in the glove compartment. The keys would be slipped through the mail slot in Sammy's apartment door.

Reflecting on the state of her old jalopy, it was a gift Sammy did not refuse. It only occurred to her some time later that Annie's gesture, giving her the Bug, may have been her friend's way of endearing Sammy to her, her way of asking Sammy to keep anything she suspected, or knew, to herself. But Sammy had known Annie for too long and didn't think her friend was capable of actually bribing her. But then, Sammy hadn't thought Annie was capable of concealing the life she had apparently been living. In the days preceding the verdict and Annie's call, Sammy never imagined her friend could have been involved in anything quite so complicated and unconventional as the relationship she had shared for more than twenty years with The Senator and Julie.

After gifting Sammy with the car, Annie told her she and Julie were heading down to the Keys. The plane would be leaving in only a couple of hours. Annie planned to spend some time with Julie at The Senator's house, now Julie's house, before she figured out what she wanted to do and where she wanted to go next. She needed the time to figure out who she was, and who she could be, without The Senator.

Sammy's sixth sense told her Annie would never leave Julie. They were now, as they had been since before her marriage to The Senator, inseparable. Sammy's gut also told her Annie would spend the rest of her life living with Julie in the Keys.

Sammy just listened to Annie. She didn't ask her anything about the Key West property, which Sammy already knew The Senator had left to Julie well before his Last Will and Testament. Sammy didn't question Annie about her absolute loyalty to Julie. She didn't ask Annie about the trio she and Julie had both been part of for such a long time. Even though Sammy didn't ask Annie any of the many questions fluttering around in her brain, Annie's phone call helped Sammy finally discover exactly where she was going with her story. Sammy knew she would simply let it alone and leave them in peace.

It was something Annie said, right before she hung up, which cemented Sammy's decision. She told Sammy she loved her, would always treasure their friendship and that she trusted her. Their conversation had almost come to an end. Sammy was ready to say goodbye, get on with sorting out her notes and begin her life without her old friend.

Then Annie tossed the last puzzle piece to Sammy. Without any warning she quickly and quietly said, "I did it." That was

it, nothing else. And after uttering those words, she was gone. No "goodbye," no "farewell," no "give me a call" or "I'll give you a call." Nothing. Just "I did it." Annie hung up. The line went dead. And Sammy was left holding the phone.

"I did it." That was it. No further explanation. No clarification of what she "did." But Sammy instinctively knew. She had been a friend of Annie's for so long, she knew. With those three words, Sammy understood why Annie was so unwavering in her support of Julie. She knew why Annie felt compelled to leave town. At that moment, still holding the phone in her hand, Sammy knew she wouldn't let on to the rest of the world how everything had fallen into place with those three little, yet absolutely and incredibly huge words, Annie had uttered - "I did it."

What had fallen into place? What did Sammy know? She knew Annie had just uttered a confession and it was Annie, and not Julie, who had propelled The Senator into the field on that horrible night. Sammy knew Annie, not Julie, was the one who had purposely, or inadvertently, ended The Senator's illustrious career and worldly future. She knew Annie had killed The Senator. And Sammy knew Annie had gotten away with it.

Just as Hank had predicted, Sammy knew she could never tell anyone, except maybe George, because nobody would believe her. They wouldn't want to believe her. They wouldn't want to believe Annie "did it."

#

Annie had just confirmed Sammy's unspoken and Hank's spoken suspicion...she was the one who hit The Senator. Was it an accident? Did she do it on purpose? Sammy didn't know how it happened. She just knew Annie had done it. Sammy didn't think she would ever know because all Annie had said was, "I did it."

Since she left Sammy with no explanation, Annie could have meant almost anything. She could have meant "I sold the house." or "I showed strength after The Senator's death." or "I stood by Julie and he was acquitted." But, if Annie had pulled off what Sammy thought she did, she would never admit to it, other than having just said, "I did it." Annie knew Sammy's credibility as a reporter would be questioned if she divulged what she had just told her, and Annie was right. She had gotten away with the perfect crime - whether or not Annie intended to commit the crime in the first place, Sammy would never know.

After reading The Senator's letter, Sammy preferred to think Annie had never seen it, that he had crumpled it up and

somehow it became caught between the bed leg and the wall. On the night The Senator was hit, Sammy knew Annie was distraught. She knew Annie had driven to meet Julie, to help him find The Senator. But what actually happened?

Who knows? Sammy thought to herself. She could only surmise. Maybe Annie came upon The Senator struggling to find his way home, walking along the side of Oak Tree Road. Maybe Annie blindly, unthinkingly, seized a split second moment of opportunity. It was possible that in that split second, Annie may have chosen to flail back at the man who had determined the course of her life - even before either of them knew who she was. Maybe Annie, in an instant, became ensconced in a blind state of rage, was overcome by unthinking anger, or overwhelming remorse for a life that fate, and The Senator, had planned for her. It was a life in which it was impossible for her to experience true love between a man and a woman. It was a life in which she would never experience joy from the birth of a child. Ultimately, it was a life where she was denied access to her own potential. Maybe then, and only then, Annie's inner self, the one that had been denied a "normal" existence, maybe then Annie seized the window of opportunity that had fleetingly presented itself. Maybe Annie took that opportunity, propelled

the vehicle toward The Senator, sent him flying through the air and ultimately took his life.

Regardless of how or why the accident happened, it irrevocably changed their lives. Sammy could only second-guess what happened, what may have gone through Annie's mind during the split second before impact. What Sammy did know was that Annie was one of the gentlest people she had ever known. If she really "did it," Sammy had to believe Annie left her house without intent, that the chain of events, which took place on that night, were not planned and just happened.

But why would Annie let Julie suffer through the trial? Sammy found a simple answer: because Annie never thought he would be convicted.

Did Julie know? Sammy didn't think so. She believed his recollection of the night The Senator died, or actually what would be better described as a lack of recollection, was real.

Then it struck Sammy how much Annie really trusted her, how much she valued their friendship. She knew Sammy would never tell. Annie knew her secret was safe with her friend. From the bottom of her heart, Sammy believed she would never see or hear from Annie again.

Annie's tiny statement was the final, and perhaps the most astonishing, surprise in a series of events that had occupied almost every waking hour of Sammy's life, Annie's life, Julie's life, and even George's life during the past year. Sammy was tired and numb. Annie had handed her a lead, which no other reporter would let slip away. But right now Sammy wasn't thinking like a reporter; she was only thinking as Annie's friend - and she was being practical. There was no way to change the chain of events that had recently taken place or the course of events, which were put into motion a lifetime ago by The Senator and Julie. Like the handsome detective, she knew there was no point in trying because, after all, no one would ever believe her.

#

Sammy grabbed the bottle of Amarula Annie had given her on her last birthday. It was a special gift, since she knew how much Sammy liked and enjoyed the precious, rare, elixir. She drank it sparingly and only took it out for rare special occasions. Sammy actually had only sipped the creamy nectar from that bottle three times before tonight: once on her birthday; once when Maxie gave her that long-promised, very

deserved, absolutely hard-earned and way overdue raise; and the third time with George.

Sammy poured a little Amarula into a small juice glass. It was not as fancy as Annie's fine crystal, but it served the same purpose - simply to hold its contents. It wasn't a special occasion. It was more like a finalé, a closing to a life she once enjoyed with friends she had admired, trusted and often envied. Sammy inhaled the sweet aroma of the creamy beige liquid. Then, without thinking, she impulsively lifted her hand. A mixture of emotions welled up from deep inside and prompted her to utter a toast in a quiet voice, which was barely audible even to herself.

"To The Senator. To Annie. To Julie. To George. And to me. May we all rest in peace."

As Sammy slowly sipped her drink, savoring each drop of her cherished ambrosia, her mind jumped back to the time when she first tasted the smooth elixir. She remembered The Senator's stories about the African liqueur. Sammy closed her eyes and imagined herself standing under the Marula tree, imagined she could feel the warm breeze from the African plains swish about her body, blow through her hair and brush gentle strokes of air across her face.

Then Sammy remembered the elephants and how, when they are overcome by Marula madness, they destroy the very thing that provides what they so desperately crave. Sammy thought how ironic it was that Annie, in a moment of split-second decision, knocked down and destroyed the very person who had for so many years provided her with a lifestyle of comfort and luxuries that she so desired. Sammy imagined, in that split second moment, out in that awful storm, Annie, like the African elephants, became overwhelmed by Marula madness.

Sammy finished her drink and felt the warm path, which the liqueur made as it slowly glided down her throat and into her belly. Her musing was over. Feeling warm and sleepy, Sammy walked into the kitchen, deposited the juice glass into the sink and filled it with warm water to soak overnight. She would take care of the actual washing tomorrow.

Sammy left the kitchen and began turning out lights throughout the apartment as she prepared to ready herself for bed. Along her way, she picked up Ali Cat, nuzzled her face in the cat's soft fur and carried her into her bedroom. Maxie would get her final story tomorrow. She now knew where she was going, what she was going to write. Correction. Sammy didn't need to write the story. The story would write itself.

Chapter 39

A Farewell to The Senator

By Sam E. Levine

Of The Details

ALLENTOWN|Late on a and only yesterday, wicks of a braided
steely-black, rain- the lives of three candle, their lives
soaked, cold winter people became simultaneously
night, which feels unraveled by fate. sparked and
as though it was Once as intricately shimmered together
both a lifetime ago woven as the three for one last time.

Like the candle, week, the beginning events, which left their evenly of the rest of one dead and the twisted lives their lives. other two fighting became quickly to regain any intertwined with It was The Senator, semblance of the fate - to end one his wife Annie and lives they once phase and begin their close friend, led. another. But that Jules Ashton, whose is where the simile lives had been The Senator's ends. For the intertwined and untimely death has three ill-fated then left Annie and souls, destiny instantaneously Julie alone, and chose that pulled apart on together, to face tumultuous, rainy that stormy night. the hardest night as the time Life became challenge of their to unravel their unraveled and lives. She, the three wicks. When complicated. For grieving widow and the next phase of three people who he, the grieving their lives began, had led charmed friend, found only two would live lives, they became themselves in a to see the ensconced in an position that rekindling of a new unbearable chain of should have pitted

them against each other for the rest of their lives. Instead, friends whose lives had been intertwined for such a very long time did not turn on each other, did not point fingers and found strength as a pair.

trial. I've tried to be impartial throughout it all because, what I haven't told you, what many of you don't already know, is that they were my friends. For nearly twenty years, Annie was my best friend.

longer need to reach into the depth of my reporter's soul - to be impartial, to tell the story as it unfolds, to keep my personal feelings out of the way and only report the facts. But other than the facts, what have I found? What is worth noting? Where do I go from here? What I do know is that I must go somewhere because, like the three of them, I must also move on.

Throughout the past year, I've kept you posted, reported the facts, and written about the awful accident that took The Senator's life. I've told you about Julie's

It has been a long ten months for all of us. Now they have each moved on. The Senator is gone. The second phase of Julie's and Annie's lives has begun. I no

Now, looking back, from the lives they will all be missed.
 all I can do is had known, had I can only tell you
 rehash the facts, built together - that, with one wick
 try to glean some with, and for, each of their candle
 sense of why that other. For missing, the other
 stormy night, and decades, like a two have proven to
 that deserted favorite old be survivors, have
 country road, was sweater, fate, or grown stronger
 destined to become "good karma" if you together and now
 the irreversible want to call it are just as
 setting for that, had been intertwined as they
 unraveling three comfortably had once been as a
 people's lives. wrapped around the trio.
 But I won't do that three to keep them
 because there warm and secure. Since the accident,
 simply is no other Now, not unlike a my best friend
 story to tell. I eulogy, I can only Annie and I have
 cannot come to any tell you about the slowly grown apart
 conclusion or make good they brought - not only in
 any sense of why to each other's spirit, but also in
 fate chose to tear lives. I can only distance. Living
 three people away tell you how they

in the Lehigh the nightmare she her friendship,
 Valley became too was thrown into on support and
 unbearable for my the night of The loyalty.
 friend after the Senator's accident,
 death of her a nightmare that Looking back at the
 husband and has continued long role I played
 throughout the after his death. during the last ten
 trial of her But, as time months, I realize
 friend. Without continued, she now that the
 The Senator, both became strong gradual movement
 Annie and Julie again, perhaps away from me and
 gravitated toward stronger than she toward Julie, as a
 one another, clung had ever been in result of the
 together and her life. While circumstances in
 retained the strong The Senator was which we were all
 bond, which once alive, it was Annie so suddenly thrust,
 held the three of who needed him. was a natural
 them together. With The Senator evolution of our
 gone, Annie found friendship. My
 Annie needed me to that it was now role as a reporter
 help her through Julie who needed mandated that I

seek to maintain impartiality toward my friend. It made it imperative for me to slowly fade from Annie's life so I could see the facts and not be blinded by my own emotions.

I knew things would never again be the same between us. Somehow, I intuitively knew we would eventually drift apart. But I can't take the credit for ensuring I maintained my distance as a reporter at the very same time I needed to be there for my friend. That credit must go to Annie. I believe she instinctively knew we needed to lessen the hold our friendship had on

us, that she knew, as time passed, our need for each other would pass as well. And she knew Julie needed her more than I did. I believe Annie realized that eventually she would come to need Julie more than she needed me.

Yet, somehow, I have hopes of continuing our friendship. I don't want to admit to myself that our friendship has

completely ended. only recently left,
 I truly believe and have gone to a
 there is a place place where they
 for me in her life can begin over
 if I ever need the again. They now
 refuge of a friend. live in a world
 where they can
 Finally, this story find, and will be
 has come to a unconditionally
 natural end. I granted, anonymity.
 have nothing else And it is a place
 to report, and they where The Senator
 are now all gone will undoubtedly
 from my life. The join them in
 Senator, of course, spirit.
 has passed on. _____
 Both Annie and Retired Reporter
 Julie have chosen George Williams
 to move away, to contributed to this
 make their homes story.
 outside the Lehigh
 Valley. They have

EPILOGUE

I've got to get home to Annie. Have to get this over with. I know Julie is upset, but the time has come. We talked about it, planned for it. It's been years in the making. It's what we set out to do, what we always knew it would come to. But I can't believe he's this upset. Damn! He and I made the plan when we were still kids, still in high school. Yeah, we were young. But not young enough to know that this is how it would have to be.

We both love Annie. Neither one of us wants to hurt her. It's just the way it has to be, the way we planned it to be. Besides, when she finds out, she'll be the better for it. No one will have to know. She can maintain her dignity, go on with her life. Begin again. Find out who

she really is - who she really is without me. And without Julie.

Damn! Why did he have to object to following through? Didn't he remember the timing of our plan? I know we hadn't talked about it for years. But it was always there. Always waiting in the wings, waiting to come into being. It was always the Keys. Always me and him. Always the place that we'd end up. Together. No longer a threesome. Finally, a real couple. But now...damn it!

Okay, okay. Julie, you win. It doesn't have to be just the two of us. We could take her along with us. Fade into anonymity as a threesome. The Keys are the perfect place. We won't even have to worry about blending in. We'll just become part of the eclectic characters who already live there. People who are already unconditionally accepted by everyone else because each person's eccentricity is just slightly less than his neighbor's. A community where one's sexuality is not questioned and privacy is respected. A place where it will be possible, where it will be so easy, for Julie and me to be together. Where having Annie with us would not really be so out of the ordinary. Would not be scrutinized. Where Julie and I could be public - and be out in public. Together. And where Annie could be with us too.

Okay. I can fix it. Change our plans for Julie. And for Annie. She doesn't know, I haven't given her the letter. It was only a draft anyway. She's been with us this long, I think I can convince her to continue on a different level. The relationship will be a little different, but really, it will be the same. In reality, nothing will really change.

God! This wind is awful. I can't seem to get ahead. I keep getting pushed back. I must've been walking for twenty minutes but don't think I've even made it a quarter of a mile. Shit! At this rate I'll never get home, never get it over, never tell Annie that life is going to change. Give her the chance to get used to the idea, to decide if she wants to come with me and Julie - or go off on her own.

She doesn't know that I'm not going to file a petition, that I won't run in the primaries. She doesn't know I've decided that it's time. Time for my political retirement. We never discussed when it would happen. I think she assumed that I'd keep running until I was too old to run again. She doesn't know how rich we've become. Shit! She doesn't know how rich we've always been. How much money is put away. How much we put away before we even met her.

She doesn't know the truth about the property in the Keys. Sure, she knows that it's an old family homestead. But she's never been there, never showed much interest in it, always thought I rented it out, never guessed, or at least never let on, that she knew. That it's been a retreat for Julie and me - for all these years. I don't think she suspects. That we have a place just waiting for us to move in. And an enormous, almost incomprehensible, amount of capital to live on. For the rest of our lives. An idyllic setting where the two of us can grow old and enjoy life without all the political fanfare and notoriety. A place where we can blend in. A community where we can be ourselves. Where people will soon forget, or won't care. Won't care that I was The Senator.

Damn Julie! Why'd you have to convince me to change our plans, alter our carefully designed destiny? Remember? This wasn't just my plan; it was your plan too. It was our plan. The two of us. Together!

Anyway, you're not married to her. I am! I'm the one who has to tell her, who will probably break her heart, who has to tell her how it's really been between us all these years. Between all of us. I'm the one who has to tell her that things are going to change. I'm the one she's going to hate, not you, not "perfect, loving Julie!"

Damn! My suit is getting ruined. I should have listened to Annie and taken my raincoat. Or an umbrella. God knows she never could get me to wear a hat. The hair, didn't want to mess my hair. Hate "hat head." I bet I must look like hell now! But I've got more important things on my mind - so who gives a shit about the hair now?

He pulled his arms around him, held his jacket closer to his body. He tried to ward off the cold, the wind, the rain - tried to get his thoughts together.

Yeah, right, as if this is going to keep me dry and warm! I must be crazy! Should have just waited for Julie to pay the bill and asked him for a ride home. Just didn't want any more of his quiet pleading about Annie. Don't understand why the plan doesn't seem to mean as much to him now as it did twenty-five, thirty years ago. Thought we were going along on the same track all these years. But now? Now I find out that he doesn't want to leave Annie behind, wants to take her along, take care of her.

Damn Julie! He doesn't really want to change a thing. Unless she goes with us, shares her life with us just like she does now, just like she has for more than twenty years. It never occurred to me that Julie would be the one to really fall in love with her. The one who isn't willing to sacrifice the relationship we built with her to whittle us

down to two and make our relationship with each other whole.

Not that I don't love her, just that I always thought when I finally told her about Julie and me that I could go on with my life, that I'd be able to leave her behind. I always thought that, once she found out, she'd be willing to go our separate ways. Once she knew the whole story. That's the difference between Julie and me, I love her but I'm not emotionally attached to her - at least not like he appears to be. At least I don't think I am.

Julie doesn't agree with me. Doesn't think Annie will want to be left alone. Doesn't think Annie will want to leave us. Doesn't think she will choose to be left behind.

Ever since that first day, the day I brought her back to our dorm to meet you, we both knew she was the final piece needed to finish the intricate puzzle of a plan that, together, we had developed during our teen years. For the two of us to become successful in our careers. Especially for me - to become a politician, a respected politician. Oh, God! Back then, I was sure that I needed a wife. That I needed to develop an image that was beyond reproach, one that would enable me to do my work without suspicion of lifestyle or inclinations. As long as Annie accepted Julie as our friend, our cover was set, was in place, and my

relationship with Julie would not be questioned - as long as I had Annie.

But, God! Julie's right about one thing. I can't just tell her in a letter like I had wanted to. Glad I tossed out that draft I started. This needs to be done face-to-face. I need to talk with her, ease her pain. Hold her if she needs to be held. Be her punching bag if she needs to strike out. And in the process, help her see that it will be better for all of us this way. But then, Julie's always right. My strong, handsome researcher who always has all his facts straight before he makes any decisions, comes to any conclusions.

God it's cold! No cars out on a night like this. I must be crazy for trying to walk home! Damn that cell phone! And that flat tire! But I've only about a mile to go to get to the gas station on Oak Tree Road. Then I'll give Annie a call. Ask her to come get me. We'll have my 'Z' towed to Joe's Garage tomorrow after the storm has passed. She'll understand. I'll just tell her that Julie had decided to stay at The Grille. That we didn't know the storm was this bad. And she'll get over the news about me and Julie and the Keys too. Julie thinks she will, he even suspects that Annie won't be surprised. God! I hope she can accept it, will find the strength to get over it. This

storm is awful but it has given me time to think about Julie's voice of reason, to understand that he is right.

But Julie usually is right. Why didn't I see it before? We have to bring her too. I tried to turn a blind eye to our present and what the plan has actually become. And, over the years, Annie has become too important to both of us. I guess he's not the only one who can't bear the thought of leaving her behind. Oh Julie! Thank God you reasoned with me, made me see that the plan should be changed. That Annie has become such an integral part of us - we can't leave her behind. That we can only leave her behind - well...only if Annie decides for herself that she wants to be left behind.

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The Senator, the man walking on the side of the road, had left his lover, was intent on getting to a phone so that he could call his wife. In the black of the night, in the raging storm, he barely saw the lights, which emanated from the car approaching from behind. Instead, he sensed them, sensed he should turn around. When he did, he saw Julie's DeVille. But, rather than step away from the approaching car, he turned and began to walk toward it, no longer pushing against the wind, but now flowing with the wind, directly toward the car, toward his friend, toward

his lover. The car came closer. And The Senator was still being pushed by his dance partner, the wind. He found he was now moving quickly, almost uncontrollably, toward the car.

As The Senator got closer to the approaching car, he was surprised to see it was not Julie in the driver's seat. Instead it was his dance partner in public life. He found himself, for that one split second before he and the car savagely impacted, staring directly into his dance partner's eyes, staring directly into her eyes, staring directly into Annie's eyes. Her eyes were void of emotion, looking right at him, looking right through him. Seeing, yet not seeing. Knowing, yet not knowing. Taking that split second of "whether or not" and acting on "whether" - rather than "not."

On impact, The Senator became free of the wind, and his newly broken body picked up a speed of its own. The Senator, now set free by his public dance partner in life, sailed wildly with his newest dance partner - the wind. As he danced uncontrollably with the wind, The Senator was effortlessly propelled toward the adjacent field and when their dance was done, he landed, painfully, yet somehow painlessly, in a crumpled heap - mostly in the field, partially on the side of the road.

For just a few short moments after he hit the cold, soaked ground, he was still conscious, still lucid, still able to comprehend what had happened and who he saw. In that final moment, and contrary to common belief, The Senator did not leave his conscious world with images of his entire life quickly passing before him. Rather his last image, of his life on this earth, was the image of the final time he would ever look into Annie's eyes. With the wisdom of impending death, he understood why, in that split second, she chose "whether" to hit him rather than "not."

In his mind The Senator smiled, for his body was no longer capable of voluntary movement. He forgave her and, with the image of Annie's eyes having been seared into his for all eternity, The Senator lost consciousness for the last time in his life.