



## ***As Patient As Death***

### **Excerpt**

Book 5 of the Falcon's Bend Series

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"Beware the fury of a patient man."

~John Dryden, *Absalom and Achitophel*

"Don't wait to be hunted to hide..."

~Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*

### **Prologue**

*February 16, 2005, The Daily Press News*

LOVE AND MURDER IS IN THE AIR. Honeymoon Haven Inn, a romantic luxury resort hideaway nestled in the woods in upper northwest Wisconsin, played host to a murder this past Valentine's Day when a blizzard shut down local roads and left the inn cut off from the rest of the town for three days with only minimal staff including the manager, Stephen Mendez, a maid, and the concierge. Twenty-five-year-old Todd Wentz, spa masseur, was found dead, stuffed into a second floor janitor's closet, death by bludgeoning with a marble statue. Due to an abundance of rescue operations already taking place in the town

below, the local police were unable to intervene for several days. Among the handful of guests were fashion designer Bobbi Kniseley, with her New Zealand model boyfriend, Dave Gilpin, and assistant Trisha Everson. Additionally, retired photographer, Rollie Stoddard, and his wife Barbara were celebrating their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Concierge Felippo Theoclymenus commented that "the roving-eyed retiree and his poor, self-conscious wife easily charmed by the smooth-talking masseur known for his gigolo exploits with female guests, young or old" had been fighting throughout their stay, culminating in the husband's jealous tirade that ended in Wentz's unceremonious murder. The case was solved by another guest, Detective Peter Shasta, on vacation from Falcon's Bend Police Department in Central Wisconsin, along with his wife Lisa, who actively aided her husband in arriving at the conclusion of the mystery. "It was dangerous—I was attacked by one of the guests, a suspect, at one point, and most of the people at the inn during that time could have been guilty. All were suspicious in one way or another. But, as you can imagine, having a real vacation is nearly impossible for my husband. When he gets a week or more off from work, we always leave town. The last thing we expected was to find another case to solve while on vacation. But I knew the only way we could get back to our romantic getaway was for me to help Pete solve the crime. While the situation was a tragedy...well, I admit I kind of liked playing sidekick to my husband's Columbo on holiday." Detective Shasta claims he couldn't have solved the mystery without his wife's impressive amateur sleuthing...

*August 24, 2005, Falcon's Bend Chronicle*

WIFE OF LOCAL POLICE DETECTIVE TURNS AMATEUR SLEUTH. "I knew something bad was up as soon as she moved into the subdivision a week ago with two kids. Cassandra Delicia—" the apt, made-up alias of Cassandra Clemens—"totally neglected the children while she sunbathed in nothing more than a velvet choker with a cameo and had sex in the backyard with the guy who called himself Jim Kenmore and showed up not long after she moved in. There was no way she gave birth to a child—not with that body. She had every man in the subdivision revved up, including Elias Moseley," Lisa Shasta, case representative at Liace Adoption Agency in Eau Claire and wife of Falcon's Bend Police Detective Pete Shasta, told reporter Dean Murphy. Other residents in the small Wisteria Road subdivision included another detective, Daniel Vincent, and his wife Melody, employed at the Herman Art Gallery in Eau Claire, along with Elias

Moseley, a freelance computer software Beta tester, whom none of the other residents saw much of in the two years he lived there. "On Monday, I got up early and noticed something in the backyard," Lisa said. "I found Cassandra's cell phone, which she carried with her everywhere, and part of the flimsy wrap she was last wearing—torn and dirty. Cassandra was nowhere in sight. I was worried about the kids, so I knocked on the door. No one answered, but that evening after work I went back to the house with my friend Melody and rang the doorbell. We looked in the windows and saw that the kids were still inside. When they fearfully opened the door, I knew there was something wrong. The children hadn't seen her since the day before, and they were terrified and starving after being left alone for countless hours. What else could we do? We fed them, then we talked to our husbands." In the meantime, Lisa secured a fingerprint from Clemens, which her husband used to run a check on Kenmore. When Lisa realized Kenmore (the alias of Jim Clemens) intended to flee the subdivision with the children later that night, she tried to intervene. "He knocked me unconscious. When I woke up, I was in the trunk of a car with the two children. The only weapon I had on me was a pocketknife." The children were later identified as Chastity, ten years old, and, Owen, five, Morgan, who were kidnapped from their Milwaukee apartment home earlier that week. The parents, Dr. Irvine Morgan and Christine Webber (divorced), didn't receive the ransom demand until August 20th. After Detectives Shasta and Vincent arrested Jim Clemens following a high-speed chase on Interstate 94, Cassandra Clemens remained missing. "I found Cassandra's velvet cameo choker on Elias's lawn just before I was knocked unconscious," Lisa confided modestly. "I guess that was the clue my husband needed to locate her." Cassandra was discovered, tied up, drugged and sexually assaulted, inside Moseley's home. Christine Webber dubbed the act retribution for the woman's crime while Dr. Morgan called Lisa Shasta "the warrior angel of mercy who saved my children with her active kindness, sympathy and unwillingness to mind her own business"...

*Lisa Shasta. Yes, she's perfect. Absolutely perfect. Just the right blend of curiosity, nosiness, fierce fighter and sympathetic angel. Just the busybody to get intimately, obsessively involved in a situation that's none of her business.*

*Yes, Lisa Shasta will play her assigned part perfectly...*

## **Chapter One**

Wednesday, March 14, 2007

Winter had held on with tenacious fingers well into March in the small town of Falcon's Bend in west central Wisconsin, and Lisa could hardly believe the mix of rain, snow and cloudy skies were finally abating.

"Swing!" Teddy shouted eagerly when Lisa wondered whether they could go out into the peeking sunlight an hour before lunch.

Seven years into Lisa and Pete's fairytale marriage, they'd adopted a little boy since Lisa had discovered long ago she couldn't have children of her own naturally. Teddy was nineteen-months-old now. Though Pete had been adorably uncertain about the prospect of being a father, he'd been gung-ho about giving his son everything. Though Teddy had been too young to use it then, Pete had set up an elaborate, wooden swing in their backyard last spring in preparation for the active monkey their son had quickly become once he started walking eight months ago.

Lisa chuckled. "Okay, little bear, let's go use that swing set. But first we bundle up."

As she'd expected, the air remained chilly with the lingering memory of rain. The snow was mostly gone—washed away by all the slushy showers they'd been getting—but they wore boots since the grass was sopping and muddy. Lisa had tucked a kitchen towel in the pocket of her jacket and used it to wipe down the swing before putting Teddy inside it.

"Ready?" She gave him a push and instantly he erupted into bubbling laughter. Lisa joined him, pushing a little harder.

Lately, she'd been looking through a lot of old photographs with Pete's parents, Abby and Ted, and she recalled a photograph of a nearly-nineteen-month-old Pete swinging, his baby-fine, ginger-red hair sticking up in every direction, bright blue eyes twinkling merrily, and his mouth, filled with random baby teeth just like Teddy's, curved into an overjoyed smile. He was such a happy little boy. Maybe that didn't last for Pete, with his turbulent home life, but Lisa was determined it would for Teddy.

*I gave up a career at Liace Adoption Agency and loved it as much for the satisfying work of placing precious children with loving couples as for the money that allowed me to be independent—not beholden to anyone, including a man. This was worth any sacrifice.* Lisa couldn't be more grateful for her life being a full-time mother to Teddy, wife to the man she loved more than life itself, taking care of her family and home. Though she hadn't realized it for the first part of her life, she knew now she had everything she'd ever wanted.

Against her will, Lisa's gaze slid to the house next door to her own. Danny and Melody, she and Pete's best friends, lived there with their nearly two-year-old daughter, Deidre.

Guilt filled Lisa, despite her belief that she was in the right and Mel was in the wrong. What had made Mel think Lisa would agree with her about

how hard it was to be a full-time mother? When Danny and Melody had fallen in love and married, they'd immediately started trying to have a baby. When they hadn't gotten pregnant right away, Mel had started college, got her BA in fine art and art history, then secured her dream job as manager of the Herman Art Gallery in Eau Claire. Instead of working five to six hours a day with a few classes in-between, she quickly began putting in ten or more hours Monday through Saturday. Danny's jealousy had been aroused because the owner of the gallery and Mel's boss, Michael Herman, had made a play for her. Even after her and Danny's initial dreams came true and she got pregnant, Michael had pursued her actively, without regard for her beloved husband.

*Maybe Danny's right to be worried about his marriage.* Lisa's best friend had recently admitted in confidence how hard it was for her to "give up her life" to be a stay-at-home mother, the way she and Danny had originally planned. She'd considered it an impossible situation to take Dee-Dee to work with her, certainly since Michael had been trying too hard to be a father to her daughter. Oh, Lisa couldn't deny that Melody's need to have something for herself was justifiable. She'd lived a suffocating life, always under a man's rule, before she met Danny and he'd rescued her both physically and emotionally. Danny couldn't become a stay-at-home father, as an investigator on the Falcon's Bend Police Department with Pete, and that was something Lisa equally understood. Melody wanted Danny to give up his job, since he had "the nerve" to ask the same of her.

*I can't understand that. I can't understand how anything but these—Dee's formative years—matter to her. Dee-Dee needs her. I want to be on Melody's side, too, because I've always believed a woman should have the option of having it all. But now that I have a child of my own, I can't imagine not wanting only what's best for Teddy and Pete, my family. I've become what I spent my college years and most of my twenties vowing to never be.*

Lisa swallowed, her attention diverting back to Teddy, who was now crying, "Higher. Push higher!" Lisa did...a little. Teddy giggled effusively.

*I should have been gentler in giving her advice.* Instead, she'd offended someone who'd become a sister to her in the last few years. Mel had refused to speak to her or Danny, and, as a result, Lisa had been worrying constantly. She'd also been babying Danny and Dee-Dee in hopes Melody would see reason about this situation. Lisa suspected she'd done the opposite and made her friend feel alone against the world. During the past few weeks, Danny's mother and sisters had been babysitting Dee while he and Melody were at work. *That won't last. Sooner or later, something has to give. I just pray it's not the marriage. Though Mel and Danny's relationship has been as volatile as a hurricane, they're so much in love, no one can imagine them ever breaking apart for long.*

Lisa forced herself to engage with her son again and soon lost herself in their blissful happiness. In the back of her mind, she made the decision to

go over and talk to her friend tonight. She missed Mel. *She knows I can't shut up and just be supportive. I don't know how to be a person like that. Not with a situation like this, so near and dear my own heart.* She looked with fierce love at Teddy, giggling still. The novelty hadn't worn off for either of them yet.

Movement drew her gaze, and Lisa gasped mildly when she realized her neighbor on the opposite side of the Vincents' house was out on her side porch paralleling Lisa's backyard. The Bocas had moved in a year and a handful of months ago. The man couldn't have been thirty-five years old and Pete had mentioned after talking to the husband that the woman was even younger. Lisa remembered being in a fog the day she'd realized they had new neighbors. She'd been caring for Teddy to the exclusion of all else. In the time since, she'd neglected to do more than greet her new neighbors... Actually she'd never seen more than glimpses of the woman. She'd had the unfortunate displeasure of talking to the husband a few times, and she'd come away from the experiences wondering if he was coming on to her with his wife so close by. Maybe he was just naturally charming to all women, but Lisa had been put off by him instantly. Her ill-will toward the man had increased when, recently, she'd seen him coming out of a tavern with some woman—obviously not his wife. He and the scantily-clad female had been pawing each other and kissing all the way to his car, and, presumably from there, to her apartment or a motel.

Lisa recalled that Pete had told her about brief interactions with the husband since they'd moved in, but he'd said each time that he hadn't formed an opinion. That was a cop answer, and Lisa knew it. Unless there was a definite reason for suspicion, Pete would reserve his judgment indefinitely.

*Boca is away a lot. Leaves early in the morning and rarely gets home before dark. Every day, too. The wife almost never leaves the house. I see her through the oversized, curtain-less windows sometimes. No way to avoid that. But she sometimes has a visitor during the day. A man wearing what looks like hospital scrubs. That guy sometimes brings groceries or other things for her. I've seen him use the key hidden under the huge plant on the front porch of the house to let himself in. So he must be some relative.*

Unable to help herself, Lisa studied the woman, shocked by how withdrawn, pale, and gauntly thin she was. *Mel thinks she's anorexic and/or bulimic. She's mentioned that the few times we talked about our new neighbors.*

Mrs. Boca—not twenty-five years old, Lisa would bet—wore a non-descript handkerchief around her head. *She's always got something like this on around her head. Because she's bald? She has to be. There's nothing under that handkerchief. It fits right against her skull. And she doesn't have eyebrows either.*

Lisa swallowed with difficulty, wondering if the woman was sick.

*Cancer? What else could it be? Anorexia or bulimia doesn't make your hair fall out...or does it? Maybe it does. How would I know? But what about eyebrows?*

Full-out staring the way she was, Lisa was shocked when the woman noticed her. Before Lisa could apologize or say a word of greeting, her neighbor all but leapt back from the deck and ran into the house through the patio door. Her expression didn't escape Lisa's notice. She looked furtive. *Almost terrified. What in the world? Surely she can't be afraid of me or Teddy?*

Lisa turned back to her son. "Getting hungry, teddy bear?"

Teddy nodded, easily allowing the transition—something Lisa told herself he got from his daddy. As she slowed the swing, then scooped her son out, she glanced at the neighboring house again, sighing. That house had gone through its share of temporary owners—most of them unfriendly and not at all sharing the roles of raising young families as everyone else currently living in the Wisteria Road subdivision were. The Bocas had done nothing to make their house a real home. They hadn't put up curtains, and Lisa couldn't help looking in undeterred, often. They barely had any furniture or possessions, she'd noted. While Lisa hated to be nosy, she considered it impossible not to see things. Like the husband always being on the phone or laptop when he was home. Like almost never seeing this husband and wife in the same room together, let alone interacting the way a couple would. Once or twice she'd seen the woman cooking, serving her husband, cleaning when she barely looked able to stand up straight.

Still bothered by the furtive, scared look her neighbor had worn on her skeletal face a moment ago, Lisa carried her son back to the house, looking up in time to see the predicted rain starting to fall. Inside, after she helped Teddy take off his jacket, hat and mittens and muddy boots, she let him choose several picture books to look at on the dining room table while she got lunch started.

*Why is this woman hiding? That's what she's doing, too. I can count on one hand how many times I've seen her outside since they moved in. So why is she inside all the time? Didn't her husband once say something after they first arrived? Something about his wife not being able to tolerate the sun?* Lisa grimaced. It seemed more than that—seemed like she couldn't tolerate people. *Why did she look so skittish? What is she afraid of?*

Teddy giggled and held up a book, saying, "Funny 'gator", and Lisa responded to his sweetness. Her neighbors were none of her business. Her main concern was her family. Her own active, wonderful life. She'd gotten in trouble in the past, being a busybody neighbor, sticking her nose in where it didn't belong, causing awkward situations that had made a few unkind people dub her an "invading army when something was amiss and thought only she could come to the rescue".

*The Bocas are none of my concern. End of story.*

She didn't even believe herself.

## Chapter Two

"Got any plans tonight?" Pete Shasta asked as he and his best friend and investigative partner on the Falcon's Bend Police Department, Danny Vincent, left the station after work.

"Picking up Dee from my mom's." Danny didn't look at him when he added, "Mel won't be home from work until late again. Preparing for an art show, I guess."

"Well, your mom and sisters must love the extra time they have with Dee-Dee," Pete said optimistically. Danny eyed him as if wondering whether an alien had abducted the real Pete Shasta, who was anything but Pollyanna in his general attitude. Pete couldn't help chuckling. "Sorry. Okay, but why don't you and Dee-Dee come over for dinner."

"Lisa must be sick of cooking for an extra two."

"Never. You know you're always welcome." Pete glanced away, struggling against saying the words Danny needed and absolutely didn't want to hear. "The man's her boss, Van Gogh," he managed, keeping his tone light. In addition to being an investigator, Danny had artistic inclinations he'd held a fleeting hope of making his career once upon a time in New York—hence Pete's favorite nickname for him. "That's all. Mel loves you. You know that. After all the two of you've been through, why not put a little faith in that?"

"You take your own advice ever?" Danny asked.

"Hell, no. Doesn't mean it's not good advice."

Danny shrugged, sounding breezy when Pete knew he felt anything but. "Well, she enjoys the attention of her boss. No denying that."

"Eh," Pete offered. "She's young. A lot younger than you. Remember that, old man. You enjoyed your time bein' young. That's as far as this'll go. She wants her life with you and Dee-Dee."

Danny took a deep breath as they approached their respective cars in the back parking lot. "I don't think she knows what she wants, Pete."

"So ask her. Why torture yourself like this?"

Pete already knew the answer to that. Danny was afraid to ask his wife what she wanted because he might not like her answer. Besides, just asking could set off an avalanche he didn't want to be the one to bring down.

*Why does she gotta put him through this? And here she's got me defendin' her so maybe Danny might feel better from hearin' a little encouragement.*

Pete clapped a hand on Danny's shoulder. "Come over after you've got Dee. Lisa's making homemade chicken tenders. You can't say no to those any more than Dee-Dee can. 'sides, the kids love to play together."

Luckily, his friend nodded.

Relieved, Pete headed home, eagerly looking forward to spending time with his wife and son after a day of routine work he could have done in his sleep. He remembered too easily what it was like to go home to an empty house and spend every night by himself. He also recalled painfully what it was like not to go home to his wife—his ex-wife Bonnie, who'd cheated on him every time the thought crossed her mind. He would have gratefully worked twenty-four hours a day back when those scenarios ruled his life. Now he had everything a man could ask for. A gorgeous, giving wife who loved him almost as much as he loved her and... *Teddy. Man-oh-man, who could've imagined that the very thing I resisted was my dream come true? Because Lisa, my fantasy, couldn't have children, I didn't let myself want kids either. She's everything I wanted and all I anticipated was trying to keep her happy enough not to notice she could do a lot better than me. When she suggested adoption seven years into a marriage that keeps getting better, deep down I didn't think I'd be any good as a father. I couldn't have imagined that having a son would change my whole life, my perspective, even my marriage, which was practically perfect to begin with. My son has made everything better and sweeter. The second that newborn bundle with bright, orange-red hair like my own was placed in my arms, I was lost.*

*I was found.*

The joy of his life had come down to pulling into his driveway at the end of every workday and seeing Lisa and Teddy waiting at the front door for him. Lisa had shocked him when she insisted she wanted to give up her career to take care of Teddy. Her boss at the adoption agency had been ready to hand over the reins of the business to her. That promotion was what Lisa had worked all her life toward. "That was when having a child of my own wasn't in the realm of possibility," she'd said when she told him she wanted to be a full-time mother to their son. "I want to be a traditional wife and mother."

Pete hadn't said what he was thinking. "You?" Instead, he'd insisted whatever she wanted to do was fine with him. Somehow the idea of a traditional wife had fallen out of favor. These days, it was sexist to be thrilled when your wife wanted to sacrifice her career for her family. But it was how Pete felt. He loved coming home to their cozy house Lisa lovingly cared for each day. She had plenty in savings from all her years working, but Pete knew sooner or later they'd feel the financial squeeze that they were an income short. He didn't care. Somehow they'd make do on his salary. As long as they were all happy, they could live without the smartphones and eighty-inch television.

His heart crammed into his throat, Pete got out and walked to his impossibly beautiful wife with a smile that lit him up and to his son, grinning and jabbering a mile a minute, his arms held out eagerly to Pete long before

he arrived to take him in. Teddy's small body against his and Lisa's on the opposite side made him feel like the puzzle was complete and whole. He hugged and kissed them both in turn, lingering when Lisa sighed against his mouth. "Is Danny coming?" she asked, sounding content.

"Soon. With the munchkin."

"Good. I made extra." She poked Teddy gently in the tummy when she said, "Guess what, teddy bear? Dee-Dee's coming over tonight."

"Dee-Dee!" Teddy cheered.

"Will Mel be late?" Lisa asked Pete.

She didn't say "again" but the sentiment was implied. It was hard for Pete to imagine Lisa and Mel being at odds and for as long as they had been these past few weeks. The two had been bosom buddies since Danny and Mel got married.

"Danny says yeah."

Lisa nodded, and they went inside the house. The scent of food cooking made Pete's stomach growl anxiously. "Babe, you're makin' me hungry. Hope Danny hurries or there won't be anything left."

"His mom might talk him into staying for dinner."

"Probably not tonight. Danny says the more he agrees to that, the more upset his mom gets with Mel."

"I should talk to her soon. Tonight."

Though Pete wanted to tell her he'd be glad when the two of them were inseparable again, he refrained from any comment at all. With Teddy still in his arms, he followed her into the kitchen. "So, what'd you two do today?" he asked.

"Swing!" Teddy said the only word Pete understood for the next minute.

"It was actually nice weather just before lunch so we went out to the backyard to swing."

"Finally gettin' some use out of that." Pete had invested money and effort putting it up.

"We'll get a lot more this summer, when summer actually starts. Won't we, teddy bear?"

She took out two more plates, glasses and sets of silverware and set them on the dining room table. "Do you know how long the Bocas have lived next door? It's been at least a year, right?"

Pete frowned, surprised by her question. "Little longer than that. Pretty much since those psychos kidnapped those two kids and held 'em in that house for ransom."

"That's right." She glanced up at him from setting the table. "We really should try to be more neighborly, Pete," she said as he munched on a pile of olives on the center breakfast bar. Teddy ate one from his fingers. "I'd like to invite them for dinner this weekend, Pete. You don't have to work, do you?"

Pete only just stopped himself from groaning out loud. His life was full enough without trying to make friends with new people. Tactfully, he said, "They don't seem to care to be neighborly either, babe. Why not just leave it be?"

"It just seems to us that they're not neighborly. We've been so focused on Teddy and our own lives. They probably think we're snobs." She came back to the island and started chopping more vegetables for a salad. "Don't get me wrong, from what I've seen I'm not a fan of the husband, but well...she seems lonely and isolated in that house. He's gone most of the time—working, I assume. She only has one visitor and not very often. Once a week or so."

Lisa could certainly be considered a much friendlier person than he was, so Pete took that into consideration and treaded carefully when he spoke. "The guy said his wife was sick anyway. He told me that one of the first times I talked to him for a few minutes after they moved in. She doesn't come outside often 'cause the medication she's on makes sunlight dangerous for her."

"So she *is* sick," Lisa said under her breath. "Do you know what she has? Because she looks incredibly pale and gaunt. I don't think she has any hair under those scarfs and handkerchiefs she wears."

"You've talked to her?" Pete asked in surprise.

"No. I saw her today. Teddy and I were at the swing set and I just looked over. She was there on her patio. It happened so fast. And then she just disappeared inside again—almost as if she was afraid of me or something. She seemed panicked when she realized I saw her. You don't know anything about her illness?"

"No. I didn't ask. It didn't seem right to ask."

"But...if she's sick, why is he gone all the time? Shouldn't he be with her? Is it terminal? Serious? It has to be. She doesn't have any hair or even eyebrows, and she's skeletal."

Pete's internal alarms were going off. He knew his wife and didn't doubt she'd soon be obsessed by all her unanswered questions. One she got her head in somewhere, she rarely backed off until she was in trouble with a capital T. "Look, babe, listen to me. If she's sick, she may not want you to be neighborly. The kindest thing you can do for her is leave her alone."

*Ah, no way my beautiful busybody's gonna take that sterling advice.*

Lisa went rigid as she responded to his words. "If she's sick, she needs more friends than ever, Pete. Especially since her husband is the Invisible Man."

The impatient, judgmental tone of her voice assured Pete she wouldn't heed his suggestion. She'd flout it as nonsense.

Setting Teddy on the barstool with a few more olives, he walked around the counter and put his arms around Lisa, tearing ruthlessly into broccoflower. She set the head down at his urging, and he put his mouth

against her ear. "Baby, we don't know anything about these people. I know you're kind-hearted and you just wanna help. But they seem like incredibly private people to me. They won't appreciate you, me, or anyone else invading their privacy. You said yourself she seemed scared of you. That should tell you something. Be friendly when they initiate. Until then...back off."

Lisa was barely breathing when he looked at her. She spoke quietly, her expression the opposite of repentant, "I don't like it. When a person is sick, they shouldn't be alone."

"That's not our choice. It's theirs."

She didn't say anything, just held herself like a statue with the words ringing between them. In an effort to distract her, Pete shifted her long, silky, mahogany hair off her neck and kissed her there. His hands slid to her firm stomach.

Pete waited with bated breath, praying she'd drop her interest in their neighbors. Luckily, she turned to him. He groaned out loud, and they kissed leisurely until the doorbell rang a handful of minutes later.

### **Chapter Three**

As a unity, they proceeded to the door and opened to Danny and little Deidre, who was every inch the picture of her mother. Dee had thick, blond, spiral curls that fell over her shoulders. Her face, complete with huge, periwinkle blue eyes, a button nose, and a smile that lit up even the darkest places, was irresistible. She was jumping around in her father's arms as if filled with Mexican jumping beans. He let her down instead of trying to hold her, and Pete did the same with Teddy. The kids greeted one another as if they hadn't seen each other in a month instead of since last night, running hand-in-hand to the open living room.

Lisa put her arm around Danny and ushered him in. Often in the last five years, Lisa had thought that this man rose and fell with the state of his relationship with his wife. He wore his heart on his face, so to speak. She could always tell in a single glance if he was happy or sad. Pete was the exact opposite. When he was sad, he locked down, without any expression at all getting through to reveal itself in his face. He could have been happy or sad for all she knew during those times. Tonight, he'd seemed uninhibitedly happy until she'd started talking about their neighbors. Pete simply wasn't the type to play Welcome Wagon.

Since they could see the kids playing together from the living room, they all went to the kitchen, Danny standing near the patio, where he could see if anyone drove into the subdivision. Lisa chopped the broccoflower and added it to the frisée salad she was preparing. "How was work?" she asked both men. Their responses were similar and barely worth noting.

She wanted to distract Danny, knowing his mind was on his wife who wouldn't be home until late, so she wasn't expecting it when he said, "She's home."

"Melody?"

"She said she'd be late."

Lisa stopped what she was doing, wiping her hands on a towel. "Do you mind if I go over and ask her to join us for dinner?"

Danny frowned, obviously not anticipating her question, considering the fight she and Mel had had recently, but seeming relieved nevertheless. When he said, "Sure", Lisa was certain things were so bad between him and his wife, he was actually looking for ways to avoid her. *I didn't want that to be the truth, but deep down I suspected what was going on. Danny and Mel's relationship is nothing if not volatile. I don't know how either of them can stand the up-and-down craziness of being in love. Me and Pete are solid, steady. Even when we fight, we make up within five minutes nearly every single time. I wouldn't have it any other way either.*

Seeing that it was sprinkling again, Lisa threw on her rain jacket and rushed next door, arriving on the drive approach just as Melody was getting out of her car. Her friend's beautiful face was locked with wariness but softened when Lisa opened her arms to hug her. "I'm sorry, bestie. You know why this is so hard for me, don't you?"

"Yes," Mel agreed instantly. They hugged and cried, cried and hugged and apologized as if stumbling over each other in the process of being gentle again.

"Please tell me you and Danny are all right. I can't stand the thought of..." *The inevitable. For five years, they've been swinging between making up and breaking up, no in-between.*

Mel grimaced. "He doesn't want to talk to me either. He's just so jealous, Lisa. Do you understand what it's like to be with someone who can't see reason when it comes to other men? Michael is nothing more than my employer—regardless of what *he* wants our relationship to be. Danny won't accept that. But I haven't done anything wrong."

Despite having a baby, Melody didn't look like she'd ever so much as considered it. She was sleek and sexy, dressed like a fashion model. So Danny was right when he said—like it was a bad thing—that his wife got more attractive every day, but Lisa knew he was afraid of losing her because of that. Michael Herman was the opposite of Danny, too—rich, cultured, brimming with confidence. Lisa preferred salt of the earth, real, humble men. Deep down, she knew Melody did, too.

"Maybe this is one of those things you can't tell someone, honey. Maybe you have to *show* Danny he's the only man you want."

Mel shook her head, looking helpless. "I don't know how. I've tried."

"You've tried as much as possible while having a rambunctious almost two-year-old in the house. You're both probably exhausted. Maybe you're a

little rusty.”

Her friend gaped at her. “Are you suggesting...? But we’re fighting so much. How would...? Who would want...?”

“Trust me. Danny wants. Fighting or no fighting, he wants. Come on. Come over for dinner. Danny and Dee are already there. I made plenty.”

Melody looked wary again—probably because she was used to either fighting or tension with her husband and so she’d been avoiding both as much as he had been. But she nodded, sighing. “Thanks.” She tossed her briefcase in the back seat and chose her steps carefully to avoid the mud with her Calvin Kline Ariel pumps.

Dee cried, “Mommy! Mommy! Mommy!” as soon as Melody walked into the house behind Lisa. Both Dee and Teddy hugged her, excited to have her joining them tonight. Then Mel shocked everyone when she proceeded to kiss Danny passionately. Lisa grinned at Pete, who seemed flabbergasted by the development.

Feeling hopeful that this would work out as well as the previous ten thousand problems the couple had gotten through somehow in five years, Lisa went to get dinner on the table.

## Chapter Four

*Friday, March 16*

Lisa’s sister-in-law, MaryEmma, was homeschooling her five-year-old son Kris (named after Pete and Jordan’s older sister, Crystal, whom they hadn’t seen in almost two decades) and her sister’s eleven-year-old daughter Ariel. Jordan’s thirteen-year-old daughter Nicole from a previous marriage was in public school. Lisa brought Teddy over each Friday morning and they had lunch with MaryEmma and the kids before going home for a nap. On Fridays, the kids combined school work with fun, performing various science and horticulture projects Lisa knew Teddy enjoyed, too.

Today, they were planting seeds inside the greenhouse MaryEmma had designed as an extension of her house. Eventually, they would transplant the small plants into the amazingly elaborate garden in the backyard that MaryEmma cultivated each year. To say she had a green thumb was putting it mildly. Lisa had deliberately dressed Teddy in old clothes and brought along a change. He was already muddy but thrilled about sticking his hands in the mounds of potting soil.

Lisa smiled at him, looking at MaryEmma with her two kids around her. She was five months pregnant and adorable. Lisa couldn’t help envying her. *I’d love another child, but Pete had trouble with getting another dog after my old faithful Basset Hound died. We still haven’t because Teddy is our sole focus. Instead, we adopted. But adopting the first time was huge for*

*him. Adopting a second time...this time a daughter...I don't even know how to bring that up to him.*

"How are Danny and Mel doing?" MaryEmma asked. MaryEmma had become friends with the couple, too, and knew the current situation.

"Better." For the past two mornings, Danny had come out in the morning with Melody and kissed her goodbye as if they'd shared an incredibly night he didn't want to be over. Though Pete had said his best friend seemed happier, Deidre was still being taken by Grandma or one of her aunties during the workdays. Lisa had to remind herself constantly that what Danny and Mel decided about the situation was none of her business, but she'd been thinking of offering to take care of Dee herself each day. But she knew in doing so she'd get even more attached to the idea of adopting again because Dee was already as close as a daughter to her.

"Good."

"What about Shell? Is she here?" Since Ariel was sitting next to MaryEmma, Lisa didn't want to be too obvious. Ariel didn't appear to notice they were talking about her mother, but then she seemed to tune out anything concerning that woman anyway.

A look crossed MaryEmma's face that made it obvious she didn't want to talk about the sore subject—one she and Jordan had been dealing with for the past few years. After MaryEmma and Jordan, initially neighbors, got married and moved into her house, Shelley and Ariel had lived in Jordan's house until they started renting it out for extra money because MaryEmma wanted to be a full-time mother to Kris. Up to that point, Shelley had been doing as well as someone with her depressive, restless personality could on her own. Then she'd lost her job. With no money coming in, she'd had to move in with her sister since living in the extra house was no longer an option for her. She'd gotten interim jobs but lost them all because she went out every night to party and hook up, then couldn't get up for work in the morning. Since she was an attractive woman, she didn't need money to go out either.

"She's becoming pretty unbearable. I don't know what to do anymore. She neglects Ari...but it's worse than that. Jordie says she's tried to seduce him more than once. I wish I could say he's imagining it, but I know he's not. He wants her out of his house. Not Ari, of course. But Shell. I don't know how to do that. I've taken care of my sister since she was younger than her daughter. How can I just act like she's not my responsibility anymore?"

"You don't think Jordan..." Lisa started.

"Of course not. But he's right. He shouldn't have to fend off an octopus in his own home. She's not his problem. But she is mine."

Lisa sympathized with her, though the truth was Shelley wasn't MaryEmma's responsibility. But both MaryEmma and Jordan loved Ariel like a daughter. Lisa knew they'd adopt her in a second if Shelley asked them to

or, likely as not, if Shelley had her own daughter taken away from her by the child welfare department.

## Chapter Five

After lunch, Lisa drove home, hoping Teddy wouldn't fall asleep in his car seat on the short trip, since he wouldn't go down for his nap as easily if he did. When she arrived in the subdivision, she saw a familiar sight pulling into the driveway of the Bocas house. The beat-up red car that belonged to the man Lisa suspected was the brother of the woman living there was parked on the garage approach. He got out with several plastic bags and went to the porch, where he tipped up the hobbit jade plant in a pot to get the key, then let himself in.

All the time she was coaxing Teddy to sleep, Lisa thought about her neighbors. Pete was against her being friendly, but why shouldn't she be? If the Bocas didn't reciprocate, she'd back off. But at least she could welcome them to the neighborhood.

Once Teddy slept peacefully, she went downstairs planning to whip up a batch of cookies. After Teddy woke, they'd go next door and knock on the door. If the woman answered, they'd give her the cookies and invite her and her husband to dinner tomorrow evening. *Pete won't like this, and not just because he isn't a guy who wants to expand his world and include new people in it. He'll resent being thrust in the middle of an iffy situation and being told to play nice.*

Lisa couldn't get herself to change her course. She opened her favorite baking cookbook. As she flipped through the recipes, trying to see what would be best as a welcome-wagon delivery, she heard a soft knock on glass. Lisa looked around, wondering where the sound had come from. She saw her neighbor standing at the patio door. Lisa's cheeks flushed at the reminder of just how often she'd been seeing this woman all week—through the windows of her house.

Lisa rushed to the patio door to open it, mesmerized by the surprising appearance of the very person she'd been thinking about off and on for days. Her neighbor looked a little different this close up, not necessarily for the better. Her expression was friendly, not at all furtive or afraid. True, she did look horribly ill. Her head was little more than a skull with skin stretch too taut over it. She'd switched the handkerchief for a colorful scarf and the clothes she wore, while loose, didn't make her appear so painfully emaciated.

"Hello," Lisa said with a bright smile.

"This is probably abrupt," the woman said. "I hope you're not offended that Jerome and I haven't been neighborly before this point. I'm Eva Boca. I live next door." She pointed back at her house.

"I'm Lisa Shasta. Come in. I've been meaning to get over there and say hi and welcome myself. I wasn't sure if I'd be intruding. And life has been in such an upheaval since we adopted."

Eva smiled wider, somehow looking more ghoulish in the process. Her eyes were almost nondescript and the lack of eyebrows only made the bones in her face seem more pronounced. Sympathy filled Lisa so she could hardly contain it from gushing out of her to embrace this poor woman. "The little boy I've seen you with? He's a cutie."

Pride filled Lisa now, warring with her compassion, and she closed the door behind her neighbor. For the first time, she noted that Eva was carrying something on a plate.

"Thanks. This is so ironic. I was literally about to bake some cookies so Teddy and I could come over with them after his nap."

Sheepishly, Eva held up the paper plate. Through the plastic wrap, Lisa saw that the cookies weren't homemade. "I'm sorry these are from a carton. I'm not much of a baker. I asked Raff to pick something up from the bakery and instead he brought a box of pre-packaged cookies. I was hoping you wouldn't notice."

Lisa laughed, struggling to hold back burning tears as she took the offering. "I'm a sucker for peanut butter crème cookies. Would you like some tea?"

"That would be lovely."

After pulling out a chair at the kitchen table and waving her guest into it, Lisa turned into the kitchen to put the tea kettle on. "Raff? Is he the one who visits you? Sorry to be nosy. I've just noticed. I saw him today."

Eva nodded. "Raffety Frisken. Raff. My older brother. He works at the hospital in town."

"Is he a doctor or nurse?"

"No. A janitor. He wears the scrubs though. I've never asked why." Eva laughed again.

Lisa busied herself getting out her stock of various teabags, cups and saucers. Tears leaked from her eyes, and she couldn't answer her own internal demand about why she was so emotional. After all, she didn't know for sure this woman was terminally ill. She just looked... *Like Death is holding her so tight, she can hardly breathe without counting because she has so few minutes left before it takes her.*

When Lisa brought the teapot over, setting it on a trivet next to the plate of cookies, Eva shook her head. "Thanks, but I don't drink anything but my distilled water. I'm picky about what I ingest. I'm sorry you went to the trouble."

"No. No trouble. I always have a cup at this time anyway." As she sat down, Lisa took one of the cookies and bit into it. Though Eva put one on her plate, she didn't pick it up.

"So...your husband is Jerome? I've met him a few times."

"Yes. He mentioned he'd met you and your husband. We'd only been married a year when we came to live here. He's the love of my life. The Lord blessed me when he brought Jerome into my life."

Lisa frowned, recalling all the times she'd looked into their windows and saw only one or the other—almost never the two of them together. "He...seems to work a lot," she murmured gently, blowing on her tea. "I mean..."

Eva nodded, looking unoffended. "He really does. He owns a chain of pharmacies around the country. A family business he took over when his father died. And he has a lot of invested stock in pharmaceutical research corporations around the world. It's not easy to be the boss. Someone has to make sure every single little thing is done right. Jerome is fanatical about that."

*At home, too?*

"What about your husband?" Eva asked.

"He's an investigator on the Falcon's Bend Police Department."

The woman nodded. "A detective. Well, that sounds like an exciting life."

Lisa chuckled. "Sometimes more than I bargained for. But Pete is the love of my life, too. I can't imagine living without him."

"That's nice."

"Listen...are you and Jerome doing anything this weekend? Would you like to come over for dinner one night?"

"How lovely of you to ask! Let me bring it up to Jerome and I'll get back to you."

Lisa nodded, thinking she'd have to do the same with her husband. Pete wouldn't be happy about this, but she'd soften him up tonight before she brought it up. She'd make his favorite dinner and plan something romantic for when Teddy was in bed for the evening. By the time she was done with him, he'd have no defenses left and he'd agree to anything she suggested.