



Falcon's Bend Case Files, Volume II

Excerpts

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Murder on the Heartstrings

“The basis of shame is not some personal mistake of ours, but the ignominy, the humiliation we feel that we must be what we are without any choice in the matter, and that this humiliation is seen by everyone.”

~Milan Kundera, *Immortality*

“Perpetual devotion to what a man calls his business is only to be sustained by perpetual neglect of many other things.”

~Robert Louis Stevenson

Chapter One

February 13th

"Each suite has a private, deluxe bath, two-person Jacuzzi, fireplace, daily maid service and a full breakfast. Guest accommodations include a heated, indoor pool, hot tub and sauna, fitness equipment, spa and massage services..."

Pete Shasta felt his beloved wife of five years glance at him from the passenger's seat. Lisa read from the brochure for Honeymoon Haven Inn, a romantic hideaway in the woods in upper northwest Wisconsin that attracted skiers and honeymooners. But he didn't take his gaze from the winter-slick roads.

The blizzard had started slowly that morning until it'd worked itself into a winter squall. By either luck or curse, he'd gotten behind a snowplow a few miles into town. Because Pete was following the plow, the road was in much better condition than those driving before it. That wasn't saying much under the circumstances. The stress of following the vehicle in the blizzard howling around them had him so on-edge, he didn't feel comfortable glancing away from the road ahead for an instant.

"You want a massage, baby, I'm your man," he murmured. They passed another car that had gone off the road, but a police officer had already arrived to help.

Lisa chuckled, continuing to read out loud about the full service restaurant, access to ice fishing, seven miles of cross-country skiing on groomed trails and snowmobile trails. Pete didn't intend to take advantage of anything beyond the privacy of their romantic suite. And maybe room service when they needed re-fueling. *If we ever get there.*

Just before he passed through a bright orange gate similar to those parks used to close up for the night, the plow turned off the road, leaving him to his own fate. They were almost there now. *Slow and steady wins the race.*

He was taking Lisa to the luxury resort for her Valentine's Day birthday. He'd timed his annual vacation with the duo holiday. He wasn't fond of travel—especially in a blizzard—so he rarely got far from his home in Falcon's Bend, Wisconsin. He'd worked as a detective on the Falcon's Bend Police Department for almost twelve years. He knew better than to stick around town on

vacation days. If he did, one way or another, he'd be called back in. Nope, he was planning on spending the next seven days and nights in the arms of his angel. Crime wouldn't get in the way this time. He'd made certain of that by choosing this secluded spot near the top of the hill, nestled in the trees. Still, he couldn't shake the premonition that he wouldn't escape so easily. He never had before.

The snow coming down in thick, wet clumps was only part of his trepidation. Even the tantalizing memory of the scraps of lace and satin he'd glimpsed in the brown shopping bag before Lisa packed it last night couldn't quell his worries. Grateful as he was that they were nearly there, the road up was steep and treacherous. He could barely see the road leading to it—the snow covered the road and had accumulated several inches. The windshield wipers did a poor job of keeping up with the fierce, blowing snowfall.

"What a beautiful place," Lisa said on a sigh, turning to put one arm over the back of his seat.

He could hear how laidback she sounded—a direct contrast to the tension he felt. He knew she thought that merely arriving here signaled nothing could go wrong and she'd soon have her man away from his mistress. At times, his job did feel that treacherous. When he was solving a mystery, little else could break his concentration. Somehow, Lisa—unlike his first wife—put up with it. Accepted it. Still loved him. *Thank you, God.*

Soon, he could reward her patience. The woman who always held his heart would have his undivided attention. He could hardly wait.

Only when the chained tires on the car cleared the hill and he pulled up under the reception-overhang of the rustic wood-and-stone structure did the tightness in his chest relax. He glanced around, seeing a large building with an oversized garage door set back from the inn.

When Lisa's fingers slipped into his hair, he looked at her. Her gesture brought back the one thing that had kept him going for the past few weeks. The anticipation of being alone with her, preferably naked, for the next seven days. The state of semi-arousal he'd been in at the mere thought of giving Lisa her

birthday gift returned. She leaned close to him, her sienna-colored eyes filled with love and promise.

"Almost two o'clock. We're here earlier than I expected, but it felt like it took forever," he said, grinning sheepishly because he knew she'd sensed his stress.

"Finally."

Her breath was warm and chocolate-scented. He'd given her a giant, heart-shaped box of her favorite candies that morning.

"You're not getting away from me for the next week." A boatload of determination laced her words.

"Thought that was my line."

Pete slid his fingers into her long, silken brown hair, cradling her face in his hand as he did so, and closed the inches between their lips. Semi-arousal turned into full-on need when her mouth opened against his and her tongue touched his. *Want her, need her, gotta have her now...*

Lisa's car door opened, shocking Pete as the exuberant voice, accompanied with an equally exuberant face, cried, "Welcome, welcome! We are so pleased to have you here at the Honeymoon Haven Inn. I am Felippo Theoclymenus, but you may call me Flip. I will be assisting you during your stay."

The middle-aged bellhop, who might have been Greek or Turkish, put his hand out, his smile reaching megawatt levels. Lisa had no choice but to get out of the car. Pete groaned, but then figured the faster they got checked in, the quicker he could get back to that kiss.

He stepped out while Flip led Lisa to the double doors. He opened one for her, then turned to Pete, bowing. He had a shock of black hair that was sprinkled liberally with gray. His deeply tanned face had numerous moles and dark spots. "If you will allow me, sir, I will park your car and bring in your luggage while you check in."

Muttering his thanks, Pete handed him the keys. At the least, he had to concede that the resort was living up to its promise of luxury. He joined Lisa inside the cozily warm reception area, and together they went to the front desk. The man there with an extravagant moustache that would have done Hercule Poirot proud inclined his dark head to them. "Good afternoon. I'm

Stephen Mendez, manager of the Honeymoon Haven Inn. How may I help you?"

Pete told him his name.

"You'll be happy to know your suite is ready for you, Mr. Shasta. I can check you in early."

Pete had figured they'd take longer getting here, with shopping or lingering over lunch, so the three o'clock check-in wouldn't be a problem. He was relieved now that they wouldn't have to wait in the lobby for over an hour.

Lisa walked around the expansive lobby filled with fancy furniture and strange artwork. In the opposite corner away from the front desk was a sitting nook bracketing an immense fireplace with a crackling fire that chased away the chill.

"You have a spa?" Lisa asked while Pete signed the papers Mendez lay before him.

"I must apologize," Mendez said, and Pete noticed then how nervous he looked. His dark eyes darted between the two of them. "Our spa manager called in sick today, so services have been canceled for the day. Additionally, massages must be scheduled in advance." He handed Lisa a form to reserve the masseur. Pete glanced at it to see they offered in-room massages. He didn't like the idea. "Our dining room should open at 3:30. However, our chef and restaurant staff still haven't arrived. I fear the weather is preventing them."

"Aren't blizzards common this time of year up here?" Pete asked. He'd seen something to that effect on the inn's website. There'd been a warning about roads in and out being closed until blizzards were over and the pass could be cleared. At the time, it'd sounded like a benefit to him. Pete remembered the orange gate he'd passed on his way up the steep hill. It was probably what they used to prevent anyone from going up, or down, the hill when conditions were dangerous.

"Yes. That's true. The weather can turn on a dime. If the local law enforcement decides it's no longer safe to travel this way, they'll close the gate on the road here. They'll also stop plowing the roads until the storm abates."

Maybe seeing Lisa glance at the restaurant next to the front desk, Mendez added, "Food service will be minimal should our

staff not arrive, but we have contingencies for this situation.”

Flip came in, dusting the snow from his head and coat.

Pete turned back to the manager. “You think the roads might close soon?”

“I can’t be sure, Mr. Shasta, but we will alert our guests if that happens.” Mendez handed him a receipt with two keycards. “Flip will take you to your suite.”

With his previous enthusiasm, Flip gathered them and ushered them toward the elevator on the opposite side of the lobby from the front entrance. On the way, he pointed out the observation lounge with huge glass windows that overlooked the forest leading higher up the hill. When they returned to the hall, Pete saw their luggage on a rolling rack next to the elevator, no doubt brought in from the door next to the elevator that led outside the parking shelter.

“You are newlyweds?” he asked, his tone friendly.

“It’s my birthday tomorrow,” Lisa told him, wrapping her arms around Pete’s at the elbow. “Pete surprised me with this romantic getaway.”

Flip nodded, smiling like a lunatic, murmuring, “Very good, very good” before he asked whether Pete was on vacation from his job.

“Pete’s a police detective. He doesn’t get *vacations*. He *escapes*.”

Flip chuckled heartily.

Pete put his arm around his wife, and she raised an eyebrow at him, a smile on her lips. Together, they entered the elevator with the luggage. Flip rattled on about the weather and Mendez’s nervousness about schedules and missing employees. He also mentioned that the couple in the suite on their floor, the Stoddards, had intended to check out on the 15th. The weather would, no doubt, prevent that. “That will please Mr. Stoddard to no end. He is a retired photographer, but seems to have an eye for the younger ladies.” Flip waggled thick, salt and pepper eyebrows. “He spends a great deal of time in the observation lounge, to see the view. His poor wife though.” Flip shook his head, his face falling. “I suspect that his obsession with the younger women is what makes her so self-conscious. Babs she

prefers to be called. She is a beautiful woman in her own right. So sad. So sad. But it is not my place to say anything."

A little uncomfortable with the amount of information this man was giving them concerning total strangers, Pete asked Flip about the absent chef and restaurant staff.

Flip nodded. "It happens here. Somehow, we always get by on minimal staff. There is nothing to worry about, I assure you, sir."

He went on to talk about the guests who'd just arrived today and those they were still expecting. A fashion designer with her New Zealand model boyfriend, a former Olympic skier who'd just married and was coming in for his honeymoon, and a dear old couple celebrating their sixty-third wedding anniversary.

Pete started to worry they wouldn't get rid of the guy easily. And all he wanted was to be alone with Lisa to see where that kiss would take them.

The elevator arrived on the second floor, revealing a plush, navy blue carpet that went well with the lightly stained, wood walls. More weird modern art adorned them.

Muttering to herself, a big, sturdy maid wearing latex gloves appeared in the hall in front of the elevator, entering just after they exited. She wore a navy blue uniform that did nothing for her abundant bosom, waist and sausage legs.

"Odelia," Flip told them with a kind of reluctant relish that told Pete their bellhop knew all, saw all and loved to gossip even as he feigned an unwillingness to talk about what wasn't his business. "Her second shift maid staff has not arrived and she let the first shift go early. With the weather, the new shift may not get through. She is not happy about this."

"Mendez didn't seem sure whether the roads would close."

"Oh, they will, sir. Most definitely. I have seen this weather before. Soon, the roads will close. The gate will close and the plows will cease. It is for safety that they must."

"For how long?"

"As long as the blizzard lasts. The weathermen, they are predicting this one will last several days. Possibly three or four."

Much as he'd been looking forward to secluding himself in a luxurious suite with Lisa, the idea of being *stranded* wasn't an

appealing one to Pete.

Flip opened the door to their suite, one of two on the second floor. The first room in their suite was a huge sitting area with a massive fireplace, plush furniture, stereo, a large television in a closing cabinet, and a full bar. Flip proceeded to bustle around, unloading their luggage, stoking the fire already blazing in the fireplace, talking constantly about lovers and interesting jobs in undiminished enthusiasm. Pete finally tucked a five dollar bill into his pocket and pushed him out the door, all the while he bowed and said, "Very good, Detective. You must call if you need anything."

Pete closed and locked the door. Lisa was grinning when he turned to her. "It'll be cozy," she said while he drew her against him. "Just the two of us. No interruptions."

She was right. His uneasiness was unfounded. When he reached for her and she came without hesitation, he realized that, in his ripe old age of 32, he could think of much worse things than being in an extravagant suite with a huge bed and the most beautiful woman in the world.

They made love with a swiftness that made him chuckle out loud when it was over...but then the sound of loud, angry voices and a door slamming nearby jolted him from his hedonist focus.

"You hear that?"

Lisa reached for him, pulling his mouth back to hers. Hear what?

Chapter Two

"Now I know what was in that brown shopping bag," Pete murmured when they'd taken the edge off needs that'd been a long time in coming.

And I've been waiting for this getaway too anxiously to be satisfied for long. Lisa chuckled, looking up at him with a mischievous smile. "It's a big bag."

Pete could never be described as a pretty boy with easy charm and confidence around women. It was part of what Lisa loved so much about him, from his endless freckles, red-orange

hair, to the way he excelled at tripping over his own tongue. He still did it with her sometimes, seven years after they'd met. His fumbling had made their courtship take longer than she'd wanted. Luckily, she wasn't a woman to sit around waiting for something to come to her. Sometimes his job took over and she barely saw him, but when she compared the way he loved her to those who came before, he always came up so far on top she found herself with no complaints at all.

Pete groaned deep in his throat before he kissed her again. Dear God, she didn't think she'd ever get enough of this man. But her stomach rumbled at that moment, loud and long. She'd been so eager to get here, she'd eaten almost nothing at lunch—other than way too much chocolate. And the restaurant wouldn't open for another hour or so.

A knock made Pete groan again, but not happily. Lisa rose with him and slipped into the warm hotel robe he handed her from the bathroom. He took the other and put it on. Her gaze went to the clock while she knotted the robe. It was nearly two-thirty.

When she sat before the cheerful fire in the sitting room, she wasn't surprised to hear the manager telling Pete that the roads had officially closed. They'd been expecting an older pair and newlyweds—both couples were now stranded in town. "Caring for a handful of guests until the roads can be cleared will be easier anyway," Mr. Mendez murmured almost to himself, twisting and tugging on one corner of his moustache.

"How many other guests made it?" Lisa asked, rising to go to stand next to Pete. She knew there was another couple on this floor, the Stoddards. The roving-eyed retiree and his poor, self-conscious wife Flip had told them about. Apparently the couple was fighting, since they'd heard arguing and a door slam nearby while making love.

"The Stoddards have been here for three days." He pointed to the suite on the other side of the second floor. "They'd planned to leave on the 15th, but that may not be possible now. There's another couple on the third floor..."

"The fashion designer and her New Zealand boyfriend?" Lisa guessed.

"Felippo has been talking again," Mendez said with annoyance. "Yes. They had a single woman with them—the fashion designer's assistant apparently. The three of them arrived about two hours before the two of you."

"So the additional staff never made it?" Lisa guessed.

Mr. Mendez gave a nervous look that vividly portrayed his worry about running the inn basically on his own. "Unfortunately, that's correct. Our chef, wait staff and additional maids are also stranded in town. While our restaurant won't be serving a full menu until our staff can get here, our maid does provide basic meals."

"And the spa?"

"Our masseur will still be providing services throughout your stay. I recommend you go down to the spa for that."

Lisa almost laughed when Pete said the masseur's services wouldn't be needed. Though she'd known he'd be too jealous to let another man massage her and, frankly, the idea of anyone else's hands on her but Pete's *wasn't* pleasant, she had been looking forward to a facial and any other pampering the spa provided.

"That's probably for the best," Mr. Mendez said to Pete's jealous comment.

His words made little sense to Lisa. Shouldn't he be advising them to take advantage of the amenities the inn offered, especially considering how little *extra* they would be providing with minimal staff during at least part of their stay?

The manager excused himself, saying he needed to inform the guests on the third floor. Pete looked after him until he'd disappeared into the hall with the elevator.

"Not sure that guy's suited to a job like this. I'm afraid he's gonna have a nervous breakdown." Pete closed the door. He was shaking his head.

"Maybe this is his first week."

"Maybe. Maybe once the roads are cleared, he'll take off and never come back."

Chuckling, Lisa reached for him. He untied the belt around her robe and pushed it off as if it was an affront to his plans.

"Hmm, maybe we can find something to do until dinner is

served..." she murmured.

A scream sounded loud and shrill from the hall. In shock, she and Pete whirled toward the suite door. The scream outside became a wail. Hurriedly, Lisa swept up her robe and pulled it back on. Then Pete rushed out of their suite into the hall with her on his heels. He looked toward the crossing hall with the stairwell and elevator on one side, then toward the janitor's closet at the end of the suite hall. Odelia, the muttering maid they'd met on their way out of the elevator, stood in front of the closet. She covered her mouth with her hand and screamed wildly again.

Lisa peered around Pete when he stopped short next to the woman. He swore and Lisa gasped. A young man had been stuffed unceremoniously inside the small space, a massage table lying on top of his body. Lisa could see he was dead.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped back and pinched herself, certain she had to be dreaming. Either she was having a nightmare or her very worst fear about her romantic holiday had come true. *Death. It's murder on the heartstrings when you're married to a detective.*

Flashback

*"The spirits of the dead who stood
In life before thee are again
In death around thee - and their will
Shall then overshadow thee: be still."
~Edgar Allan Poe, Spirits of the Dead*

"What was her real fate nobody knows, in consequence of so many pretending to know. It is one of those facts that have become confounded by a variety of historians. Some asserted that she lost her way among the tangled mazes of the swamp and sunk into some pit or slough; others, more uncharitable, hinted that she had eloped with the household booty, and made off to some other province; while others assert that the tempter had decoyed her into a dismal quagmire on top of which her hat

was found lying. In confirmation of this, it was said a great black man with an axe on his shoulder was seen late that very evening coming out of the swamp, carrying a bundle tied in a check apron, with an air of surly triumph."

~Washington Irving, *The Devil and Tom Walker*, 1824

Chapter One

February 12th

"Come on, ya old mutt. It's gettin' late," Ryan Staub called to the black lab that'd been in his life for so long, he no longer remembered a time without her. Hannah whined, sniffing around the thick, black Tamarack trees and shrubs that surrounded the swamp. The lab disappeared from view again.

Exploring the woods behind the farm, even in the dead of winter, was the highlight of her day. Lately, afternoon was the only time either of them got out of the house. Ryan spent most of the morning sleeping off an all-night drunk.

But the sun had long since faded behind ominous clouds, the moon peeking out here and there with a wane light. Fog had begun rolling in around them, dense and opaque, rendering vision to barely a five-foot radius.

Shivering, Ryan cast a wary glance at the trees wrapped in vines as numerous as gnarled fingers. Sometimes he imagined they reached toward him, hoping to snatch a corner of his coat and drag him down into the swamp.

Though neither Ryan, nor his parents and grandparents before him, had ever had a satisfactory cause for it, the lake here on the Staub property, with its many bogs, never froze over completely—not even in Wisconsin's dead-cold winters. The rotting stink of methane, hydrogen sulfide and phosphine of the swamp was a continuous state.

A popping sound made him jump. "That ain't right," he muttered his anxiety that the swamp still emitted its unseasonable flatulence this time of year. His voice sounded eerie in the growing darkness, as if the trees were closing in tighter and tighter.

He was about to call for his dog again when, off to the right, he heard Hannah let out a terrified, shaky whine, a sound that quavered his insides like shaken Jell-O.

Ryan stared in open-mouthed horror when an ethereal, green-yellow blob of light rose slowly from the swamp. The light hovered for a moment, luminescence shifting, then it began to glide—straight toward him. Within the drifting ghostly glow, he saw a great black figure carrying an axe. Over its shoulder was a bundle tied in a checked apron. There was a grin of triumph on the grimy, twisted face. A pair of slitted red eyes stared out at him. A strange humming tune emanated from the creature as it continued to approach him.

From behind the ghastly image, Hannah appeared, barking madly and frantically at the shape. *Not crazy. My old dog sees it, too! I'm gettin' the hell outta here now!* Ryan snapped out of his trance, turned and ran even when he couldn't see to piss in front of him.

"Hannah!" he cried.

Damn him for it, but he didn't bother to make sure his old mutt followed. He ran the path he had a thousand times before, through the fog and darkness. When he couldn't prevent himself from it a moment longer because every hair on the back of his neck stood on end, he looked back at the apparition. *Not the devil! Lucinda. My dead wife. And that can only mean she's come back for revenge.*

Ryan ran all the way home, not turning back a second time. No siree, not when a part of him knew that horrible specter followed, dogging his heels, gnarled fingers reaching... He threw open the front door, aware then that Hannah wasn't beside him the way she always was when he came in his house. *Don't matter. Can't save her. God in heaven, I can't save myself anymore.*

Ryan slammed the front door shut, fumbling to lock it. He didn't breathe his sigh of relief just then though. No. He flew through the rest of the rambling old farmhouse, checking every lock on door and window, aware the whole time that *it* was out there. *Lucinda's come back to me. But then she ain't fully left since she disappeared seven months ago. She's everywhere I*

look. I can feel her presence, smell her expensive perfume. She's been hauntin' me.

Just as he had since she'd left without a trace, Ryan broke open a bottle of whiskey, sat down in his chair, and tried to drown the memories that wouldn't leave him.

Chapter Two

February 13th

Ryan woke when the morning sunlight flooded the living room and spilled over him like a jury shining a light on a sinner without a prayer. He'd fallen half out of his chair, the whiskey bottle in shards at his feet. Blinking against a throbbing headache and the ruthless light, he caught a glimpse of the mud on his boots. The stink of the swamp was on them.

His mouth as foul as a half-dried fish washed up on the beach, he closed his eyes again when the memory of what he'd seen last night came back to him. *No. Hell no. It was dark. That swamp oughta be frozen over this time of year. It's against the laws of nature that it never does. Lucinda, even Old Scratch himself, shouldn't be able to come out of it. Shouldn't... Nah, it was dark. I was spooked. I imagined it all.*

Forcing himself to his feet, Ryan lurched toward the bathroom. A shower would set him to rights again. Then he'd have breakfast. He'd go out and look for Hannah. *Probably slept in the barn, the lovable old mutt. Cold, but she'll survive. She has before. It'll teach her not to stay behind when I say it's time to go.*

He didn't want to think about how fast he'd run home, never mind the one friend he had in the world. He'd run faster than a man who'd become nothing more than a drunk and a recluse should have been able to. For the last several months, he'd been selling off farm animals and equipment just to stay in his home, pay the bills and keep himself in the booze that was his only means of coping.

The water gushing over him felt good, warming him when he

hadn't realized how cold he was to begin with. His hunger also came back. *It's what comes of having too damn big of an imagination. And that's all it was.*

To prove he truly believed that, he took a shaky breath, scrubbing the water from his face as he stood under the spray. With effort, he screwed open the small window then forced himself to look out on the clearing and driveway. *No sign of Hannah. No sign of a ghost. No damn indication of Lucinda's devil ghost.*

As if his mind conjured the image, a face appeared in the window screen. He screamed, jumping back. For an instant, he flailed against the plastic shower curtain. His calves came up against the cast iron side of the bathtub. With nothing else to hold the rest of him, he went crashing through the curtain, out of the tub, backwards. His head slammed against the edge of the toilet.

Blissfully, everything went black.

Double Take

"An honest person has no secret dealings."

~Chinese Proverb

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

~Matthew 6:19-21, New International Version (NIV)

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Chapter One

April 12th

"You okay?" Warren Jensen asked as they walked out to their

patrol car.

Amber Carfi looked over at her partner and lover. They'd been together romantically since Christmas and moved into his big farmhouse together at the end of January. In the more than two and a half months since then, all their friends, family and co-workers had expressed approval over the relationship they'd tried so hard to hide.

Sighing, she admitted to herself that she'd been distracted all morning, had even opted to skip breakfast—definitely not like her—and she knew Jensen noticed. Did he really want to hear the reason for her inability to concentrate? "I don't know," she managed.

"What does that mean?"

She slid into the passenger's seat—not the usual seat she tried to get; they always fought over who would drive. "Now I know there's somethin' wrong," he said softly.

She turned to find him leaning toward her. Tall, muscular, tan, Jensen had blondish-brown hair and a scruffy face that rebelled against shaving. The scruff always came back within hours. On their days off, he'd taken to not shaving at all, which she loved. He was even sexier than usual with stubble.

He grabbed her chin to keep her from turning away.

"You really wanna know? You sure?" she asked.

"Why *wouldn't* I wanna know, honey? It's you. Come on."

"Okay." She took a deep breath, wishing he'd let her look away when she said this. "I was supposed to get my period a week ago. I'm pretty regular. And I still don't have it this morning."

Well, I can take comfort in that. He didn't get a punched-in-the-stomach look in his eyes, the way I expected. He's not trying to demand confirmation of the fact that I believe not getting my period means nothing serious.

Instead, he said, "That week your birth control was screwed up."

About a month ago, they'd gotten new insurance at the police department that required all long-term prescriptions to be filled via mail order. The company that was supposed to handle the order had screwed up, and her birth control ran out for nearly

a week before the packet came. She'd been so busy that week, she hadn't gotten a single free moment to call the company and find out what she could do in the meantime. *Icing on the cake, both me and Jensen were insatiable that week. Sure, he went out and got condoms after that first day without the pill, but we had one time unprotected. Which could explain why I'm not getting my period.*

"It doesn't *have* to mean you're pregnant," Jensen murmured. She knew the ramifications had to be hitting him now. "It could mean you've been under stress you don't even realize."

He's coming up with excuses for the lateness. He not any more ready for the possibility of a pregnancy than I am. I can't blame him. "What am I stressed about?"

"You've got a stressful job. Your dad's dating Cora Kingsley."

Cora was the county coroner—a real piece of work. Amber had found her anal and annoying since the first time she met her on the job. And now her father was going out with the hag. "What in the world does he see in her?"

Their radio crackled, and Jensen beat her to the call. Tammy Allan at Dispatch said, "Just took a call from a local artist who believes he's had some work stolen, presumably last night. The Brooks Gallery on Main Street."

Amber took down the details. Though she'd taken quite a few art classes in college—more to become well-rounded than because she had any personal interest—she didn't consider herself an expert, or even savvy, in the area. Her tastes were more suited to Coolidges' poker dogs being raided by the police in "Pinched with Four Faces."

When she and Jensen entered the atmospheric lobby through the front door, the bells on the door tinkled in welcome and soft jazz music played. A young man sat behind the counter. Seeing their uniforms, he called up a spiral staircase to the right of the desk to announce them. A positively melodic, male voice responded that he'd be down in a moment.

Amber wandered over to a brochure rack near an inside door marked "Private No Admittance." She noted without interest that Jensen had wandered down the hall of the gallery entrance. *Would've figured him more for poker dogs, too.*

The brochure was labeled The Brooks Gallery. On the front panel was a picture of the artist, Victor Brooks, who could never be considered hard on the eyes. With thick, jet black hair, irresistible dimples in a face that could have been carved by a master, and strong, muscular hands and arms, he could have been a sit-in for the real artist. After all, who would ever see the ogre in his studio?

Amber read from one of the panels: "Accomplished contemporary realist artist, Victor Brooks constructs tightly controlled still life paintings in oil on canvas, drawings in graphite on paper, watercolor on paper and 5-color lithographs. He is also one of a small number of contemporary artists skillful enough to use a meticulous technique called silverpoint drawing, in which shapes, reflections and shadows are built up in a slow, repetitive layering of strokes. Among other fine art museums and galleries, Mr. Brooks' works are represented in collections including Boston Museum of Fine Arts, National Museum of American Art (Washington, DC) and Art Institute of Chicago. His works are also for sale at Biddington's Art Galleries and Auction. Mr. Brooks maintains a private studio and public exhibiting gallery in Falcon's Bend, Wisconsin."

Ooh, didn't know dinky little Falcon's Bend harbored our own celebrity. We're still reeling from the time Brett Favre put in an appearance at a shopping mall an hour from here.

Jensen was suddenly standing next to her. He said softly, "Can you believe some of this stuff runs from \$150 to \$7000?"

Amber returned the brochure to the rack and followed him back into the hall. The gallery was sumptuous, draped in velvet carpeting, the lighting muted. Within the hall, there were three separate galleries: Off to the right, a room containing Brooks' watercolor paintings and lithographic gallery; to the left, a room with drawings in graphite and silverpoint; and, in the far back of the building, a gallery with still life paintings in oil. The display cases themselves were works of art. She also noticed a number of video cameras covering every angle of the gallery.

"His paintings are in the style of contemporary," Amber noted out loud as she glanced at each one. "Realism has specific philosophical, art historical and literary roots that harken back to

earlier centuries. The 20th century term "Realism" broadened in usage to become loosely synonymous with "figuration", "representational art" and "illusionistic painting". However, today we apply the term "realism" to a contemporary style of art depicting recognizable objects or people. By the second half of the century, they were using the term with a small "r" and it became the accepted word for differentiating representational works from abstract or conceptual ones. You can see this artist's broad scope of influences within contemporary realism in these still lifes and interiors, and portraiture with people as subjects."

Jensen looked at her like she'd sprouted another head during her textbook tour of an art class she'd taken in college. She shrugged. "Anyway, they're pretty good. He does well. See how everything is designed to point the eye toward the art. When they leave here, people will remember the artwork; probably not the color of the walls or anything else."

"You're into this stuff?"

"No. But I know talent when I see it. Everything is detailed and life-life."

Jensen shrugged. "Most I've ever paid for art is \$20 for the "Kramer Painting" poster on eBay. I framed it myself."

Amber couldn't help giggling...until a voice—that gorgeously melodic one—said behind them, "I'm partial to that design myself."

She and Jensen turned, and Amber found herself facing the drop dead gorgeous Victor Brooks. *Oh, definitely not an ogre hiding in his studio. This is the guy from the brochure.* At around thirty-five years old, he was tall, lean, with hair just a shade too long, and beautiful eyes. He also smelled incredible. The charming smile on his face made Amber feel slightly giddy. She wondered how much of her ridiculous rambling into her academic past he'd heard.

It wasn't until Jensen glanced at her pointedly, then turned to Victor, that Amber realized she was staring at the artist like a star-struck teenager. "We received a call about something missing from your gallery, Mr. Brooks?"

"Yes. I'm Victor Brooks. I own this gallery and fill it with my own works."

Jensen introduced both of them, and Victor shook hands with them, smiling pleasantly with a welcome that did nothing for Amber's already spinning head. Hunger had to be doing this to her. *I should've known better than to skip breakfast.*

"What's missing specifically?" Amber asked.

"My "Risa in Porcelain"."

"Excuse me?" Amber said.

"It's a new painting I've completed. A large oil on canvas valued at nearly six thousand."

"Dollars?"

Victor chuckled good-naturedly.

Amber glanced again in the largest of the galleries. "How come some of your work isn't framed?"

Victor murmured his approval of her question. He swept his arms out to indicate a work in the room without a frame. "An unframed painting means that the viewer focuses entirely on the painting itself. Truthfully, I don't do it often, but there is one in this room I intend to leave unframed. The others will go to the framer soon, though I haven't decided for sure whether I'll include them in my upcoming show. To answer your question, certainly a frame gives a more professional look and helps define the boundaries." He pointed to another painting, this one framed. "However, in this work, see how the understated framing allows the painting to float against the background? Notice how it captures the eye and presents the painting inconspicuously. You see, the more a frame draws attention to itself, the more it distances the viewer. In many ways, the painting becomes an object. On the other hand, a fine, carved frame like this one on my "Dubious" gives a grand and formal appearance. The warm tones and hues are brought to the fore in the highest compliment. I like to consider a frame as background to artwork. Unless a frame completes the painting, I either opt for a simple, subdued frame that lets my work be the focal point or allow it stand on its own, unframed."

Jensen coughed next to her, and Amber snapped out of the spell Victor seemed to weave over her with his hand directions and the rich sound of his voice as he spoke. "What about the missing painting? "Risa in Porcelain"? What does it look like?"

"It's on a 31" by 30" canvas. My wife Risa is in the bathtub. Very tasteful. Exquisitely framed. I can show you an ACEO archival print of it." His tone betrayed an immense amount of love—for his wife, his painting, or both.

"A what?" Amber squeaked.

"ACEO stands for "Art Cards, Editions and Originals". A 2.5" by 3.5" collectible of my detailed artwork reproduced on a small scale. The reproductions can be purchased for a fraction of the price of the original, although my order for this one isn't in yet. I do keep archives of all my works, of course."

Of course he does. Why am I acting like such an idiot? Jensen's gonna give me an earful when we leave.

"If you can give us a copy, that would help a lot."

"The best I can get you is a color copy of it from my printer. It won't be anywhere near as good, but you understand that I can't give you my archival print."

"That's fine. We just want to know what it looks like so we have an idea what we're looking for," Jensen said.

"Do you do your own framing, Mr. Brooks?" Amber asked.

He shook his head. "No. I've been having the Rudenbecks at Framed do that for me for years."

"Framed is a business here in Falcon's Bend?"

"Just outside of, actually. I'll get you their contact information when I get the ACEO."

"Do you have any idea who might have taken your art, Mr. Brooks?" Jensen asked.

"None whatsoever."

"When did you notice it was missing?"

To make herself useful while Jensen conducted the interview, she got out of her notepad and pencil and started writing.

"I came in a little later than usual today, around nine o'clock. I always do a turn around my gallery before I get started in my studio upstairs. I noticed the painting was gone right away."

"And it was here when you left last night—at what time?"

"Six-thirty."

"You were the last to leave?"

"That's right."

"And was your employee here when you got here this morning?"

"No. Richard came in just a few moments before the two of you arrived. It was right here that my "Risa in Porcelain" was hanging."

Victor needlessly pointed to the bare spot—surrounded by subtle lighting—on the wall of the main gallery. "I'm preparing for a show on April 23rd. As you can see, my "Risa in Porcelain" was a spotlight item."

"How long has it been up in this spot?"

"Not long at all. It's a new painting. I'd just gotten it back from the framer yesterday, and I spent most of the day yesterday putting it up here exactly the way I wanted it. All for naught now, I'm afraid."

Jensen pointed at the cameras around the room. "You've obviously got video surveillance in place throughout the gallery. What about alarms? Burglar? Fire?"

"Yes, of course. All of those."

Amber was studying the camera near the empty place on the wall. "None of these cameras are working."

"But they're always on..." As if to prove it, Victor walked in front of one, then to the side. The camera didn't follow him.

"What an idiot I am!" With that, he rushed out to the lobby.

Retribution

"Retributive justice asserts that a legitimate moral response to crime is proportionate punishment... [i.e., Punishments are proportionate] to the severity of their respective crimes."

~Wikipedia, *Retributive Justice*,

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Retributive_justice

"Bring thyself to account each day ere thou art summoned to a reckoning; for death, unheralded, shall come upon thee and thou shalt be called to give account for thy deeds."

~Baha'u'llah, *Baha'i Faith 1844 A.D.*

August 21st

"If I've never known the difference between a hot summer day and a *scorching* hot summer day, I do now."

Lisa Shasta glanced at her best friend, Melody Vincent, who was in her thirtieth week of pregnancy. Even wearing a light sundress that showed the baby bulge she carried proudly, she looked overheated and uncomfortable. Her high cheekbones were stained a deep red.

It wasn't hard to envy her, despite her current complaint. Lisa had wanted a baby of her own for a long time, but an emergency hysterectomy seven years ago had ended any possibility of that. To top it off, the dog she'd gotten just after she learned she could never have children had recently died of an infection. Peterkins, named after a character in her favorite Raggedy Ann book, had been a mixed breed dog who'd needed a lot of babying. A week after his passing, she couldn't seem to forget how pitifully he'd whine whenever she was nearby, begging her to rub his ears just the way he liked. The way he slobbered all over when he ate and drank. The softness of his tongue when he licked her face and looked up at her with tender love in his big, soulful eyes.

Lisa blinked back tears. "Maybe we should have canceled this," she murmured. They'd invited their best friends, Melody and Danny, to this grill-out with Mel's father and Lisa's husband's parents, who were long divorced but had recently begun speaking to each other again after a decade and a half of enmity.

Mel squeezed her hand. "Not on my account. Ever since my father moved to Falcon's Bend to be closer to us and his first impending grandchild, he calls every day. I prefer the visits. Then Danny can field some of the excitement." Mel's sapphire eyes held an expression of playful sarcasm.

Lisa smiled.

From the other side of the house, the bell at the front door sounded.

"I'll start the salad," Mel offered. "The guys must have the steaks almost ready." The four men had converged out on the patio deck near the grill while she and Melody stayed inside where the air conditioning was.

Lisa nodded. "We'll be right there."

While Melody struggled out of her chair, Lisa went to open the door for Pete's mother, Abby. The older woman who'd finally allowed her hair to go graceful silver held out a dessert container.

"You didn't need to bring anything," Lisa protested, taking the cold dish with one hand and moving into a hug with the other. Together, they walked into the kitchen to find Melody opening a large bag of salad greens. With the kitchen shears, she pointed to the plate of raw steaks still sitting on the counter. "Something made them forget what they were supposed to be doing out there," Mel said wryly. "Care to guess what? It's awfully quiet out there."

"What's going on?" Abby asked.

Lisa and Melody looked at each other knowingly.

"Our new neighbor is one hot Latin babe," Lisa told her mother-in-law. "Even the mailman can't stop talking about Cassandra Delicia—isn't that the perfect name for her?" Lisa snorted in a very unladylike fashion.

Melody's eyes had narrowed. "She must be outside in the back yard again, half dressed."

Abby shook her head in disbelief. "She'd have to be something else to get the attention of your always faithful men."

Lisa waved her over to the dining room windows. "Come see."

Both Abby and Melody came to stand beside her. Lisa pushed back the curtains that overlooked the backyard that had moments of being lush and green...when it wasn't being shorn to stubs. This would be called the summer of much mowing. Their husbands and the other male neighbor on the square in the subdivision mowed so often, the grass had become short enough that the hot July sun scorched it. At the very least, Lisa was grateful that none of them had an excuse to mow anymore.

Across Lisa and Pete's lawn was the backyard of their new neighbor. The woman appeared to be about twenty-five-years

old, but Lisa knew she couldn't possibly be that young. Cassandra stood at least six feet tall—legs all the way up to her eyeballs, the men liked to comment, drool on their chins—with absolutely huge boobs; a tiny waist; thick, black hair that flowed halfway down her back; and a deep bronze tan displaying not a single line. At night, the woman always wore a ridiculous velvet choker cameo that would have been better suited to an elegant gown than the barely-there bikini she wore without fail.

"So that's the Latin hottie," Pete's mother murmured.

"She just had to move in when I'm so pregnant, I look like I swallowed the world's biggest watermelon," Mel muttered.

"You're gorgeous," Lisa insisted.

Between the two of them, they'd been throwing out enough hate at the woman to set off bonfires. Unfortunately, it didn't keep Cassandra indoors. Ironically, the witch with the perfect body had two children. Lisa and Melody had caught a glimpse of them when Cassandra moved in about a week ago. She'd come in the evening while Lisa and Melody had been out on the deck with their husbands. Cassandra ushered the children into the house without delay. The young, tow-headed girl was about nine-years-old; her brother maybe five. The two looked so much alike, there was no doubt they were siblings. However, neither looked anything like their dark, Amazon-esque mother.

The day after the family arrived, Lisa and Mel had decided to pay them a neighborly visit. Cassandra had been about as rude as a person could be before she closed the door in their faces. The children hadn't been outside once since then. Cassandra had had one visitor—that second night after she moved in. The man had been her height but muscular, bronze, and as darkly good looking as the woman. The two had made love on the deck as if they didn't have a single inhibition, as if the world belonged to them. Who cared about nosy neighbors?

Since that day, Cassandra had spent most of her time laying out completely naked in the sun. She'd been a stickler about an even tan, too. Around six o'clock, dressed in little more than a skimpy thong bikini and a see-through wrap over it, a tube of lipstick tucked into the hip string of the bikini bottom, she'd come back outside and walk around the backyard with a cell phone in

her hand. Someone called her every night and they talked for hours.

From the window, Lisa glanced over at her own deck. Sure enough, all four men stood in a riveted state, watching Cassandra's pacing phone call. The witch didn't seem to notice the crowd of pathetic guys gawking at her.

Lisa and Pete lived in a subdivision that had four, two-story prefab houses in a square. She and Pete lived to the left of Danny and Mel. A few months ago, the couple who'd lived in the house Lisa and Pete's deck faced had moved out and it'd been standing empty until Cassandra came. To the right of that house was their other neighbor, Elias Moseley. In the two years he'd lived there, they'd learned only that he was a freelance computer software Beta tester and debugger. He worked out of his house, and FedEx and UPS came every single day. They'd seen the not-what-most-women-would-consider-attractive man about twice a year—until Cassandra moved in. Seemed she was an enticement nothing else ever had been for the hermit Elias. Each time Cassandra left her house, he appeared out on his deck, pretending to be taking the air. His gaze rarely left her during that time.

Lisa noticed he was outside again, too, ogling his scantily clad neighbor like she was putting on a show just for him.

"Danny invents reasons to go out and see her," Mel said out loud, her glare menacing and completely at odds with the sweet Southern charm she was known for.

"So does Pete," Lisa said on a sigh.

"How often do the two of *you* spy on her?" Abby asked.

Guiltily, Lisa flushed. Okay, so the men weren't the only ones fascinated by Cassandra. Lisa told herself she'd simply never seen anyone display the extreme confidence this woman did. Much as she'd always been fairly confident of herself and Pete's total devotion to her, she'd been losing that assurance steadily for the past week. She also knew part of her depression stemmed from the loss of her baby Peterkins.

Melody's continuous feeling of bloating certainly wasn't helped by Danny's attention to another far-from-bloated woman. Truthfully, Lisa had never seen her best friend more radiant. Though she didn't doubt Danny's devotion to Mel any more than

she did Pete's to her, she could understand when her friend told her she'd been refusing her husband's constant advances since Cassandra claimed the neighborhood for her own shrine—with her on the throne.

"She completely ignores her children," Lisa said. "Children should be outside playing, at least when the sun isn't hot enough to burn them red as lobsters. They *never* come outside."

"Hard to believe they are her children," Melody murmured her usual refrain. "Nor do they look anything like the stud who came around to 'service' Cassandra the day after they moved in."

Abby turned determinedly away from the windows. "Weren't you going to show us some ultrasound pictures tonight, Melody?"

Melody barely turned from the window. "Next week. I'm having a 3D ultrasound and we'll be able to see the baby's face. I wonder who he or she will look like."

"She'll be gorgeous," Lisa said, having decided that a baby girl fit Danny and Melody best. "When you put two gorgeous people together, you get gorgeous babies. Now, let's get those steaks out there before our men make an attempt to see if the grass really is greener on the other side."

Up In Smoke

"It's better to live alone in the desert than with a quarrelsome, complaining wife."

~Proverbs 21:19, New Living Translation

"Never attribute to malice what can be adequately explained by stupidity."

~Unknown from *Hanlon's Razor*

November 5th

"Don't worry about it," Detective Pete Shasta said to his partner, Danny Vincent. "Stay there. We'll take care of this."

Danny's wife, Melody, had gone into labor that morning—eight excruciatingly long days after her due date. Her water had broken just after lunch today. Falcon's Bend Police Department Dispatch had called both Pete and Danny when a call came in about a fire not deemed accidental at a local Christmas tree farm. Pete had called his partner and told him he and Jeff Chopp, the department's patrol sergeant, would handle the call.

"You nervous?" Pete asked. Danny had been a basket case for weeks, constantly expecting his wife to go into labor when the two of them least expected it.

"I never would've said it after some the hardcore cases I've worked as a cop," Danny started, sounding shaken up, "but I really think I'm gonna be one of those fainting fathers."

Pete laughed out loud. "Everything'll be fine. Lisa plans to call to give me updates. Just focus on your wife and your first baby. We'll smoke a cigar together later."

Pete's wife, Lisa, had gone with their best friends to the hospital. *And I saw the look in her eyes—the one she's withheld for almost four months, since she shocked me out of sound sleep to bring up the idea of us adoptin' a kid together.* A hysterectomy seven years ago had seen to it that Lisa couldn't have children of her own. In the five years the two of them had been married, Pete couldn't deny that she'd shown signs of wanting a child of her own, despite the impossibility. Unless they adopted. *And I'm not ready. Don't know that I'll ever be ready.*

By the time Pete and Chopp pulled in the driveway of the tree farm and parked near an enormous oak tree, the fire department and paramedics had already arrived. The Christmas tree lot toward the back north of the property was ablaze. Even from a distance, Pete could see the owner wouldn't be able to salvage much.

A neighbor, who'd come home for lunch, had called 911 after seeing smoke and fire on the Christmas tree farm up the road from him.

On the south side of the property stood a tall, thick line of oaks, maples, elms and birches that obscured the road from the south. The eyewitness who'd called in the fire lived on the south side. All he could see through the trees were smoke and fire

rising above them. By the time he'd seen it, the fire had already spread and done major damage.

One of the firemen pointed them toward the sectioned display lot near the driveway, calling that they'd found the owner, Mitchell Ferrara, unconscious on the ground there. Farther north of the display lot was the actual "farm" of Christmas trees. Around Thanksgiving, those looking for a tree would either come to cut down their own from the farm, or they'd choose one already cut and painted to look its greenest and freshest on the display lot.

As Pete and Chopp moved toward there, Pete saw charred, smoking piles of leaves dotting the area. The smoldering piles extended all around the northwest corner of the property. In the west section, a large house with attached garage had escaped the fire.

Paramedics knelt by a man lying face-down on the ground, his head pointing toward the house. Not too far away was a rake. "He's conscious now," one of them said. "Mr. Ferrara, do you know where you are?"

The man lifted his dark head, then pushed himself over so he lay on his back on the ground. His face was black, eyebrows, bangs and moustache singed. Sweat rolled down his face in thick rivulets. He wore jeans, a t-shirt, boots wet at the toe, and work gloves. As the man had turned himself over, Pete saw that the sweat stains on the shirt reached all the way around to the front collar and underarms.

"I'm okay," the patient offered, but when he sat up, the paramedics insisted he stay sitting until they looked him over.

Pete guessed the man was in his mid- to late twenties, in fairly good shape other than a beer belly that, around these parts, was pretty common. Drinking beer and watching football were Falcon's Bend's most popular activities.

"How do you feel?" a paramedic asked the property owner.

Coughing, he managed, "I'm all right."

The man turned his head and looked back at the forest of Christmas trees. He groaned in agony, ending with a cuss. "Ah man, there goes Christmas this year. It's gone, sure as shoot. All gone."

"Do you remember what happened here, Mr. Ferrara?" Pete asked, taking a step closer to him and kneeling on the ground. He almost wished he hadn't when the stench coming off the guy hit him. Pete had noticed how bad the guy was sweating. Fact was, it wasn't a particularly warm day. Barely forty-five degrees, and the weatherman was predicting rain later. The wind came through pretty good from the south, making the temperature seem warmer than it actually was. *Probably why the fire spread so quick up to the Christmas trees.* The fire and southern air had warmed things up, but not enough to make someone sweat as bad as Ferrara seemed to be.

"I was raking leaves."

Okay. That would explain the pungent stink hanging around the guy, especially since he'd obviously been at it for a couple hours, based on the numerous leaf piles.

Shaking his head, Ferrara spoke in a shell-shocked tone. "Some big guy appeared out of nowhere just as I was finishing my raking. I planned to start bagging the piles. He must've parked somewhere out on the road, but I never saw the vehicle. He was wearing a ski mask. He demanded my wallet."

Ferrara reached back, turning slightly on his side to pat the right rear pocket of his jeans. Pete saw that there was a faded area there matching the rectangular shape of a wallet. "Yup, my wallet's gone."

"So, this big guy came up to you and demanded your wallet. About what time was that?"

"Maybe around one."

"What did you do when the guy demanded your wallet?"

"Told him 'no way' and turned to head up to the garage for the trash bags. The guy must've picked up the rake and cold-cocked me with the handle, stole my wallet, then started the piles of leaves on fire for the trouble I caused him by not handing my money over right away."

Ferrara glanced back over the smoking stumps of trees. "Barely nothing left. My winter livelihood's all gone up in smoke." He looked up, eyes squeezed closed tightly, and moaned, "My wife is gonna kill me."

Ghost of the Past

“One need not be a chamber to be haunted; One need not be a house; The brain has corridors surpassing Material place.”

~*Emily Dickinson*

“Foolish men imagine that because judgment for an evil thing is delayed, there is no justice; but only accident here below. Judgment for an evil thing is many times delayed some day or two, some century or two, but it is sure as life, it is sure as death.”

~*Thomas Carlyle*

Prologue

September 13, 1989

Ericka Callister, sixteen years old, was used to having everything go her way. She hadn't expected to give birth this way. She'd imagined it would be a weekend—Friday night would have been ideal. Just after dinner, since Mother made all her phone calls then and that would occupy her attention most of the night. Ericka could slip out to this rundown old motel at the edge of town she'd chosen months ago. Within an hour, well before her ten o'clock bedtime, the thing would be done.

She'd get in her custom-painted, plum-red Corvette convertible her parents had bought for her birthday this summer—the envy of all her popular friends. She'd put her favorite Milli Vanilli CD in the stereo and listen to “Blame It On The Rain.” Her mom would yell a bit when she got home for going out without telling anyone where she was going, but then she'd hug her and ask if she was all right, if she needed anything. Ericka would just say she was tired, go to bed, sleep late. This night would be forgotten as though it'd never happened.

Tiffany would call her in the morning. So would Jeremy. She would tell him unemotionally to piss off—and stop bothering to

hide that he'd been dating Rachel Reeves on the sly. As if *she* cared. She was Ericka Callister. She could have any guy she wanted. And she didn't want *him*.

Jeremy didn't need to know that she hated him more than life itself. That she wished it was him who had to face this ordeal. She wished *he* would die this night. She would laugh in his face and prove she felt nothing whatsoever for him. He meant that little to her.

But it wasn't Jeremy who woke up at one-thirty in the morning, only hours before she had to go school, to find herself lying in a pool of liquid. He didn't experience the mind-numbing cramps that undulated through her almost non-stop as she changed out of her soaked pajamas into a long, shapeless dress and jeans, and grabbed the bag she'd packed three weeks ago. Jeremy didn't have to sneak out of his own house, desperate not to wake Mother and Daddy, and drive out of the garage without alerting the whole household or the neighbors.

Ericka knew the baby was coming fast miles before she reached the motel. She was panting, trying not to double over, as she requested a room from the grizzled man who seemed to realize she wasn't a normal customer. Barely looking at him from under the oversized hat she wore, she paid in cash and took the key as soon as he offered it.

Her knees gave out on her as soon as she opened the creaky door of her room. The sound of insects scurrying for cover terrified her, but the pain was so bad she wanted to scream. Nothing else mattered. She could feel something hanging down between her legs. It hurt. It hurt so bad.

When the cramp passed with little relief, she crawled inside, reached for the light, then locked the door behind her. She dragged herself onto the bed. There was an old radio on the nightstand with dead bugs on it. Somehow, she had to cover the sound if she screamed. She had to cover *any* sound that came from this room. She flipped the button and the radio played a country song crooning, "When she looked back, there were no tears in her eyes...baby's gotten good at goodbye." Not having time to care that she'd taken a morality stand against country music, she turned it up.

As she struggled out of her baggy jeans, another cramp seized her and she half sobbed, half groaned through clenched teeth. *Would have been so easy...so easy if all my dieting had gotten rid of this thing. Mother was so worried. Kept asking why I wore such big clothes. Why I never eat anymore. I've always been so fashionable and healthy. Until Jeremy put this thing inside me, with his thing. Why did I let him?*

The memory of what she'd been thinking then... *How stupid. I was so in love with Jeremy Ives. Junior year, he was captain of the football team, class president. We were the golden couple. I was the head cheerleader, straight A student. I had everything. Did I even love him? Ever? Or did I just believe nothing bad could ever happen to me?* She'd decided in early December to give Jeremy an early Christmas present while her parents were skiing at Devil's Head for the weekend. He'd been begging for sex for so long. They'd been dating for over a year.

Why did I keep doing it whenever we were alone together? I never got anything out of it. A few grunts, and it was over for him. More than over for me. It wasn't worth this.

And as soon as she realized she really was pregnant, she told him, later asking herself how she'd expected him to react. He'd insisted that it was *her* problem. Not his. "Get that straight right now. You tell anyone about this, that it's mine, Ericka, and I'll make sure you suffer for it. You figure this whole thing out yourself."

He had too much going on, he said later, as if that made everything better for her. He was going to get a football scholarship. Blow this place and go on to be a star like Joe Montana. Besides, he'd been planning to break up with her for weeks.

While he hadn't officially dumped her even after all this time, she knew he'd been cheating, laughing at her behind her back with his new girlfriend. *Bet Rachel's already sleeping with him. I hate Jeremy. Hate them both.*

Ericka closed her eyes against tears as another contraction ripped through her abdomen until it felt like all her body parts were trying to come apart in different directions. Panting, she pushed without consciously thinking about it. *I was the queen.*

The world was mine. But pretty soon it'll be over and I can go back to my life the way it was supposed to be.

Something released from her below, and she gasped in shock. Struggling, she sat up to see the blood and gray-mucus covered thing between her legs, huddled into itself and looking almost blue. Maybe it was dead. Born dead.

Not really considering what she was doing, she wiped her hand over the face. The tiny blue lips opened under her hand, and she drew back as if burned as a robust cry burst from the thing. *No! Quiet!*

When she put her hand back over the mouth to make it stop crying, it only screamed louder. She struggled up, got a pillow and put it over the quivering mass. Then she got out of bed and picked up her bag from the door. Another contraction hit her while she stood. She sank to her knees and groaned, shaking with the violence of the contraction. Something wet and warm slipped out between her legs. *Afterbirth. Oh no.*

The thing on the bed was crying, loud even under the pillow. Why was it so healthy? It didn't look thin and starved, the way she'd felt for nine long months as she tried to get rid of it before it ever got to this point. It should have been half-dead already. She'd all but killed *herself* these past nine months.

She pulled out the sheet she'd brought from home. She wrapped the cloth completely around the wailing form, then pushed the bundle into her backpack. Struggling, she rose to her feet to strip the dirty looking, off-white pillowcase from the other motel pillow. She wet it in the bathroom and used it to wash the blood from her legs. She picked up the afterbirth with the case, then put that inside her backpack, too. Ripping the top coverlet off the bed, she wadded it as best as she could, but it was too big to fit into the pack. She finally zipped it without the bloody coverlet.

Ducking her head out the motel door, she looked around. She didn't hear anyone around. Even muffled inside the sheet and pillowcase, the crying from her backpack was so loud. Why wouldn't it shut up?

Ericka ran to her car. A half hour later, she pulled into the alleyway behind a bakery she'd come to with her mother

frequently and parked next to the dumpster without turning off her car.

Her heart beat hard in terror, but she didn't hesitate, telling herself she'd done the only thing she could do. It was her choice, after all, and she chose to have a life—the one she'd been living before this tragedy happened to her.

She was Ericka Callister, sixteen years old, and used to having everything go her way. She didn't expect one event that'd been over in a matter of hours to haunt her relentlessly for the rest of her life.

Chapter One

November 25, 2005

Someone was following her.

Ericka had come into Falcon's Bend that morning. She'd taken the day off to do some Christmas shopping. The teenager had been following her since she arrived, moving along with her from one shop to the next, into the coffee shop she'd had lunch in, followed by more shops. He was behind her now on the sidewalk.

From the glimpses she'd gotten of him, he looked about seventeen years old. He was big, like a football player, with a shock of jet-black hair.

I've seen his hard, pale, unrelenting face before. In the nightmares I've had for years. Someone is chasing me. I'm running, but never fast enough to escape. My heart is beating wildly in terror. When I turn back, I see a ghost. And I recognize him. His is the face I've seen only in my nightmares.

Breathing hard, Ericka ducked into the Rainbow Café.

Chapter Two

Patrol Officer Amber Carfi pushed into the Rainbow Café. Still in uniform, shivering off the cold outside, she drew quite a few

stares, but she ignored them. She was starving. She'd missed dinner because of a call that came in just before she was about to head out for the day. Head out and join her lover and fellow patrol officer Warren Jensen. He'd left work early and told her to pick up dinner on her way home later. He said he'd meet her there.

Yeesh, he's been acting weird all day. First, he insists we take separate cars to work this morning when we're partners. We leave home together, drive around in the same patrol car all day, then go home together. He knew he was leaving early today, but didn't bother mentioning the fact to me. He must have planned it because he had no trouble getting our superiors to agree to it. The weirdest part was that he didn't bother explaining where he was going or what he was doing. He just laughed, kissed me, and said, "See ya later."

What did that mean? Strange behavior. Secrets. They always led to something bad. She'd learned that from experience. And she didn't want that to be the case this time. Especially if it meant Jensen was planning to dump her. She'd been ecstatically happy since they moved into his big, old farmhouse back in January. Almost eleven months of bliss. She wasn't ready for it to end. She could have sworn he didn't want it to either.

Amber went up to the front counter and sat next to a woman with perfectly coiffed long, blond hair, wearing an expensive pair of wool slacks and a cashmere sweater. The day after Thanksgiving—the biggest shopping day of the year—at six-thirty, the place was absolutely stuffed, hot as hell, and the waitresses were bustling around without a pause. *Should've called my order in. I'm gonna be here awhile.*

Amber sighed and reached past Barbie for the holiday menu. "Excuse me."

Just her luck, she was starving, and the chances of being waited on anytime soon weren't looking good. She scanned the usual list of Thanksgiving goodies on the menu. Rainbow Café was the one restaurant in town that served Thanksgiving dinner and every conceivable kind of leftover from it the day after the holiday. She and Jensen had missed their Thanksgiving yesterday because of work. By the time they'd made it to his family get-

together, which her father had been invited to as well, there wasn't a lot of food left. Jensen's father never made the traditional meal anyway. *They better not run out of turkey, mashed potatoes and gravy, stuffing or sweet potatoes, Jensen, or I may have to murder you when I get home.*

Amber glanced around again. The waitresses were all busy. How much longer would it take? She turned to Barbie, noting that she was sipping coffee. Just coffee?

"Have you ordered yet, or are you waiting for service, too?" Amber asked her. "Looks pretty busy in here. I'm wondering how long I might have to wait."

"I'm just having coffee." The blond lowered heavily made-up blue eyes.

"What can I get you, Officer?" a waitress appeared as if conjured by a leftover Thanksgiving fairy. She plucked a pen out from over her ear.

"I need a take-out order—Thanksgiving dinner with all the fixings for two. Dessert, too. How long do you think it'll be?"

"Good fifteen at least, hon."

"Then maybe I better have a slice of that pumpkin pie, double heavy on the whipped cream, and coffee while I wait."

"Sure thing."

The waitress slapped the order up, yelling back into the kitchen, then had the overloaded pie and black coffee on the counter in front of Amber in another two snaps. If the chef could be as efficient, she might be home by seven.

Amber dug into the pie, unconsciously noting that Barbie had pulled a napkin out of the dispenser between them. Taking another bite of the pie, all other thoughts were forgotten as she closed her eyes and savored. *Mhm*. There was something about pumpkin pie and enough whipped cream to choke a horse that always made her count her blessings.

The napkin suddenly appeared against her arm. For an instant, Amber thought she had cream smeared all over her face. Why else would Barbie offer her a napkin? Then she saw five words scrawled on the white paper rectangle: "Help me. I'm being followed."