

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 19TH

DAY 1

Chapter

One

It was just past midnight, the end of another on-my-feet marathon waitressing the dinner shift. I hustled through the steamy kitchen on my way to the back door, trying not to slip on the grease-slicked red tile floor. As I skated past Tommy, the baby-faced high school kid who always does a great job busing my tables, I slapped twenty-five bucks of my tip money into his palm.

“You’re the best, Lark,” Tommy called over the hiss and clatter of dirty dishes and a growling garbage disposal. “Hey! When are you gonna ditch this joint and run away with me to Costa Rica?”

“Next year, Tommy. I promise. I’m too old for you right now.”

It was our running joke. But tonight it struck me as particularly ironic—and sad.

I really need to talk with Annie.

When I last saw her before I left for work she was already on her second rum and Coke. Maybe we can help each other laugh again.

The lights of our modest split-level house on Dale Drive were still ablaze when I wheeled into the driveway. As I got out of the car, a biting breeze off nearby Lake Mendota blew my hair in my face. I shook my head and the wind shoved the wild strands aside. The October sky was bleak and overcast. It felt as if snow was in the air.

When I pushed open the unlocked front door, a strong noxious smell assaulted me.

“Annie?” I called. “Annie? What’s that smell?”

I heard Annie’s car running in the attached garage.

“Annie?” I stepped into the house.

That’s when I saw her.

“Oh, my God...ANNIE!”

She was sprawled on her back, arms outstretched, legs sticking through the open hallway door into the garage. She wore a gray woolen warm-up suit and tennis shoes, exactly what she was wearing when I left for work. Her Nissan continued to spew carbon monoxide into the house.

The rest is a panicked jumble: I remember darting into the garage, turning off the ignition with quivering hands, throwing open the garage door, making a frantic 911 call, and covering her lips in a desperate attempt at mouth-to-mouth. Her clammy skin felt like cool putty.

“Oh, God...Oh, God.” My heart galloped.

In the distance I heard the whine of sirens, but kept working on Annie, blowing air into her lungs, watching her chest expand, relax, then stay that way.

“Come on, Annie. Come ON. BREATHE!”

Her ashen face remained blank, eyes gazing indifferently past me at the ceiling, raven hair splayed against the floor’s polished wood. Her face was vacant, impassive, so funlike the beautiful, radiant, gregarious person she’d once been.

The sirens grew louder. I glanced out the open door behind me and saw a fire

truck. Seconds later, an ambulance and a police car screeched to a stop in front of the house. A man wearing a bright orange windbreaker and carrying what looked like a huge tackle box dashed in. Kneeling next to me, the man set the box down next to Annie's head, felt her cheek and pressed her neck.

I kept blowing into her mouth and pressing her chest.

"I think she's gone, ma'am," he said softly. "She has been for some time."

"No she's not," I cried. "There's still a chance." I kept blowing and pressing. "There's got to be a chance. We have to keep trying...have to keep tr—" my voice trailed off and I buried my head on Annie's chest and sobbed. My tears made dark blotches on her gray sweatshirt.

After a moment, I sat up and, still crying, took her right hand in both of mine. Her hand felt cool. I sandwiched it between my two warm ones, trying to transfer my heat to her, but her hand insisted on remaining cold. Tenderly, I stroked her cheek with the back of my left hand.

Cold. So cold.

"Lark!"

I turned.

Father Dan Houseman, the new priest at the nearby St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, stood in the doorway. He's in his mid-thirties and looks like a thoughtful version of the Marlboro Man—ruddy and a little scruffy in tweed, denim, and wire rims, his white priest's collar the only nod to ecclesiastical formality.

"Father Dan!" I jumped up. "What are you doing here?"

Quickly, he came to me and surrounded me with his arms. I let myself collapse

against his shoulder. He smelled of Old Spice.

I backed away. “How did you know to come?”

“I was on call,” he answered, not seeming to take offense at the skeptical tone in my voice. “I’m a volunteer chaplain for Dane County.”

A year ago, when Father Dan arrived at St. Stephen’s—and Annie learned he was single—she seemed to turn into a giddy schoolgirl, sometimes referring to him as “The Hunkatollah.”

I admired him from afar, but knew I had no chance competing against Annie. She was the vivacious one; I’m the shy barn owl, always scoping things out from a safe distance. Part of me ached to be with him, because he seemed to be such a good person. But the suspicious side of me feared he was just another smooth operator—a sophisticated version of the drunken frat boys who used to try to paw me at parties.

Probably half a dozen firemen were in the house, opening windows and placing fans by them. Their whirring kicked up a chilly breeze.

“Excuse me, Miss.” A middle-aged policeman with a concerned look on his clean-shaven face held a small notebook in one hand and a ballpoint pen in the other. “I’m sorry to bother you, but I need to ask you a few questions. Could you tell me your name?”

“It’s Lark. Lark Chadwick.”

“Age?”

“Twenty-five.”

He scribbled. “And the name of the deceased?”

It seemed so weird, so clinical, to refer to what had once been such a vibrant,

alive person as “the deceased.”

“Anne Chadwick,” I monotoned. My head throbbed.

“And your relationship to the deceased?”

“She’s my aunt. My father was her brother.”

“Was?”

“Both my parents were killed in a car accident when I was an infant. Annie raised me since I was four.”

“Who raised you before that?”

“My grandparents—her parents.”

“And how can they be reached?”

“They can’t. They’re...deceased.” I smiled ruefully at how comfortably I could ease into cop-speak.

“Her age?” He nodded at Annie, lying prone on the floor.

“Thirty-nine.”

“Marital status?”

“Divorced. Her husband ditched her twenty years ago.”

“Any children?”

“No.”

I went through the motions of answering his questions, all the while feeling like I was having an out-of-body experience.

“In the past few days did you notice if she’d been distressed about anything?” the cop asked.

“Nothing specific,” I said, trying to remember. “She seemed preoccupied lately,

but certainly not suicidal.”

Suicide. The word stuck in my throat. I couldn’t believe that Annie would even consider the ultimate rejection of life and hope. The ultimate rejection of family and friends. The irrevocable rejection of me. It didn’t seem possible, yet there she was, lying dead at my feet, arms outstretched as if making an angel in the snow.

“It just doesn’t make sense,” I cried, turning to Father Dan. “Annie held the personality franchise for the entire Midwest. Why would she do such a thing?”

Father Dan shook his head slowly, sadly. His eyes were puffy and bloodshot.

I turned away. “This doesn’t make sense,” I muttered.

I stalked through the living room, stopping outside Annie’s bedroom door, my arms folded tightly across my chest. “She wasn’t depressed. She loved life. I just don’t get it.”

I glanced into Annie’s room, looked away, did a double-take—and screamed.

FAST TRACK

By

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