

Discovering Wounded Justice
CRUEL MENACE



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PROLOGUE

QUIRK OF FATE

The woman refused to take no for an answer.

Not another one! his mind raged.

With mounting irritation, she reiterated her request to the implacable aide. But it was Erik Johannsen's job to filter out the time wasters. And the dangerous.

Not that he saw anything dangerous in the beauty who stood before him. Tall and willowy, with a thick curtain of dark, rippling hair, the woman was clearly English and mature past her years, and her exotic features – the slightly elongated, incandescent dark eyes and striking cheekbones, the small straight nose and translucent complexion – were stunning.

“It’s impossible, I tell you,” the aide repeated calmly. “Ms. Giordano never sees people out of the blue.” Then he added soothingly, “Why don’t you tell me what it’s about and perhaps I can make an appointment for you – though I must warn you it won’t be soon.”

The woman looked down at the middle-aged man at the desk and felt a sudden scorching surge of rage and resentment. Did this crazy man really think she was going to walk away now? After all this time?

She moved closer to the desk. “I said I wanted to see Alyssa Giordano – and I want to see her *now*.”

Johannsen wasn’t easily intimidated. But as those fierce, gleaming eyes met his own an instinctive shudder ran down his spine. Suddenly, distrusting his earlier judgment, he wondered if he should use the security button placed unobtrusively at the base of

his desk. A necessary precaution when one worked for a woman as controversial as Alyssa Madison Giordano.

“Look, as I’ve tried to tell you, it’s not possible—”

The woman cut him short, her voice barely under control. “Then do this for me. Give this to your boss.” She took a long, sealed envelope from the cheap raffia bag slung over her shoulder. “Then if she says she doesn’t want to see me I’ll go.”

Johannsen tightened his lips in frustration as the woman dropped the envelope on the desk in front of him. What the hell... demanding overbearing vixen... still, it might be the only way to get rid of her short of calling security. With a curt nod, he rose from his desk and, aware of the woman’s silent scrutiny, crossed the room and tapped at the door to the inner office.

Alyssa Giordano was on the telephone, chatting in her familiar quick fire fashion, as he entered the office. He saw her glance up with a probing frown as he passed the envelope across the cluttered desk and signaled towards the reception area. He watched her thick brown hair fall before her green eyes as she cradled the receiver between her shoulder and ear; she continued speaking while he watched she carefully tear open the envelope. A split second later, he saw her eyes grow wide in astonishment as she stopped mid-sentence. The blood appeared to freeze in her veins as she looked at the hand-written pages. *It was impossible... totally impossible...* her face proclaimed.

CHAPTER 1

MENACE GROWING

The luminescent headlights of the imported Daimler cut through the darkness.

He rarely allowed himself the pleasure of taking the wheel but tonight, as he left New York and its worries behind, his thoughts were far from the delights of driving the superbly tuned machine. A pulse drummed agonizingly in his left temple, and his palms were damp around the leather-bound steering wheel.

The traffic on the turnpike was light at that time on a Sunday night, and in less than an hour he had arrived at the turnoff to Millbrook.

As he took the Daimler easily around the curves of the narrow country lanes, he recalled the many weekends he'd spent at Millbrook House in the last eight years. The American Colonial house set in five hundred rolling acres was where he had so often entertained the elite and powerful, cementing the connections which had allowed his empire to expand and prosper.

As Duncan Kennedy turned off the lane and brought the car to a halt in front of a pair of magnificent scrolled gates, he knew that after what had happened in the past week nothing would ever be the same again.

He pushed the electric eye on the dashboard and the gates swung slowly open. He hadn't informed the staff of his arrival, but the red glow of the sensor would alert them. Normally he was a creature of routine and habit, and they would, no doubt, be surprised by this late and unexpected arrival.

Duncan Kennedy's lips twisted in a bitter parody of a smile. Well, there were a few more surprises to come. As he alighted from

the car on the curved pebble driveway, he saw the glow of lights from the staff quarters at the rear. Despite the copious staff, no one would disturb him, he was sure of that.

In the cavernous hallway he snapped on one of the two magnificent chandeliers, and then hesitated at the entrance to the sitting room.

Why not? he thought. His courage needed no bolstering – he had made up his mind – yet he saw no reason to deny himself the pleasure of a fine glass of whiskey. His footsteps made no sound on the thick Axminster. Just as his thick hand firmly seized the Waterford decanter, he was disturbed by the ringing of the telephone.

Damn. His face darkened. Not now. Not this evening.

But it was only the internal line. He heard the soft Scottish burr of Robertson on the other end.

“Wasn’t expecting you, sir. Just wondered if you required me.” The respectful, soothing tones of the perfect servant. A man who knew his job was easier than most and was determined to do nothing to lose it.

“No, Robertson. Thank you. Don’t disturb yourself.”

Duncan was surprised at the steadiness in his voice. And as he replaced the receiver he thought obliquely how faultless Janet had always been in her choice of domestic staff. *You concentrate on the business, darling*, she would say, *leave the rest to me*.

And as he filled his glass, bitterness again twisted his lips. In the end, it seemed, his wife had proved better at her job than he at his.

He drank the whiskey in one long swallow and, as he placed the empty tumbler back on the silver tray, he took a moment to dwell on the beauty of the room – on the elegant mix of antique and contemporary furnishings, on the superb marble fireplace that had cost him a small fortune to restore, on the Degas that was now worth almost twenty times what he had paid for it.

Material possessions, Duncan Kennedy thought. *Was that the measure of success, realized ambition? What was it all for?* Yet nothing of his material possessions, he knew now, compared to a man’s reputation.

His expression hardened as he turned and hurried from the sitting room, the urgency once more within him. In the wood-paneled gun room, where telephone lines were secured and cameras absent, he dialed to disturb another man with the ringing of the telephone. After replacing the receiver, he turned back towards the entrance of the space.

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His fingers trembled only slightly as he unlocked the walnut cabinet and lifted the ivory-handled pistol from its padded bed.

He prowled, he planned, and he did everything under the sun to ensure there were no survivors.

Holding the gun in one hand and dragging Duncan Kennedy behind him with the other, as he stalked through buildings around the three-and-a-half-million dollar property, meant that he had to keep his guitar case slung over his back. As the horrifying events began in the late hours of the evening, the slayer forced Kennedy into the barn. He fired the gun to silence the squealing horses as he splashed gas through the central internal passageway of the barn.

He ignited the match and threw it behind him into the barn as he coerced Kennedy into the horse float, to drive it to the mansion's gates before shooting the tires, blocking the entrance to emergency vehicles, ensuring that they would have problems entering the property. It took an hour for the mad man to kill Kennedy's wife and fifteen-year-old daughter, taking his time and taking his pleasure, before laying more fuel and setting fire to the mansion. Then, in front of the security cameras, as the executioner exited dragging millionaire businessman Duncan Kennedy along with him, he gesticulated in defiance and disappeared off-camera, to kill Kennedy outside, then escape.

It was exactly five minutes after midnight when the last shot broke the chilly silence of the night.

The call came through the emergency operator at precisely eleven minutes past midnight.

Sergeant Tim Olsen was the duty sergeant at the station that early morning. He was twenty-three years old and to him the details meant nothing. As far as the former New Yorker was concerned, it was just another burglary turned homicide.

"So that's 506 Sharon Turnpike, right? Is a bus on the way?" He paused a moment for the answer. "Okay, we'll get a car there right away."

Only after he passed on the information did the young sergeant discover that this was no ordinary 10–53.

Oh, God... I have to interrupt the Chief's poker game...

The interruption could not have come at a worse time.

For more than three hours, Hugo Martinez had been dealt lousy hand after lousy hand. Finally, he was poised to end his losing streak. As befitted a man who had plotted his way through the bureaucratic jungle to become the first Hispanic chief of police in Millbrook, his bronzed face betrayed no sign of emotion as he looked down at his royal flush.

But his luck was out that evening. Just as he was about to call the bluff of that liverish oaf who ran the city's most profitable restaurant, there was a knock on the door. With an apologetic cough, a uniformed sergeant poked his head into the smoke-filled room.

"Chief, forgive me, please... but something urgent..."

"Hold on," the police chief snapped. A pot of almost three months' salary was at stake. *Why did he have to be interrupted now?* "What is it, Olsen? It had better be worth the disturbance, man."

The young sergeant looked nervous. "Uh... if we could speak in private, sir?"

With a heavy sigh, Hugo Martinez lifted an apologetic shoulder to his waiting companions. Placing his precious cards down carefully on the blanket-covered table, he lifted his powerfully built form out of the chair. "Just a moment please, gentlemen."

He shut the door sharply behind him, his bad temper obvious. The hallway outside the exclusive restaurant's private banquet room where the regular weekly card game took place was deserted. Still the nervous sergeant felt compelled to whisper the message despite the isolation.

As he listened to the details, the police chief's face grew paler, even behind his skin tones. *No... Surely not... It was impossible...* Then he spat out a vicious tirade of insults against the Lord, His mother and even some of the saints.

For Hugo Martinez knew without a doubt that he had just lost all chance of playing his winning hand that night.

“Christ, Angie... I’ve only had a couple of hours’ sleep in three goddamn days!”

Through bleary, bloodshot eyes, the cinematographer blinked awake to see Angela Ryan’s face staring down into his own. At almost the same instant, he realized that the pain he could feel in his ribs was being caused by the toe of his tormentor’s thick, leather boot.

“Wakey, wakey, Ray. We didn’t come here to sleep through the damned crime wave. Grab that camera and move it – the Chief of Police wants to give a statement. Lee’s already downstairs.”

Grumbling and swearing under his breath, Ray Jensen struggled out from under the covers and in the weak light from the solitary exposed bulb felt for his fur-lined boots under the bed. He was still wearing the clothes he’d gone to sleep in a short time before, and his fleshy face was shadowed by thick stubble.

“You have no idea what I’d give for a coffee right now.” He groaned again as he heaved his heavy equipment onto his shoulders and followed the impatient journalist out of the hotel room. They were on the fourth floor and were forced to enter the icy, malodorous darkness of the stairwell to make their way to ground level. The elevator had stopped working ten days ago and no one had bothered to fix it. But by now, they’d all spent enough time in the sleepy town to know that was par for the course.

“Talk to me nicely and I might save your life.” Torch in hand, Angela was clattering down the steep stairs ahead of him. “I’ve still got a pound of pure Arabica left. Soon as this is in the can I’ll give you enough for a cup.” Her voice echoed in the confined space.

“Hey, anyone ever tell you you’re all heart, Ange?”

They were nearing street level and through the thick concrete walls, they could hear the swelling noise outside. Angela grinned in the dim light. “Nope, and if they did I’d think I was getting soft.”

Ray Jensen was sure she wasn’t joking. By 6 a.m., the crowd outside the gates of Millbrook House had swelled to half of the community’s population. Film and television crews from around the country, with a couple of international crews, were jockeying for the best vantage points as they filmed the activity in the home of the once mighty family. Surrounded by the buzzing, tugging mass, Angie began arguing loudly with a French camera crew who were

trying to move her on so they could place their own presenter in the prime location she had assumed.

But Angela Ryan had had plenty of practice in standing her ground. Her French was limited, but fortunately it consisted mostly of insults, and with black looks and plentiful swearing protests, the French were forced to move on.

“Okay, Ray, let’s go.” As her sound technician adjusted his controls, Ryan reached into the pocket of her green, fur-lined anorak and pulled out a comb, which she ran quickly through her thick, dark red hair. It was her only concession to grooming for on-air presentation. Ray held up two fingers and Angie took the proffered microphone. In a moment the camera was rolling.

“Over the last few hours the situation here in Millbrook House has grown even more disturbing. Estimates now put the crowd at close to five thousand but no one is yet sure if the authorities have made any progress with the investigation into the fire at the ancestral home of Janet Kennedy, a descendent of the original owners of the home, Catherine Hart and her husband, Dr. Alfred Tredway, and the shooting of her husband, Duncan.

“EMTs have taken Mr. Kennedy to Vassar Brothers Medical Center. Police haven’t been able to speak with Mrs. Kennedy or the Kennedys’ daughter, Kristie, as of about half an hour ago. They’re not sure at this point if they were home or of their current whereabouts. As you can see, the grounds are now swarming with officers not only from the New York State Police’s forensic team but also from the Dutchess County Sheriff’s Office, the Millbrook Police Department and a number of fire departments. The Chief of the Millbrook Police Department is coming out shortly to give us a statement...”

It was a three-minute grab, shot direct by satellite to a national, and possibly worldwide, audience of millions. Most would be barely able to believe what they were seeing. But American viewers would be reassured to find Angela Ryan once again in the thick of the action. The slightly built redhead was a familiar sight wherever in the nation a hot spot caught fire. Casually dressed, face bereft of makeup, the thirty-four-year-old correspondent had filed a long list of tough crime stories. Those who worked with her sometimes felt driven beyond the limits of personal safety, but the male ego

ensured there was never any official complaint. If Angela Ryan could handle it, so could they.

As Martinez approached the media scrum, with Olsen in tow, the sound of what seemed like a world of voices started screaming at him. “Ladies and gentlemen,” Martinez paused as he waited for the screaming reporters to quiet.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please.” Martinez paused again as the din died down. “We’ll be making a short statement and will only take a couple of questions. Millbrook Police Department will be taking command of the investigation. Sergeant Tim Olsen will be the lead investigator under my supervision and he will tell you all that we know at the moment.” Martinez stepped back to give his junior the limelight.

“Th—th—thanks, Chief,” Olsen stuttered momentarily at being forced to give his first media statement. He coughed, to appear to clear his throat. “At eleven minutes past midnight this morning, Millbrook Police Department received a nine—one—one call that a fire had started at Millbrook House. Duncan Kennedy was found outside the home with a gunshot wound and has been taken to Vassar. At this point, we have not been able to contact Mr. Kennedy’s wife, Janet Kennedy, or their daughter Kristie.

“The Millbrook Police Department and fire crews are anxious to inspect the home, but it has been difficult to access because of the severity of the fire and wooden boards covering its doors and windows. The fire caused the home’s roof to collapse, making the building too unstable to enter, and completely destroyed a nearby stables block and garages.

“An abandoned horse float with flat tires also blocked the property’s front gates, which were padlocked. Bullet cartridges and pools of blood have been found at the property.

“Once we can get access to the inside of the house, we will be looking to inspect the home’s CCTV system in the hope that it might provide some clues about how the fire started and whether intruders were involved. The house, a garage and stable block and another outbuilding were severely damaged. As soon as the house is

deemed to be safe by the Fire Department, we'll carry out a search to establish if anybody was inside. Forensic investigators have been at the scene to make an initial sweep to collect evidence and officers will be making a house-to-house investigation. That's what we know at the moment."

Initially relieved to have completed his initial media briefing, Olsen was taken aback at the reporters screaming questions at him and he turned to Martinez. Martinez, stepping back towards Olsen and slapping him on the back, turned back to the crowd.

"Alright, alright, just one question at this time." The crowd hushed. "You," he paused as he pointed, "Angela Ryan, yes, your question?"

"Is this related to Kennedy's current business strife? Or does it go back to the blackmail attempt a couple of years ago?"

"Look, we just don't have enough information yet. As I said at the beginning, Millbrook Police Department will be taking charge of the investigation and I'll be supervising it personally. I'll be calling another press conference as soon as we have more information. Thank you." Martinez turned to Olsen and they walked away as the reporters started screaming again from behind the crime scene tape.

CHAPTER 2

SUSPICION ABOUNDS

It took three days for Millbrook Fire Department to secure Millbrook House before the Fire Chief would permit police access to the site of the gutted house for the first time. Extensive debris in the main building meant a proper search could take several days and possibly weeks.

The large horse box which had been left by the gates of the property and the animal carcasses found at the scene had been removed almost immediately for forensic tests. Officers would be waiting for some time for the results of the necropsies. By the time officers had completed a complete search of the outbuildings, a cursory search of the annex part of the main building and started removing the remaining vehicles from the site, Duncan Kennedy had regained consciousness from surgery and was recovering slowly at Vassar. But his wife and daughter had still not been located.

Millbrook's Chief of Police arrived at the scene just as his lead investigating officer authorized entry to the main part of the house for forensic specialists to begin the lengthy, painstaking process of sifting and examining all the contents. Since Millbrook Police Department was small, the Governor had authorized the New York State Police to assist Martinez because of the notoriety of the incident. Olsen had nearly a hundred officers and support staff working directly under his command at the scene. The officers on the investigation were checking "every possible line of inquiry," developing profiles on each family member, speaking to friends and relatives, and alerting ports and airports in their efforts to find out what happened to the family.

Correspondents had offered conjecture not about the cause, but about the motive behind the cause: was it that Kennedy's business was close into bankruptcy with debts in the millions, or was it further extortion from a disgruntled client? But investigators could not convince them that the speculation about the family was "unhelpful," as it had upset friends and relatives and could only hinder the scrutiny of possible suspects.

It had taken the forensic detectives, with large quantities of heavy machinery, several days to remove the larger pieces of debris. The cranes brought in to lift out the destroyed structural framing pieces and huge sandstones, and the trucks brought in to haul them away, had finally departed.

The officers had just started the painstaking process of sifting through the extensive smaller pieces of the wreckage. Olsen exited the temporary structure housing the communications equipment with his mug refreshed with coffee, which had become grimy after being brewed within an inch of its life; a sip, a grimace and a shake of the head. He had taken to standing between the command post and the rubble with a portable two-way radio: it allowed him the luxury of seeing progress and being close to the fixed radio if he needed it. It would take time for them to complete the sorting process and for all the contents to be examined; it would be a process that could continue for weeks. Hugo Martinez had made his way through the mass of correspondents for his daily briefing from Tim Olsen on the progress. He liked Angela Ryan and had taken to exchanging pleasantries with her on his way past the media scrum; she was professional, and attractive, which only assisted her cause to get first comment.

"Good morning Ms. Ryan." Martinez adjusted his belt and his two-way radio.

"Morning, Chief. How many today?" She referred to the amount of coffee he'd already had – the question had become almost a daily ritual. He chuckled.

"Stopped counting after five." His ritual answer. They exchanged knowing looks and laughed.

"Anything new?" The second ritual question, this time from Ray Jensen.

“Hi Ray. Don’t know yet. Just about to find out.” Another stock answer. Their heads all then turned towards the rubble as two groups of the specialist searchers hollered to Olsen.

“Looks like we got something.” Ray hoisted the camera back on to his shoulder, took stills of the two groups of the specialist searchers and then tracked Olsen’s progress. Martinez sighed, waited for the transmission. Ryan said nothing, intently focused on the young sergeant.

Olsen approached the closer group and caught the Chief out of the corner of his eye. He took a thin, metallic container from the extended arm and examined it. They watched him gingerly climb over the rubble to the second, further group and bend over to gingerly shift a few pieces of the ruins. Martinez’s radio crackled.

Post, Bravo 1. Switch to Channel 7, over, the Chief and the news crew heard Olsen’s voice crackle over the portable.

Shit. Martinez’s thoughts sauntered; he grimaced and started to fiddle with the equipment on his belt as they watched Olsen’s animated conversation with the command post. He suddenly stopped his fiddling. *No, brainy.* His frown turned upward slightly. He would keep his impatience in check for the moment.

“Well, it looks like I need to get a report.”

“Thanks, Chief,” both newsies chimed towards the Police Chief’s back as he sauntered to meet Olsen at the edge of the debris. They watched the two men for about ten minutes before short bursts of siren parted the on looking media crowd. The two morgue transport vehicles were closely followed by a van, white, decaled with the logo of a security company. While the few other crew cameras followed and took background shots of the hearses, Ray and Angela tracked the security company van against instinct.

“Wonder what that’s about?” Ray asked.

“Don’t know. Hugo’ll tell us.” Angela had taken to first naming the official in his absence.

“Yeah, good one. Knew your legs would come in handy some day,” Ray mocked her. She rolled her eyes at him and she blew a raspberry at him. He laughed back.

Both were disappointed that day as the Millbrook County Police Chief scurried past them as he left for the day, without his customary friendly post-action briefing.

It was almost three weeks after they had attended the initial press conference at the burnt out house. The cameras caught the backs of Martinez and Olsen returning to the inside Millbrook County Police Headquarters and the sounds of the reporters screaming more questions at them.

“That was Millbrook County’s Police Chief, Hugo Martinez, and the lead investigating officer, Sergeant Tim Olsen,” Angela Ryan intoned as she turned back to the camera. “Sergeant Olsen has just confirmed that the two charred bodies found inside the burned-out Millbrook House a week ago were those of Duncan Kennedy’s wife, Janet, and daughter, Kristie. The flames that gutted the mansion caused its internal walls and floors to collapse. The badly damaged house was too unstable for officers to enter for several days, but when they did, detectives discovered two bodies inside. Due to the position of the bodies, officers working the scene had to remove a ton of collapsed internal walls and floors to move the bodies and a .22 rim fire rifle was found lying near the corpses. It took some time to remove the bodies and the rifle from the scene for transport to the State Police Headquarters Laboratory in Albany.

“It then took several days for the pathologists to conclude the autopsies and determine that the corpses were those of Janet and Kristie Kennedy, who had not been seen since a fire gutted their house two weeks ago, and that they’d been shot. Mrs. Kennedy’s body was so badly burned she could only be identified using dental records. We don’t yet know if the rifle was legally owned by Mr. Kennedy or someone else brought it in and the Laboratory will need to conduct further tests to establish if it was the one used to shoot the Kennedys and to kill the animals.

“Three horses and three dogs were also found dead at the estate and Chief Martinez has also informed us that the necropsies determined that the horses were shot but the dogs died in the fire. Forensic officers continued to search for evidence at the property today, as special prayers were said for the family at a nearby church.

“Police are also looking into Kennedy’s financial dealings as well as those of his business partners. The company is close to going into liquidation, and Kennedy and his partners were facing large bills from creditors and tax authorities. Kennedy is apparently recovering well from the gunshot wounds he received at the scene,

but his doctors have said that he's not yet well enough to speak with police. Police have said they think the sprawling property was set alight in an arson attack but they'll need to speak to the financially troubled Kennedy to find out if he can tell them anything about what happened or why.

"Now, last time we were at the scene, we saw a van belonging to a security company leave shortly after the medical vans that took the bodies away. The forensic team has recovered what appear to be film reels from inside the burnt out shell. Kennedy's company had a security system using closed circuit television at his office and he'd recently had the house fitted out with a similar system. Somehow, the cameras and the film survived the fire but police won't tell us just yet whether they can use the film. That's all Martinez has told us today.

"I'm Angela Ryan, reporting from the Millbrook County Police Headquarters. Back to you in the studio."

"Cut," Ray said, "Good take. It's in the can."

"Thanks." She paused. "Damn." Another pause. "Shit!" she whispered, her eyes went blank. He knew that look. He had studied her for too long not to know that look.

"What?"

Nothing.

"Ange, wakey wakey."

Still nothing. He shoved her, awakening her from her trance.

"Ange, what?"

"The cameras. The van picked up the cameras!" Angela guffawed with joy.

"What? Whaaat? Whadaya mean the van picked up the cameras?" Ray's mind was slow today; he had gone without his second cup of Arabica this morning. His eyes narrowed, his lips turned upward. "Yeah, the cameras. Shit, what a shot!" He got it.

Angela watched, inanely humming, as Ray packed up his gear. They shook their heads as they debunked to their vehicle, to depart Millbrook County Police Headquarters.

Wish we could try and salvage the images from the video for them! Their minds were again synchronous, as they often were.

CHAPTER 3

UNWANTED ATTENTION

To bag an interview with the mother of the millionaire businessman who survived gunshot wounds in an arson attack on his home, and whose wife and daughter were murdered during the attack, would seem like the pinnacle of her career. It would be the first time the anguished woman would speak of her grief to the world. It would be the first time in her career that she would conduct an interview in the newsroom rather than in the field.

Angela had surprised even herself with her career progression in the eight years after the Jane Roe saga had ended. After a brief period as a publicist with a celebrated agency and a job as a writer at a major network, she joined one of the morning shows as a writer and researcher the year the Roe decision became public. She moved up to become that show's regular "Today Girl," handling lighter assignments. Within a year she had become a reporter-at-large, developing, writing, and editing her own reports and interviews. When a stubborn pig-headed man of the old guard was offered the host role, he refused to take it unless he was named sole host, without Ryan as co-host. That had sealed it for her: the other major network had been making approaches, promising to give her a prime time on-air gig, particularly after the early work she had done on this case. She took her bargaining power and brought Ray along on her coattails. She would be officially designated as the program's, and the network's, first female host. What neither she nor Jensen knew was how their careers would pan out after that first in-studio interview. Of course she would have no other cameraman than Ray Jensen. His directorial debut would also be an original experience for him.

"Hey, Ray," Angela Ryan called to the newly titled "director" as he walked across the floor of the studio. She had just finished having makeup and hairspray applied.

"Ange, what were you thinking when you agreed to this?" He was exasperated by the tightness of a tie around his neck. He wasn't used to working in the formality of a newsroom and much preferred the field.

"I have no fuckin' idea!" Ryan was also incensed by the idea of wearing something other than her usual casual field attire. "But what, you wanna miss this?"

"Pulling the interview of the century, no, the millennium? Hell no! When's she get here? You met her yet?"

"She's in makeup now. Yeah, just for a minute when I was getting my hair done. Me! Getting my hair done! And makeup! What a laugh." Jensen couldn't hold in the chortle. "Hey, come on! You look like you got your makeup done too!"

"Yeah, yeah, alright!" Ray moaned.

"You all set?"

"Yeah. How 'bout you?"

"No."

"Oh, come on! You forced me into this; you're not going to get out of it now! At least I won't have to worry about the wind blowing your hair in your face!"

"Yeah, alright, alright!" Angela moaned. "I'll cop that. How long we got before we're on?"

"About ten. Time to get on the set. Better get her out here."

"Yeah, it's time to get settled in the chair." Ryan turned about, moved towards makeup, looking for an assistant, someone, to ask about getting settled in front of the camera. Angela found a dowdy, slightly chubby girl, who looked like she hadn't left school yet; she'd seen her around the newsroom before. "Sarah?"

"Y-yes?" The girl jumped on hearing the crack reporter's voice and stumbled into a camera.

"Could you find Mrs. Kennedy, please? Ray and I'd like to get her on the set."

"Y-yes, s-sure, I'll get her!" The plain teenager, a little overwhelmed, was more that pleased to run off on an errand for a woman the caliber of the semi-famous Angela Ryan. Angela wandered back to Ray's position in front of the set, saw him with a hand over his mouth, desperately trying to hold in his laughter.

"What are you snickering at?"

"That poor child!" Ray moved his hand away from his face. "You know she thinks a lot of you, right?"

"I know," Angela rolled her eyes. "She'd be quite pretty, if she paid more attention to herself. She's got potential though." They considered that thought in silence until they saw the young girl slowly walking the elderly interviewee from behind the framing towards the set, supporting her elbow with her hand free of the clipboard. Angela headed towards the women, one more aged than the other, a heel catching on a bundle of cables almost causing her to stumble but she quickly regained her footing.

"Hello again, Mrs. Kennedy," she said to the grief stricken woman. "You look wonderful! Are you ready?"

"Hello. Why thank you, dear." Enid Foster Kennedy tried to keep her sorrow in check, but the anguish could not escape her voice and, as they moved slowly to the chairs on the set, her misery was obvious to everyone on the set. "No, I'm not ready. I can understand outliving my husband but I don't think I'll ever accept that I've outlived a grandchild."

"No, I don't think I could accept it either. Let's go sit. We're almost ready to go." As she helped Mrs. Kennedy get settled before seating herself, Ryan unobtrusively glanced at Jensen and got the half minute signal. Again she had timed it to perfection.

"Okay, Mrs. Kennedy, we're just about ready," Angela said just as she turned towards the camera. It was strange to see Ray standing offset from the camera this time, rather than behind it. He gave her their usual silent code for "Go, we're rolling."

"I'm Angela Ryan. Welcome to *Twenty/Twenty* and thank you for joining me for my first special presentation. This will be the first in a number of presentations over the coming months. Tonight, I'm joined by Mrs. Enid Foster Kennedy, mother of Duncan Kennedy. Thank you for joining me, Mrs. Kennedy. How is your son?"

"Thank you, dear. Duncan is slowly improving, getting better."

Ryan asked Mrs. Kennedy about, and she spoke of, her grief but said nobody knew of her son's financial problems. The mother of Duncan Kennedy said she was driven with sadness and shock and found it hard to believe that her son was unable to face telling his family of his impending financial doom.

Mrs. Enid Foster Kennedy, who lived in the area where her son and his wife and fifteen-year-old daughter had lived, also said she could not ever believe that her son would ever take such reckless and fraudulent actions; it must have been those awful partners of his. Mrs. Foster, who was reported to be seventy-eight, described her young granddaughter, Kristie, as “beautiful” and spoke of her struggle to understand what some hideous monster had done to his family because of her son’s partners.

“I can’t condone what his partners have done.” Her eyes welled up with a tears and she let out a little sob as Angela leant forward and patted her hand. She drew a breath and continued. “Duncan talked to nobody, we knew nothing about his financial situation and it’s come as a tremendous shock. So many of his friends have told me that, had they known, they would have helped him however they could. They were a very close, loving family unit and I don’t think he could face telling them he thought they were going to lose everything, but it wasn’t his fault.”

Mrs. Foster said her granddaughter had been an accomplished horsewoman and “absolutely loved” her horses. Kristie attended a private school; her father loved clay pigeon shooting and liked playing the country squire, even wearing tweeds to meetings. “Kristie was just a lovely girl,” she said. “Kristie was in a local horse show only the weekend before and placed first in a championship.”

Prior to going to air, Angela and Ray had taped an interview with the last person to see the family before the fire and at that point, Angela cut to the taped portion. John Hughes was a neighbor and host of the weekend horse show in which Kristie had participated, and he could not fathom the tragedy: “Duncan was fine, just his normal self – they all were. They are very nice and a very close family. Duncan is very much a family man who loved his animals almost as much as he loved his daughter.”

As Ray cut back to Angela after the tape concluded, she wiped a tear from her cheek and turned back to Mrs. Kennedy.

“It must be hard.”

“It’s very hard. I’ve lost a daughter-in-law and beautiful granddaughter and I’ve nearly lost my son. Life will never be the same without them. I’m finding it very difficult to come to terms with.” At that point, the mature woman pulled a photograph out. It was a classic happy snap. A little out of focus and badly framed

but nevertheless a record of one of the myriad joyful moments that punctuate family life: a long weekend, Mom and Dad in the background, a teenager with them, and all smiling contentedly at the camera.

“Thank you Mrs. Kennedy.”

“No, thank *you*, dear.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, that concludes my first program. See you again next week. Thank you, good luck and good night.”

As the studio lights dimmed and the end-credit music began, Angela turned back to Mrs. Kennedy to see the picture again. Her son, his wife and daughter’s innocent smiles in that photo – or the women’s last thoughts – simply did not bear thinking about. Little did she know that the thought of the women’s innocent smiles, their last thoughts, again would come back to bother her.

CHAPTER 4

UNDUE NOTICE

For Lydia Kennedy, the morning of her eleventh wedding anniversary began like any other summer's day.

It was just before six when she stepped out onto the deck of her cliff side home, her perfectly maintained thirty-nine-year-old body wrapped in a brilliantly patterned silk sarong.

Heaven... Pure heaven... Lydia smiled to herself as she took in the glittering ocean lapping lazily onto the outrageously expensive curve of sand that was Montauk's Gin Beach.

This long-established summer retreat of New York's rich and powerful was less than a two hour's drive north of the city, but for Lydia it was a lifetime away from the damp and dingy Manchester slum where she had spent her childhood.

On mornings like this, with the ocean sparkling diamond bright in the early sunshine and the rhythmic murmur of the breakers in her ears, the former Lydia Tobin would remember to bless the patron saint of ambitious women who had surely brought Duncan Kennedy into her life.

That miracle had occurred in London almost a dozen years ago, just when Lydia was beginning to feel the first stirrings of real panic about the future. It wasn't as if she hadn't done the groundwork – she worked hard on getting the right wardrobe, accent, address – and although she had spent her last penny in the process, her ultimate goal still remained frustratingly out of reach.

By the time of her fortuitous meeting with the American entrepreneur thirteen years her senior, Lydia had slept with an indefinite number of men – quite a few of whom hadn't even minded

paying for the privilege. Yet time and time again the barrier of class had thwarted her ambitions. It was as if some indefinable hovering stench invariably alerted her prospective prey to the lowliness of her background.

But on that late June evening her luck had changed. A hard-won invitation to a smart dinner party at the honorable Arthur Neeson's Knightsbridge flat had provided the key to the door of her future.

Widowed just eight months, Duncan Kennedy had been on a business trip to London when he had accepted that fateful dinner invitation. For the forty-year-old businessman it was love at first sight when he was introduced to the fetching brunette in the low-cut dress which so perfectly matched her green eyes. They were seated across from each other at the long candle-lit table, and it didn't take Lydia long to sense the difference in this approach. Americans it seemed were much less concerned about class than her fellow countrymen.

She could see the warm light of appreciation and desire in Duncan Kennedy's dark eyes but something bothered her... The light was slightly dimmer than she was used to. He had tried to keep the details of his predicaments, both past and present, from her but, with all her classless cunning, Lydia had found out what went wrong and she would not let anyone destroy her promotion in life or thwart her ambitions again. It had not been hard for her to discover the circumstances surrounding his first dilemma: the extensive media coverage at the time had made it easy. It was the murder of his wife and daughter, and the police's inability to identify and capture their executioner, that had really wound up the media exposure: he had extracted much public sympathy for that.

But the media coverage of Duncan Kennedy's second financial predicament has not been as extensive and it had been harder to scrape together the details of the quandary he faced with his current business partner, Lydia Price, whom she had taken to calling "the other Lydia". He lost almost all of his dead wife's family money, but not his own fortune – the Manhattan residence and an astounding, to a girl from the slums of Manchester it was astounding, amount of cash – it had been his – in the breakup with his and the other Lydia's business partner. It was why he had moved from Millbrook to Montauk and he had been able to bring only Robertson with him;

Lydia had tried to win Robertson over with their common birthright, but the “southerner” had never been able to win the “northerner” over. She supposed it was his loyalty to his former mistress; she also supposed he knew more about Duncan’s predicament but Lydia couldn’t drag the more intimate detail out of him.

Such a bad stain, in fact, was something that her privileged man almost couldn’t bear to face the future on top of the loss of his first wife. Lydia had convinced her namesake in the business partnership to let her fight back on their behalf to prove their “innocence” and expose their charlatan partner. They had come away with their reputations relatively unscathed. It was not quite their fault: it had almost certainly been caused by their former partner’s fraud and their failure to see it early enough. And in less time than it later took her to find Montauk on the map, she landed her prize.

The marriage took place a mere six months later beneath the arches of St Patrick’s parish church, rather than the Cathedral of the same name, in Manhattan. It was then the blushing bride got her first inkling that her husband’s fellow citizens might not be quite as egalitarian as she had first surmised. Not all of the female guests were thrilled with the eligible widower’s choice of wife. No doubt, Lydia told herself, they resented the fact that an outsider, and a Pom at that, had beaten them to such a desirable catch.

Yet she had seen no reason to let their antagonism worry her. Not with the gold and diamond ring on her left hand that proclaimed her Mrs. Duncan Kennedy of Manhattan and Montauk. Slowly acceptance had come, and Lydia had settled into her adopted country with the ease of one who has found her spiritual home. Even the feeling of being in the shadow of his first wife had diminished and she had eclipsed Janet at her job of being the prominent mate of a prominent man. Lydia wasn’t sure if Duncan had noticed, but she had taken on a slight variation of one of the dead woman’s axioms. *You attend to the firm, beloved, and leave the rest to me.*

She loved the summers at the beach. With Duncan busy in Jersey with the “other” Lydia all week, she had the house to herself and enjoyed her solitude. She was never bored – she was too grateful for the ease and pleasure of her life.

Turning away from the view, Lydia went inside and prepared for her usual morning walk. At her heels her peach-colored poodle,

Dominique, pranced excitedly as she picked up her broad-brimmed raffia hat. She had seen what damage the sun could do in the complexions of her American contemporaries.

"Come on, then, Dommie."

As they left the house Lydia followed the excited animal down the path through the trees that led to the beach. The sun on her arms felt like a sensual caress. Later it would grow fiercer, but by that time, she told herself, she would be safely ensconced inside with the latest magazines.

The sand was still cool beneath her bare feet as she headed towards the jutting headland with its unused lighthouse. Apart from a handful of surfboard riders far from the beach there were few people around at this hour. The real summer crowds – the holidaymakers who filled the apartments and inns of the Long Island beaches – wouldn't be descending for another few days.

Lydia Kennedy frowned at the thought. She'd grown as intolerant as her long-time neighbors to the intrusion of outsiders onto the strip of sand which she had grown to regard as her own. Why couldn't the hordes find somewhere else to go with their litter and ice boxes and raucous stereos?

"Dommie! Come back here!" Lost in thought, she had allowed the little dog to wander too far away. Now she called again as she watched him scrambling over the rocks. He was still at the silly stage, she thought fondly. Just fourteen months old. Her sweet baby.

"Dommie!" She called again and clapped her hands until finally the dog bounded down the hills of sand towards her. As he came closer Lydia could see he was carrying something in his mouth. *Now what...?*

Then her mouth tightened. "Dommie! Drop it! Drop it at once!"

Perhaps it was the rare sharpness of his mistress's tone that caused the dog to do as he was told. And with a look of disgust Lydia kicked sand over the used... well, they'd called them French letters in her youth. You'd think people would at least have the decency to dispose of the damn things properly. Kids, no doubt. In this climate, unlike Britain's, they could do it outside.

Lydia walked on with a frown. It was a wonder any local girls were still game enough for that sort of mischief after the vicious attack that had happened at South Lake, a couple of beaches down

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the coast. Twice now. And still the police hadn't come up with any likely suspects. Remembering the headlines, Lydia shivered despite the warmth of the sun.

But the shiver she felt at the thought of the attacks was nothing to her reaction ten minutes later, when she arrived at the base of the headland. She was picking her way through the sharp rocks when she saw it, a splash of color floating gently in one of the tidal pools.

A lost towel, she guessed.

Until she got closer...

I knew he knew more!!! her mind screamed.

The 911 dispatcher patched the call through to Long Island at precisely seven minutes past seven that morning.

A young sergeant was the duty sergeant at the station that morning. He was twenty-three years old, the same age as Tim Olsen had been when he had taken a similar call, and to him the details meant nothing. As far as the officer was concerned, it was just another Hamptons socialite having a conniption.

"So that's near the Montauk Lighthouse, right? Okay, we'll get a car there right away."

Only after he passed on the information did the young sergeant discover that this was no ordinary 10-53, particularly for the Chief.

Oh, God... I have to interrupt the Chief's breakfast...

Both policemen saw the irony.

Hugo Martinez had been on losing streak after being dealt lousy hand after lousy hand at an evening poker game when Tim Olsen had brought him the news.

Both men had come a long way since Millbrook. Now the Deputy Superintendent of the New York State Police, the first Hispanic chief of police to make it so far, and the Chief of the Long Island Police Force, it was another young sergeant who knocked on the door to bring them the news. This young sergeant looked as nervous as Olsen had been back then when he had brought similar news of another body to Martinez.

Again, the nervous sergeant felt compelled to whisper the message.

As both men listened to the details, both their faces grew paler. *No... Surely not again... It was unimaginable...* For more than a decade, they had not been able to solve the death of his first wife by garroting before she was shot, a detail that had been withheld from the media. The police wanted them to think she had died of gunshot wounds; it was not uncommon for the police to withhold “minor” details, Martinez had learnt the small trick to enable him to weed out true leads from pranksters hoping for reward from his mentor. They did not need the vicious invective of slurs this time: they just looked at each other. For each knew without a doubt that they had just lost all chance of finishing their breakfast that morning and that their careers were in the balance if they did not solve this and the previous crime.

“Christ, Angie... I’ve only had a couple of hours’ sleep in three goddamn days!”

It was almost déjà vu. Through bleary, bloodshot eyes, the cinematographer blinked awake to see Ryan’s face staring into his own through the van’s window. This time, the pain he could feel in his ribs was being caused by his tormentor’s elbow.

“Wakey, wakey, Ray. We didn’t come here to sleep through the damned crime wave. Grab that camera and move it.”

Angela Ryan paused, and laughed. She also recognized it was almost déjà vu. The players were almost the same but it was Long Island instead of Millbrook. Again, the crowd outside the gates of Duncan Kennedy’s residence had swelled to half of the community’s population. Again, film and television crews from around the country were jockeying for the best vantage points as they filmed the activity in the home of the once mighty family. This time, it was a Hollywood camera crew who were trying to move Angie on so they could place their own presenter in the prime location she had assumed. But given her rise and rise within her profession over the last twelve years, she had earned the right to keep them out. She hated the jockeying for position and had not missed it one iota;

but both she and Jensen remembered their younger days and their enthusiasm for field work.

“Okay, Ray, let’s go.” As her sound technician adjusted his controls, Angie reached and took the proffered microphone from Ray. In a moment the camera was rolling.

“Death has put Duncan Kennedy in the spotlight again. The unsolved murder of his heiress wife, Janet, and their daughter Kristie, over thirteen years ago and his hasty marriage to his British born second wife, Lydia Tobin, first brought him to national notoriety. Now, the second Mrs. Kennedy has found the body of his butler on the beach outside their Hamptons beach house...”

CHAPTER 5

INAUSPICIOUS PROGRESS

The door seemed impenetrable – it slid with some difficulty; it seemed as if there was something impeding its progress as Alyssa tugged at the handle. The small shop front was at the end of the single-floor building row, which contained a mix of professional, retail and eatery businesses across the road from Hoboken's largest shopping mall.

This can't be good... No, don't panic, she thought. It had taken her over two hours and her last hundred dollar bill to get through the Holland Tunnel: the cab had been caught behind the overturned truck. She had thanked the powers that be for her foresight to have removed her jacket while waiting to pass through the tunnel: the early–August summer heat permeated the taxi, even with the windows down. It was an unusually long, hot summer.

Save for her never-ending desire to be early and, luckily, the cabbie knew the building where her interview was as his daughter worked in it, she would never have made it on time. As she pushed the door closed behind her, she turned away from the reception desk to take a gasp of air without the receptionist seeing.

"Hi, I'm Alyssa Giordano. I have an appointment with Mr. Kennedy and Ms. Price."

"I'll let them know you're here," the girl who looked like she should still have been in school responded with a nod. Alyssa hoped that the run in her pantyhose wasn't visible as she sunk into the low settee and adjusted her skirt. She had bought the most expensive suit she could afford, hoping to show at least an air of professionalism.

It was her twelfth interview after passing her final examinations at Albany Law School. She had heard of Kennedy's notoriety from

news reports from the year before and her parents had cautioned her against taking an interview with him; but she was past caring about that given her pressing financial concerns.

She had not yet attempted the Bar Examinations in either Albany or Trenton, as she knew the student loans officer would soon be knocking and the examination fees could wait a little. Alyssa had lost track of the number of résumés she'd sent out, to firms in Albany, Manhattan, Jersey, to as many State and County Judges as her – really her parents' – resources would allow.

The results on her transcript were adequate, better than passing grades, but they were not outstanding. Alyssa was in the middle of her class and she had made the Dean's List twice; but her grade point average was not what the big firms, or the more senior judicial officers, were looking for. Although she had not studied as hard as she could or should have, Alyssa seemed to float through effortlessly; the liking the Dean had taken to her did not trigger the connection that the Dean had with her past in Alyssa's memory, but it had bemused her.

Although the firm was an inconsequential one in Hoboken, Alyssa was tired of the abundant rebuffs from the Judges and the hundreds of firms she'd applied to. All she wanted was a job. *Stop squirming! You look fine.*

She wrangled herself out of the couch, hoping she didn't look too undignified, as the tallish, pot-bellied man approached. "Hi, I'm Duncan Kennedy," he said, offering his hand.

"Alyssa Giordano." Her hand tingled as she let go of his solid shake.

"Follow me." She caught a glimpse of the chubby woman sitting at the table from behind Kennedy's girth as she followed behind him into the conference room. "This is Lydia Price, my partner. Take a seat."

"Thank you. Good morning Ms. Price." Alyssa pulled the chair out as she reached across the table to offer her hand. Price's grip wasn't as firm as Kennedy's was, as dainty as the generously proportioned hand could make it.

As both Alyssa and Kennedy took their seats, Kennedy next to Price and Alyssa across from them, the door at the other end of the room opened. The tall sinewy blonde sauntered in, brushing his hair off his glasses with his long fingers.

"Bill Morisette," he announced, offering his hand.

"Hi, Alyssa Giordano," she muttered, shivering as she gripped his strong hand, halfway out of her chair. "No, no, sit," he said, motioning for her to return to her seat. He turned his chair towards her as he sat down next to her.

"Bill is our senior Associate," Lydia said. "So let's get started."

Alyssa hoped they took her instant attraction to Bill, and subsequent skittishness, as job interview nerves. The previous interviews had given her some confidence in the process itself, but Bill's charisma and magnetism had rocked that slightly. Alyssa remembered to smile, the tips she had learnt in her client interviewing class and tried to maintain eye contact with all of them as they fired questions at her. She also dredged up the questions – the start date and her availability, the firm pecking order, the type of work she'd be doing – she had forgotten at the other meetings. She'd be working with Bill and his clerk, Connie, assisting them with the housing development sales for one of the firm's major clients: it pleased her to no end that Bill would be her supervisor – real estate law had been one of her better subjects, but she hoped her attraction didn't show too much.

"When will you be taking the Bar Exams?" Kennedy asked.

"I–I'm not sure. I–It really depends on where I get a job," Alyssa stuttered. "I'll take the first Exam I can after I start work. If I got the job here, I'm hoping I can take the Exam in Trenton in February."

"Have you thought about taking a Bar review course?" This time it was Price, smiling, who begged the question.

"I'm looking at some Bar Review courses at the moment," Alyssa smiled back. "And I've got some materials about a number of them here in New Jersey and some in New York. Again, it'll depend on where I get a job as to which one I choose."

"I think that about does it. Any more questions, Lydia?" Duncan asked. Price just shook her head. They all stood as the encounter concluded and Duncan opened the conference room door for Alyssa.

"Thanks for coming," he said, as he ushered her towards the exit, "We'll let you know about the job in a couple of days."

"I'd appreciate that, Duncan," she started as she shook his hand. "I look forward to hearing from you." She turned towards

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the pretty front-desk girl, smiled and nodded before walking back to the door. It slid open effortlessly this time; Alyssa wondered if it was a sign as she stepped out and slid it back into place, breathed deeply before stepping off the portico to find her way home.

Compared with the last graduation ceremony she had attended, Alyssa's Commencement Day started gloriously.

Neither the dark grey clouds nor the early winds that had overshadowed the start of her parents' Commencement Day arrived for hers. The fact that this ceremony was occurring at the opposite end of summer rather than in late spring may have had something to do with it. Justice Susan McCoy, of the New York State Supreme Court, looked stunning during the Commencement address despite the heat; the unusually high temperatures had not abated.

Alyssa had wondered how she would get the six extra tickets she needed; the Law School had limited ticket numbers to four for those graduating and both sets of grandparents as well as her parents and siblings wanted to attend. At least Uncle Bobby had begged off attending, relieving Alyssa of the need to ask for more tickets; his mother-in-law had dictated that his wife and Alyssa's cousins visit that day. Somehow, the extra tickets had ended up in her envelope when she collected them. Alyssa wondered how it had happened, but she had not made the connection with her Boston heritage; but the Dean had and remembered her maternal great-grandfather, the Senator, with fondness and was just a little disappointed that he could not attend. The Commencement ceremony and Law School reception passed quickly and Alyssa had just enough time to have a few words in private and a congratulatory hug with Peggy Cooper, a classmate, before she was dragged home for the late lunch with her family.

The trip back to the house had again taken several vehicles, but they passed the traffic more easily. Alyssa's mother and grandmothers had put lunch in the oven while she was dressing, before they had left the house early that morning. Unlike her parents' Commencement, this was just a family affair: only her grandparents, parents, four sisters and her sole brother, as her classmates had their own families to contend with. It had become a tradition to cook enough food for

what seemed like an army for a month, as their family had become: it made it only too easy to refrain from portion control, but who cared today?

"I remember watching your parents graduate with you on my lap," Alyssa's maternal grandfather intoned as they all sat down, plates piled high.

"Oh, come on Poppy Ian! Don't start!" Alyssa rolled her eyes.

"Ah, yes. That was a good day. You remember when you got married, Gino, Moira?" It was her paternal grandfather, Paolo, reminiscing this time.

"Stop! Please, not you too, Nonno." Alyssa begged, fork halfway to her mouth, as she almost spilt the mouthful of food over her almost clean shirt.

"Oh, come on boys, that's enough" Nonna Maria interjected.

"Just get back to your food!" It was Nanna Caitlin who interrupted this time. Her parents started to laugh, and the laughter echoed around the room as the meal continued late into the night.

CHAPTER 6

COMMENCEMENT

It was the day after graduation, a week after her meeting with Kennedy Price. The Albany summer weather had remained constant.

Alyssa, relieved that Commencement day had passed as uneventfully as her family would allow, was even happier that her mother had turned off her alarm and allowed her to sleep late. As she folded away the cap and gown her parents, and now she, had worn at their graduation, her cell phone's ringing startled her. She jumped, bumping the bed, knocking the phone to the floor.

"Hello?" she answered it after kicking it almost across the room.

"Hello. Alyssa?"

"Yes?"

"Hi, it's Bill Morissette. Congratulations, Duncan and Lydia asked me to call to offer you the job. When can you start?"

"Wow! Thanks," Alyssa exclaimed, pausing, not wanting to sound too excited. "Look, I'll need to quit my job here," – she didn't let on she was working for her parents – "find a place to live over there. Is August thirty-first okay?"

"Hmmm," Bill uttered, "Yes, that's good. I'm starting holidays for my honeymoon on Friday that week."

"You're getting married?" Alyssa hoped the disappointment in her voice wasn't too obvious. "Congratulations. When's the wedding?"

"Thanks, it's the next Sunday, September 6. Again, well done on the job. We'll see you on the thirty-first. You'd better get working on your review for the Jersey Bar Exams." The phone disconnected before she could thank him again for the announcement.

"Mom! Mom!" Alyssa almost fell down the stairs as she ran searching for her mother. "I got the job with Kennedy Price, in Hoboken!"

"That wonderful, darling! When do you go?"

"I start on the thirty-first." Her mother embraced her and squeezed hard.

The fortnight before starting the post at Kennedy Price had been hectic: packing up, getting a hold on an apartment close to work. The first week of her first real job in the law was nerve wracking: re-introducing herself to Duncan, Lydia and Bill, meeting the secretaries, learning how real estate transactions worked in actuality.

She walked to work that first morning. Although the weather was turning, Alyssa felt exhilarated enough about her perceived change in fortune and needed to work a bit of her excitement off. This time, as she approached the offices of Kennedy Price, she had no trouble sliding the front door open.

The same girl who had been on the front desk when she arrived for her interview was still there. "Hi, I'm Alyssa Giordano; I'm starting work here today." At least she'd been able to obtain a different suit so she wouldn't be remembered from the first meeting as only having one outfit.

"Hi, I'm Gayle," the girl answered pleasantly enough. "I remember you from the interview." She got up and came around the high desk and offered her hand, which Alyssa took. She was taller than Alyssa had first thought and almost waif-like, her long sun-bleached curls setting off her tanned face quite prettily. "Duncan and Lydia aren't here right now, but Bill's waiting for you. I'll show you into his office."

"Thanks," Alyssa responded to Gayle's back as she followed her into Bill's office.

She sat at a desk in the secretarial pool in a space divided from the reception desk and Gayle by a thin partition, rather than in a formal

office; space was limited. There were only enough offices for the partners and Bill and the conference room was more accurately the office lunchroom; but Alyssa did get to see clients by herself in there occasionally.

Alyssa was disappointed that Morisette was getting married; she was drawn to him, absorbed in his charisma. His charm had fascinated her at their first meeting and captivated her even further during that first week at her new job.

She tried to use her limited feminine charm, her voluptuous body – during a couple of meetings in his office, she'd pushed her chest forward onto his desk, allowing the buttons on her shirt to “accidentally” fall open and show more cleavage – to catch his attention and make him realize it was her he wanted. But she couldn't catch his awareness sufficiently for him to call off his wedding without just saying so; she didn't know him well enough, really wasn't confident enough in herself, to do that.

Bill came back from his honeymoon appearing well rested and, in the months that followed, Alyssa continued her attempts to captivate him, show her curves to him. He noticed it, her. Alyssa began to feel that Bill oft looked at her longingly, and regretfully, when he mentioned his wife. But he took no overt action. He couldn't completely suppress his growing craving for Alyssa but his self-control and willpower only allowed him the occasional explicit flirtation.

As Veterans Day 1993 approached, the change in seasons had become more pronounced. Alyssa's mood had begun to turn in the same direction: she was feeling as if the weight of the world was on her with the load of work on her desk. Her days became longer, arriving at the office first and departing last, in the dark in both instances. Alyssa mostly kept her time at the office during what was supposed to be weekends to daylight hours.

The secretaries, especially Gayle and Connie, had not quite been able to keep their contempt for Alyssa under wraps. Duncan made her squirm and she got an uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach every time he came to her desk: he always managed somehow to

touch her suggestively but not quite sexually. He seemed to dump all his tax cases on Alyssa, piling her desk to just below boiling point, leaving him with almost naught to do so he could go off to the movies with his wife, whom Alyssa had never met. Lydia didn't seem to want to know her; she was buried in the burden of family law cases on her desk, not leaving her much time for a love life. Her appetite had diminished significantly under the strain; she had fainted a couple of times from low blood pressure rather than hunger.

Bill seemed to be her only ally; he tried his best to assist her with Duncan's tax cases, but that wasn't his area. He had taken her to the medical center after the second fainting turn – she figured his concern to be genuine that time rather than sexual – where the doctor had waxed and waned about the importance of nutrition.

"Alyssa," Gayle barked from the reception desk, with a mouthful of lunch, "phone, line three."

"Thanks, Gayle." Alyssa tried to appear pleasant and upbeat without asking who it was. She wanted to hide her discomfort from them; she thought to risk offending someone was to risk her job. She'd arrived at 6:30 a.m., having only had a piece of toast and nothing else since then.

She picked up the receiver and announced herself.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Giordano," she heard on the other end. "I'm Melissa, from Justice McCoy's Chambers in Manhattan. Her Honor wondered if you were still interested in a clerkship with her and wanted to interview with her."

Alyssa stopped herself short of audibly gasping. A clerkship, in the State Supreme Court in Foley Square! That would be a coup, but could she bring herself to move away from Bill? Wouldn't it be a failure if she had to run home with her tail between her legs to live with mommy and daddy again? She knew in her head he was married. She had met his wife, Theona, at the bank a couple of times and begun to form a friendship with of her. It was silly, to be regretted later – how much hurt it would cause her only time would reveal, but her profound yearning for Bill overruled her head.

"Thank you so much for calling, Melissa," Alyssa mused "but I started a job in Hoboken a couple of months ago which I consider I'm committed to. Could you thank Her Honor for me, but I don't

want to waste her time, when she could offer the interview for the position to someone else.”

“Alright, Ms. Giordano,” the executive assistant replied. Alyssa sighed as she replaced the receiver on the hook.

“What was that all about?” Connie barked from behind her. Alyssa jumped slightly off her chair, startled.

“Nothing,” Alyssa uttered as she swiveled her chair to face Connie, seeing Gayle standing with her head around the partition. “Justice McCoy’s secretary, the Judge wanted to interview me for a clerkship with her. I’m happy to stay here, so I turned the interview down.”

Gayle and Connie glanced at each other, rolled their eyes and turned back to the work on their computer terminals. Alyssa’s face reddened, with fear rather than embarrassment, and her eyes welled with tears as she turned back to her own terminal and continued copy typing the contract documents Bill had dictated to her. She felt so alone, shunned, but to leave now would make her feel she had failed to make it on her own; she really didn’t want Mom and Dad to think she couldn’t live, and love, on her own.

Alyssa passed the rest of the afternoon in silence, only leaving her desk to get her sandwich from the kitchenette to nibble on. The phone rang at seven, the usual time of the evening for the security company to call if the office alarm had not been activated by then. She stood, shakily, and packed her desk readying her things to leave. She began her ritual to lock the office, ensuring the back door was locked before returning to her desk to collect her bag before turning on the alarm on the way out the front door.

“What are you still doing here?” the voice boomed, making Alyssa jump in fright and her face pale. It was Duncan Kennedy. “Did I startle you?” He moved closer, putting his arm around her to stroke her back.

“Yes, sorry,” she mumbled, “I had to finish a few things, I’m just leaving now.”

“It’s so dark. Would you like me to walk you home?” Duncan enquired, suggestively.

“No, thank you, I drove in today,” she replied shaking slightly, picking up her bag and moving towards the front door. Alyssa hoped he would take her rebuff for the hint it was supposed to be.

“Okay, I’ll walk you to your car,” he said walking behind her to the exit. As she slid the door open, she heard him punching in the code on the alarm pad and felt his hand rub his hand over the hooks holding the back of bra together. Alyssa hoped he hadn’t felt her shudder at his touch.

They stepped into the car park together and Duncan and enquired about the offer by Justice McCoy. *Damn! They told him! Bitches!* she thought. He watched Alyssa as she climbed into her not quite broken down car, telling him of her rejection. *Don’t feel bound to stay*, he told her, *I’d be disappointed if you decided not to stay, but it IS a good opportunity*. His insincerity was blindingly obvious even to someone as naïve as Alyssa thought she was. She made her excuses about it, saying she was happy where she was: it wasn’t a complete lie, she was happy to have moved out of her parents’ home and be living on her own but she wasn’t going to tell him how nervous he made her.

“Are you going back to Albany for the weekend?” He held the door open and leant down, bringing his face close to hers.

“Yes, Mom and Dad are picking me up in about half an hour.”

“I’d better let you go then.” Duncan moved out of the door well and closed the door for Alyssa.

She waved goodbye to him after closing the door and drove off, barely making it up the stairs to her front door and to the kitchen sink to vomit and wash it out before her parents arrived.

CHAPTER 7

UNDER PRESSURE

She was stressed. The Bar review course had been eating into time at the office: she was arriving barely before, and was leaving the office at the same time as, the secretaries to make the night classes and Lydia Price had indicated her disapproval with scathing glares. And she needed more time away from the office, to actually take the Exams. She was tired. The self-study time and assignments had been cutting into her sleep: she had been getting only a couple of hours a night, slumped over her study notes most of the time.

And now she was anxious, panicky. They hadn't signed off on her request to take the time out of the office to sit the Exams, despite the fact that she had submitted it to them more than a month ago. And the last thing Alyssa wanted on a Friday afternoon, after being the victim of not only Lydia's derisive glares but also those from the secretaries, before the anticipated sleepless weekend of study ahead of her, was to have the conversation she needed to have with someone. But, since she'd submitted her request to the partners at the same time as the application to the New Jersey Board of Bar Examiners, she presumed she'd given them enough notice for them to say yes.

She'd expected Duncan to be in by mid-morning, as was his practice, so she could press him to sign the form; but when he hadn't arrived by the time she got back from lunch, Alyssa elected to stop procrastinating and ask Lydia sign it on his behalf.

"Here goes nothing," Alyssa mumbled as she approached Lydia's office.

"What is it!" Lydia snapped as she heard the mumbling. That didn't bode well, Alyssa perceived.

"Lydia, you got a moment?" she asked as she reached, and stuck her head in the barely open door.

"Just a moment," she snapped again.

"I just wanted to talk about the Bar Exam."

"What for? You should be ready by now."

"I am. Well, at least I think I am. But I wanted to ask about the approval for my leave, for me to go to Trenton for the Exam."

"Have you got all the forms ready?"

"Yep," Alyssa replied. "The forms had to be in by December fifteen, well over a month ago. I filed them with the Board of Bar Examiners in plenty of time. You signed the check, remember? And I put in my leave request a month ago." She sensed that Lydia was holding back, but Alyssa couldn't understand why.

"Ooohh, yes. When is it? The Exam?" It had been so long since she herself had taken the Exams that Lydia had "forgotten" that it was always held on the last Tuesdays and Wednesdays in February and July.

"It's two and a half weeks away. February twenty three and twenty four, but I'd like to be in Trenton the night before. And I'd stay over the night of the twenty fourth and drive back early the next morning."

"What the hell for? We need you here, at least the day after! You'll have plenty of time to get there!"

"I don't want to run the risk of getting stuck in traffic. I won't be allowed in if I'm late." Another thing Lydia seemed to have forgotten.

"Look, I don't have the time for this now. You'll have to ask Duncan."

"But Duncan's not in!"

"Too damn bad. You'll have to ask Duncan." Lydia stood up from her desk and forced Alyssa out the door.

"When's he going to be here?"

"I don't know. Ask Connie, or Gayle," she snarled as she slammed the door behind Alyssa; she was stunned and stared at the door for what seemed an eternity before returning to her desk and, as she sat down, saw Connie and Gayle whispering over some papers.

"Connie, Gayle, do either of you know when Duncan will be in?"

"No," Connie retorted.

"Tomorrow, I think," Gayle barked.

"Okay, thank you," Alyssa replied meekly. *Jeez, what is with everyone today?* she thought as she turned back to her desk to keep working on the figures she had to prepare by the end of the day for the closings due next week.

It wasn't until the secretaries were getting ready to head out the door at the end of the last business day of the week that Kennedy arrived. Alyssa jumped as she heard the front door slide open: she'd been disturbed by her lunch-time conversation with Lydia about taking time to sit the Bar Exams and had been caught up in thought, planning how to approach Duncan on the subject, and had finalized barely half the figures for next week's closings.

"Hello ladies!" he announced, directed to the secretaries rather than to Alyssa, as he slid the front door closed behind him and made his way down the corridor between the offices and secretarial pool towards his partner's office.

"Hello Duncan," Gayle and Connie chimed in chorus, fawning over him. They seemed to enjoy the flirtatious attention that he bestowed upon them, that Alyssa so loathed.

"Hi Duncan. Got a minute? Can I talk to you?" Alyssa asked as he stopped outside Bill's office.

"Not right now; I need to talk to Bill. Can you give me ten minutes," Duncan cut her off as he turned and entered Bill's office and closed the door behind him; it wasn't a question, really, but a statement.

"Sure," Alyssa responded as the door slammed behind him, not quite sure if he heard. Ten minutes turned into an hour and the senior partner made several trips between his junior partner's and senior associate's offices. Alyssa tried to work but she was distracted by Duncan's travels between Lydia and Bill's offices. Finally, after a nerve-wracking hour and a half, Alyssa heard Lydia's door open again.

"Alyssa, can you please come in." This time it was Lydia who posed the question as a statement.

"Sh-sh-sure," Alyssa stuttered as she stood and walked over to the office in the back corner of the office space. As she entered the room, she saw that Lydia had seated herself behind her desk and Bill was sitting in one of the two chairs on the other side of the desk;

Duncan remained standing and motioned for her to sit in the empty chair next to Bill.

"Duncan, Bill and I have been discussing the conversation you and I had at lunchtime," Lydia started as Alyssa lowered herself onto the edge of the empty chair. "We're not going to be able to approve your leave application for the Bar Exams, we can't give you time off at this point."

"What? Why?" Alyssa was stunned.

"I'll be away. Lydia and I are going to England that week," Duncan said. Alyssa understood him to mean his wife, rather than his business partner, since she had met, and now knew, the second Mrs. Kennedy and had heard her accent. She had some sympathy for the "accident prone" woman; Alyssa's instinct told her that Mrs. Lydia Kennedy, whom everyone in the office called "the other Lydia" was not "accident prone".

"And we need you here to look after Duncan's tax cases while he's away," Lydia interrupted. "You can take the Exams next time they're scheduled."

"But that won't be till July!" Alyssa's voice started to crack under the mounting strain; it meant that they wouldn't increase her pay packet until she'd taken, and passed, the Bar Exams. "And the tax cases are ready!" She moved her gaze from Duncan to stare at Bill, hoping for some sign of support from him; Bill, who had been silent throughout the heated exchange, unable to bring himself to contradict the people currently holding his career in their hands, he shifted his gaze from Alyssa's pleading, begging eyes to look at his shuffling feet.

"You'll just have to wait," Duncan retorted. "And you'll have to reimburse the firm for the Exam fees: we'll be taking it out of your pay packet." At this point, Alyssa slumped into the back of the chair and burst into tears. She'd never be able to pay them back and pay the Exam fees on her own. If she asked her parents for yet more money, they would want to know why and, with the truth, the Senator would be told and stick his kind, great-grandfatherly nose in; she sobbed a little harder knowing, if she wanted to stand on her own two feet, there was no other option but not to ask. Bill, remaining silent, simply stretched out his hand and stroked Alyssa's shoulder.

"Oh, pull yourself together!" Lydia snapped as she turned her stare from Alyssa to Duncan, who merely nodded his head once.

"We're not heartless, we won't take it all out at once, the money for the fees; we'll deduct it over a few pay packets." Alyssa nodded as she heard a softening in Lydia's tone, and a small amount of compassion which she did not expect given her previous callousness, as she stopped sobbing and took a tissue from Lydia's pudgy outstretched hand.

"You can get yourself sorted to take to the July Exams first thing Monday morning," Duncan, his tone still strident, indicated. "And we'll agree to let you take the time off now, without pay of course. When are they?"

"July twenty six and twenty seven," Alyssa uttered barely above a whisper as she wiped her face. But she wasn't going to let them off so easily now; they had pushed her around enough today and the urge she felt to punish them overwhelmed her self-doubt and diminishing confidence. As her strength grew, she said "I want the whole week off, and I want it off with pay."

"No, not the—" Duncan started.

"Yes, that's okay," Lydia interrupted him as she changed the dates on the form and signed it. She pushed across her desk towards Duncan and held the pen out for him.

"But—" Duncan tried again.

"But nothing, Duncan." She stabbed the pen at him; he took it and signed the form begrudgingly. "Now go and get some rest over the weekend. Are you right to get home by yourself?" Lydia asked Alyssa, her tone still sympathetic.

"You didn't bring your car today, did you?" Bill inquired as he shifted his head to look into Alyssa's eyes.

"No, I didn't," Alyssa sighed. She couldn't bring herself to look at him.

"I'll take her home." Bill indicated as he looked at Lydia.

"Alright," Duncan said, "off you go then."

Bill rose from his chair slightly before Alyssa did and opened the junior partner's room office door for her. She went out ahead of him and the door slammed behind them. As they proceeded down the corridor, he stopping at his office door to watch her collect her handbag from her desk, they could hear the raised voices of their employers.

What the fuck did you do that for! Kennedy yelled.

Don't yell at me! Price screamed back. *Now what the fuck did I do what for?!*

Tell her she could have all that time off in July. The volume of Kennedy's voice lowered ever so slightly. *We're not going to be able to tell her she can't go then!*

We shouldn't be telling her she can't go now! Price's voice pitched higher. *We'll lose her, just like we lost the last one! Again! And we can't afford that right now!*

That wasn't my fault! She was useless. And just remember whose money it is that funded this joint starting.

No she wasn't useless; she just refused to put up with you and your antics! You remember who keeps this place running, keeps the money rolling in. And keeps you in your playboy lifestyle!

Oh, don't give me that bullshit! You know you wouldn't be here without me! Without my money!

What! Your money? Don't you mean your dead wife's money?

Having heard enough, Morisette started down the corridor to the front door at the same time Giordano moved away from her desk in the same direction after collecting her bag. Alyssa reached the door first, barely ahead of Bill. As she tugged at the handle, as it happened on the day she arrived for her interview for the job with the firm, it seemed as if there was again something getting in the way of the door from sliding open with any ease. He reached for the door from behind her, putting his hand over hers on the handle, and, her spine tingling as she felt his hand on hers and his taut form skimming against her back, they worked together to slide the door open.

CHAPTER 8

INHIBITIONS

They walked to his car, got in and drove to her apartment in silence. The silence remained as he parked when they arrived. He exited the small car first, and opened the door for her. She fumbled in her handbag for her keys as they walked speechlessly to her front door and dropped them as she tugged them out. He was able to stop himself from running into her as she bent to pick them up; but he wasn't able to stop himself from looking at her sensual form as she did so. She dropped them again at the door as she fumbled to get a key into its lock and, again, he wasn't able to stop himself from looking at her voluptuous figure as she picked the keys up for a second time.

After finally unlocking and pushing open the door, she didn't remove the keys or close the door as she raced into the bathroom and slammed that door behind her. He stood at the front door, dazed, unsure what to do. As he heard her begin to dry-retch, he pulled the keys out of the door and closed it behind him as he entered the apartment. He stopped after barely taking three steps inside the accommodations: he was stunned, just as much at how small and decrepit the surroundings in which she lived were as he was at the sounds he heard emanating from the bathroom. The room in which he was standing, really only a living room with a daybed and small kitchenette, was dingy, paint peeling, and the small room without a door purporting to be a bedroom, a drape attempting to cover the opening without success, really wasn't big enough for a bed.

I can't leave her alone tonight, can I? He pondered as he tried to block out the sounds of her continuing to gag behind the closed

bathroom door. *At least the bathroom has a door.* He sighed. *Wait! Yes! No! Theona!* His mind scalded as his back straightened in fear. *No, hang on a minute! She's at her mother's!* He smiled at that thought. He shook his head as he heard the vomiting stop and faucets start and sat himself on the daybed. It was another minute before the faucets stopped running and she walked out of the bathroom to see him sitting on the daybed.

"Sorry," she said.

"That's okay. Nothing to be sorry about. Are you alright?" She could hear genuine concern in his voice as she saw him pat the space beside him.

"Yes, I'm fine," she lied. He knew it was a lie, she knew, somehow sensed, he knew it was a lie; the ever so subtle changes in her appearance and demeanor, too subtle for the others to notice but not him, belied the notion that she was fine. She inhaled, then exhaled, deeply before walking towards him to obey his gestured instruction. He lifted his arm as she sat, put it around her shoulders. She leant in slightly and put her arms around his waist. He discerned that, at this moment, she just felt comforted by his touch, his presence, but not the sexual energy he was exuding for her. In her inexperience, she had been unable to hide her feelings for him but he had hoped he had been careful enough to hide his own feelings. "Theona?"

"At her mother's. For the weekend."

"You mind staying a bit? I don't want to be alone at the moment."

"Not at all. Of course I'll stay, I don't mind at all," he babbled. He drew her head to his chest as leant back against the armrest. He smelt her hair as he felt her breasts, her beautiful wonderful breasts, rub against his chest. "I'm sorry."

"What for?" She was surprised at the regret in his voice.

"What they did, the Bar Exams." He breathed in the scent of her hair again. "I begged them not to."

"Why?"

"It's not fair to make you wait until July."

"No, why did they—"

"Oh, okay. It was him, the lazy misogynist pig. He just wants to swan around in his own importance, on the blood sweat and tears of others."

"But surely she had something to say about it."

"She tried, but she can't really do much."

"Huh? They're partners!"

"He's got the money; and she can't afford to buy him out right now. He likes watching people bow to his will."

"Oh. I see. That makes sense now."

He could see it didn't, but he didn't contradict her second lie. He yawned.

"You're tired," she said. "I should let you go."

"No, I'm right." He yawned again.

"No, you're tired," she giggled.

"Yes, I could use a bit of kip."

"Here, let me up so you can lie down."

"No, you're right. This is big enough for the both of us, isn't it?" She just nodded at the statement. He used his free arm, so he wouldn't have to remove the other from her shoulders or her head from his chest, to lift her legs onto the daybed so he could extend himself along its length; she matched his maneuverings and extended the length of her body against his.

"Isn't Theona expecting you?"

"No, not this weekend. This is a secret mother daughter business weekend."

"Ah, yes. The secret mother daughter business weekend."

They laughed and yawned and slipped into an easy silence, not needing to speak. He wanted to offer her more than just friendship, support, but didn't; she would have accepted what he wanted to offer, but decided that all she really wanted at the moment was a little bit of comforting. The meeting with the bosses had drained them both. Despite the early hour, they fell asleep in each other's arms.

The touch of his arms around her, rather than the bright sunlight pouring through the small window, woke her. She didn't open her eyes immediately, but when she did she saw he was still in the clothes he wore to the office yesterday. She adjusted her head to see that she was also still in the clothes she wore to the office yesterday, but both their shoes were off; she didn't know how, and didn't care, how he got them off without waking her.

"Hello, sleepyhead." His voice was low, gentle.

"Hello, sleepyhead." She matched her voice to his.

"Sleep well?"

"Yep. You? How long have you been awake?"

"Yep. Since sunup. Hungry?"

"Mmmm. Yes!"

"Alright then." With that, he sat up, forcing her to raise herself up with him, and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. "Let's go get something to eat."

"My teeth are fuzzy, my face is dirty."

"You jump in the shower while I grab a change of clothes from the car."

"Huh?" She looked at him inquisitively as he grabbed her keys and opened the front door. She wondered, *Why would he have a change of clothes in his car?*

"Theona makes me keep an overnight bag in my car." He rolled his eyes. "Just in case she wants to take a spontaneous weekend away."

"Oh." She rolled her eyes back. "That's spontaneous." He laughed as the door slipped shut behind him.

As she left the bathroom in a towel, she saw, as expected, he had returned before she had finished her routine and was sitting back on the daybed.

"There's a clean towel in there," she said as she pulled the towel tighter.

"Righto," he said as he stood and picked up his bag.

His arm grazed hers as they passed each other, him into the bathroom, her to the doorless bedroom. The smallness of the apartment meant that she could hear all that happened within it; she listened to the shower running as she dressed and fixed her hair in a loose plait. It was his turn to see her sitting on the daybed as he exited the bathroom, fully dressed, bag in hand, hair still wet.

"You ready?" he asked as he stopped outside the bathroom door.

"Yep."

"Where's a good place to eat around here?"

"Around here?" She chuckled. "I don't know. I normally don't go out to eat around here."

"Right." He chuckled. "I don't think I'd go out to eat around here either." He pulled open the front door and let her out first. "I know a place."

They fell back into the easy silence of the previous evening as they approached his car. The hush continued until they were seated

in the café he'd chosen. The banter at the café was basic, limited to ordering, checking the fare was satisfactory, banal mindless chatter until it came time to pay the check; she wanted to contribute, he wouldn't let her and a small but friendly argument ensued. He refused to let her hand over any of her cash and she eventually accepted his graciousness, at which point the silence resumed and remained until he pulled up outside her apartment block. He turned off the engine and they sat silently for what seemed an eternity but, in reality, was scarcely a minute.

"Thanks for breakfast," she said, remaining motionless.

"That's okay," he replied, also remaining still.

"What you up to for the rest of the weekend?"

"Dunno yet. You?"

"Well, I was going to study. But now? I'll probably do some laundry."

"Laundry. I gotta do some laundry too. Take the weekend off from study." He stroked her forearm; she felt a shiver electrify her spine.

"I'd better go." She put her hand over his, holding it on her.

"Yeah, you'd better go." They sat, his hand on her arm and her hand on his, for another eternity before she removed her hand from his to open the door. He stared at her back as she got out of the car. He waved at her as she closed the door behind her before driving off; she stood on the sidewalk as he drove off, watching until she could no longer see the car.

"Thanks so much," Alyssa said into the telephone. She'd spent the first half of the working week splitting her time, and her mind, talking to the Clerk of the New Jersey Supreme Court about transferring to, and paying for, the July sitting of the Bar Exams. "So you'll send me a letter?" She listened a moment. "Yes, that's the address. Thanks again." She breathed a sigh of relief as she put the hand piece back to its position.

"What was that?" She jumped at the male voice behind her and swiveled the chair around to see Morisette behind her, leaning against the partition.

"The Clerk of the Court." Her eyes moved to look at Connie, sitting with her back to them and her attention directed to her

computer but she sensed that her ears were pricked. "I'm set for the July Exams. And they've agreed to carry over the fees till then."

"So my affidavit worked?" Bill smiled as he turned his eyes towards Connie to see her shake her head. Alyssa, still looking at Connie, also saw it. She turned to a case file and rifled through it; they both decided to ignore her feigned lack of inquisitiveness. "You won't have to pay the fee again? I thought they weren't refundable."

"No, they're normally not refundable, or even transferable. But the clerk said that the Court agreed my circumstances were extenuating enough to transfer the fees."

"That must be a relief."

"It is."

"You wanted to talk to me about some files?" He pushed himself off the partition. "Bring them in," he said as he headed back to his office.

"Sure." She swiveled back to her desk and picked up the files for the cases she wanted to discuss. As she stood and followed him into his office, out of the corner of her eye she caught Gayle sitting on Connie's desk as they whispered to each other. She knew they were whispering about her, again. She pretended not to notice; she knew of no other way to deal with it.

CHAPTER 9

DOWNWARD SPIRAL

Spring was building to another hot summer.

Her parents had tried to put a stop Alyssa's weekend working habits by picking her up – they didn't trust the rundown car she'd bought for herself – on Friday nights for trips to Albany and only returning her mostly on Sunday afternoons, sometimes Monday mornings. However, it wasn't that she didn't want to spend the weekends in Albany, but her parents' expectations only loaded more pressure on. But at least they had replaced her dilapidated car with a decent one her father considered reliable, but only after he had examined it. It allowed her to make her own way to Albany and back again, so at least she could take her own sweet time about when she left. And, not only did the travel time cut into her study time for the Bar, so too did the time her parents wanted to spend with her, taking her to galleries, to visit her grandparents or just simply talking to her.

Alyssa had been able to build a wall around herself to block out Gayle and Connie's scathing looks. Gayle, who got the mail ready addressing and stuffing the envelopes for the Post Office in the afternoon, didn't mind doing it for the others, especially Bill – Alyssa imagined that Gayle also had a crush on him, but hid it better – but loathed doing so for Alyssa.

Bill's imposed routine of meeting her mid-mornings for coffee to discuss her work had helped, but it hadn't helped Gayle's attitude as it cut into the secretary's time with Bill. Alyssa would miss the daily interludes over Easter, but at least it was late this year. She'd continued her flirtations, showing him her cleavage as often as she could; Bill hadn't stopped her, he seemed to enjoy ogling her.

This time, she wouldn't be able to avoid the trip back to Albany, but she had come to accept the inevitable. Alyssa had been able to avoid it for some months, making excuses about studying for the Bar Exams, but Easter was not an occasion where any excuse would hold with her staunchly Roman Catholic mother. The drive from Hoboken to Albany was not as difficult as she expected before the long weekend; Duncan and Lydia had decided to close the office at lunchtime and it was either too late or too early for Alyssa to be caught in traffic. She had gone home to change from her work wear and collect her one piece of luggage for the weekend and still missed the traffic which had already come and gone and the workers would not start the drive until the usual workday end. *Thank you for making Duncan so lazy*, she prayed silently as she pulled into the driveway in time for dinner.

"Hello, anyone home? I'm here," Alyssa called as she fumbled with her keys in the door, the rucksack almost falling from her shoulder.

"Hello. In the kitchen," Moira answered. "How was the drive?"

"Good, pretty easy for today. Anyone else home?" she called out from halfway up the hall to her room to deposit her bag.

"No, just me at the moment," her mother yelled.

"Where's Dad?" Alyssa's voice lowered as she retraced her steps to the kitchen.

"Golf." As she returned to the kitchen with her half-finished novel, Alyssa saw Moira roll her eyes as she put the casserole dish in the oven. "Where else? Can you watch the oven while I go change?"

"Sure." Alyssa sat at the kitchen table and took to the page where she had left off the night before.

Alyssa looked up as she heard the door thump shut. She had been so engrossed in the book that she had not heard the keys turning in the lock or the door open.

"Ciao, Moira? Alyssa?" the male voice intoned; he had seen Alyssa's car in the driveway.

"Hi Dad. In the kitchen." Gino hugged her as they kissed each other's cheeks.

"Where's Mom?"

"Changing. She went in about half an hour ago."

“Hello darling,” her mother, now dressed for dinner, declared as she wandered into the kitchen and hugged her father. “Have you told her?”

“Not yet. I’ve just got in.”

“Told me what?” Alyssa demanded, looking askance from one to the other.

“Shall you tell her or shall I?” Moira asked Gino.

Gino said nothing, but put his hand in his pocket, fished out a set of keys and handed them to Alyssa.

“What are these?” This time, Alyssa’s tone was a little less demanding.

“The keys to your new co-op,” Gino announced, beaming. Moira drew her hands to her mouth to cover her smirk, but could not hide her excitement.

“What? I don’t understand!” Alyssa exclaimed.

“Well,” Moira started, “We were a bit uncomfortable with where you’re living now, and it’s just not safe for a young lady.”

“We’ll come up next weekend to show you around and help you move in,” Gino interjected. This time, Alyssa would allow them to help; it would only be a few bags.

Alyssa jumped up; knocking over the chair she had been sitting on, and threw her arms around her parents without saying a word. The rest of the weekend passed as uneventfully as Easter could in the Giordano household apart from the gift her parents gave her; attending the Vigil Mass and the traditional Giordano Easter Sunday feast, it was the most uneventful, and eventful, Easter that she had spent with her family.

At least she would not have to move as far to her new home this time. And she would have more time, and seclusion, for studying for the Bar.

The “party,” if you could call it that, celebrated not only Alyssa’s first year at Kennedy Price but also her having completed the Bar Exams. It was only a few small cakes and pastries over morning coffee in the conference room the Friday after her actual anniversary, but she was surprised and pleased that Bill had remembered and organized it for

her. The secretaries made some small effort to hide their disdain for Alyssa from the partners, which seemed to go over their heads.

Alyssa prayed silently that Lydia and Duncan couldn't feel the sexual tension which had been mounting between her and Bill. There were a few general conversations going on around her as Alyssa stood watching against the external wall.

"So," Duncan turned and said to her, "I finally got the IRS to give the Ruiz's an extension on paying their overdue taxes."

"Great!" Alyssa said, trying to sound excited but knowing that it would mean he was throwing more work at her. "What has to be done?"

"It's almost done." Duncan sighed. "They've sold their house in Suffolk, it closes at the end of November, but they should be able to buy a new smaller one, with what's left over after the taxes are paid."

"So what has to be done?" Alyssa repeated, trying desperately not to cringe.

"They've signed a contract for a new place on Long Island. But they'll need bridging finance as the escrow's shorter, end of October. Can I leave that with you?" Duncan replied.

"Sure, I'll get on it straight after lunch." As she said it, Alyssa could see Bill eyeing her, then looking at his feet, while he was half listening to Lydia as he watched Duncan about to sink Alyssa's planned early evening.

"Before would be better."

The month and a half since the anniversary of her appointment had been rougher than usual.

It was the day the Ruiz's needed to have the bridging finance for the Long Island property, otherwise they'd lose it. The finance broker had been able to find all bar the last ten percent and they needed to decide if they wanted to pull the money out of their 401(k) plan.

Alyssa's heart was in her throat all day that Friday, waiting for Mrs. Ruiz to call with the answer; she'd already left several messages for Mrs. Ruiz before lunch and lost track of the number of times she had spoken to their bank manager. If she didn't get an answer to the

vendor's attorney by close of business, then the whole deal would be off and they would lose their deposit as a penalty.

"Alyssa, Mrs. Ruiz, line four this time."

She was now so used to Gayle barking at her from the reception desk about her phone calls that she did not hear the snarl in her voice. Anyway, it was almost time for the weekend and Alyssa didn't care this close to closing time.

"Thanks so much Gayle," she said picking up the phone. "Hi Mrs. Ruiz, what's happening?" She listened. "Yes? You could pull the funds out?" Another pause, more listening. "I'll let everyone know. Thanks for letting me know." Again a pause, further listening. "Yes; yes it'll be okay now. I better get this letter done; it's got to go today." Alyssa started typing the letter before she had hung up the phone.

"What's happening?" Bill enquired. Alyssa swung her chair around to see him peering through the floor to ceiling trellis overlooking Connie's desk, dividing it from the internal passage.

"That was Mrs. Ruiz." The relief in Alyssa's voice was obvious. "She was able to get the funds out of their 401(k) plan without any penalties and the bank's already said they've got the rest."

"Good," Bill smiled, "Let Garrick Westman know."

"I'm on that now," Alyssa said as she was turning back to her computer.

The letter finished printing with minutes to spare; she just hoped she could get it faxed before Gayle left with the mail.

"Gayle, could I please have an envelope?" Alyssa asked as she started to copy the number from the letter to the keypad on the fax machine.

"Here, I'll do that," Gayle snarled, snatching the letter from her hand. Bill saw Alyssa's downcast face flush as he exited Duncan's office for his own. Alyssa's eyes barely caught his pause and glance at her as she turned back to her own desk, but she understood his meaning.

Alyssa heard the fax machine warble as she reorganized her handbag. *Why do I keep so much in here?* She saw the transmission report on the reception desk as she walked to the exit but did not stop to check if her letter had transmitted satisfactorily.

Gayle almost slammed the door on Alyssa's wrist as she ran out with the mail, the handbag wedging it open just enough to allow Bill to catch it before it went any further. She trembled as she felt his

touch in the small of her back and hoped that he did not feel it. She angled her head slightly, to see him beaming at her, and she beamed back. As they strolled out together, they said nothing, nothing needing to be said.

The week since the Ruiz's' finance had been approved had been a blur; almost as normal as Alyssa had become used to, but it was odd she hadn't heard from Garrick Westman about it. There were always things that needed to be organized and other closings that would not stand still, so she had ignored the strangeness of it.

She turned, glancing at her watch. As she heard the door slide open. It was the first time she'd seen Duncan walk into the office on a Saturday; it baffled her. She was glad she'd had a couple of hours in silence before he arrived. Oh well, who was she to question the great mysteries of the world?

"What are you doing here?" He looked at Alyssa in bewilderment, slightly stand-offish. That wasn't a first, him not being suggestive, since the Ruiz's purchase had gone off the rails almost two weeks ago; he had toned it down for some reason unknown to Alyssa and she was glad for it.

"Just updating the loose bound Tax Codes. It's the only time I've had to do it this week." She indicated to the pile of ring binders and replacement pages.

"Oh. Oh, okay." He paused, looked at her in a strange way momentarily and headed into his office.

Alyssa's head came up as heard the keys on the fax machine at the front desk beeping, annoyed at his intrusion on her quiet time in the office. She was almost finished her filing, which had taken her the whole Saturday morning.

Not much more to go... she thought, so she kept her head down.

The machine squawked to sound that the transmission was going through and Alyssa turned her head to see Duncan start punching away at the keypad again. She hadn't heard him come out of his office; as she finished her filing on the Tax Code, she wondered why he was being so secretive.

"Don't stay too long," Duncan called from the front door as the noises on the fax machine stopped.

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“Just a second, I’m coming now. I’ll walk out with you,” Alyssa rejoined as she grabbed her bag and ran to the door. Duncan slid the door open silently, let her out as he turned on the alarm and followed her out. He walked in front of her without a word and drove off. Alyssa stood for a moment, shaking her head, thinking it strange, but put it out of her mind and didn’t give it any further thought.