

CHAPTER 1

The ka-ching of the cash register irritated Alfred as he plunked the canned goods into a brown paper bag. Heavy items on the bottom—fragile items and perishables on top. He could bag groceries with his eyes closed. He should be a checker by now.

Keith had promised to make him a checker months ago. Then, when an opening occurred in the neighborhood grocery store in Lomita, California, he promoted Stephanie instead. Stephanie, the blue-eyed bitch with streaked blond hair who wouldn't say two words to him, even when he was bagging at her counter, as he was now. She was probably sleeping with Keith. Alfred knew that she laughed at him. Laughed whenever she looked at his potbelly. Maybe not out loud, but inside. If she ever found out he had an outie bellybutton, that would only make matters worse.

However, none of this mattered anymore. Alfred had a much bigger problem—Penny. She had been acting very strangely the last few weeks. It was almost as if she were a different person. He was afraid of losing her. He was sure she was being unfaithful to him. She was his whole world. Without her, he would be left with nothing. Desperate times called for desperate measures.

He finished putting the groceries into the bags and the bags into the cart. He glanced at his Timex watch. His shift was over. He looked around the front of the market until he spotted Keith at the courtesy counter. He walked toward Keith, taking off his apron as he went. He wouldn't need the apron anymore—because he was resigning, effective immediately.

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The thunder of bowling balls rolling down the alleys and the staccato crack of pins being toppled provided background music to the buzz of conversation that emanated from the bowlers. Occasional shouts of triumph or groans of despair added syncopation to the other sounds. Penny sat at one of the tables in the refreshment area, aloof from it all, sipping a soda.

Not that she wasn't a social person. In fact, she loved interacting with people, but tonight she was happy to be momentarily alone with her thoughts. Her thoughts centered on one person—Gary Blanchard—a tall, good looking young man bowling for the IBM team.

She had met Gary in person four short months ago, but that had been long enough for her to know that she wanted to spend the rest of her life with him. She, who had said she was never going to have any snot-nosed kids, was now willing to take on those and anything else that came along for this man who had upset her chemicals so much that she weighed less than she had since eighth grade. That was good, because the smashing figure it had given her had helped her win him.

They were leaving on a trip together in two days. They both loved to travel, and this would be a great adventure. When they returned, they would move into a brand new apartment—together—in Torrance. Life was almost perfect.

Almost. Penny had received two notes—notes that scared her. And telephone calls—from whom? Somebody who breathed into the phone but didn't say anything. Today she had finished moving out of her apartment in Lomita. She would spend the last two nights before their trip with Gary in his apartment. Hopefully, that would stop the notes and the phone calls. She would have Gary to protect her.

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Gary made his four-step approach and released the ball. He watched it roll down the alley, hoping that it would hook. He had never quite mastered bowling. Part of his game strategy was a dose of wishful thinking. Tonight, however, everything had come together. Just as his life had

come together. The ball hooked into the 1-3 pocket, and the chain reaction leveled all the pins. Two strikes in a row. A good way to end the game and the season.

As he walked back to his teammates, Penny caught his eye and smiled at him from the refreshment area. That was the smile that had melted his heart. She had wanted to come tonight. She had wanted to watch him bowl in the last match for the IBM team. He couldn't think of a sport more boring to watch than bowling, so she must really love him. Which was good, because he really loved her.

Gary rolled his two bonus balls. It took both balls for him to knock down ten pins, but he still had the best game of his life—a 216. When you're hot, you're hot. Since this was the last night of league play, there was some sort of an awards ceremony taking place in the refreshment area. Very informal, since this was primarily a social league. He collected Penny and introduced her to his teammates. With her smile and her personality, not to mention her looks, she was an immediate hit.

Gary was surprised when his name was called for an award. After all, he wasn't even the best bowler on his own team. The award was for "highest single game score, including handicap." His 216 had done it when added to his handicap. It paid to have a big handicap. He laughed as he accepted the award, but he got a good-natured round of applause, and Penny clapped enthusiastically.

A little later his team gathered for a drink. Lee, one of the older men in his IBM office—he was in his forties—said, "Gary, I hear you're going on a trip. Tell us about it."

"Well, we're going up north. We're going to hit some of the national parks. And I guess we're getting married."

Everybody looked surprised and then offered congratulations. Gary accepted them, grinning. He glanced at Penny. She was sitting with her mouth open, as if in shock. She shouldn't be. They had discussed marriage. For example, whether to get married at the beginning or the end of the trip. She favored the beginning—because of what her New England relatives would say. And she just happened to have a wedding dress that she had purchased on her summer visit home. A dress her relatives insisted she buy, she had told Gary, making a face at the memory.

All right, so he hadn't formally proposed to her on bended knee. They'd had a meeting of the minds, which was better.

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Alfred had a feeling of impending doom. He had been sitting in his car for hours, on the street outside Penny's apartment. He had parked in a spot he knew well and from where he had a good view of her bedroom window. The light inside her bedroom had never come on. Where was she? Even if she were out with that jerk boyfriend of hers, she should be home by now. Didn't he have to work tomorrow? Alfred looked at his watch by the glow of a streetlight. Almost midnight.

Her car wasn't there, either, parked in the apartment house lot where it should be. That meant she had driven somewhere to meet him. It wasn't typical of her behavior. Ever since she had returned from her trip home to Fenwick, Connecticut, she had been acting differently.

What was the guy's name? Gary something or other. He wasn't worthy of holding her hand. Alfred was afraid that she was falling for him. Girls often fell for the bad guys. Alfred had actually been glad she had gone home. It meant that she couldn't be serious about this Gary person—just as she hadn't been serious about the dozens of other guys she had dated during the year since he had reconnected with her. Now his main source of information about her was cut off.

Every Sunday morning, Penny and her roommate used to go to a café on Pacific Coast Highway, eat breakfast, and talk. Alfred would sit in the booth diagonally across from them, so that he and Penny had their backs to each other. This cut down the possibility that she would recognize him. In addition, his beard, baseball cap, dark glasses, and the loose clothing he wore to hide his potbelly made him look much different than he had looked when they had graduated from high school six years before. The chances of her spotting him were minimal.

His sharp ears could hear every word they said. He knew Penny was going home for two weeks after she finished teaching for the year. He knew that her roommate was going home for keeps. She was giving up the ghost, giving up the California dream, and returning to the safety of her hometown, somewhere outside of New York City. Penny and her roommate flew east at the same time. Only Penny came back. The Sunday morning breakfasts ended.

With the end of the breakfasts, Alfred's information flow dried up. That was when the horrible feeling that he was losing Penny began. This Gary person was winning her. Alfred's warnings to Penny hadn't changed anything. It was time for action. He could go to the corner of Pacific Coast Highway and call her number from the phone booth, to see if she were there. He had done that before. This time, he already knew the answer.

He took his flashlight and laboriously got out of his 1959 Ford Fairlane, stiff from sitting so long. He closed the door gently. He didn't want to wake up any of the apartment dwellers along the street. He walked to the alley between Penny's building and the one next to it.

Penny's window faced the blank stucco wall of the other building. A few windows dotted the wall of Penny's building, like rectangular eyes, but they were all dark. The only way he was likely to be seen was if somebody came walking along the street and glanced between the buildings. Somebody walking at midnight in Los Angeles was not a scenario he was worried about.

Penny's window was above eye level. Alfred shone his flashlight into the flowerbed that had been planted alongside the building until he spotted what he was looking for, hidden behind a large bush. It was a wooden palette, the kind on which bags of cement, fertilizer, or similar items were typically stacked.

Alfred had stashed the palette there for emergencies like this one. He was glad that the building owner hadn't found and removed it. He put the flashlight in his pocket and carefully lifted the palette out of its hiding place. He carried it to a spot directly beneath Penny's window and leaned it against the wall.

The tricky part was climbing it and balancing on the top without falling into the thorns of a rosebush. He wasn't the most agile person in the world, but if he were very careful, he could do it. With the flashlight in his pocket he was able to lift one foot high enough to place it on top of the palette. Then he had to push hard off the ground with his other foot and simultaneously use the strength of his upper leg to lift his body until he could grasp the sill of Penny's window.

He did this now, teetering precariously on the top edge of the palette for a few seconds until he had both feet planted firmly on it. His body was pressed against the stucco. When he had stabilized himself, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the flashlight. He shone it through the window. The first thing he saw was Penny's bed. Something about it looked strange. It was covered with a bedspread, but the spread was flat. There was no pillow underneath it. A minor thing, perhaps, but... Alfred tensed.

The room looked different than it had the first time he looked through her window from the top of the palette. He had been watching that window from his car on and off for months. He knew it was a bedroom window because occasionally she would come to the window in a

nightgown and look out. Alfred lived for those moments. Apparently she thought no one could see in because she never closed the drapes.

One night he hadn't seen her car and thought she was out. He had an impulse to look into her room at close range. That was when he had found the palette set out on the street with the trash from one of the buildings. He had carried it to the window, climbed onto it, and was investigating the room with his flashlight when he heard a noise inside. He just had time to douse the flashlight when the bedroom light came on and Penny walked into the room—naked.

In spite of his fear of being discovered, he couldn't take his eyes off her. The first thing he saw was her flat stomach and her beautiful innie bellybutton. The rest of her was just as spectacular. Then he ducked his head below the level of the window. He didn't dare jump to the ground because the window was open, and she might hear him.

He balanced there for an eternity of seconds, his bent legs starting to shake from holding his body in a cramped position. Finally, not hearing any sounds from her room and afraid he would collapse, he took a chance and dropped to the ground. He froze there, listening. Silence surrounded him, except for the distant hum of automobiles, ubiquitous in Los Angeles. He hid the palette, being careful not to make any noise, and returned to his car.

Now, Alfred shone the flashlight around the room. It flashed across the top of the dresser, which was bare. In a panic, he moved the beam to the open closet door. The closet was empty. Penny's clothes were gone. Penny was gone.