

**ЛИТАГЕНТ HARPERCOLLINS,
SIDNEY SHELDON**

TELL ME YOUR DREAMS

Sidney Sheldon

Tell Me Your Dreams

«HarperCollins»

Sheldon S.

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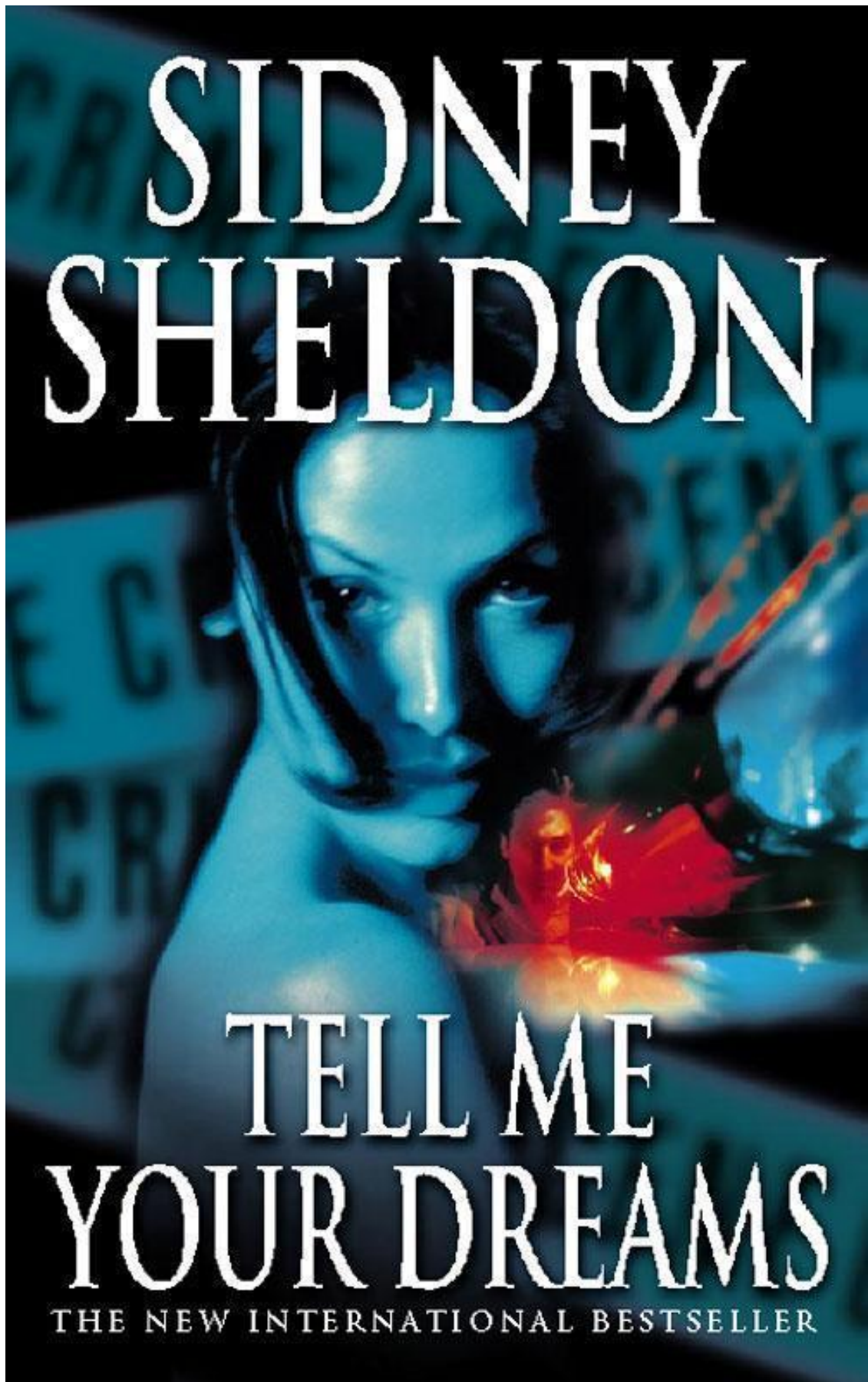
The fast-paced novel from the internationally bestselling author of *The Best Laid Plans*, *Morning, Noon & Night* and *Bloodline*. Someone was following her. She had read about stalkers, but they belonged in a different, faraway world. She had no idea who it could be, who would want to harm her. She was trying desperately hard not to panic, but lately her sleep had been filled with nightmares, and she had awakened each morning with a feeling of impending doom. Thus begins Sidney Sheldon's chilling novel, *Tell Me Your Dreams*. Three beautiful young women are suspected of committing a series of brutal murders. The police make an arrest that leads to one of the most bizarre murder trials of the century. Based on actual events, Sheldon's novel races from London to Rome to Quebec City to San Francisco, with a climax that will leave the reader stunned.

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SIDNEY SHELDON

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HARPER

Copyright

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For the two Larrys: Larry Hughes and Larry Kirshbaum, my two literary Sherpas

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[Part One](#)

Chapter One

SOMEONE was following her. She had read about stalkers, but they belonged in a different, violent world. She had no idea who it could be, who would want to harm her. She was trying desperately hard not to panic, but lately her sleep had been filled with unbearable nightmares, and she had awakened each morning with a feeling of impending doom. *Perhaps it's all in my imagination*, Ashley Patterson thought. *I'm working too hard. I need a vacation.*

She turned to study herself in her bedroom mirror. She was looking at the image of a woman in her late twenties, neatly dressed, with patrician features, a slim figure and intelligent, anxious brown eyes. There was a quiet elegance about her, a subtle attractiveness. Her dark hair fell softly to her shoulders. *I hate my looks*, Ashley thought. *I'm too thin. I must start eating more.* She walked into the kitchen and began to fix breakfast, forcing her mind to forget about the frightening thing that was happening, and concentrating on preparing a fluffy omelette. She turned on the coffeemaker and put a slice of bread in the toaster. Ten minutes later, everything was ready. Ashley placed the dishes on the table and sat down. She picked up a fork, stared at the food for a moment, then shook her head in despair. Fear had taken away her appetite.

This can't go on, she thought angrily. *Whoever he is, I won't let him do this to me. I won't.*

Ashley glanced at her watch. It was time to leave for work. She looked around the familiar apartment, as though seeking some kind of reassurance from it. It was an attractively furnished third-floor apartment on Via Camino Court, with a living room, bedroom and den, bathroom, kitchen and guest powder room. She had lived here in Cupertino, California, for three years. Until two weeks ago, Ashley had thought of it as a comfortable nest, a haven. Now it had turned into a fortress, a place where no one could get in to harm her. Ashley walked to the front door and examined the lock. *I'll have a dead bolt put in*, she thought. *Tomorrow.* She turned off all the lights, checked to make sure the door was firmly locked behind her and took the elevator to the basement garage.

The garage was deserted. Her car was twenty feet from the elevator. She looked around carefully, then ran to the car, slid inside and locked the doors, her heart pounding. She headed downtown, under a sky the color of malice, dark and foreboding. The weather report had said rain. *But it's not going to rain*, Ashley thought. *The sun is going to come out. I'll make a deal with you, God. If it doesn't rain, it means that everything is all right, that I've been imagining things.*

Ten minutes later, Ashley Patterson was driving through downtown Cupertino. She was still awed by the miracle of what this once sleepy little corner of Santa Clara Valley had become. Located fifty miles south of San Francisco, it was where the computer revolution had started, and it had been appropriately nicknamed Silicon Valley.

Ashley was employed at Global Computer Graphics Corporation, a successful, fast-growing young company with two hundred employees.

As Ashley turned the car onto Silverado Street, she had the uneasy feeling that *he* was behind her, following her. *But who? And why?* She looked into her rearview mirror. Everything seemed normal.

Every instinct told her otherwise.

Ahead of Ashley was the sprawling, modern-looking building that housed Global Computer Graphics. She turned into the parking lot, showed the guard her identification and pulled into her parking space. She felt safe here.

As she got out of the car, it began to rain.

At nine o'clock in the morning, Global Computer Graphics was already humming with activity. There were eighty modular cubicles, occupied by computer whizzes, all young, busily building websites, creating logos for new companies, doing artwork for record and book publishing companies and composing illustrations for magazines. The work floor was divided into several divisions:

administration, sales, marketing and technical support. The atmosphere was casual. The employees walked around in jeans, tank tops and sweaters.

As Ashley headed toward her desk, her supervisor, Shane Miller, approached her. “Morning, Ashley.”

Shane Miller was in his early thirties, a burly, earnest man with a pleasant personality. In the beginning, he had tried to persuade Ashley to go to bed with him, but he had finally given up, and they had become good friends.

He handed Ashley a copy of the latest *Time* magazine. “Seen this?”

Ashley looked at the cover. It featured a picture of a distinguished-looking man in his fifties, with silver hair. The caption read “Dr. Steven Patterson, Father of Mini Heart Surgery.”

“I’ve seen it.”

“How does it feel to have a famous father?”

Ashley smiled. “Wonderful.”

“He’s a great man.”

“I’ll tell him you said so. We’re having lunch.”

“Good. By the way ...” Shane Miller showed Ashley a photograph of a movie star who was going to be used in an ad for a client. “We have a little problem here. Desiree has gained about ten pounds, and it shows. Look at those dark circles under her eyes. And even with makeup, her skin is splotchy. Do you think you can help this?”

Ashley studied the picture. “I can fix her eyes by applying the blur filter. I could try to thin her face by using the distort tool, but—No. That would probably end up making her look odd.” She studied the picture again. “I’ll have to airbrush or use the clone tool in some areas.”

“Thanks. Are we on for Saturday night?”

“Yes.”

Shane Miller nodded toward the photograph. “There’s no hurry on this. They want it last month.”

Ashley smiled. “What else is new?”

She went to work. Ashley was an expert in advertising and graphic design, creating layouts with text and images.

Half an hour later, as Ashley was working on the photograph, she sensed someone watching her. She looked up. It was Dennis Tibbie.

“Morning, honey.”

His voice grated on her nerves. Tibbie was the company’s computer genius. He was known around the plant as “The Fixer.” Whenever a computer crashed, Tibbie was sent for. He was in his early thirties, thin and bald with an unpleasant, arrogant attitude. He had an obsessive personality, and the word around the plant was that he was fixated on Ashley.

“Need any help?”

“No, thank you.”

“Hey, what about us having a little dinner Saturday night?”

“Thank you. I’m busy.”

“Going out with the boss again?”

Ashley turned to look at him, angry. “Look, it’s none of your—”

“I don’t know what you see in him, anyway. He’s a nerd, cubed. I can give you a better time.” He winked. “You know what I mean?”

Ashley was trying to control her temper. “I have work to do, Dennis.”

Tibbie leaned close to her and whispered, “There’s something you’re going to learn about me, honey. I don’t give up. Ever.”

She watched him walk away, and wondered: *Could he be the one?*

At 12:30, Ashley put her computer in suspend mode and headed for Margherita di Roma, where she was joining her father for lunch.

She sat at a corner table in the crowded restaurant, watching her father come toward her. She had to admit that he was handsome. People were turning to stare at him as he walked to Ashley's table. *"How does it feel to have a famous father?"*

Years earlier, Dr. Steven Patterson had pioneered a breakthrough in minimally invasive heart surgery. He was constantly invited to lecture at major hospitals around the world. Ashley's mother had died when Ashley was twelve, and she had no one but her father.

"Sorry I'm late, Ashley." He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.

"That's all right. I just got here."

He sat down. "Have you seen *Time* magazine?"

"Yes. Shane showed it to me."

He frowned. "Shane? Your boss?"

"He's not my boss. He's—he's one of the supervisors."

"It's never good to mix business with pleasure, Ashley. You're seeing him socially, aren't you? That's a mistake."

"Father, we're just good—"

A waiter came up to the table. "Would you like to see a menu?"

Dr. Patterson turned to him and snapped, "Can't you see we're in the middle of a conversation? Go away until you're sent for."

"I—I'm sorry." The waiter turned and hurried off.

Ashley cringed with embarrassment. She had forgotten how savage her father's temper was. He had once punched an intern during an operation for making an error in judgment. Ashley remembered the screaming arguments between her mother and father when she was a little girl. They had terrified her. Her parents had always fought about the same thing, but try as she might, Ashley could not remember what it was. She had blocked it from her mind.

Her father went on, as though there had been no interruption. "Where were we? Oh, yes. Going out with Shane Miller is a mistake. A big mistake."

And his words brought back another terrible memory.

She could hear her father's voice saying, "Going out with Jim Cleary is a mistake. A big mistake ..."

Ashley had just turned eighteen and was living in Bedford, Pennsylvania, where she was born. Jim Cleary was the most popular boy in Bedford Area High School. He was on the football team, was handsome and amusing and had a killer smile. It seemed to Ashley that every girl in school wanted to sleep with him. *And most of them probably have*, she had thought, wryly. When Jim Cleary started asking Ashley out, she was determined not to go to bed with him. She was sure he was interested in her only for sex, but as time went on, she changed her mind. She liked being with him, and he seemed to genuinely enjoy her company.

That winter, the senior class went for a weekend skiing trip in the mountains. Jim Cleary loved to ski.

"We'll have a great time," he assured Ashley.

"I'm not going."

He looked at her in astonishment. "Why?"

"I hate cold weather. Even with gloves, my fingers get numb."

"But it will be fun to—"

"I'm not going."

And he had stayed in Bedford to be with her. They shared the same interests and had the same ideals, and they always had a wonderful time together.

When Jim Cleary had said to Ashley, “Someone asked me this morning if you’re my girlfriend. What shall I tell him?” Ashley had smiled and said, “Tell him yes.”

Dr. Patterson was worried. “You’re seeing too much of that Cleary boy.”

“Father, he’s very decent, and I love him.”

“How can you love him? He’s a goddamned *football* player.

I’m not going to let you marry a football player. He’s not good enough for you, Ashley.”

He had said that about every boy she had gone out with. Her father kept making disparaging remarks about Jim Cleary, but the explosion occurred on the night of the high school graduation. Jim Cleary was taking Ashley to an evening graduation party. When he came to pick her up, she was sobbing.

“What’s the matter? What’s happened?”

“My—my father told me he’s taking me away to London. He’s registered me in—in a college there.”

Jim Cleary looked at her, stunned. “He’s doing this because of us, isn’t he?”

Ashley nodded, miserable.

“When do you leave?”

“Tomorrow.”

“No! Ashley, for God’s sake, don’t let him do this to us. Listen to me. I want to marry you. My uncle offered me a really good job in Chicago with his advertising agency. We’ll run away. Meet me tomorrow morning at the railroad station. There’s a train leaving for Chicago at seven A.M. Will you come with me?”

She looked at him a long moment and said softly, “Yes.”

Thinking about it later, Ashley could not remember what the graduation party was like. She and Jim had spent the entire evening excitedly discussing their plans.

“Why don’t we fly to Chicago?” Ashley asked.

“Because we would have to give our names to the airline. If we go by train, nobody will know where we’ve gone.”

As they were leaving the party, Jim Cleary asked softly, “Would you like to stop off at my place? My folks are out of town for the weekend.”

Ashley hesitated, torn. “Jim ... we’ve waited this long. A few more days won’t matter.”

“You’re right.” He grinned. “I may be the only man on this continent marrying a virgin.”

When Jim Cleary brought Ashley home from the party, Dr. Patterson was waiting, in a rage. “Do you have any idea how late it is?”

“I’m sorry, sir. The party—”

“Don’t give me any of your goddamn excuses, Cleary. Who the hell do you think you’re fooling?”

“I’m not—”

“From now on, you keep your goddamned hands off my daughter, do you understand?”

“Father—”

“You keep out of this.” He was screaming now. “Cleary, I want you to get the hell out of here and stay out.”

“Sir, your daughter and I—”

“Jim—”

“Get up to your room.”

“Sir—”

“If I ever see you around here again, I’ll break every bone in your body.”

Ashley had never seen him so furious. It had ended with everyone yelling. When it was over, Jim was gone and Ashley was in tears.

I'm not going to let my father do this to me, Ashley thought, determinedly. He's trying to ruin my life. She sat on her bed for a long time. *Jim is my future. I want to be with him. I don't belong here anymore.* She rose and began to pack an overnight bag. Thirty minutes later, Ashley slipped out the back door and started toward Jim Cleary's home, a dozen blocks away. *I'll stay with him tonight, and we'll take the morning train to Chicago.* But as she got nearer to his house, Ashley thought, *No. This is wrong. I don't want to spoil everything. I'll meet him at the station.*

And she turned and headed back home.

Ashley was up the rest of that night thinking about her life with Jim and how wonderful it was going to be. At 5:30, she picked up her suitcase and moved silently past the closed door of her father's bedroom. She crept out of the house and took a bus to the railroad station. When she reached the station, Jim had not arrived. She was early. The train was not due for another hour. Ashley sat on a bench eagerly waiting. She thought about her father awakening and finding her gone. He would be furious.

But I can't let him live my life. One day he'll really get to know Jim, and he'll see how lucky I am. 6:30 ... 6:40 ... 6:45 ... 6:50 ... There was still no sign of Jim. Ashley was beginning to panic. What could have happened? She decided to telephone him. There was no answer. 6:55 ... *He'll be coming at any moment.* She heard the train whistle in the distance, and she looked at her watch. 6:59. The train was pulling into the station. She rose to her feet and looked around frantically. *Something terrible has happened to him. He's had an accident. He's in the hospital.* A few minutes later, Ashley stood there watching the train to Chicago pull out of the station, taking all her dreams with it. She waited another half hour and tried to telephone Jim again. When there was still no answer, she slowly headed home, desolate.

At noon, Ashley and her father were on a plane to London...

She had attended a college in London for two years, and when Ashley decided she wanted to be involved in working with computers, she applied for the prestigious MEI Wang Scholarship for Women in Engineering at the University of California at Santa Cruz. She had been accepted, and three years later, she was recruited by the Global Computer Graphics Corporation.

In the beginning, Ashley had written half a dozen letters to Jim Cleary, but she had torn them all up. His actions and his silence had told her only too clearly how he felt about her.

Her father's voice jarred Ashley back to the present.

"You're a million miles away. What are you thinking about?"

Ashley studied her father across the table. "Nothing."

Dr. Patterson signaled the waiter, smiled at him genially and said, "We're ready to look at menus now."

It was only when Ashley was on her way back to the office that she remembered she had forgotten to congratulate her father on his cover of *Time* magazine.

When Ashley walked up to her desk, Dennis Tibbie was waiting for her.

"I hear you had lunch with your father."

He's an eavesdropping little creep. He makes it his business to know everything that's going on here. "Yes, I did."

"That can't have been much fun." He lowered his voice. "Why don't you ever have lunch with me?"

"Dennis ... I've told you before. I'm not interested."

He grinned. "You will be. Just wait."

There was something eerie about him, something scary. She wondered again whether he could be the one who ... She shook her head. *No.* She had to forget about it, move on.

On her way home, Ashley stopped and parked her car in front of the Apple Tree Book House. Before she went in, she studied the reflection in the storefront mirror to see if there was anyone behind her whom she recognized. No one. She went inside the store.

A young male clerk walked up to her. “May I help you?”

“Yes. I—Do you have a book on stalkers?”

He was looking at her strangely. “*Stalkers?*”

Ashley felt like an idiot. She said quickly, “Yes. I also want a book on—er—gardening and—
and animals of Africa.”

“Stalkers and gardening and animals of Africa?”

“That’s right,” she said firmly.

Who knows? Maybe someday I’ll have a garden and I’ll take a trip to Africa.

When Ashley returned to the car, it began to rain again. As she drove, the rain beat against the windshield, fracturing space and turning the streets ahead into surreal pointillistic paintings. She turned on the windshield wipers. They began to sweep across the window, hissing, “He’s gonna get you ... gonna get you ... gonna get you....” Hastily, Ashley turned them off. *No*, she thought. *They’re saying, “No one’s there, no one’s there, no one’s there.”*

She turned the windshield wipers on again. “He’s gonna get you ... gonna get you ... gonna get you...”

Ashley parked her car in the garage and pressed the button for the elevator. Two minutes later, she was heading for her apartment. She reached the front door, put the key in the lock, opened the door and froze.

Every light in the apartment had been turned on.

Chapter Two

“All around the mulberry bush, The monkey chased the weasel. The monkey thought ‘twas all in fun, Pop! goes the weasel.”

Toni Prescott knew exactly why she liked to sing that silly song. Her mum had hated it. *“Stop singing that stupid song. Do you hear me? You have no voice, anyway.”*

“Yes, Mother.” And Toni would sing it again and again, under her breath. That had been long ago, but the memory of defying her mother still gave her a glow.

Toni Prescott hated working at Global Computer Graphics. She was twenty-two years old, impish, vivacious, and daring. She was half smoldering, half firecracker. Her face was puckishly heart shaped, her eyes were a mischievous brown, her figure alluring. She had been born in London and she spoke with a delightful British accent. She was athletic and loved sports, particularly winter sports: skiing and bobsledding and iceskating.

Going to college in London, Toni had dressed conservatively during the day, but at night, she had donned miniskirts and disco gear and made the swinging rounds. She had spent her evenings and nights at the Electric Ballroom on Camden High Street, and at Subterania and the Leopard Lounge, mixing with the trendy West End crowd. She had a beautiful voice, sultry and sensuous, and at some of the clubs, she would go to the piano and play and sing, and the patrons would cheer her. That was when she felt most alive.

The routine inside the clubs would always follow the same pattern:

“Do you know you’re a fantastic singer, Toni?”

“Ta.”

“Can I buy you a drink?”

She smiled. *“A Pimm’s would be lovely.”*

“My pleasure.”

And it would end the same way. Her date would lean close to her and whisper in her ear, *“Why don’t we go up to my flat and have a shag?”*

“Buzz off.” And Toni would be out of there. She would lie in her bed at night, thinking about how stupid men were and how bloody easy it was to control them. The poor sods did not know it, but they *wanted* to be controlled. They *needed* to be controlled.

And then came the move from London to Cupertino. In the beginning, it had been a disaster. Toni hated Cupertino and she loathed working at Global Computer Graphics. She was bored with hearing about plug-ins and dpi’s and halftones and grids. She desperately missed the exciting nightlife of London. There were a few nightspots in the Cupertino area, and Toni frequented those: San Jose Live or P. J. Mulligan’s or Hollywood Junction. She wore tight-fitting miniskirts and tube tops with open-toed shoes having five-inch heels or platform shoes with thick cork soles. She used a lot of makeup—thick, dark eyeliner, false eyelashes, colored eye shadow and bright lipstick. It was as though she were trying to hide her beauty.

Some weekends, Toni would drive up to San Francisco, where the real action was. She haunted the restaurants and clubs that had music bars. She would visit Harry Denton’s and One Market restaurant and the California Café, and during the evening, while the musicians took their break, Toni would go to the piano and play and sing. The customers loved it. When Toni tried to pay her dinner bills, the owners would say, *“No, this is on the house. You’re wonderful. Please come back again.”*

Did you hear that, Mother? “You’re wonderful. Please come back again.”

On a Saturday night, Toni was having dinner in the French Room at the Cliff Hotel. The musicians had finished their set and left the bandstand. The maître d’ looked at Toni and nodded invitingly.

Toni rose and walked across the room to the piano. She sat down and began to play and sing an early Cole Porter number. When she was finished, there was enthusiastic applause. She sang two more songs and returned to her table.

A bald, middle-aged man came up to her. "Excuse me. May I join you for a moment?"

Toni started to say no, when he added, "I'm Norman Zimmerman. I'm producing a road company of *The King and I*. I'd like to talk to you about it."

Toni had just read a glowing article about him. He was a theatrical genius.

He sat down. "You have a remarkable talent, young lady. You're wasting your time fooling around in places like this. You should be on Broadway."

Broadway. Did you hear that, Mother?

"I'd like to audition you for—"

"I'm sorry. I can't."

He looked at her in surprise. "This could open a lot of doors for you. I mean it. I don't think you know how talented you are."

"I have a job."

"Doing what, may I ask?"

"I work at a computer company."

"I'll tell you what. I'll start by paying you double whatever you're getting now and—"

Toni said, "I appreciate it, but I ... I can't."

Zimmerman sat back in his chair. "You're not interested in show business?"

"I'm very interested."

"Then what's the problem?"

Toni hesitated, then said carefully, "I'd probably have to leave in the middle of the tour."

"Because of your husband or—?"

"I'm not married."

"I don't understand. You said you're interested in show business. This is the perfect showcase for you to—"

"I'm sorry. I can't explain."

If I did explain, he wouldn't understand, Toni thought miserably. No one would. It's the unholy curse I have to live with. Forever.

A few months after Toni started working at Global Computer Graphics, she learned about the Internet, the worldwide open door to meeting men.

She was having dinner at the Duke of Edinburgh with Kathy Healy, a friend who worked for a rival computer company. The restaurant was an authentic pub from England that had been torn down, packed in containers and shipped to California. Toni would go there for Cockney fish and chips, prime ribs with Yorkshire pudding, bangers and mash and English sherry trifle. *One foot on the ground*, she would say. *I have to remember my roots.*

Toni looked up at Kathy. "I want you to do me a favor."

"Name it."

"I want you to help me with the Internet, luv. Tell me how to use it."

"Toni, the only computer I have access to is at work, and it's against company policy to—"

"Sod company policy. You know how to use the Internet, don't you?"

"Yes."

Toni patted Kathy Healy's hand and smiled. "Great."

The following evening, Toni went to Kathy Healy's office, and Kathy introduced Toni to the world of the Internet. After clicking on the Internet icon, Kathy entered her password and waited a moment to connect, then double clicked another icon and entered a chat room. Toni sat in amazement, watching rapid, typed conversations taking place among people all over the globe.

“I’ve got to have that!” Toni said. “I’ll get a computer for my flat. Would you be an angel and set me up on the Internet?”

“Sure. It’s easy. All you do is click your mouse into the URL field, the uniform resource locator, and—”

“Like the song says, ‘Don’t tell me, show me.’”

The next night, Toni was on the Internet, and from that time on, her life changed. She was no longer bored. The Internet became a magic carpet that flew her all over the world. When Toni got home from work, she would immediately turn on her computer and go online to explore various chat rooms that were available.

It was so simple. She accessed the Internet, pressed a key and a window opened on the screen, split into an upper portion and a lower portion. Toni typed in “Hello. Is anyone there?”

The lower portion of the screen flashed the words “Bob. I’m here. I’m waiting for you.”

She was ready to meet the world.

There was Hans in Holland:

“Tell me about yourself, Hans.”

“I’m a DJ in Amsterdam at a great club. I’m into hip-hop, rave, world beat. You name it.”

Toni typed in her reply. “Sounds great. I love to dance. I can go all night long. I live in a horrible little town that has nothing to offer except a few disco nights.”

“Sounds sad.”

“It bloody well is.”

“Why don’t you let me cheer you up? What are the chances of our meeting?”

“Ta ta.” She exited the chat room.

There was Paul, in South Africa:

“I’ve been waiting for you to check back in, Toni.”

“I’m here. I’m dying to know all about you, Paul.”

“I’m thirty-two. I’m a doctor at a hospital in Johannesburg. I—”

Toni angrily signed off. *A doctor!* Terrible memories came flooding through her. She closed her eyes a moment, her heart pounding. She took several deep breaths. *No more tonight*, she thought, shakily. She went to bed.

The following evening, Toni was back on the Internet. Online was Sean from Dublin:

“Toni ... That’s a pretty name.”

“Thank you, Sean.”

“Have you ever been to Ireland?”

“No.”

“You’d love it. It’s the land of leprechauns. Tell me what you look like, Toni. I’ll bet you’re beautiful.”

“You’re right. I’m beautiful, I’m exciting and I’m single. What do you do, Sean?”

“I’m a bartender. I—”

Toni ended the chat session.

Every night was different. There was a polo player in Argentina, an automobile salesman in Japan, a department store clerk in Chicago, a television technician in New York. The Internet was a fascinating game, and Toni enjoyed it to the fullest. She could go as far as she wanted and yet know that she was safe because she was anonymous.

And then one night, in an online chat room, she met Jean Claude Parent.

“*Bonsoir*. I am happy to meet you, Toni.”

“Nice to meet you, Jean Claude. Where are you?”

“In Quebec City.”

“I’ve never been to Quebec. Would I like it?” Toni expected to see the word *yes* on the screen. Instead, Jean Claude typed, “I do not know. It depends on what kind of person you are.”

Toni found his answer intriguing. “Really? What kind of person would I have to be to enjoy Quebec?”

“Quebec is like the early North American frontier. It is very French. Quebecois are independent. We do not like to take orders from anyone.”

Toni typed in, “Neither do I.”

“Then you would enjoy it. It is a beautiful city, surrounded by mountains and lovely lakes, a paradise for hunting and fishing.”

Looking at the typed words appearing on her screen, Toni could almost feel Jean Claude’s enthusiasm. “It sounds great. Tell me about yourself.”

“*Moi?* There is not much to tell. I am thirty-eight years old, unmarried. I just ended a relationship, and I would like to settle down with the right woman. *Et vous?* Are you married?”

Toni typed back, “No. I’m looking for someone, too. What do you do?”

“I own a little jewelry store. I hope you will come and visit it one day.”

“Is that an invitation?”

“*Mais oui. Yes.*”

Toni typed in, “It sounds interesting.” And she meant it. *Maybe I’ll find a way to go there*, Toni thought. *Maybe he’s the person who can save me.*

Toni communicated with Jean Claude Parent almost every night. He had scanned in a picture of himself, and Toni found herself looking at a very attractive, intelligent-looking man.

When Jean Claude saw the photograph of Toni that she scanned in, he wrote, “You are beautiful, *ma chérie*. I knew you would be. Please come to visit me.”

“I will.”

“Soon.”

“Ta ta.” Toni signed off.

On the work floor the next morning, Toni heard Shane Miller talking to Ashley Patterson and thought, *What the hell does he see in her? She’s a right git.* To Toni, Ashley was a frustrated, spinsterish Miss Goody Two-shoes. *She doesn’t bloody know how to have any fun*, Toni thought. Toni disapproved of everything about her. Ashley was a stick-in-the-mud who liked to stay home at night and read a book or watch the History Channel or CNN. She had no interest in sports. *Boring!* She had never entered a chat room. Meeting strangers through a computer was something Ashley would never do, *the cold fish.* *She doesn’t know what she’s missing*, Toni thought. *Without the online chat room, I never would have met Jean Claude.*

Toni thought about how much her mother would have hated the Internet. But then her mother had hated everything. She had only two means of communicating: screaming or whining. Toni could never please her. “*Can’t you ever do anything right, you stupid child?*” Well, her mother had yelled at her once too often. Toni thought about the terrible accident in which her mother had died. Toni could still hear her screams for help. The memory of it made Toni smile.

“*A penny for a spool of thread, A penny for a needle. That’s the way the money goes, Pop! goes the weasel.*”

Chapter Three

IN another place, at another time, Alette Peters could have been a successful artist. As far back as she could remember, her senses were tuned to the nuances of color. She could see colors, smell colors and hear colors.

Her father's voice was blue and sometimes red.

Her mother's voice was dark brown.

Her teacher's voice was yellow.

The grocer's voice was purple.

The sound of the wind in the trees was green.

The sound of running water was gray.

Alette Peters was twenty years old. She could be plain looking, attractive or stunningly beautiful, depending on her mood or how she was feeling about herself. But she was never simply pretty. Part of her charm was that she was completely unaware of her looks. She was shy and soft-spoken, with a gentleness that was almost an anachronism.

Alette had been born in Rome, and she had a musical Italian accent. She loved everything about Rome. She had stood at the top of the Spanish Steps and looked over the city and felt that it was hers. When she gazed at the ancient temples and the giant Colosseum, she knew she belonged to that era. She had strolled in the Piazza Navona, listened to the music of the waters in the Fountain of the Four Rivers and walked the Piazza Venezia, with its wedding cake monument to Victor Emanuel II. She had spent endless hours at St. Peter's Basilica, the Vatican Museum and the Borghese Gallery, enjoying the timeless works of Raphael and Fra Bartolommeo and Andrea del Sarto and Pontormo. Their talent both transfixed her and frustrated her. She wished she had been born in the sixteenth century and had known them. They were more real to Alette than the passers-by on the streets. She wanted desperately to be an artist.

She could hear her mother's dark brown voice: *"You're wasting paper and paint. You have no talent."*

The move to California had been unsettling at first. Alette had been concerned as to how she would adjust, but Cupertino had turned out to be a pleasant surprise. She enjoyed the privacy that the small town afforded, and she liked working for Global Computer Graphics Corporation. There were no major art galleries in Cupertino, but on weekends, Alette would drive to San Francisco to visit the galleries there.

"Why are you interested in that stuff?" Toni Prescott would ask her. "Come on to P. J. Mulligans with me and have some fun."

"Don't you care about art?"

Toni laughed. "Sure. What's his last name?"

There was only one cloud hanging over Alette Peter's life. She was manic-depressive. She suffered from anomie, a feeling of alienation from others. Her mood swings always caught her unaware, and in an instant, she could go from a blissful euphoria to a desperate misery. She had no control over her emotions.

Toni was the only one with whom Alette would discuss her problems. Toni had a solution for everything, and it was usually: "Let's go and have some fun!"

Toni's favorite subject was Ashley Patterson. She was watching Shane Miller talking to Ashley.

"Look at that tight-assed bitch," Toni said contemptuously. "She's the ice queen."

Alette nodded. "She's very serious. Someone should teach her how to laugh."

Toni snorted. "Someone should teach her how to fuck."

One night a week, Alette would go to the mission for the homeless in San Francisco and help serve dinner. There was one little old woman in particular who looked forward to Alette's visits. She was in a wheelchair, and Alette would help her to a table and bring her hot food.

The woman said gratefully, "Dear, if I had a daughter, I'd want her to be exactly like you."

Alette squeezed her hand. "That's such a great compliment. Thank you." And her inner voice said, *If you had a daughter, she'd look like a pig like you.* And Alette was horrified by her thoughts. It was as though someone else inside her was saying those words. It happened constantly.

She was out shopping with Betty Hardy, a woman who was a member of Alette's church. They stopped in front of a department store. Betty was admiring a dress in the window. "Isn't that beautiful?"

"Lovely," Alette said. *That's the ugliest dress I've ever seen. Perfect for you.*

One evening, Alette had dinner with Ronald, a sexton at the church. "I really enjoy being with you, Alette. Let's do this more often."

She smiled shyly. "I'd like that." And she thought, *Non faccia, lo stupido. Maybe in another lifetime, creep.* And again she was horrified. *What's wrong with me?* And she had no answer.

The smallest slights, whether intended or not, drove Alette into a rage. Driving to work one morning, a car cut in front of her. She gritted her teeth and thought, *I'll kill you, you bastard.* The man waved apologetically, and Alette smiled sweetly. But the rage was still there.

When the black cloud descended, Alette would imagine people on the street having heart attacks or being struck by automobiles or being mugged and killed. She would play the scenes out in her mind, and they were vividly real. Moments later, she would be filled with shame.

On her good days, Alette was a completely different person. She was genuinely kind and sympathetic and enjoyed helping people. The only thing that spoiled her happiness was the knowledge that the darkness would come down on her again, and she would be lost in it.

Every Sunday morning, Alette went to church. The church had volunteer programs to feed the homeless, to teach after-school art lessons and to tutor students. Alette would lead children's Sunday school classes and help in the nursery. She volunteered for all of the charitable activities and devoted as much time as she could to them. She particularly enjoyed giving painting classes for the young.

One Sunday, the church had a fair for a fundraiser, and Alette brought in some of her own paintings for the church to sell. The pastor, Frank Selvaggio, looked at them in amazement.

"These are—These are brilliant! You should be selling them at a gallery."

Alette blushed. "No, not really. I just do them for fun."

The fair was crowded. The churchgoers had brought their friends and families, and game booths as well as arts-and-crafts booths had been set up for their enjoyment. There were beautifully decorated cakes, incredible handmade quilts, homemade jams in beautiful jars, carved wooden toys. People were going from booth to booth, sampling the sweets, buying things they would have no use for the next day.

"But it's in the name of charity," Alette heard one woman explain to her husband.

Alette looked at the paintings that she had placed around the booth, most of them landscapes in bright, vivid colors that leaped from the canvas. She was filled with misgivings. *"You're wasting good money on paint, child."*

A man came up to the booth. "Hi, there. Did you paint these?"

His voice was a deep blue.

No, stupid. Michelangelo dropped by and painted them.

"You're very talented."

"Thank you." *What do you know about talent?*

A young couple stopped at Alette's booth. "Look at those colors! I have to have that one. You're really good."

And all afternoon people came to her booth to buy her paintings and to tell her how much talent she had. And Alette wanted to believe them, but each time the black curtain came down and she thought, *They're all being cheated.*

An art dealer came by. "These are really lovely. You should merchandise your talent."

"I'm just an amateur," Alette insisted. And she refused to discuss it any further.

At the end of the day, Alette had sold every one of her paintings. She gathered the money that people had paid her, put it in an envelope and handed it to Pastor Frank Selvaggio.

He took it and said, "Thank you, Alette. You have a great gift, bringing so much beauty into people's lives."

Did you hear that, Mother?

When Alette was in San Francisco, she spent hours visiting the Museum of Modern Art, and she haunted the De Young Museum to study their collection of American art.

Several young artists were copying some of the paintings on the museum's walls. One young man in particular caught Alette's eye. He was in his late twenties, slim and blond, with a strong, intelligent face. He was copying Georgia O'Keeffe's *Petunias*, and his work was remarkably good. The artist noticed Alette watching him. "Hi."

His voice was a warm yellow.

"Hello," Alette said shyly.

The artist nodded toward the painting he was working on. "What do you think?"

"*Bellissimo*. I think it's wonderful." And she waited for her inner voice to say, *For a stupid amateur*. But it didn't happen. She was surprised. "It's really wonderful."

He smiled. "Thank you. My name is Richard, Richard Melton."

"Alette Peters."

"Do you come here often?" Richard asked.

"*Si*. As often as I can. I don't live in San Francisco."

"Where do you live?"

"In Cupertino." *Not—"It's none of your damn business" or "Wouldn't you like to know?" but—"In Cupertino." What is happening to me?*

"That's a nice little town."

"I like it." *Not—"What the hell makes you think it's a nice little town?" or "What do you know about nice little towns?" but—"I like it."*

He was finished with the painting. "I'm hungry. Can I buy you lunch? Café De Young has pretty good food."

Alette hesitated only a moment. "*Va bene*. I'd like that." *Not—"You look stupid" or "I don't have lunch with strangers," but—"I'd like that."* It was a new, exhilarating experience for Alette.

The lunch was extremely enjoyable and not once did negative thoughts come into Alette's mind. They talked about some of the great artists, and Alette told Richard about growing up in Rome.

"I've never been to Rome," he said. "Maybe one day."

And Alette thought, *It would be fun to go to Rome with you.*

As they were finishing their lunch, Richard saw his roommate across the room and called him over to the table. "Gary, I didn't know you were going to be here. I'd like you to meet someone. This is Alette Peters. Gary King."

Gary was in his late twenties, with bright blue eyes and hair down to his shoulders.

"It's nice to meet you, Gary."

"Gary's been my best friend since high school, Alette."

"Yeah. I have ten years of dirt on Richard, so if you're looking for any good stories—"

"Gary, don't you have somewhere to go?"

"Right." He turned to Alette. "But don't forget my offer. I'll see you two around."

They watched Gary leave. Richard said, "Alette ..."

“Yes?”

“May I see you again?”

“I would like that.” *Very much.*

Monday morning, Alette told Toni about her experience. “Don’t get involved with an artist,” Toni warned. “You’ll be living on the fruit he paints. Are you going to see him again?”

Alette smiled. “Yes. I think he likes me. And I like him. I really like him.”

It started as a small disagreement and ended up as a ferocious argument. Pastor Frank was retiring after forty years of service. He had been a very good and caring pastor, and the congregation was sorry to see him leave. There were secret meetings held to decide what to give him as a going away present. A watch ... money ... a vacation ... a painting ... He loved art.

“Why don’t we have someone do a portrait of him, with the church in the background?” They turned to Alette. “Will you do it?”

“Of course,” she said happily.

Walter Manning was one of the senior members of the church and one of its biggest contributors. He was a very successful businessman, but he seemed to resent everyone else’s success. He said, “My daughter is a fine painter. Perhaps she should do it.”

Someone suggested, “Why not have them both do it, and we’ll vote on which one to give Pastor Frank?”

Alette went to work. The painting took her five days, and it was a masterpiece, glowing with the compassion and goodness of her subject. The following Sunday, the group met to look at the paintings. There were exclamations of appreciation over Alette’s painting.

“It’s so real, he could almost walk off the canvas ...”

“Oh, he’s going to love that ...”

“That should be in a museum, Alette ...”

Walter Manning unwrapped the canvas painted by his daughter. It was a competent painting, but it lacked the fire of Alette’s portrait.

“That’s very nice,” one of the members of the congregation said tactfully, “but I think Alette’s is—”

“I agree ...”

“Alette’s portrait is the one ...”

Walter Manning spoke up. “This has to be a unanimous decision. My daughter’s a professional artist”—he looked at Alette—“not a dilettante. She did this as a favor. We can’t turn her down.”

“But, Walter—”

“No, sir. This has to be unanimous. We’re either giving him my daughter’s painting or we don’t give him anything at all.”

Alette said, “I like her painting very much. Let’s give it to the pastor.”

Walter Manning smiled smugly and said, “He’s going to be very pleased with this.”

On his way home that evening, Walter Manning was killed by a hit-and-run driver.

When Alette heard the news, she was stunned.

Chapter Four

ASHLEY Patterson was taking a hurried shower, late for work, when she heard the sound. A door opening? Closing? She turned off the shower, listening, her heart pounding. *Silence*. She stood there a moment, her body glistening with drops of water, then hurriedly dried herself and cautiously stepped into the bedroom. Everything appeared to be normal. *It's my stupid imagination again. I've got to get dressed*. She walked over to her lingerie drawer, opened it and stared down at it, unbelievably. Someone had gone through her undergarments. Her bras and pantyhose were all piled together. She always kept them neatly separated.

Ashley suddenly felt sick to her stomach. Had he unzipped his pants, picked up her pantyhose and rubbed them against himself? Had he fantasized about raping her? Raping her and murdering her? She was finding it difficult to breathe. *I should go to the police, but they would laugh at me.*

You want us to investigate this because you think someone got into your lingerie drawer?

Someone has been following me.

Have you seen who it is?

No.

Has anyone threatened you?

No.

Do you know why anyone would want to harm you?

No.

It's no use, Ashley thought despairingly. *I can't go to the police. Those are the questions they would ask me, and I would look like a fool.*

She dressed as quickly as she could, suddenly eager to escape from the apartment. *I'll have to move. I'll go somewhere where he can't find me.*

But even as she thought it, she had the feeling that it was going to be impossible. *He knows where I live, he knows where I work. And what do I know about him? Nothing.*

She refused to keep a gun in the apartment because she hated violence. *But I need some protection now*, Ashley thought. She went into the kitchen, picked up a steak knife, carried it to her bedroom and put it in the dresser drawer next to her bed.

It's possible that I mixed my lingerie up myself. That's probably what happened. Or is it wishful thinking?

There was an envelope in her mailbox in the downstairs entrance hall. The return address read "Bedford Area High School, Bedford, Pennsylvania."

Ashley read the invitation twice.

Ten-Year Class Reunion!

Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief. Have you often wondered how your classmates have fared during the last ten years? Here's your chance to find out. The weekend of June 15th we're going to have a spectacular get-together. Food, drinks, a great orchestra and dancing. Join the fun.

Just mail the enclosed acceptance card so we'll know you're coming. Everyone looks forward to seeing you.

Driving to work, Ashley thought about the invitation. *"Everyone looks forward to seeing you."* *Everyone except Jim Cleary*, she thought bitterly.

"I want to marry you. My uncle offered me a really good job in Chicago with his advertising agency ... There's a train leaving for Chicago at seven A.M. Will you come with me?"

And she remembered the pain of desperately waiting at the station for Jim, believing in him, trusting him. He had changed his mind, and he had not been man enough to come and tell her. Instead, he had left her sitting in a train station, alone. *Forget the invitation. I'm not going.*

Ashley had lunch with Shane Miller at TGI Friday's. They sat in a booth, eating in silence.

"You seem preoccupied," Shane said.

"Sorry." Ashley hesitated a moment. She was tempted to tell him about the lingerie, but it would sound stupid. *Someone got into your drawers?* Instead, she said, "I got an invitation to my ten-year high school reunion."

"Are you going?"

"Certainly not." It came out stronger than Ashley had intended.

Shane Miller looked at her curiously. "Why not? Those things can be fun."

Would Jim Cleary be there? Would he have a wife and children? What would he say to her?

"Sorry I wasn't able to meet you at the train station. Sorry I lied to you about marrying you?"

"I'm not going."

But Ashley was unable to get the invitation out of her mind. *It would be nice to see some of my old classmates*, she thought. There were a few she had been close to. One in particular was Florence Schiffer. *I wonder what's become of her?* And she wondered whether the town of Bedford had changed.

Ashley Patterson had grown up in Bedford, Pennsylvania, a small town two hours east of Pittsburgh, deep in the Allegheny Mountains. Her father had been head of the Memorial Hospital of Bedford County, one of the top one hundred hospitals in the country.

Bedford had been a wonderful town to grow up in. There were parks for picnics, rivers to fish in and social events that went on all year. Ashley enjoyed visiting Big Valley, where there was an Amish colony. It was a common sight to see horses pulling Amish buggies with different colored tops, colors that depended on the degree of orthodoxy of the owners.

There were Mystery Village evenings and live theater and the Great Pumpkin Festival. Ashley smiled at the thought of the good times she had had there. *Maybe I will go back*, she thought. *Jim Cleary won't have the nerve to show up.*

Ashley told Shane Miller of her decision. "It's a week from Friday," she said. "I'll be back Sunday night."

"Great. Let me know what time you're getting back. I'll pick you up at the airport."

"Thank you, Shane."

When Ashley returned from lunch, she walked into her work cubicle and turned her computer on. To her surprise, a sudden hail of pixels began rolling down the screen, creating an image. She stared at it, bewildered. The dots were forming a picture of her. As Ashley watched, horrified, a hand holding a butcher knife appeared at the top of the screen. The hand was racing toward her image, ready to plunge the knife into her chest.

Ashley screamed, "No!"

She snapped off the monitor and jumped to her feet.

Shane Miller had hurried to her side. "Ashley! What is it?"

She was trembling. "On the ... the screen—"

Shane turned on the computer. A picture of a kitten chasing a ball of yarn across a green lawn appeared.

Shane turned to look at Ashley, bewildered. "What—?"

"It's—it's gone," she whispered.

"What's gone?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. I—I've been under a lot of stress lately, Shane. I'm sorry."

"Why don't you go have a talk with Dr. Speakman?"

Ashley had seen Dr. Speakman before. He was the company psychologist hired to counsel stressed-out computer whizzes. He was not a medical doctor, but he was intelligent and understanding, and it was helpful to be able to talk to someone.

"I'll go," Ashley said.

Dr. Ben Speakman was in his fifties, a patriarch at the fountain of youth. His office was a quiet oasis at the far end of the building, relaxed and comfortable.

"I had a terrible dream last night," Ashley said. She closed her eyes, reliving it. "I was running. I was in a huge garden filled with flowers ... They had weird, ugly faces ... They were screaming at me ... I couldn't hear what they were saying. I just kept running toward something ... I don't know what ..." She stopped and opened her eyes.

"Could you have been running *away* from something? Was something chasing you?"

"I don't know. I—I think I'm being followed, Dr. Speakman. It sounds crazy, but—I think someone wants to kill me."

He studied her a moment. "Who would want to kill you?"

"I—I have no idea."

"Have you *seen* anyone following you?"

"No."

"You live alone, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Are you seeing anyone? I mean romantically?"

"No. Not right now."

"So it's been a while since you—I mean sometimes when a woman doesn't have a man in her life—well, a kind of physical tension can build up ..."

What he's trying to tell me is that I need a good— She could not bring herself to say the word. She could hear her father yelling at her, "*Don't ever say that word again. People will think you're a little slut. Nice people don't say fuck. Where do you pick up that kind of language?*"

"I think you've just been working too hard, Ashley. I don't believe you have anything to worry about. It's probably just tension. Take it a little easier for a while. Get more rest."

"I'll try."

Shane Miller was waiting for her. "What did Dr. Speakman say?"

Ashley managed a smile. "He says I'm fine. I've just been working too hard."

"Well, we'll have to do something about that," Shane said. "For openers, why don't you take the rest of the day off?" His voice was filled with concern.

"Thanks." She looked at him and smiled. He was a dear man. A good friend.

He can't be the one, Ashley thought. He can't.

During the following week, Ashley could think of nothing but the reunion. *I wonder if my going is a mistake? What if Jim Cleary does show up? Does he have any idea how much he hurt me? Does he care? Will he even remember me?*

The night before Ashley was to leave for Bedford, she was unable to sleep. She was tempted to cancel her flight. *I'm being silly, she thought. The past is the past.*

When Ashley picked up her ticket at the airport, she examined it and said, "I'm afraid there's been some mistake. I'm flying tourist. This is a first-class ticket."

"Yes. You changed it."

She stared at the clerk. "I what?"

"You telephoned and said to change it to a first-class ticket." He showed Ashley a slip of paper. "Is this your credit card number?"

She looked at it and said slowly, "Yes ..."

She had not made that phone call.

Ashley arrived in Bedford early and checked in at the Bedford Springs Resort. The reunion festivities did not start until six o'clock that evening, so she decided to explore the town. She hailed a taxi in front of the hotel.

"Where to, miss?"

"Let's just drive around."

Hometowns were supposed to look smaller when a native returned years later, but to Ashley, Bedford looked larger than she had remembered. The taxi drove up and down familiar streets, passing the offices of the *Bedford Gazette* and television station WKYE and a dozen familiar restaurants and art galleries. The Baker's Loaf of Bedford was still there and Clara's Place, the Fort Bedford Museum and Old Bedford Village. They passed the Memorial Hospital, a graceful three-story brick building with a portico. It was there that her father had become famous.

She recalled again the terrible, screaming fights between her mother and father. They had always been about the same thing. *About what?* She could not remember.

At five o'clock, Ashley returned to her hotel room. She changed clothes three times before finally deciding on what she was going to wear. She settled on a simple, flattering black dress.

When Ashley entered the festively decorated gymnasium of Bedford Area High School, she found herself surrounded by 120 vaguely familiar-looking strangers. Some of her former classmates were completely unrecognizable, others had changed little. Ashley was looking for one person: Jim Cleary. *Would he have changed much? Would he have his wife with him?* People were approaching Ashley.

"Ashley, it's Trent Waterson. You look great!"

"Thanks. So do you, Trent."

"I want you to meet my wife ..."

"Ashley, it *is* you, isn't it?"

"Yes. Er—"

"Art. Art Davies. Remember me?"

"Of course." He was badly dressed and looked ill at ease. "How is everything going, Art?"

"Well, you know I wanted to become an engineer, but it didn't work out."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah. Anyway, I became a mechanic."

"Ashley! It's Lenny Holland. For God's sake, you look beautiful!"

"Thank you, Lenny." He had gained weight and was wearing a large diamond ring on his little finger.

"I'm in real estate now, doing great. Did you ever get married?"

Ashley hesitated. "No."

"Remember Nicki Brandt? We got married. We have twins."

"Congratulations."

It was amazing how much people could change in ten years. They were fatter and thinner ... prosperous and downtrodden. They were married and divorced ... parents and parentless ...

As the evening wore on, there was dining and music and dancing. Ashley made conversation with her former classmates and caught up on their lives, but her mind was on Jim Cleary. There was still no sign of him. *He won't come*, she decided. *He knows I might be here and he's afraid to face me.*

An attractive-looking woman was approaching. "Ashley! I was *hoping* I'd see you." It was Florence Schiffer. Ashley was genuinely glad to see her. Florence had been one of her closest friends. The two of them found a table in the corner, where they could talk.

"You look great, Florence," Ashley said.

"So do you. Sorry I'm so late. The baby wasn't feeling well. Since I last saw you, I've gotten married and divorced. I'm going out with Mr. Wonderful now. What about you? After the graduation party, you disappeared. I tried to find you, but you'd left town."

"I went to London," Ashley said. "My father enrolled me in a college over there. We left here the morning after our graduation."

"I tried every way I could think of to reach you. The detectives thought I might know where you were. They were looking for you because you and Jim Cleary were going together."

Ashley said slowly, "The *detectives*?"

“Yes. The ones investigating the murder.”

Ashley felt the blood drain from her face. “What ... murder?”

Florence was staring at her. “My God! You don’t know?”

“*Know what?*” Ashley demanded fiercely. “What are you talking about?”

“The day after the graduation party, Jim’s parents came back and found his body. He had been stabbed to death and ... castrated.”

The room started to spin. Ashley held on to the edge of the table. Florence grabbed her arm.

“I’m—I’m sorry, Ashley. I thought you would have read about it, but of course ... you had left for London.”

Ashley squeezed her eyes tightly shut. She saw herself sneaking out of the house that night, heading toward Jim Cleary’s house. But she had turned and gone back home to wait for him in the morning. *If only I had gone to him*, Ashley thought miserably, *he would still be alive. And all these years I’ve hated him. Oh, my God. Who could have killed him? Who—?*

She could hear her father’s voice, “*You keep your goddamned hands off my daughter, do you understand? ... If I ever see you around here again, I’ll break every bone in your body.*”

She got to her feet. “You’ll have to excuse me, Florence. I—I’m not feeling very well.”

And Ashley fled.

The detectives. They must have gotten in touch with her father. *Why didn’t he tell me?*

She took the first plane back to California. It was early in the morning before she could fall asleep. She had a nightmare. A figure standing in the dark was stabbing Jim and screaming at him. The figure stepped into the light.

It was her father.

Chapter Five

THE next few months were misery for Ashley. The image of Jim Cleary's bloody, mutilated body kept going through her mind. She thought of seeing Dr. Speakman again, but she knew she dare not discuss this with anyone. She felt guilty even *thinking* that her father might have done such a terrible thing. She pushed the thought away and tried to concentrate on her work. It was impossible. She looked down in dismay at a logo she had just botched.

Shane Miller was watching her, concerned. "Are you all right, Ashley?"

She forced a smile. "I'm fine."

"I really am sorry about your friend." She had told him about Jim.

"I'll—I'll get over it."

"What about dinner tonight?"

"Thanks, Shane. I—I'm not up to it just yet. Next week."

"Right. If there's anything I can do—"

"I appreciate it. There's nothing anyone can do."

Toni said to Alette, "Miss Tight Ass has a problem. Well, she can get stuffed."

"I feel *dispiace*—sorry for her. She is troubled."

"Sod her. We all have our problems, don't we, luv?"

As Ashley was leaving on a Friday afternoon before a holiday weekend, Dennis Tibbie stopped her. "Hey, babe. I need a favor."

"I'm sorry, Dennis, I—"

"Come on. Lighten up!" He took Ashley's arm. "I need some advice from a woman's point of view."

"Dennis, I'm not in the—"

"I've fallen in love with somebody, and I want to marry her, but there are problems. Will you help me?"

Ashley hesitated. She did not like Dennis Tibbie, but she could see no harm in trying to help him. "Can this wait until tomorrow?"

"I need to talk to you now. It's really urgent."

Ashley took a deep breath. "All right."

"Can we go to your apartment?"

She shook her head. "No." She would never be able to make him leave.

"Will you stop by my place?"

Ashley hesitated. "Very well." *That way I can leave when I want to. If I can help him get the woman he's in love with, maybe he'll leave me alone.*

Toni said to Alette, "God! Goody Two-shoes is going to the twerp's apartment. Can you believe she could be that stupid? Where's her sodding brains?"

"She's just trying to help him. There's nothing wrong with—"

"Oh, come on, Alette. When are you going to grow up? The man wants to bonk her."

"Non va. Non si fa così."

"I couldn't have said it better myself."

Dennis Tibbie's apartment was furnished in neo-nightmare. Posters of old horror movies hung from the walls, next to pinups of naked models and wild animals feeding. Tiny erotic wood carvings were spread out on tables.

It's the apartment of a madman, Ashley thought. She could not wait to get out of there.

"Hey, I'm glad you could come, baby. I really appreciate this. If—"

"I can't stay long, Dennis." Ashley warned him. "Tell me about this woman you're in love with."

"She's really something." He held out a cigarette. "Cigarette?"

"I don't smoke." She watched him light up.

"How about a drink?"

"I don't drink."

He grinned. "You don't smoke, you don't drink. That leaves an interesting activity, doesn't it?"

She said to him sharply, "Dennis, if you don't—"

"Only kidding." He walked over to the bar and poured some wine. "Have a little wine. That can't hurt you." He handed her the glass.

She took a sip of wine. "Tell me about Miss Right."

Dennis Tibbie sat down on the couch next to Ashley. "I've never met anybody like her. She's sexy like you and—"

"Stop it or I'll leave."

"Hey, that was meant as a compliment. Anyway, she's crazy about me, but her mother and father are very social, and they hate me."

Ashley made no comment.

"So the thing is, if I push it, she'll marry me, but she'll alienate her family. She's really close to them, and if I marry her, they'll sure as hell disown her. Then one day, she'll probably blame me. Do you see the problem?"

Ashley took another sip of wine. "Yes. I..."

After that, time seemed to vanish in a mist.

She awakened slowly, knowing that something was terribly wrong. She felt as though she had been drugged. It was an enormous effort merely to open her eyes. Ashley looked around the room and began to panic. She was lying in a bed, naked, in a cheap hotel room. She managed to sit up, and her head started to pound. She had no idea where she was or how she had gotten there. There was a room service menu on the nightstand, and she reached over and picked it up. *The Chicago Loop Hotel*. She read it again, stunned. *What am I doing in Chicago? How long have I been here? The visit to Dennis Tibbie's apartment had been on Friday. What day is this?* With growing alarm, she picked up the telephone.

"May I help you?"

It was difficult for Ashley to speak. "What—what day is this?"

"Today is the seventeenth of—"

"No. I mean what *day* of the week is this?"

"Oh. Today is Monday. Can I—"

Ashley replaced the receiver in a daze. *Monday*. She had lost two days and two nights. She sat up at the edge of the bed, trying to remember. She had gone to Dennis Tibbie's apartment ... She had had a glass of wine ... After that, everything was a blank.

He had put something in her glass of wine that had made her temporarily lose her memory. She had read about incidents where a drug like that had been used. It was called the "date rape drug." That was what he had given her. The talk about wanting her advice had been a ruse. *And like a fool, I fell for it*. She had no recollection of going to the airport, flying to Chicago or checking into this seedy hotel room with Tibbie. And worse—no recollection of what had happened in this room.

I've got to get out of here, Ashley thought desperately. She felt unclean, as though every inch of her body had been violated. What had he done to her? Trying not to think about it, she got out of bed, walked into the tiny bathroom and stepped into the shower. She let the stream of hot water pound against her body, trying to wash away whatever terrible, dirty things had happened to her. What if he had gotten her pregnant? The thought of having his child was sickening, Ashley got out of the shower, dried herself and walked over to the closet. Her clothes were missing. The only things inside the closet were a black leather miniskirt, a cheap-looking tube top and a pair of spiked high-heeled shoes. She was repelled by the thought of putting on the clothes, but she had no choice. She dressed quickly and glanced in the mirror. She looked like a prostitute.

Ashley examined her purse. Only forty dollars. Her checkbook and credit card were still there. *Thank God!*

She went out into the corridor. It was empty. She took the elevator down to the seedy-looking lobby and walked over to the checkout desk, where she handed the elderly cashier her credit card.

“Leavin’ us already?” He leered. “Well, you had a good time, huh?”

Ashley stared at him, wondering what he meant and afraid to find out. She was tempted to ask him when Dennis Tibbie had checked out, but she decided it was better not to bring it up.

The cashier was putting her credit card through a machine. He frowned and put it through again. Finally, he said, “I’m sorry. This card won’t go through. You’ve exceeded your limit.”

Ashley’s mouth dropped open. “That’s impossible! There’s some mistake!”

The clerk shrugged. “Do you have another credit card?”

“No. I—I don’t. Will you take a personal check?”

He was eyeing her outfit disapprovingly. “I guess so, if you have some ID.”

“I need to make a telephone call ...”

“Telephone booth in the corner.”

“San Francisco Memorial Hospital ...”

“Dr. Steven Patterson.”

“One moment, please ...”

“Dr. Patterson’s office.”

“Sarah? This is Ashley. I need to speak to my father.”

“I’m sorry, Miss Patterson. He’s in the operating room and—”

Ashley’s grip tightened on the telephone. “Do you know how long he’ll be there?”

“It’s hard to say. I know he has another surgery scheduled after—”

Ashley found herself fighting hysteria. “I need to talk to him. It’s urgent. Can you get word to him, please? As soon as he gets a chance, have him call me.” She looked at the telephone number in the booth and gave it to her father’s receptionist. “I’ll wait here until he calls.”

“I’ll be sure to tell him.”

She sat in the lobby for almost an hour, willing the telephone to ring. People passing by stared at her or ogled her, and she felt naked in the tawdry outfit she was wearing. When the phone finally rang, it startled her.

She hurried back into the phone booth. “Hello ...”

“Ashley?” It was her father’s voice.

“Oh, Father, I—”

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m in Chicago and—”

“What are you doing in Chicago?”

“I can’t go into it now. I need an airline ticket to San Jose. I don’t have any money with me. Can you help me?”

“Of course. Hold on.” Three minutes later, her father came back on the line. “There’s an American Airlines plane leaving O’Hare at ten-forty A.M., Flight 407. There will be a ticket waiting for you at the check-in counter. I’ll pick you up at the airport in San Jose and—”

“No!” She could not let him see her like this. “I’ll—I’ll go to my apartment to change.”

“All right. I’ll come down and meet you for dinner. You can tell me all about it then.”

“Thank you, Father. Thank you.”

On the plane going home, Ashley thought about the unforgivable thing Dennis Tibbie had done to her. *I’m going to have to go to the police, she decided. I can’t let him get away with this. How many other women has he done this to?*

When Ashley got back to her apartment, she felt as though she had returned to a sanctuary. She could not wait to get out of the tacky outfit she was wearing. She stripped it off as quickly as she

could. She felt as though she needed another shower before she met her father. She started to walk over to her closet and stopped. In front of her, on the dressing table, was a burned cigarette butt.

They were seated at a corner table in a restaurant at The Oaks. Ashley's father was studying her, concerned. "What were you doing in Chicago?"

"I—I don't know."

He looked at her, puzzled. "You don't know?"

Ashley hesitated, trying to make up her mind whether to tell him what had happened. Perhaps he could give her some advice.

She said carefully, "Dennis Tibbie asked me up to his apartment to help him with a problem ..."

"Dennis Tibbie? That *snake*" Long ago, Ashley had introduced her father to the people she worked with. "How could you have anything to do with him?"

Ashley knew instantly that she had made a mistake. Her father had always overreacted to any problems she had. Especially when it involved a man.

"If I ever see you around here again, Cleary. I'll break every bone in your body."

"It's not important," Ashley said.

"I want to hear it."

Ashley sat still for a moment, filled with a sense of foreboding. "Well, I had a drink at Dennis's apartment and ..."

As she talked, she watched her father's face grow grim. There was a look in his eyes that frightened her. She tried to cut the story short.

"No," her father insisted. "I want to hear it all ..."

Ashley lay in bed that night, too drained to sleep, her thoughts chaotic. *If what Dennis did to me becomes public, it will be humiliating. Everyone at work will know what happened. But I can't let him do this to anyone else. I have to tell the police.*

People had tried to warn her that Dennis was obsessed with her, but she had ignored them. Now, looking back on it, she could see all the signs: Dennis had hated to see anyone else talking to her; he was constantly begging her for dates; he was always eavesdropping ...

At least I know who the stalker is, Ashley thought.

At 8:30 in the morning, as Ashley was getting ready to leave for work, the telephone rang. She picked it up. "Hello."

"Ashley, it's Shane. Have you heard the news?"

"What news?"

"It's on television. They just found Dennis Tibbie's body."

For an instant the earth seemed to shift. "Oh, my God! What happened?"

"According to the sheriff's office, somebody stabbed him to death and then castrated him."

Chapter Six

DEPUTY Sam Blake had earned his position in the Cupertino Sheriff's Office the hard way: He had married the sheriff's sister, Serena Dowling, a virago with a tongue sharp enough to fell the forests of Oregon. Sam Blake was the only man Serena had ever met who was able to handle her. He was a short, gentle, mild-mannered person with the patience of a saint. No matter how outrageous Serena's behavior, he would wait until she had calmed down and then have a quiet talk with her.

Blake had joined the sheriff's department because Sheriff Matt Dowling was his best friend. They had gone to school together and grown up together. Blake enjoyed police work and was exceedingly good at it. He had a keen, inquiring intelligence and a stubborn tenacity. The combination made him the best detective on the force.

Earlier that morning, Sam Blake and Sheriff Dowling were having coffee together.

Sheriff Dowling said, "I hear my sister gave you a bad time last night. We got half a dozen calls from the neighbors complaining about the noise. Serena's a champion screamer, all right."

Sam shrugged. "I finally got her calmed down, Matt."

"Thank God she's not living with me anymore, Sam. I don't know what gets into her. Her temper tantrums—"

Their conversation was interrupted. "Sheriff, we just got a 911. There's been a murder over on Sunnyvale Avenue."

Sheriff Dowling looked at Sam Blake.

Blake nodded. "I'll catch it."

Fifteen minutes later, Deputy Blake was walking into Dennis Tibbie's apartment. A patrolman in the living room was talking to the building superintendent.

"Where's the body?" Blake asked.

The patrolman nodded toward the bedroom. "In there, sir." He looked pale.

Blake walked to the bedroom and stopped, in shock. A man's naked body was sprawled across the bed, and Blake's first impression was that the room was soaked in blood. As he stepped closer to the bed, he saw where the blood had come from. The ragged edge of a broken bottle had punctured the victim's back, over and over again, and there were shards of glass in his body. The victim's testicles had been slashed off.

Looking at it, Blake felt a pain in his groin. "How the hell could a human being do a thing like this?" he said aloud. There was no sign of the weapon, but they would make a thorough search.

Deputy Blake went back into the living room to talk to the building superintendent. "Did you know the deceased?"

"Yes, sir. This is his apartment."

"What's his name?"

"Tibbie. Dennis Tibbie."

Deputy Blake made a note. "How long had he lived here?"

"Almost three years."

"What can you tell me about him?"

"Not too much, sir. Tibbie kept pretty much to himself, always paid his rent on time. Once in a while he'd have a woman in here. I think they were mostly pros."

"Do you know where he worked?"

"Oh, yes. Global Computer Graphics Corporation. He was one of them computer nerds."

Deputy Blake made another note. "Who found the body?"

"One of the maids. Maria. Yesterday was a holiday, so she didn't come in until this morning—"

"I want to talk to her."

"Yes, sir. I'll get her."

Maria was a dark-looking Brazilian woman in her forties, nervous and frightened.

"You discovered the body, Maria?"

"I didn't do it. I swear to you." She was on the verge of hysteria. "Do I need a lawyer?"

"No. You don't need a lawyer. Just tell me what happened."

"Nothing happened. I mean—I walked in here this morning to clean, the way I always do. I—I thought he was gone. He's always out of here by seven in the morning. I tidied up the living room and—"

Damn! "Maria, do you remember what the room looked like before you tidied up?"

"What do you mean?"

"Did you move anything? Take anything out of here?"

"Well, yes. There was a broken wine bottle on the floor. It was all sticky. I—"

"What did you do with it?" he asked excitedly.

"I put it in the garbage compactor and ground it up."

"What else did you do?"

"Well, I cleaned out the ashtray and—"

"Were there any cigarette butts in it?"

She stopped to remember. "One. I put it in the trash basket in the kitchen."

"Let's take a look at it." He followed her to the kitchen, and she pointed to a wastebasket. Inside was a cigarette butt with lipstick on it. Carefully, Deputy Blake scooped it up in a coin envelope.

He led her back to the living room. "Maria, do you know if anything is missing from the apartment? Does it look as if any valuables are gone?"

She looked around. "I don't think so. Mr. Tibbie, he liked to collect those little statues. He spent a lot of money on them. It looks like they're all here."

So the motive was not robbery. Drugs? Revenge? A love affair gone wrong?

"What did you do after you tidied up here, Maria?"

"I vacuumed in here, the way I always do. And then—" Her voice faltered. "I walked into the bedroom and ... I saw him." She looked at Deputy Blake. "I swear I didn't do it."

The coroner and his assistants arrived in a coroner's wagon, with a body bag.

Three hours later, Deputy Sam Blake was back in the sheriff's office.

"What have you got, Sam?"

"Not much." Deputy Blake sat down across from Sheriff Dowling. "Dennis Tibbie worked over at Global. He was apparently some kind of genius."

"But not genius enough to keep himself from getting killed."

"He wasn't just killed, Matt. He was slaughtered. You should have seen what someone did to his body. It has to be some kind of maniac."

"Nothing to go on?"

"We aren't sure what the murder weapon is, we're waiting for results from the lab, but it may be a broken wine bottle. The maid threw it in the compactor. It looks like there's a fingerprint on one of the pieces of glass in his back. I talked to the neighbors. No help there. No one saw anyone coming in or out of his apartment. No unusual noises. Apparently, Tibbie stuck pretty much to himself. He wasn't the neighborly type. One thing. Tibbie had sex before he died. We have vaginal traces, pubic hairs, other trace evidence and a cigarette stub with lipstick. We'll test for DNA."

"The newspapers are going to have a good time with this one, Sam. I can see the headlines now—MANIAC STRIKES SILICON VALLEY." Sheriff Dowling sighed. "Let's knock this off as fast as we can."

"I'm on my way over to Global Computer Graphics now."

It had taken Ashley an hour to decide whether she should go into the office. She was torn. *One look at me, and everyone will know that something is wrong. But if I don't show up, they'll want to know why. The police will probably be there asking questions. If they question me, I'll have to tell them*

the truth. They won't believe me. They'll blame me for killing Dennis Tibbie. And if they do believe me, and if I tell them my father knew what he did to me, they'll blame him.

She thought of Jim Cleary's murder. She could hear Florence's voice: *"Jim's parents came back and found his body. He had been stabbed to death and castrated."*

Ashley squeezed her eyes shut tightly. *My God, what's happening? What's happening?*

Deputy Sam Blake walked onto the work floor where groups of somber employees stood around, talking quietly. Blake could imagine what the subject of conversation was. Ashley watched him apprehensively as he headed toward Shane Miller's office.

Shane rose to greet him. "Deputy Blake?"

"Yes." The two men shook hands.

"Sit down, Deputy."

Sam Blake took a seat. "I understand Dennis Tibbie was an employee here?"

"That's right. One of the best. It's a terrible tragedy."

"He worked here about three years?"

"Yes. He was our genius. There wasn't anything he couldn't do with a computer."

"What can you tell me about his social life?"

Shane Miller shook his head. "Not much, I'm afraid. Tibbie was kind of a loner."

"Do you have any idea if he was into drugs?"

"Dennis? Hell, no. He was a health nut."

"Did he gamble? Could he have owed someone a lot of money?"

"No. He made a damned good salary, but I think he was pretty tight with a buck."

"What about women? Did he have a girlfriend?"

"Women weren't very attracted to Tibbie." He thought for a moment. "Lately, though, he was going around telling people there was someone he was thinking of marrying."

"Did he happen to mention her name?"

Miller shook his head. "No. Not to me, anyway."

"Would you mind if I talked to some of your employees?"

"Not at all. Go ahead. I have to tell you, they're all pretty shaken up."

They would be more shaken up if they could have seen his body, Blake thought.

The two men walked out onto the work floor.

Shane Miller raised his voice. "May I have your attention, please? This is Deputy Blake. He'd like to ask a few questions."

The employees had stopped what they were doing and were listening.

Deputy Blake said, "I'm sure that all of you have heard what happened to Mr. Tibbie. We need your help in finding out who killed him. Do any of you know of any enemies he had? Anyone who hated him enough to want to murder him?" There was a silence. Blake went on. "There was a woman he was interested in marrying. Did he discuss her with any of you?"

Ashley was finding it difficult to breathe. Now was the time to speak up. Now was the time to tell the deputy what Tibbie had done to her. But Ashley remembered the look on her father's face when she had told him about it. They would blame him for the murder.

Her father could never kill anyone.

He was a doctor.

He was a surgeon.

Dennis Tibbie had been castrated.

Deputy Blake was saying, "... and none of you saw him after he left here on Friday?"

Toni Prescott thought, *Go ahead. Tell him, Miss Goody Two-shoes. Tell him you went to his apartment. Why don't you speak up?*

Deputy Blake stood there a moment, trying to hide his disappointment. “Well, if any of you remembers anything that might be helpful, I’d appreciate it if you’d give me a call. Mr. Miller has my number. Thank you.”

They watched as he moved toward the exit with Shane.

Ashley felt faint with relief.

Deputy Blake turned to Shane. “Was there anyone here he was particularly close to?”

“No, not really,” Shane said. “I don’t think Dennis was close to anybody. He was very attracted to one of our computer operators, but he never got anywhere with her.”

Deputy Blake stopped. “Is she here now?”

“Yes, but—”

“I’d like to talk to her.”

“All right. You can use my office.” They walked back into the room, and Ashley saw them coming. They were headed straight for her cubicle. She could feel her face redden.

“Ashley, Deputy Blake would like to talk to you.”

So he knew! He was going to ask her about her visit to Tibbie’s apartment. *I’ve got to be careful*, Ashley thought.

The deputy was looking at her. “Do you mind, Miss Patterson?”

She found her voice. “No, not at all.” She followed him into Shane Miller’s office.

“Sit down.” They both took chairs. “I understand that Dennis Tibbie was fond of you?”

“I—I suppose ...” *Careful*. “Yes.”

“Did you go out with him?”

Going to his apartment would not be the same as going out with him. “No.”

“Did he talk to you about this woman he wanted to marry?”

She was getting in deeper and deeper. Could he be taping this? Maybe he already knew she had been in Tibbie’s apartment. They could have found her fingerprints. Now was the time to tell the deputy what Tibbie had done to her. *But if I do*, Ashley thought in despair, *it will lead to my father, and they’ll connect that to Jim Cleary’s murder*. Did they know about that, too? But the police department in Bedford would have no reason to notify the police department in Cupertino. Or would they?

Deputy Blake was watching her, waiting for an answer. “Miss Patterson?”

“What? Oh, I’m sorry. This has got me so upset ...”

“I understand. Did Tibbie ever mention this woman he wanted to marry?”

“Yes ... but he never told me her name.” That, at least, was true.

“Have you ever been to Tibbie’s apartment?”

Ashley took a deep breath. If she said no, the questioning would probably end. But if they had found her fingerprints ... “Yes.”

“You have been to his apartment?”

“Yes.”

He was looking at her more closely now. “You said you’d never been out with him.”

Ashley’s mind was racing now. “That’s right. Not on a date, no. I went to bring him some papers he had forgotten.”

“When was this?”

She felt trapped. “It was ... it was about a week ago.”

“And that’s the only time you’ve been to his place?”

“That’s right.”

Now if they had her fingerprints, she would be in the clear.

Deputy Blake sat there, studying her, and she felt guilty. She wanted to tell him the truth. Maybe some burglar had broken in and killed him—the same burglar who had killed Jim Cleary ten years earlier and three thousand miles away. If you believed in coincidences. If you believed in Santa Claus. If you believed in the tooth fairy.

Damn you, Father.

Deputy Blake said, "This is a terrible crime. There doesn't seem to be any motive. But you know, in all the years I've been on the force, I've never seen a crime without a motive." There was no response. "Do *you* know if Dennis Tibbie was into drugs?"

"I'm sure he wasn't."

"So what do we have? It wasn't drugs. He wasn't robbed. He didn't owe anybody money. That kind of leaves a romantic situation, doesn't it? Someone who was jealous of him."

Or a father who wanted to protect his daughter.

"I'm as puzzled as you are, Deputy."

He stared at her for a moment and his eyes seemed to say, "I don't believe you, lady."

Deputy Blake got to his feet. He took out a card and handed it to Ashley. "If there's anything you can think of, I'd appreciate your giving me a call."

"I'll be happy to."

"Good day."

She watched him leave. *It's over. Father's in the clear.*

When Ashley returned to her apartment that evening, there was a message on the answering machine: "You got me real hot last night, baby. I'm talking blue balls. But you'll take care of me tonight, though, the way you promised. Same time, same place."

Ashley stood there, listening in disbelief. *I'm going crazy*, she thought. *This has nothing to do with Father. Someone else must be behind all this. But who? And why?*

Five days later, Ashley received a statement from the credit card company. Three items caught her attention:

A bill from the Mod Dress Shop for \$450.

A bill from the Circus Club for \$300.

A bill from Louie's Restaurant for \$250.

She had never heard of the dress shop, the club or the restaurant.

Chapter Seven

ASHLEY Patterson followed the investigation of Dennis Tibbie's murder in the newspapers and on television every day. The police appeared to have reached a dead end.

It's over, Ashley thought. There's nothing more to worry about. That evening, Deputy Sam Blake appeared at her apartment. Ashley looked at him, her mouth suddenly dry.

"I hope I'm not bothering you," Deputy Blake said. "I was on my way home, and I just thought I'd drop in for a minute."

Ashley swallowed. "No. Come in."

Deputy Blake walked into the apartment. "Nice place you have here."

"Thank you."

"I'll bet Dennis Tibbie didn't like this kind of furniture."

Ashley's heart began to pound. "I don't know. He's never been in this apartment."

"Oh. I thought he might have, you know."

"No, I don't know, Deputy. I told you, I never dated him."

"Right. May I sit down?"

"Please."

"You see, I'm having a big problem with this case, Miss Patterson. It doesn't fit into any pattern. Like I said, there's always a motive. I've talked to some of the people over at Global Computer Graphics, and no one seems to have known Tibbie very well. He kept pretty much to himself."

Ashley listened, waiting for the blow to fall.

"In fact, from what they tell me, you're the only one he was really interested in."

Had he found out something, or was he on a fishing expedition?

Ashley said carefully, "He was interested in me, Deputy, but I was not interested in him. I made that quite clear to him."

He nodded. "Well, I think it was nice of you to deliver those papers to his apartment."

Ashley almost said, "What papers?" and then suddenly remembered. "It—it was no trouble. It was on my way."

"Right. Someone must have hated Tibbie a lot to do what they did."

Ashley sat there tense, saying nothing.

"Do you know what I hate?" Deputy Blake said. "Unsolved murders. They always leave me frustrated. Because when a murder goes unsolved, I don't think it means that the criminals were that smart. I think it means that the police weren't smart enough. Well, so far, I've been lucky. I've solved all the crimes that have come my way." He got to his feet. "I don't intend to give up on this one. If you can think of anything that will be helpful, you'll call me, won't you, Miss Patterson?"

"Yes, of course."

Ashley watched him leave, and she thought, *Did he come here as a warning? Does he know more than he's telling me?*

Toni was more absorbed than ever in the Internet. She enjoyed her chats with Jean Claude the most, but that did not stop her from having other chat room correspondents. At every chance, she sat in front of her computer, and the typed messages flew back and forth, spilling onto the computer screen.

"Toni? Where have you been? I've been in the chat room waiting for you."

"I'm worth waiting for, luv. Tell me about yourself. What do you do?"

"I work at a pharmacy. I can be good to you. Do you do drugs?"

"Sod off."

"Is that you, Toni?"

"The answer to your dreams. Is it Mark?"

“Yes.”

“You haven’t been on the Internet lately.”

“I’ve been busy. I’d like to meet you, Toni.”

“Tell me, Mark, what do you do?”

“I’m a librarian.”

“Isn’t that exciting! All those books and everything ...”

“When can we meet?”

“Why don’t you ask Nostradamus?”

“Hello, Toni. My name is Wendy.”

“Hello, Wendy.”

“You sound like fun.”

“I enjoy life.”

“Maybe I can help you enjoy it more.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Well, I hope you’re not one of those narrow-minded people who are afraid to experiment and try exciting new things. I’d like to show you a good time.”

“Thanks, Wendy. You don’t have the equipment I need.”

And then, Jean Claude Parent came back on.

“Bonne nuit. Comment ça va? How are you?”

“I’m great. How about you?”

“I have missed you. I wish very much to meet you in person.”

“I want to meet you, too. Thanks for sending me your photograph. You’re a good-looking bloke.”

“And you are beautiful. I think it is very important for us to get to know each other. Is your company coming to Quebec for the computer convention?”

“What? Not that I know of. When is it?”

“In three weeks. Many big companies will be coming. I hope you will be here.”

“I hope so, too.”

“Can we meet in the chat room tomorrow at the same time?”

“Of course. Until tomorrow.”

“À demain.”

The following morning, Shane Miller walked up to Ashley. “Ashley, have you heard about the big computer convention coming up in Quebec City?”

She nodded. “Yes. It sounds interesting.”

“I was just debating whether we should send a contingent up there.”

“All the companies are going,” Ashley said. “Symantec, Microsoft, Apple. Quebec City is putting on a big show for them. A trip like that could be kind of a Christmas bonus.”

Shane Miller smiled at her enthusiasm. “Let me check it out.”

The following morning, Shane Miller called Ashley into his office.

“How would you like to spend Christmas in Quebec City?”

“We’re going? That’s great,” Ashley said, enthusiastically. In the past, she had spent the Christmas holidays with her father, but this year she had dreaded the prospect.

“You’d better take plenty of warm clothes.”

“Don’t worry. I will. I’m really looking forward to this, Shane.”

Toni was in the Internet chat room. “Jean Claude, the company is sending a group of us to Quebec City!”

“Formidable! I am so pleased. When will you arrive?”

“In two weeks. There will be fifteen of us.”

“Merveilleux! I feel as though something very important is going to happen.”

“So do I.” *Something very important.*

Ashley anxiously watched the news every night, but there were still no new developments in the Dennis Tibbie murder. She began to relax. If the police could not connect her with the case, there was no way they could find a connection to her father. Half a dozen times she steeled herself to ask him about it, but each time she backed off. What if he were innocent? Could he ever forgive her for accusing him of being a murderer? *And if he is guilty, I don't want to know*, Ashley thought. *I couldn't bear it. And if he has done those terrible things, in his mind, he would have done them to protect me. At least I won't have to face him this Christmas.*

Ashley telephoned her father in San Francisco. She said, without preamble, “I'm not going to be able to spend Christmas with you this year, Father. My company is sending me to a convention in Canada.”

There was a long silence. “That's bad timing, Ashley. You and I have always spent Christmas together.”

“I can't help—”

“You're all I have, you know.”

“Yes, Father, and ... you're all I have.”

“That's what's important.”

Important enough to kill for?

“Where is this convention?”

“In Quebec City. It's—”

“Ah. Lovely place. I haven't been there in years. I'll tell you what I'll do. I haven't anything scheduled at the hospital around that time. I'll fly up, and we'll have a Christmas dinner together.”

Ashley said quickly, “I don't think it's—”

“You just make a reservation for me at whatever hotel you're staying at. We don't want to break tradition, do we?”

She hesitated and said slowly, “No, Father.”

How can I face him?

Alette was excited. She said to Toni, “I've never been to Quebec City. Do they have museums there?”

“Of course they have museums there,” Toni told her. “They have everything. A lot of winter sports. Skiing, skating ...”

Alette shuddered. “I hate cold weather. No sports for me. Even with gloves, my fingers get numb. I will stick to the museums ...”

On the twenty-first of December, the group from Global Computer Graphics arrived at the Jean-Lesage International Airport in Sainte-Foy and were driven to the storied Château Frontenac in Quebec City. It was below zero outside, and the streets were blanketed with snow.

Jean Claude had given Toni his home telephone number. She called as soon as she checked into her room. “I hope I'm not calling too late.”

“*Mais non!* I cannot believe you are here. When may I see you?”

“Well, we're all going to the convention center tomorrow morning, but I could slip away and have lunch with you.”

“*Bon!* There is a restaurant, Le Paris-Brest, on the Grande Allée Est. Can you meet me there at one o'clock?”

“I'll be there.”

The Centre des Congrès de Quebec on René Lévesque Boulevard is a four-story, glass and steel, state-of-the-art building that can accommodate thousands of conventioners. At nine o'clock in the morning, the vast halls were crowded with computer experts from all over the world, exchanging information on up-to-the-minute developments. They filled multimedia rooms, exhibit halls and video-conferencing centers. There were half a dozen seminars going on simultaneously. Toni was

bored. *All talk and no action*, she thought. At 12:45, she slipped out of the convention hall and took a taxi to the restaurant.

Jean Claude was waiting for her. He took her hand and said warmly, “Toni, I am so pleased you could come.”

“So am I.”

“I will try to make certain that your time here is very agreeable,” Jean Claude told her. “This is a beautiful city to explore.”

Toni looked at him and smiled. “I know I’m going to enjoy it.”

“I would like to spend as much time with you as I can.”

“Can you take the time off? What about the jewelry store?”

Jean Claude smiled. “It will have to manage without me.”

The maître d’ brought menus.

Jean Claude said to Toni, “Would you like to try some of our French-Canadian dishes?”

“Fine.”

“Then please let me order for you.” He said to the maître d’, “*Nous voudrions le Brome Lake Duckling*.” He explained to Toni, “It is a local dish, duckling cooked in calvados and stuffed with apples.”

“Sounds delicious.”

And it was.

During luncheon, they filled each other in on their pasts.

“So. You’ve never been married?” Toni asked.

“No. And you?”

“No.”

“You have not found the right man.”

Oh, God, wouldn’t it be wonderful if it were that simple. “No.”

They talked of Quebec City and what there was to do there.

“Do you ski?”

Toni nodded. “I love it.”

“Ah, *bon, moi aussi*. And there is snowmobiling, ice-skating, wonderful shopping ...”

There was something almost boyish about his enthusiasm. Toni had never felt more comfortable with anyone.

Shane Miller arranged it so his group attended the convention mornings and had their afternoons free.

“I don’t know what to do here,” Alette complained to Toni. “It’s freezing. What are you going to do?”

“Everything.” Toni grinned.

“*A più tardi*.”

Toni and Jean Claude had lunch together every day, and every afternoon, Jean Claude took Toni on a tour. She had never seen any place like Quebec City. It was like finding a turn-of-the-century picturesque French village in North America. The ancient streets had colorful names like Break Neck Stairs and Below the Fort and Sailor’s Leap. It was a Currier & Ives city, framed in snow.

They visited La Citadelle, with its walls protecting Old Quebec, and they watched the traditional changing of the guard inside the walls of the fort. They explored the shopping streets, Saint Jean, Cartier, Côte de la Fabrique, and wandered through the Quartier Petit Champlain.

“This is the oldest commercial district in North America,” Jean Claude told her.

“It’s super.”

Everywhere they went, there were sparkling Christmas trees, nativity scenes and music for the enjoyment of the strollers.

Jean Claude took Toni snowmobiling in the countryside. As they raced down a narrow slope, he called out, “Are you having a good time?”

Toni sensed that it was not an idle question. She nodded and said softly, “I’m having a wonderful time.”

Alette spent her time at museums. She visited the Basilica of Notre-Dame and the Good Shepherd Chapel and the Augustine Museum, but she had no interest in anything else that Quebec City offered. There were dozens of gourmet restaurants, but when she was not dining at the hotel, she ate at Le Commensal, a vegetarian cafeteria.

From time to time, Alette thought about her artist friend, Richard Melton, in San Francisco, and wondered what he was doing and if he would remember her.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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