

Third Eye Witness

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by Kathi Bjorkman

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Based on the Experiences of Marilyn Hughes

Inspired in Part by the Experiences of Marilyn Hughes as written in 'The Mysteries of the Redemption: A Treatise on Out-of-Body Travel and Mysticism' and 'Galactica: A Treatise on Death, Dying and the Afterlife'

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Disclaimer

This book is a work of fiction. Places, Names, characters, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locals or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental or fictitious.

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Author Bio

Kathi Bjorkman resides in Colorado and Arizona. Born and raised in Minnesota, she moved out west with her family in 1998 to live and work in the Rocky Mountains. Degreed in Business, she is employed at a Colorado guest ranch that specializes in hosting large wedding events.

Fascinated by the historical significance of the western states, she produced a paranormal clue-solving fiction novel that weaves together, known Indian cultures, ancient religious practices, real historical events, and renowned western landmarks.

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Dedication

I dedicate this book to my daughters Sara and Megan, who encouraged me to write a third novel.

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Chapter 1

It was late—half past nine at the rural home that loomed up from the beams on their headlights. No signs of life—as they cruised slowly down the leafy tree-lined road—none that they could detect, anyway. Lots of tire tracks veered off the old road that outdated the home in need of a defined parking area. Slowing to a stop, the driver pushed on the brakes and parked. This was the place, porch swing and all.

Exiting the vehicle, they each checked their weapons as they headed for the front door. Finding it locked, their eyes met for a second before they reacted. Wasting no time, one of them groped for the key that was waiting for them under the welcome mat while the other readied his flashlight. Unsure their instructions were accurate they defensively prepared to enter. Joey, the new hire, turned the key in the lock and thrust the door open. Richard crossed the threshold first as they entered unannounced.

Silence inside the home made no sense. Cars were parked in the driveway and people resided in the home according to the tipster.

Once inside, the flashlight guided them to the living room that resembled an obstacle course. Belongings were tossed about and furniture had been disturbed. Sickness churned through their stomachs as they were quickly overcome by the unmistakable smell of decay.

Joey gagged through a conspiratorial whisper, “What is that?”

Sighing sadly, Richard replied, “You can hang back.”

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“No, I’m good,” his voice crackled as he surveyed the contents of the room, “but, what a mess.”

Richard repeated patiently, “Joey, you don’t have to do this. I can tell it’s your first time.”

Acting skittish, Joey whisked his flashlight beam around the room until he located a wall switch. “This should help,” he said reassuringly. Flipping the toggle switch aggressively with no results, his aggravations flared, “There’s no light. What do we do?”

Richard kept moving forward, “Bring your light over here,” he ordered, “it’s probably bad wiring.”

Joey stumbled over a pile of clothing that had been dumped on the floor from a toppled laundry basket, “Shit,” he muttered as he regained his footing and joined Richard. “Now what?”

“Shhh,” Richard hushed Joey. Straining to hear, he motioned him to follow as he tracked the source of a soft ambient sound. Water sloshed as he stepped onto the carpeted hallway saturated from water escaping from an overflowing toilet in the bathroom. Using his flashlight, he located a light switch and flipped it on. As he did so, he was able to locate the shutoff valve and stop the water. They proceeded to the end of the hall where a large suite loomed. The door was open and the lights were off. Richard entered first and turned on the overhead light. Panic spiked when he hit pay-dirt. Two young adults lay dead on the bedroom floor.

“Oh my God,” Richard expelled.

“Who do we call?” Joey asked Richard absentmindedly.

“The coroner,” he replied evenly.

It was a warm July night at the remote house that would not give up the truth easily. Located south of Tulsa

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Oklahoma where the land has grown generations of wheat and citizens, heads turn when a stranger walks by. Every family's name is carved on a headstone in the cemetery they all share in a town where there isn't enough news for a publication. Even when dispatch received a routine call middle of the evening that led to patrol officers responding it seemed unimportant or unnecessary.

Back when it had started, the newlyweds should have known that it was too good to be true. Or . . . maybe it was likely to last decades. After all, he seemed like a self-made mutt and she a pedigreed Catholic type with great looks, education, an alpha daddy . . . and friends with secrets. Whatever brought them together, or determined their fate doesn't matter—by the time they said their 'I do's', the clock started ticking. Like Billy Joel use to sing, "Only the Good Die Young."

"What did dispatch say again?" Joey's voice broke a bit.

"Someone was unable to make contact and requested a welfare check," Richard's voice stayed emotionless as he looked around.

Joey looked at his partner. "Have you ever seen anything like this before?" His question lingered in the air as Richard turned and walked back to the squad car that crackled with warbled squawking from dispatch.

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Chapter 2

Summer days in the mile-high city of Denver Colorado shown bright through glass-walled commercial offices that dominated the downtown municipality. Known for its urban sophistication and extreme outdoor Rocky Mountain adventures, the famous capitol of Colorado was one of the highest cities in the United States.

Martine, a practicing lawyer representing a client owning a mid-sized company, began her day at the offices of a law firm bringing suit against her client. Practical and fastidious, she was known to be able to think quickly and have the right words in almost every situation—often finishing other’s sentences.

Thriving on mental stimulation, she never stopped thirsting for knowledge. And this provided her with a versatile mind capable of comprehending complex concepts with which most people could never identify. Alert, curious, clever and witty, Martine’s highly intuitive nature served her well when she was confronted with challenging circumstances and impossible odds in the world of corporate and criminal law.

Loving her newest job and the competition it brought every day prevented the dreaded stagnation she endured in her last position at the FBI while she was married and raising two daughters. After the passing of her husband and with her children grown, logic and reason guided her to embark on a more lucrative and demanding use of her legal talents.

On this typical Colorado sunny day, Martine and her associate Nathan entered the elite conference room of the opposing law firm to one of her more recent cases. Taking

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their seats at the far side of a long mahogany table, they waited patiently for the plaintiffs' attorneys to join them.

"Good Morning," a tall man in a suit and tie greeted them as he and his associate joined them at the table. "I'm Mark Lang and this is Jonas Wilbur."

Martine and her associate stood as the two opposing lawyers took their places across from them. "I'm Martine and this is Nathan."

"Thank you for coming, counselors," Mark said formally.

Martine looked directly at him while giving him her quick delivery, "Did we have a choice?"

"Not really, if you want to avoid a forced buy-out," Mark returned with superiority.

Martine's reserved and practical nature nodded her concession, "Well since that's apparent, let's get to work."

Mark began, "As you can see our client proposes he be bought-out amicably, or he'll force a buy-out through our district court system."

"What's he proposing?" Martine questioned.

Jonas spoke this time, sliding a written proposal to her, "He believes his vested shares are worth \$550.00 each."

Doing quick math in her head, Martine sounded out, "What? So, suddenly he believes the company is worth seventeen million."

Jonas enumerated his position, "Actually, he thinks its worth much more, but concedes to a 20% limited partnership discount for his minority interest. His contribution and skill has increased the value here, and the company will continue to benefit greatly. He's sure of the value and we concur. I can provide you with our projections and financial analysis that was performed by a certified appraiser."

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Tired of Jonas dragging on like a bad headache, Martine butted in, “Are you referring to intellectual property or something else? Because, his initial investment was valued at \$50.00 a share, and I’m not aware of any other contribution he made or growth in the company,” Martine finished with a questioning smile.

Arrogantly, Jonas replied, “More or less.”

Martine tried another tactic, “Is there anything else he wants that would satisfy him without a buy-out?”

“No, he wants to be liquidated, that’s all,” Jonas was adamant.

“Why’s that?” Martine asked.

Jonas obliged her, “He doesn’t feel his talents are appreciated anymore and he wishes to separate completely.”

“I can understand that,” Martine relented. “I would like to know more about his talents though. From what I’ve assessed, he was a bookkeeper that became the accountant—not a partner. We don’t get what we wish for—we get what we work for. When he became an accountant a year ago—he became more accountable—ethically speaking.”

“I don’t know what you’re implying, but it was his creative management of the company finances with his initial investment that made it the success it is today,” Jonas countered with rigid certainty. “Maybe if the company had treated him fairly and generously for his skills and leadership, we wouldn’t be here.”

“Isn’t that calling the kettle metal, boys?” Martine shuffled her notes before psychoanalyzing their client, “I’ve never seen so many grievances from one person. He’s a habitual complainer not a leader. Let’s see, offices are too hot, coffee isn’t hot enough, computer isn’t fast enough, hours are too long, breaks are too short, gas allowance too

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small, parking spot to far, and not enough paid vacation time.”

“What’s your point, you got a hold of his personnel records?”

“Somewhat,” she intimated.

Mark angered, “You violated his privacy unless he signed for its release.”

“There’s a lot of drama in your client’s life—does it follow him, or does he make it?” Martine pointed-out what was obvious to her.

Mark defended their client, “It’s well within his right to make his concerns known to Human Resources.”

“Yeah, but he didn’t,” she bantered back. “Those were all derived from complaints filed by his co-workers who considered him a negative influence, likewise the company has actually done everything they could to address and appease your client, but he’s like a bad head cold that won’t get better. I think he has more problems than you can help him with.”

Jonas spurned her, “So now you’re a psychiatrist too?”

Martine shrugged him off, “I don’t have to be one to recognize he needs help with HRC.”

Mystified, Jonas and Mark looked at each other. “HRC,” Jonas blurted with a smirk, “what’s that Human Resource Counseling?”

“No, it stands for Help-Rejecting Complainer, and it’s a publicized disorder he should look into.”

“That’s about enough, what’s your point,” Mark blared.

Martine turned the tables, “I think you’re helping someone that can’t be helped, so I’m going to help you.”

Mark laughed sarcastically, “How’s that?”

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Operating on a short loop, Martine fired back, “Really, guys, climbing mountains for achievements is expected—using people like rocks is a fault.” Irritated, she continued, “The Company is not valued at anything close to his expectations. He might not be as good as he thinks at minding the books,” she stated with a look of questioning suspicion. “If he can make the company worth seventeen million, maybe he can find water on the moon, too.”

With a wall of silence building, Martine’s associate Nathan weighed-in, “I’ve reviewed the financing. Forensically speaking, it’s as crooked as a barrel of snakes.” He slid a multipage document across the table to Mark and Jonas.

With the mood shifting, Martine weakened the prosecution’s narrative, proposing, “Our client will offer him the current value of his investment; two months severance, and a small bonus.”

Mark broke-in, “Our client has put his heart and soul into this company for five years. He’s made a lot of sacrifices and will be expecting substantial consideration for his efforts, this is an insult.”

Martine smiled confidently, “I’m sorry for your client’s hardships, but that’s our final offer unless he prefers to keep his shares in the company. That might be the best thing he could invest in for himself, because based on what I saw on the balance sheets and tax returns, he’s trying to sell water to the ocean. He clearly doesn’t know what he’s doing.”

Miffed, Mark angered, “Looks like we’re going to court.”

Nathan chuckled, “Not after you read that certified document.”

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Irked, Mark waived the document at Martine and Nathan, “We’ll be filing with the courts today.”

“Use your inside voice, Mark,” Martine returned as she gathered her belongings and stood. “Nothing focuses the mind like a deadline—I’ll be looking forward to it.” Leaving the table she added, “I suggest you counsel your client well.”

Mark snapped back, “You should do the same.”

“I already did,” Martine said without hesitation, “Good day to you, gentlemen.”

As they walked away from the conference room, Nathan laughed, “That was actually fun.”

“Not for them,” Martine mused, as she breezed out of the firm’s offices.

“Are you thinking judge, or jury?” Nathan asked.

Martine gave a knowing smile. “Neither, that was a contingency case. They’re not going to lose money on it. Going to court is a huge investment and a risky gamble.”

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Chapter 3

In the completely isolated and diverse St. Cloud Minnesota, the main drag called Division Street has been around for decades and seen its fair share of new faces—contrast St. Cloud State University, the state prison, the ever changing parade of excited students arriving on schedule, news primarily coinciding with college sports, events, parties, and who could ever forget in the seventies—streaking. The one thing St. Cloud students shared with Minneapolis and St. Paul was the dramatic climate changes Minnesota promised year round.

Then one Labor Day holiday weekend that all changed. Unprecedented evil stormed the cloudy city leaving every transient and long-term resident a suspect in the disappearance of two adolescent girls—sisters. When their missing bodies were eventually discovered in the quarries, which had been considered up until that time the renowned party and swimming destination for college students, it seemed to narrow down the suspects to thousands of male scholars.

On a typical Labor Day weekend, students of all ages were out of class and looking for new friends, fun, beer, and adventures. For most, they were experiencing freedom from their parents, an exciting social life, and all the alcohol they wanted—for the first time.

Television reporting on the crime, and paper posters hanging throughout the town and campus put the kibosh on the initial enthusiasm experienced in St. Cloud that school year. Leaving fear and shock in the wake of the unimaginable, people wanted answers to the gruesome

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stabbing deaths of fifteen year old Mary and her twelve year old sister Susanne. This type of incident would normally tear a community apart—if there were any suspects. As the years passed, the mystery murders became an urban legend that lingered in curious minds waiting for the day that Minnesota would create a “Cold Case” investigation for the unsolved crimes.

Eventually, the state that ranked number five in agricultural had a new crop of investigators join The Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension. Jordon Cain, young, confident, clever and resourceful, relocated to the state of Minnesota to serve as Special Agent in the Cold Case Unit.

Jordon, new to Minnesota, laughed with his co-workers when they presented him with a humorous gift at his informal induction luncheon. Dozens of eyes locked on him when he held up the large white t-shirt with a graphic of a giant mosquito and a bold caption that read *Minnesota State Bird*, until his boss signaled him to his office. “Yes, sir,” Jordon said, still grinning from the cheery moment he just shared with his new office family. He thanked everyone and followed his supervisor, Lawrence Downy, to a small conference room.

“You wanted your own case as soon as possible,” Lawrence said, “well here it is,” a ragged ridge formed between his eyes, “a desperate and hopeless one,” he finished matter-of-factly.

Like anyone catching their first fish, Jordon was riveted. “Great, where do I start?”

Pointing to a stack of file-bin boxes, his superior advised him, “You need to go through and organize everything first, then present ideas to me and a list of viable

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suspects. We will expand resources when there's a feasible course of action determined."

"What's this mean?" Jordon asked when he noticed the boxes had different names and dates.

Lawrence sniffed, "There were two victims—sisters, and several investigations have occurred over time."

"How much time are we talking?" Jordon's curious nature probed as he began setting one of the boxes on the table in a windowless room.

"This cold case has sunk deep into another decade this year." Lawrence removed his glasses and wiped his brow after lifting a couple boxes from the floor to the table.

"Is that what happens in a state with 10,000 lakes," Jordon quipped at his own clever metaphor with a smile.

Matching his humor, Lawrence replied, "10,000 lakes and 800,000 boats according to the registration department. But you won't have time for that sport. This will be a challenge."

Young Jordon cocked his head and looked at the names on the box. "How old," he asked.

"Four decades. You'll be starting from scratch. You won't find many clues in here. No one has."

"No, how old are the girls?" Agent Jordon clarified.

"Oh, twelve and fifteen," Lawrence answered.

Jordon wasn't born when the crimes occurred, nor was he a native of Minnesota. "How could that be?" he said with sadness. "This is horrible . . . their ages . . . so young . . . so long ago."

Sounding a little annoyed with the agencies of the past, Lawrence theorized, "Because back then investigators couldn't find a cold in Minnesota, and they didn't share information. That's your job now. Investigate like you would if it happened yesterday."

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Jordon waited till Lawrence left before opening the tomb of yellowed papers and photos that cast a musky ancient odor from the passage of time. “Uh-huh,” he mused, as he lifted a paper which served as the missing poster in the case. “What else can I use in this treasure chest?” He rubbed the back of his head. Optimistic about the challenge of solving a notorious case that has eluded so many before him, Jordon began eagerly categorizing the evidence bestowed to him.

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Chapter 4

It was exceptionally ominous outside when Martine fell asleep the night of a darkened moon. Astronomers have a name for it when the sun, moon, and earth are in alignment and the lunar cycle starts over. New Moon, as it's called, signals a fresh-start, rebirth, or a time when innovative intentions are made. As she slipped deeper into unconsciousness her soul lifted higher than earthly astronauts have yet to go.

Faster than a radio wave, that moves at the speed of light between stars, space gas, and dust particles, Martine rocketed towards the constellation of the Big Dipper. On intuition she headed toward the last star at the end of its handle before being catapulted toward Arcturus, the third brightest star in our heavens. Approaching its solar system at a high speed, she passed by the super-sized sun glowing like a giant ember in the atmosphere before streaking toward a predominantly blue planet.

In an instant, her velocity slowed as she entered the environment of an earth-like planet, noting large bodies of water, expansive forests, and mountains as she floated in. Setting down in a grassy valley with one pathway leading away, she instinctively headed through the green field in the direction of a small building that appeared to be a house connected to the trail.

Entering the home through a typical doorway, her vision first took in the stark walls and floor of what resembled a bare-bones vacant apartment with tan carpet and beige appliances. Realizing the apartment's floor plan replicated one she was familiar with, drew her into the living

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room that had a large garden-level picture window facing into the parking lot.

Straining to see through the window that didn't seem to have the view of a parking lot or anything else, she moved up to the glass until it suddenly made a quick flicker as a realistic image of the outside driveway faded-in. Taking in the three-dimensional photographic image complete with her own car and others, made her impulsively step back from the instantaneous *déjà vu* dating decades ago.

More ghostly images floated into place as she rapidly backed away until the entire space replicated her old college apartment down to the sofa pillows and school books set on the coffee table. Even her memories were syncing-up to another point in time as the mental imagery finished forming a collage of her meager college household at hyper-speed.

Glancing around at the newly fashioned accommodations brought a feeling of certainty and overwhelming thoughts of her life there. Viewing her past through the futurist display of her student housing was a visual phenomenon she had never experienced before, right down to the soft multicolored mohair afghans on the chair and sofa which had been comforting family heirlooms that had traveled with her to college.

Every object was so clear, concise, and realistic, that she eventually tried to stroke one of the beautiful Afghans her mother had knitted for her. Though the Afghan appeared real enough to touch, her hand felt air when she reached out for it.

It was evident to Martine that some type of hologram was creating the images, though she wasn't familiar with the futuristic technology that was often portrayed in the Hollywood film industry. Choosing not to be fearful of the mysterious 3D photographic illusion, she began peering into

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each room that duplicated a perfect remembrance from her past—leaving her bedroom for last.

Drawn to the recollections of a time long forgotten put Martine in a state of awe as she made her way through the home that clearly exemplified her first apartment shared by several college girls. Deep relief overwhelmed her emotions as she embraced fond memories of friends and camaraderie when she took in the personal belongings they each had contributed to furnishing their apartment together—wondering why she hadn't thought about this time in her life for so many years.

Transitioning to her bedroom sparked something else she had put out of her mind long ago. Darkened by the closed blinds on the window, the only light present was her nightstand lamp that lit her pillow and the object sticking out from under it. Her eyes fixed on the bed that displayed a knife with its blade gleaming from the lamp next to it—a weapon she slept with for self-defense after her security was seriously compromised by a life threatening ordeal.

Perplexed by the contrasting visual effect this represented made her ponder its deeper meaning. Realizing the differences were significant and disturbing, caused her to recall the events that altered her carefree spirit and create an amnesia that blocked it all out. As she backed out of the bedroom doorway, a sudden gust of air startled her. Pivoting around to face the entrance, she observed three adolescent girls walking into the home.

“Hello,” Martine called out with apprehension. Hearing no reply, she tried again. “Can I help you?”

“Yes,” answered the oldest one.

Surprised that spirits from beyond would need her help, she stepped towards them. “Who are you and what do you need from me?”

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Without words the older girl who seemed to be about fifteen, walked up to Martine and handed her what appeared to be an old piece of paper yellowed with age.

Her curiosity, fully peaked, reached for the folded note. "What's this?" Martine asked quizzically as she opened the paper.

"You know how to help us," the youngest one said as they started to fade-out.

"Wait," Martine pleaded as she watched them slowly dissolve. Left alone with the handwritten note, she read the rhythmic words out loud.

*"Hearts that measure a feather
Have brought us together
Our deaths reveal a tale
Of life gone off the rails
When days were good
Laugh we would
There was no fear
Before those years
Hidden crimes
Stopped our time
Three went down
One stayed around
Later with our scars
We met among the stars
There's music in a voice
That's how we made our choice
Make this cease
And we find peace."*

Uncomfortable in the space that started to slowly dissipate around her, Martine knew she did not want to stay longer and left the dwelling in a hurry. Using the same pathway, she headed for her landing spot that was down a

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meandering trail and over a hill. As she ascended to the top of the mound a feeling of being watched made her look back. Behind her were three glowing silhouettes that radiated brighter as she focused on them. In a gesture of acknowledgment, Martine waved and smiled at them before the light of day faded and stars began to whirl through her vision—pulling her back into her sleeping body.

Darkness surrendered to the light as a bold sunrise beamed through her bedroom window, waking Martine from her dream. Startled into consciousness Martine sat up in bed, her logical mind filled with skepticism. She was unfamiliar with other solar systems and had not made conclusive decisions about what sort of life existed on other worlds—though it was obvious to her we must have alien neighbors with habitable planets. More important than examining those prospects was the notion that three young girls entrusted her with their plea for much needed assistance.

Who were they and why did they need her? Psychic episodes in the past were limited to direct interactions with Shamans, spirit guides, and angelic messengers—never lost souls.

As customary, when she encountered a dream experience that left a lasting impression, it was documented in her journal before beginning her day.

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Chapter 5

Agent Jordon Cain presented his supervisor with his preliminary findings after evaluating the cold case records entrusted to him, “Because these murders were about forty years ago the passage of time will make this more difficult than I thought. There were few suspects identified throughout the years, and none of them actually cleared.”

“What else do you have?”

“Susanne’s body was found first. She had been stabbed thirteen times with what appears to be a smallish knife and her fully-clothed body was partially concealed by a bush. Mary’s body was recovered by divers on a ledge forty feet underwater. Her jeans and panties were strewn on the cliff. Her bra had been cut into four pieces, her panties were cut and her white sweater had been slit in an unusual manner. She was stabbed six times.”

“Were any college students in the suspect pile?”

“Not that I could find. What is interesting is there have been a lot of hands on the case over the years. This may be one of Minnesota’s longest running unsolved murder cases.”

“Get to the point.”

“Right. In late eighty’s the FBI ran a profile that indicates Mary was the target and the assailant would likely be about her age. In 2005, the Vidoq Society, a nonprofit organization of experts in criminal investigations, agreed to review the case. Their findings are confidential, but they indicated investigators were on the right track with suspects, and confirmed that the culprit has been identified. They named him.”

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“Really, and yet it stayed dead in the water.”

“Yes it did. They couldn’t prove it with what they had. He also passed a lie detector test. I confirmed the reward is up to \$50,000. I’m ready to post this and activate the case with all the media. I know what I’m looking for.”

“What’s that?”

“I need some undisputable forensic evidence,” Jordan proclaimed, “or a star witness. We can’t get a parking ticket conviction based on hearsay and what’s in those boxes. There most likely was an accomplice. People do seem to spill more information after so many years go by. Secrets don’t mean as much when they’re grown up or have their own families to protect. We’re ready to pull the trigger,” Jordan sparked eagerly.

“Do you have anything intriguing to present to the media that they haven’t already reported on? To get free airtime, they need a hook,” the seasoned investigator recommended. “What do you have now that will get their attention and not tip off the suspect or suspects?”

Jordon thought for a moment, “I do have something.”

“We have one shot at this. Show me what you got,” his superior coaxed.

Jordon went through his notebook. “Here it is. According to Mary’s mother there were indications she was acting strange before the murders. Mary’s friend knew she had a problem, and her mother found out from relatives she was concerned about getting money out of her bank account. Her mother also found the last entry in her diary was torn out and later, much later discovered it in a box of cards. The biggest mystery to these murders was written on that page.”

“Do you have that page?”

“Yes I do. It’s her handwriting too.” Jacob picked up the page and read, “*To my family, should I die, I ask that my*

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stuffed animals go to my sister. If I am murdered, find my killer and see that justice is done. I have a few reasons to fear for my life and what I ask is important."

"So Mary's fifteen. You have suspects that are about fifteen. Is that correct?"

"Yes, sir," Jordon exclaimed.

"Run with it."

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Chapter 6

Martine woke to an unnerving feeling from the past. Recalling the emotions that were suppressed for the better part of her life perplexed her. Meandering to the bathroom, she contemplated how she could feel so disconnected because of a past occurrence in her life that resulted from a fateful decision made to save time.

Pausing to look in the mirror for answers, she suddenly associated events from long ago with her dream last night. Even now she was nearly duplicating her actions from the morning after her death defying episode.

Tens of years earlier she resided in the small garden level apartment that housed several school girls, and slept with a knife under her pillow after her roommate's keys and identification were stolen in a dramatic altercation that ultimately resulted in a mere purse snatching instead of a double homicide. "Why am I recalling that night? Why now?" Martine asked herself, shaking off the odd feeling—resuming her normal routine.

Although the life in Minnesota helped launch her education in business and law—it was the personal events stemming from one horrific encounter that solidified what she would eventually do in life—detecting evil in its many forms. Together with her paranormal experiences, education, and keen insights, she could see through complicated layers and veils that concealed the enemy and kept victims oblivious to their wicked agendas.

Once she had her morning coffee and got comfortable in front of her computer for the obvious e-mail updates, she remembered her curiosity about the nagging

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effects of her college day memories. Back at a point-in-time where Ted Bundy was actively making his mark as a prolific serial killer that hadn't been discovered yet, she was a carefree co-ed about to be thrust into danger.

Realizing now for the first time how truly fortunate she was to survive, caused her to rethink what happened to the culprits that were apprehended in her assault case. Due to the fact her assailants ironically engaged in a much more serious crime within a week of her encounter with them, she was not present when they were prosecuted for attempted murder.

Due to the age of all parties involved the courtroom and records were sealed from the public forever. Now her curiosity was piqued with the prospect of seeing what might have materialized online, an information highway that didn't exist decades ago.

Using Google, she typed in a search for *St. Cloud juvenile crimes 1970's*. Sipping her coffee, she sat back and waited for pages to refresh. Yielding nothing, she tried another search for *juvenile murder crimes 1970's*. Again nothing, except for multiple top page search links promoting a high-profile Cold Case Tip Line for information regarding the murders of sisters Mary and Susanne from St. Cloud, Minnesota. Clicking on the link, she mused to herself, "I don't know why I would check on this case, but I recall the mystery of it." Unfamiliar with the details of the case, except for being present as an incoming St. Cloud State University student when the news broke after the girls were found murdered, she felt prompted to read and understand why she would be reliving her time at the University she had completed her undergraduate business degree..

Soon she was engrossed in details and photos that appealed to the public for help. Renewed interest in these

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murders was intriguing—especially for Martine since the timing of her recollections and this recent cold case unit reopening of an infamous case coincided perfectly. She felt certain she must be able to contribute. Not as a lawyer, but some type of witness to the events of that time.

Buried deep, like the young victims Martine only knew of, were her memories of a time long ago when their paths intersected with her due to an evil psychologically warped boy. With renewed awareness she grabbed her own head like a vice and tried to force extinct remembrances up to the surface.

She thought hard, fought her doubting mind, and called the tip-line.

“Agent Jordan Cain,” the voice answered.

“Hello, my name is Martine. I’m calling about the Mary and Susanne murder case.”

“Yes,” he replied with little interest.

Awkward about how to present her possible role in helping with the case, she continued, “I was a student at the University back then and think a case I was involved in might have a connection to yours.”

Still sounding disinterested, he asked, “Which one.”

Lacking her own specifics, she stammered a bit, “I . . . I and my roommate were involved in an assault and theft a couple years after the Reker murders.” She heard how dumb that sounded and stopped.

“Uh-huh,” he said faintly.

“I know that my theory is a stretch, but if you look into it there may be evidence that connects three crimes.”

“What crimes?”

Martine began explaining her long story, “After our encounter with a few guys, the one I identified went on to kidnap, rape, assault, and stab a young fifteen year old girl.

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They left her for dead at the gravel pit, but she survived and made it through a field to a home a mile away. I helped connect evidence that proved her assailant was ours. Because her crime was so serious and they had so much evidence and proof on her case, they didn't pursue or prosecute him for our theft. I never knew what happened to him and his accomplices."

"What girl?" Jordon sounded slightly more engaged.

"I don't know her name. But I do remember things the detective told me. She was working at her father's Dairy Queen."

"Do you mean Dairy Bar?"

"Probably," Martine replied, "I just related it to a Dairy Queen because that's what I grew up with. I wasn't from St. Cloud."

"Do you know her name?" Jordon asked.

"No, I don't think I ever knew that."

"Do you know the detectives name?"

Martine could tell he lacked concentration by his tone, and dreaded her own answer, "No, not after all these years. I did spend a good amount of time with him. He took our case seriously. The guys got my roommates purse which had our address and apartment keys in it."

"Huh, what was the name of the guy you ID'd?"

"I don't know."

Sounding fed up, Jordon disengaged, "Well, thank you for calling."

Knowing his attention span had waned, she made one more attempt, "I wasn't allowed to know much of anything because they were all juveniles. The reason I called was to see whether anything from the Dairy Bar victim case has been looked at for your case. Because her case was so strong

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and tragic it did go to trial. I saw the evidence they used. If it hasn't been looked at I think it might be worth a check."

Showing a little curiosity, Jordon asked, "What's your name?"

"My roommate's name was Lisa Howard. She had her purse stolen. The report should be in her name." Martine chose not to disclose her own name or credentials—it would serve no purpose, and it could be embarrassing to be out in left field with an agent that already sounds like he's handled a barrage of worthless tips and curiosity seekers. Noticing how young Jordon sounded on the phone she preferred to steer him away from her identity for as long as possible. "I don't think our police report will give you much. It's the Dairy Bar Case you want."

"Why do you think that?" Jordon remained nonchalant.

Martine stayed calm, formulating her words carefully, "I was face to face with the boy that pulled a knife and stuck it under my roommate's chin. He was young and without fear or conscience. His accomplices were older, larger, and taller—yet they were standing thirty feet away while he committed the assault. He was the one that tried to murder the Dairy Bar girl. I realize now how close Lisa and I came to being his victims, too."

Jordon combated her notions, "We've had tips on the Dairy Bar case. Similarities aren't enough."

"DNA would be," Martine reminded him.

Jordon cleared his throat, "Like what?"

"His DNA with theirs," Martine took a deep breath and continued, "What you do have for Mary and Susanne amounts to clothing with DNA that probably was mishandled and has degenerated. Even advances might not produce what you need to identify a culprit, but it might be

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close enough if you find adequate DNA markers that match with a suspect and excludes others. In a perfect scenario you would find his DNA with theirs on the weapon.”

“That’s a long shot because we don’t have a weapon, or anything else from the assailant. We need more than a hunch. We need witnesses,” Jordon returned.

“Of course I understand that, let me explain better.” Martine knew she would have to try and restructure all the events of that night to explain the evidence. She talked fast as she reenacted her experience, “Here’s what I’m thinking. It was September, maybe the weekend after Labor Day. Lisa and I were going dancing on Division Street. We could walk there from our apartment. There were no cars on that street back then. We were running late so we did take a short-cut through a large wooded neighborhood with big old Victorian looking homes and lots of leaves on the ground that made noise when we walked through. About half-way we both stopped talking because we could hear other footsteps shuffling through the fall leaves. We both walked faster to get to the residential street. Once we reached the security of the lighted sidewalk we turned right towards Division. Out of nowhere, a young man jumps in front of us and asks where we’re going. We keep walking, forcing him to walk backwards or get out of the way. He asked again where we’re headed and when we told him, he said we’d almost made it there and pulled a knife that he pushed up under Lisa’s chin. When I looked to Lisa on my right I saw two other older guys up on the grassy knoll, really big ones. Lisa didn’t see them, and she didn’t lose her voice either. When he grabbed for her purse she screamed. Then I screamed. The young man that wanted her purse wouldn’t let go of it and neither would Lisa. He even dragged her when she tripped on the uneven sidewalk and landed on the ground. Neither

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would let go until the strap broke. What I couldn't believe was when that was over and the guys went running back into the dark neighborhood full of trees and homes, Lisa ran after them screaming for her purse. So, I ran after her screaming to stop. She made it all the way through to the opposite street. That's when I saw the vehicle's profile as it sped away in the dark. When the police came and took our report, Lisa didn't speak or remember anything. I honestly don't know if she ever did. I, however, remembered it all."

Jordon caved a little, inquiring, "What did you remember?"

"He was about seventeen, he had a greenish t-shirt with a graphic on it, hair color was wavy brown, knife was unique, belt was brown leather, short ankle type boots were brown, but most distinct was the vehicle. Based on what I saw the entire police force responded that night and pulled-over every vehicle closely matching that description, and had me look at all of them. No matches. The detective assigned to our case contacted me to come and look at photo books of vehicles and suspects. I even drew pictures of the car I saw. I could not identify it in any books."

"How does that really help now?" Jordon remained solemn.

"About a week later the detective asked if he could come pick me up at my apartment to discuss the case again, but he never came. There were no cell phones back then either. He did contact me later that week and asked to bring me back to the station. He had something to show me. He had many Polaroid photos in front of me on his desk. I immediately identified the guy. He then showed me the knife, boots, belt, shirt, and jeans. He then asked me to come with him outside to a garage facility. Inside this building was the car I had been adamant about. The doors were off the

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vehicle and it was being examined by men in white lab coats with spot lights surrounding the station wagon. That's when he explained everything to me. The car and everything I had identified belonged to the suspect in the Dairy Bar girl abduction case. The car was actually not in any police photo books. The victim and perpetrators were all juveniles in that case, and they wouldn't need me anymore. Their case was so strong that they were going to prosecute the crimes done to this little girl—rape and attempted murder. He showed me everything because I had tried so hard to cooperate, but couldn't help with that darn car, until he showed it to me and I confirmed it was the one. So many were nearly like it, but the taillight was unique and didn't match any photos on file. The detective confirmed that.”

Now Jordon began to engage, “I've heard of the Dairy Bar case, and a purse snatching back then.”

Martine's law experience spoke, “Those records have been sealed. No one would have ever had access to them because their juvenile status secured their privacy.” She didn't mean to sound more knowledgeable than the agent she was entrusting this information with. “Maybe you have the authority to request them now? What might the car and knife forensics hold? Our ordeal happened two years after your case.”

Unexpectedly, Jordon sounded dejected again, “That building was destroyed and they built a new one years ago. The older files and damaged ones didn't make the trip.”

Martine's heart sunk at the news. She was certain there was something there. “I wish I could help more,” saying goodbye, she left him with her number.

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Chapter 7

America had won the war in Iraq known as Desert Storm, but Stewart Kincaid's wife had lost the battle with cancer at home. His wife's death left him a shell of a man, down on his luck, lonely and brokenhearted with an infant daughter to care for by himself. Texas is where he landed to resurrect his cratered life thanks to the guidance of his father-in-law, a legend in the oil and cattle business.

Stewart loved sunrises over the corn fields as much as the chomping sound of Jurassic sized piston-pumping rigs drawing oil out of the ground. His daughter Charmaine was his only child and reason for living—driven to provide a prosperous life filled with privileges for her, he never remarried.

Once a hardheaded colonel in the army, turned ruthless oil baron stateside, it was his daughter Charmaine who remained the little voice in his head that kept his heart in check. Without either knowing, they were each other's moral compass in a big maze of challenges and setbacks that spanned twenty-five years.

Stewart's life was permanently altered when he learned of his daughter's demise. Finding out from local officials that his daughter's death was ruled a murder-suicide didn't pacify or persuade him that the truth was that simple. Never a coward, always a warrior, he required more convincing and went into combat mode—calling a trusted buddy from his early years in the Gulf War.

"Hello, Mahoney here," the highly respected Arizona FBI Director answered the caller.

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“John Mahoney, Stewart Kincaid here,” a southern accent with a twist replied to the man from his past.

“Stewart? How the heck are you and all those Texas oil fields? Good thing they keep making cars and better roads,” Mahoney replied spryly. Originally lost and alienated in the world after he also lost his wife, John Mahoney escaped his pain by covering his loss with a wry wit, a blanket of solitude, and miles of fencing containing longhorn cattle. Stewart had rescued him and put him to work on his cattle ranch for as long as he needed during that dark time in his life and they had become long-time close friends..

“Been better,” he answered blankly, “I’ve run into a situation that requires the best.”

“You always have the best,” John Mahoney bolstered his wealthy buddy’s ego with a low chuckle. Fast acquaintances from their stint in Kuwait, John and Stewart’s time together in Texas elevated their relationship to trusted friends and comrades. From the time he was a freckled face boy he wanted to be a cowboy with lots of cattle. Alone in the world without his love, he turned his badge in and traded it for spurs and hats. He spent years in Texas before returning to his true profession in law enforcement.

“Something’s happened . . . to Charmaine,” Stewart’s voice broke-up, “John, she’s . . . dead.” His faint sob could be heard as he bereaved his daughters passing.

Shock rose out of John, “What? How? When? Jeez, man, why didn’t I know?” He turned his back from the bright computer screen he had been staring into and softened his voice, “Are you okay?”

“That would be no. I need your help.”

“What can I do?”

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“I just found out they don’t really have the ability to investigate a crime?”

“You mean it wasn’t an accident or medical?”

“Right, they closed the case and said it was murder-suicide.”

“Murder, suicide . . . who are we talking about?” Mahoney quizzed.

Stewart took a deep breath, “Charmaine and her husband Levi Norton.”

“Mm-Hmm, I didn’t know she was married,” Mahoney processed the news out loud.

“They eloped. I didn’t know much about him because she had moved to Oklahoma for a job and got married there. I’ve met him, I can’t believe he would do this,” he said emphatically.

“So, they were newlyweds,” Mahoney conjectured.

“Uh-huh,” Kincaid said slowly, “little over a year.”

“What do you think happened?” Mahoney questioned.

Stewart cleared his throat, “I wanna know what you think. They were either terrorized by a violent predator, or her new husband murdered her and killed himself.”

“Was the marriage in trouble?”

“I really don’t know if it was. I doubt it. She sounded happy every time I spoke with her.”

“How can I help? Did this happen in Texas? I can make some calls.”

“No,” he said dejectedly, “they were in Oklahoma. Is that a problem?”

“Officially it is. I don’t have jurisdiction there. It’s not considered an FBI matter unless they want to bring us in. It doesn’t sound like it’s a federal matter. What’re you asking?”

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“I trusted him to protect her, not murder her. I need to know the truth to this dichotomy . . . could he really have killed her and himself?” Stewart’s authoritative nature sounded through the phone, “I have to know for certain.”

“If I had a daughter I’d want to know too,” Mahoney concurred, “tell me about him.”

“As Levi tells it, they were meant to be together and fell deeply in love the moment they met. They were making a home for themselves and the children they would raise on the plot of land left to him by his grandmother. They were already planning on the next generation of Norton’s that would grow up alongside the crops and cows that had already begun to flourish. They mutually loved the life of farming. He said Charmaine could drive a tractor and prepare dishes that came from produce she grew in her own garden. I talked to them a couple times a week.”

“What about Charmaine?”

“Well, you know she was a girl in motion from the moment she could walk. She had two speeds. By high school she was a parents dream with grades and ribbons to show for it. In college she graduated top of her class with a degree in psychology. Before she graduated there was a job waiting for her.”

“How’d they meet?”

“Corpus Christi Spring Break,” Stewart recalled nostalgically. “She fell for his old-fashioned gentlemanly charm, so I heard. Oh, apparently he was handsome and funny, too.”

“How did you know that?”

“Charmaine told me how he entertained her like no other boy ever had. She thought Levi was so full of life and had figured out so much—I think he mystified her.”

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“They say girls do marry their daddies. Sounds a little like you, my friend.”

Stewart sighed, “Well, he definitely said all the right words to her. I really believed they loved each other and they talked about how the land they loved would provide for them. Now it’s up to me to know if someone else did this and why. What could possibly go wrong to disfigure two promising lives? How’d they get robbed of their futures?”

“How can I help?” Mahoney asked.

“I’d like new eyes on this investigation. I could accept their conclusion if you agreed with it.”

“Of course I will.”

“John, please do whatever it takes to get to the truth. I need to know if Charmaine’s match made in heaven headed to hell by his hand or someone else’s.”

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Chapter 8

Martine settled herself in the comfort of her bed for a well deserved night's sleep. Appearing in court the next morning before most people would be leaving for work would require an early bedtime. Falling asleep with work on her mind made slumber more challenging, so she left the television on to hear the weather forecast for her day in Denver. With lights out and low indistinct conversations ensuing between newscasters playing out in her room, she soon drifted peacefully into a deep sleep.

In a matter of seconds, she found her consciousness and materialized in a darkened desolate land. Feeling her feet were grounded on rough and gravelly terrain, she turned around to face the opposite direction. Peering into the distance, she only saw blackness. Uneasy with her predicament, she instinctively looked up to the heavens and detected the bright star of Arcturus which appeared to be blinking like a beacon.

Connecting with the familiar celestial body caused her to be teleported straight ahead, while in alignment with the pulsing star. In an instant her human-form now donning the casual attire of the fifties, stood at the entrance to an abandoned fairground named *Tomorrow Land* that was left in ruins after years of neglect. Crooked signage and faded paint was reminiscent of an eerie, haunted, creepy, sideshow that time forgot.

"Hello," a tall thin elderly man dressed in the vintage style décor of a renowned Master of Ceremonies suddenly greeted her enthusiastically when the entrance lights sparked on. Distinguished in his stovetop hat, tan knickers tucked

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into dark knee-high boots, a white shirt with a colorful bowtie, and a wide-lapel red jacket with long coat-tails, made it obvious he was in charge. "Come in, my dear, we've been waiting for you." Theatrically, he gestured towards the entrance like an actor ushering the audience to a grand performance. "Right this way, little lady," he said, tipping his hat.

Curious, Martine started to approach the entrance when the tall double doors swung open to the colorful light display of a lively carnival that lit up all the rides and sideshows that'd been forsaken. She was mesmerized in seeing by the glorious majesty of the condition it was originally in during its years of splendor. "This is beautiful," she exclaimed in wonder.

"Please come this way, there's not much time for you to see what we have."

Drawn into the magical illusion of amusement and thrills, she entered eagerly like a young girl anticipating the adventures a carnival promised. Ahead to her left, rotating upright at a slow speed was the biggest brightest Ferris wheel she'd ever seen. Behind the Ferris wheel was a sophisticated roller coaster jetting around at unpredictable velocities.

Passing by a convex mirror of illusion, she giggled at her abnormally elongated body dressed in high waisted, red, white, and green, plaid pedal pushers with a red high collared blouse. Her shoulder length blonde hair was softly curled with bangs down to her eyebrows.

When Martine was directed by her host to board the Ferris wheel that was slowing to a stop, she objected with a shake of her head, "I don't need to take a ride."

"You certainly do," encouraged the elderly man dressed like the ring leader from a Barnum and Bailey circus act. Pointing a shaky finger at her, he resumed, "There is

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much to see from up on top. There's too much gravity down here. You'll feel light and free on the biggest wheel in operation." He opened the gate and escorted her to a chair that was rocking back and forth.

"Okay," she said hesitantly, "Just once around, please." Sitting down in the moving chair, she inquired, "Am I the only one on the ride?"

"No, young lady, you're not." Stepping aside he let a happy-faced clown board the Ferris ride and join her in the chair. Locking the safety bar that held them in, he tipped his hat again. "From here you can see everything we offer."

Handing Martine a bouquet of colorful balloons the clown with a classic red nose and big painted smile joyfully clapped, expressing his glee. Apprehensive about the verbally silent man next to her, she directed her attention to the sites around her as the Ferris wheel began to slowly lift them off the ground. With everything coming into view, she could see the fair grounds were filling with young people in love—strolling about the grounds sharing cotton candy on a stick.

Stopping the wheel briefly for more passengers gave Martine time to notice details and noises that were difficult to focus on when the motor was churning and she was on the ground. Not far away to her right was a superlative merry-go-round of horses—merrily moving in a circle with no one riding them. Appropriately named 'Rainbow Horse Carousel,' the glamorous assortment of leaping, jumping, running, and prancing, fanciful-horses moved up and down on a pole, staying on the round platform that rotated around its center to the lively organ music of 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow.'

As they were nearing the top she could see mazes of booths selling chances to win stuffed animal prizes,

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illusionists, unusual attractions, and carnival food; like, corn dogs, popcorn, and slushy drinks. Every memory she had as a young girl on the fourth of July was coming back.

By the time they reached the highest position possible, grand fireworks went off that rivaled any she had ever seen. More spectacular than her earthly memories, she delighted with, “Ooh . . . Ahh.” Momentarily stalled at the top while other riders got on, Martine could almost reach out and touch embers of the fireworks display, “Isn’t this amazing?” she exclaimed to the clown.

Miming his delight with boisterous gestures of joy, the clown watched the sky with her.

Looking around Tomorrow Land’s once empty fairgrounds, she suddenly noticed the park had been reinvigorated with the activities of new parents chasing their youngsters from ride to ride while young boys and girls rode real live ponies in circles and miniature train cars on tracks. Older children screamed and hollered on the death defying roller coaster challenge, and children of all ages gleefully rode the moving carousel horses.

Mesmerized by the constant exploding bursts of tiny orbs that lit the sky while the previous ones faded away, kept Martine gushing over the fireworks until the ride jolted and started its descent. When the big wheel started moving downward, the fireworks suddenly stopped, drawing her attention back down to the fairgrounds beneath them where panic broke out.

With the fun rides and games abruptly cut short, Martine cried out, “What’s happening?” Seeing that small children were disappearing one by one, she turned to the clown, “Where are they going?” Horrified she stared him down for answers, her eyes engaging with his painted face that was no longer jolly. “What happened to you?” Noticing

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he now appeared as a sad-faced clown with a down turned mouth and eyes that drooped, she demanded he speak, “What just happened?”

Disturbed and lowly in demeanor, the gloomy looking clown pointed to the painted-on tear drop under his right eye.

Hearing no reply she yelled out, “Get me off of here.”

When the chair reached the bottom she flung the safety bar aside and leapt off. “What is going on?” she begged.

“How was your adventure?” her host queried.

Agitated, Martine insisted, “Where are the children?”

All he offered her was a knowing expression.

“Am I supposed to find them?” Glancing around, all she could see were ponies walking in circles without riders, and empty rides twirling, spinning, and zooming. “Because I will,” she threatened.

“You can’t find them, they’re gone.” Taking her hand, he led her off the platform.

Caught up in the reality of another realm, she couldn’t fathom who would take the children. “They existed, I saw them.”

“You saw what could’ve been, if the soul had found a home.”

Stunned, she protested, “Those children were born with souls—we all are,” she argued. “Was it an illusion, a trick, or mirrors? What?” she ranted at the man in charge.

“Only in your world is the soul an illusion. Here, I assure you, it is not.”

“You need to explain the difference. I know we can’t see our souls, but we do have one.”

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“Yes, and here you saw souls burst forth, finding their future homes.”

“The fireworks?” Martine guessed, exhibiting a quizzical expression mixed with bewilderment.

“Souls are visible as powerful sparks of life here, so you are correct.” He lifted his hat in respect.

Still looking around, Martine couldn’t relent, “I still don’t understand where the children went, I know you know.”

“They’re not to be,” he stated with certainty.

Irritation rising, she challenged him further, “Because?”

Bowing his head in respect, he remained evasive, “They couldn’t stay.”

Angry and frustrated, Martine pushed harder, “Sir, are you saying they didn’t want to go, and you won’t tell me what you did to them?”

“I did nothing with them, I did nothing to them—I assure you,” lights throughout the spectacular venue began blacking-out as he spoke.

Unable to remedy the problem, Martine stood helpless as her soundings turned dark and empty. “Come back,” she called out, as she heard the last note of the musical merry-go-round fade out.

Awakened by the sound of her beeping alarm clock, Martine blinked her eyes open with the lingering images of a dream experience that was burnt into her mind like a hot branding iron. Tortured by the horrible memories of her nonsensical dream, she rubbed the temples on her head.

As in the past, Martine felt confused by the etheric borderlands between the material realm and unearthly ones. Deciphering profound teachings of knowledge instilled in her while using her connection between both realities was

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mostly confusing at first, sometimes for a long period of time. Becoming part of both worlds at the same time allowed greater teachings and understanding to be obtained, but when exposed at a specific point in time—like stars aligning— something monumental could be revealed. But until that is harvested by the recipient, it can resemble a massive scavenger hunt.

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Chapter 9

They connected online and arranged for a clandestine meeting in a dark alley far from the crime scene. Their late night mission was laced with profanity until the slender good-looking man stopped it, "It doesn't matter now. It's done."

Angered by some insults, a bearded over weight man replied, "I did what you wanted, you owe me."

Through the lips of a sly grin, he returned, "If I hadn't heard that you were alive and among the living, I would have sworn that you were greeting me at the gates of hell."

Phil took the last drag off his cigarette and flicked it to the side. "Who says I'm not?"

"Right," the other man said slowly, pondering the reason that brought them together after years of separation.

"Well, it's done," Phil declared with a raspy voice.

"Good . . . good," he stammered, handing the scary looking thug a large envelope with cash inside.

"Yes, it is. That's why they call me, Doctor Phil Good. Is it all here?" Stubby fingers fondled the cash inside as biting comments ensued.

"The ten big ones you couldn't turn down," he said coldly with anger in his heart that was as stubborn as the blood stains darkening on the young couple he had arranged to have murdered. "One more thing," he added.

"Yeah, what's that?"

"\$10,000 is a lot of money, you know what else?"

"What?"

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“\$250,000 sounds much bigger. That’s what it’ll cost you in legal fees if we’re caught,” he warned as he puffed out his chest.

“Yada, yada, yada . . . that’ll never happen—I know what I’m doing,” Phil bragged.

“Uh-uh, that’s not gonna happen to me,” the good looking man shot back. “Make sure it doesn’t happen to you.”

“Oh, it won’t,” Phil vowed.

“Need one more done now.”

“At your service,” he said greedily, patting the envelope. “You do mean one, right?”

“I do now, because you didn’t get the two I hired you for. You’re the fool that killed the wrong one,” he corrected Phil.

Phil raised his eyebrows with a smile. “I was at the right place at the right time—you can verify that if you want.”

“Whatever,” he replied, looking away from Phil.

“Collateral damage happens all the time in this business.”

“Well, I’m not paying for anymore mistakes,” the mastermind said definitively.

Phil smirked, “And I didn’t ask you to.”

“Here are the details,” he relayed, handing Phil a typed note.

“Texas? Why there?”

“Let’s just say someone was hiding a secret, and someone couldn’t keep one, and their plans have changed.”

“This’ll cost extra if it’s in Texas.”

“Fine, make it happen,” he said, turning to leave.

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Chapter 10

“Martine,” Nathan Elliot addressed his co-counsel, “congratulations on your groundbreaking ruling with the court today. I know it was a grueling case that was long on odds and short on evidence. Getting the death penalty on one defendant and probation for our client was momentous,” he summarized with great satisfaction.

“Thank you, I really did have to get creative,” she acknowledged her middle aged colleague..

“Yes you did. When you presented your closing, I think the jury wasn’t just going to sentence that guy to death once, I think they wanted to be able to dig him back up and kill him again.”

Martine smiled at the huge compliment and grabbed a thick folder with documents. “I believe this is a wrap for our client if she can avoid dating ‘Sweet Heart Swindlers’ that kill,” she quipped with a disapproving brow. Handing the folder to Nathan, she added, “This is what the prosecutor will need if the defendant tries to file an appeal.”

Nathan fumbled the piece of paper in his hand. “Oh, about that, here’s a message from the defendant that will be residing on death row. It’s his parting promise.” Nathan scrunched his face as he reluctantly handed off the note to Martine.

After glancing at the death threat, she crinkled up the worthless paper and tossed it back at Nathan. “Better save that for evidence in case he makes good on his promise to whack me.”

Nathan looked dumbfounded. “Aren’t you going to do something about this?”

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“Like what?” Martine jostled back. “Confucius said, ‘Before you embark on a journey of revenge—dig two graves.’ I’ve done as much as I can to get him off the streets for good. If they let him get to me, we’ll both be buried.”

“Right, right,” Nathan said nervously, “what can he do to you now?”

“Exactly, you can stick a fork in this case—it’s done.”

“Gotcha, we’re done discussing this case for now,” Nathan stated with nod. “I’ll take those documents and get out of your way,” he finished as he swept up the files and walked out the office door.

Fast clicks sounded from Martine’s keyboard when she acknowledged Nathan’s departure without looking up, “Thank you.”

“Ahem,” a tall distinguished heartbreaker with edges so sharp they could cut beckoned her attention.

Martine perked-up and laid eyes on a familiar face. “Mahoney,” she exclaimed, “John Mahoney,” her voice sounded surprised, “what brings you to Colorado?”

“You,” he stated suggestively. Martine happened to be wearing a silky blouse in a radiant sapphire blue color. He intensified intensified his glance showing his intrigue. “Can we talk?”

Caught off guard by his sudden appearance and his handsome stature, she bristled that he could have that effect on her, even after forces and distance worked against them since the first time they had met so many years ago. She had been a lawyer in Colorado, and he an FBI Director in Arizona. Their jobs permitted nothing more than a long-distance working familiarity as there had never been a chance for them to be together, nor an opportunity for the

Terminated

possibility to consider more, though Martine felt the burn of separation the last time they had worked a case.

“Um, let me think.” Gathering her thoughts, she stood up to greet him with a compliment, “I almost didn’t recognize you in your formal digs.”

“Mm-hum,” he said with a grin walking up to her desk. “You look great, office isn’t too shabby either, and it suits you well. When I found out you were working at this classy law firm I thought I’d better dress for the occasion.”

“What occasion?” His compliment was enough to cast the blush of a fine rosé wine across her face. “I’d no idea you were in town. What can I do for you, stranger?”

“Have a drink with me,” he smiled alluringly.

They were once conflicted crime solving comrades as a mutual admiration evolved into a trusted and respected kinship that brought him to her when he was struggling with the unresolved deaths of Charmaine and Levi.

Returning a puzzled grin, she queried hesitantly, “Now?”

Mahoney nodded affirmatively, “Please, if you can.”

Martine deferred to her watch, “I guess I can go now. It’s five and they won’t miss me. There’s a bar and restaurant on the first floor of this building, let’s go there.” Grabbing her purse, she joined him and headed to the elevator.

“So what’s really going on?” she inquired.

“I need your help on a case,” he divulged allusively.

Pushing the down button for the elevator, she nodded in acceptance, “There’s lots of lawyers in Arizona . . . so why me?”

“I think I need your other qualifications,” he returned coyly as he ushered her through the open elevator doors.

Tapping the illuminated control marked for the lobby, she countered, “I can’t practice law in Arizona. I’m

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not licensed there and I'm not with the FBI anymore—remember.”

“I know that,” he confirmed, staring straight ahead at the closed doors.

Confused, Martine repeated him, “You know that.”

“Yep,” he confirmed, staying tight lipped.

Perplexed, she looked over at him, guessing, “Is the law firm I'm with involved in one of your cases?”

Mahoney exited the elevator behind her. “No, nothing like that,” he remained frank.

Martine was familiar with his no-nonsense disposition and stayed quiet while pointing to the restaurant with a marquee of big lit red, white, and blue letters advertising, *United Steaks of America*. She walked in first and turned to address him, “You make it sound mysterious and urgent. You've got my imagination working overtime.”

Soft pop music played overhead in the trendy bar and restaurant they entered together. Mahoney indicated to the hostess an empty table in the corner of the lounge area would be ideal for them as he remained mystifying, “And that's why I need you. It's your creativity and ability to solve the impossible that I could really use. What does your sister call it? Um . . . your *Super Power*.” He pulled a chair back for her to sit on.

“Uh-huh, I've never heard that before,” she chuckled at the thought of her sister Jolene's comment. Mahoney and Martine first met when her sister lured her to Arizona to help work a complicated case that Jolene was working on when she was a rookie FBI agent.

“Your hidden skills or talents that remain a mystery to me and others around you,. I suspect those are what we could use right now.”

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“We?” she restated. Martine paused and acknowledged the server that interrupted their conversation to deliver drink menus.

“Can I get you something to drink,” she addressed them both.

Martine handed the menu back to her. “Certainly, I’ll have a margarita on the rocks.”

“And you, sir?”

Mahoney smiled at the young girl, “I’ll have a Crown and Coke.”

“Thank you, I’ll be back with your order.”

Martine looked over to Mahoney. “You were saying why you needed my help on a case.”

“Right, I’m helping a friend,” he finally divulged.

“I see. Still not sure how I can help, or what you mean, but I’m available to listen,” she replied guardedly. “I’m so busy sorting out everyone else’s conflicts and disputes, I know I’ll find this interesting and I feel like I owe you a favor. I welcome your friendship and the fact you trust my input.”

Mahoney, an isolated tough guy, admired by colleagues, and structured within the confines of a bureaucratic organization, found the unconventional Martine a challenge in operating an investigation with her assistance. Loyal, dedicated and authoritative, he wasn’t initially trusting or appreciative of her process in resolving unorthodox types of criminal activity—her being a lawyer and not an investigator. Though their methods seemed to clash, they both did what they had to for all the right reasons. On the surface they were opposites, in the center, though, they complemented each other.

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Mahoney conceded, "You tend to operate outside the fringes of society's normal constraints. I think that might be needed here."

"Hmph, not sure how to take that," she remarked. "What're you implying?"

Mahoney leaned toward her, "You tend to change directions like a revolving door, and I don't know how that occurs, but it does make a difference somehow."

"Aw, it might seem that way to you."

He nodded, "And everyone else, as I recall."

Returning to their table, the server set the drinks down and asked, "Will there be anything else I can get for you right now?"

Mahoney replied, "No, this will be fine for now."

Martine nodded at her as she backed away. "Okay, Mahoney," she said slowly, "What's going on?"

"Well, there seems to be more than a murder-suicide in this case. My personal investigating has drummed up nothing that supports or denies the possibility. I really want your insights."

"This doesn't sound like a legal matter," she injected.

"You're right. This girl, Charmaine, is my friend's daughter. She reminds me of your daughter Eva."

"Ah, you want a motherly take on what could've happened."

"Maybe more," he hinted. "I need your suspicious mind that goes where others haven't even considered. Like I said, I've hit a dead end," his tone hardened, "on the surface I come to the same conclusion. When I scratch a little deeper I see something else."

Martine asked suspiciously, "Why did the local investigators determine it was murder-suicide?"

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“Tunnel vision I presume.” Mahoney explained, “Tunnel vision on any case leaves reasonable doubt they’re incorrect. Unless every possible person is investigated and eliminated they haven’t convinced me, and they don’t know how to do that. The lead investigator couldn’t find water if he . . .,” Mahoney’s voice stalled.

“Fell out of a boat,” Martine finished. “Never just look at one person . . . rather the constellation of people attached to them.”

Mahoney sparked, “Exactly, it’s rare for a couple in their modest home to be executed, but it’s more unlikely to be murder-suicide if the signs were never apparent. I want to find out if one of them lured a killer into their lives and the other was collateral damage, or if it was conclusively a murder-suicide.”

“There are no guarantees here,” Martine clarified. “I have to be honest with you so that your expectations are open to what I might or might not find.” Squeezing the lime into her drink, she went further, “When inspiration strikes, I strike back. Likewise, I’m not an investigator by trade—I’m a lawyer who might not be of any assistance. Tell me more about what you’ve found.”

Mahoney set his drink down. “I’m gonna lay a fair amount of information on you that shows a great deal of solidarity within the current community and officials that have weighed-in on this closed investigation. As far as they’re concerned it’s over, and are not interested in any of the FBI services I recommended,” Mahoney vented his frustration.

“Well that sounds like cold comfort,” Martine acknowledged with a nod. “Tell me about Charmaine first.”

“According to her father she is remarkable, innocent, courageous and bright. Apparently she traded the thrills and

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frills of a debutant for the humble country life her husband wanted on a family owned farming parcel he inherited. Stewart Kincaid has it in his mind that he needs the best investigator I know to re-examine the local's determination of murder-suicide."

Sipping her drink, Martine quizzed deeper, "What do you think about the determination?"

"They're wrong," he scoffed.

Martine grinned, "Someone always is."

"This stinks like low tide."

"Did you know this girl?" she asked.

Mahoney elaborated, "I knew her when she was young and got to ride a horse for the first time. Her dad and I were at the county fair showing his prize cattle. I put her on one of those merry-go-rounds and then the pony rides . . .," he rambled reminiscently until he stopped himself when Martine didn't engage. "Where'd you go?" he asked, snapping her out of her daze.

Startled out of a *déjà vu* stupor, she exclaimed clumsily, "Oh, sorry, I was in the 1950's or 60's."

He laughed, "It wasn't then, I can assure you."

"Right, uh . . ., I was remembering something that I experienced myself at a county fairgrounds," she finessed her response just enough to avoid explaining a dream episode that surfaced and might be related to this peculiar set of circumstances.

"I see, but I've seen that look before," he revealed.

Martine quickly changed the subject, "John, I don't know how I can be of help. I'm completely consumed with work. I feel terrible telling you I can't take off any time from my job here."

Mahoney redirected her, "If you could get the time needed would you want to help investigate this case for me?"

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Mahoney had never formally asked Martine for assistance on a case. Previously, she somehow became involved and managed to perform with resounding success on each occasion.

Martine drew a deep breath. "I don't see how I can," she replied regretfully.

"The reason I flew in to see you was to first meet with your senior law partners regarding a contract to hire your services. They have agreed and accepted a retainer from Stewart Kincaid for your legal expertise on some of his business dealings. Only you, Stewart, myself, and your daughter, Alexa, will know what you're really helping with."

"Mm-hum, very clever, Mr. Mahoney, you must be extremely serious about this and well connected."

"In a word, yes, money and resources are not Stewart's problem—finding answers to his daughter's death is."

"Does Alex know about this?"

Mahoney fell somber, "Who do you think I asked first? Since your sister Jolene is on vacation for three weeks, I did contact my youngest protégé."

"Aw ha, she knew it wouldn't be possible if she asked me to help," Martine surmised aloud. "We both work so many hours a week we text more than talk . . . she figured I wouldn't be able to devote any time on a case I'm not assigned to, right?"

Busted, Mahoney pursed his lips, "That is accurate, so what do you think?"

"I don't know," she replied, "when do you need me?"

"Would you be able to fly to Texas in two days? Stewart is holding a burial service there for his daughter this week since he is now in possession of the remains. There

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may be an advantage for you to attend and meet her friends and family. What'd you say?"

Martine took a sip of her drink. "Are you certain I'm cleared with my law firm to help this client?"

Mahoney confirmed with a wink, "One hundred percent."

Realizing her recent dream may relate to this situation, she decided, "I'll be in Texas in two days."

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Chapter 11

Martine was driving into a timeless old west marmalade sunset on her way home from work when she got a call from her daughter Alexa. “Hey,” she answered, talking through her blue tooth as she cruised on the highway.

“Where are you, mom?” Alexa asked.

“Almost home,” Martine relayed, changing lanes.

“Check your e-mails when you get there. I sent you some really fresh updates on that Minnesota case you asked me about. Good stuff.”

“Got it,” Martine replied, “are you home yet?”

“Nope, almost though,” Alexa replied. “See ya in a few.”

When Martine pulled into her garage, she grabbed her satchel before heading into her house. Stepping out of her heels to feel at home, she quickened to her kitchen for a cold beverage before getting into her personal e-mails. Digital chirping sounded from her computer as they downloaded on her screen.

Clicking through her incoming mailbox she paused when she located Alexa’s communications. As promised, her daughter had sent a slew of links from Minnesota media forums relating to the cold case she had called a tip into. Connecting to the first link on her screen with the headline ‘Reker Sister’s Murder Back in Spotlight,’ she read through with wild excitement.

Alex walked in the home and approached her mother. “What do you think?”

“I think they know who did it,” Martine cited.

“Is it who you thought,” Alexa asked.

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For the first time, Martine knew everyone's name and what went down during the two years she was in Minnesota. "This news broke because they used the new Minnesota's Open Records Law and obtained police and court files about the Dairy Bar case that were never made known to the public, or other officials," she explained to Alexa. "I didn't even know anyone's name, until now."

Alexa sat down next to her with investigative interest. "When you were in college did you know what was done to the girl that had survived the attack?"

"Actually, I did," Martine sighed, "I know there were many stab wounds and I believe that I was informed she was tortured with cigarette burns too. That's not discussed here, so it could be a false memory. I would've discussed that with Agent Cain, but it didn't come up and I'm not sure of those facts. I stuck to what I did personally observe."

Alexa voiced her opinion, "Whatever you did tell him got those records unsealed and narrowed their main suspect down to one guy from what I read. The similarities in both incidents were stunning."

"Back then, I don't think law enforcement could conceive of a fifteen-year-old boy committing such a serious offense," Martine sounded sad, "even though they considered him after the Dairy Bar crime it says he passed a lie detector. That mistake cost decades of delays. Polygraphs are useful if the person isn't displaying a lack of empathy, guilt, conscience or remorse. They should've submitted his alibis and friends to polygraphs back then. If he was behaving like a psychopath, they should have believed he was and not ruled him out just because a polygraph didn't indicate deception."

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“He’s the guy from what I read. I did some checking on his whereabouts for you, too,” Alex expressed with disappointment, as well.

“Oh dear, what is it, more rape and murder?” Martine guessed.

“Well . . . there’s that, and he has cancer.”

“Crap, that mean’s this may never go to court in time.” Feeling the gravity of the moment, Martine reflected on her personal circumstances, “I guess its best I never knew all this information till now. Today I realize how fortunate Lisa and I were to elude the abduction planned for both of us. He and his two friends would have tortured, raped, and murdered us, too.”

Alexa looked alarmed. “That’s a horrible thought,” she flashed. “Who would’ve been left to put it together? All the victims are deceased today. It says Suzie, the Dairy Bar girl has passed away from cancer. You told me Lisa never remembered anything about that night. You were the only one left that could say something because the three incidents’ clearly intersected.”

“It’s a devastating ending if he’s never charged and convicted,” she concluded with a lingering eye on the computer screen.

“Yeah,” her daughter acknowledged, “it is.”

Martine changed direction, “Oh, I had a visitor today. Looks like I’m going to Texas, know anything about that?”

“Oops,” Alexa said sheepishly, “how could we say no?”

“So, you’re going to help too?”

“Of course I am,” Alexa replied with self-assurance.

“Okay, I’ll probably need special assistance since I’m not really an investigator.”

“Don’t worry, mom, I’ll have your back.”

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“Good, somebody always has,” Martine grinned proudly at her daughter.

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Chapter 12

Martine flung her shoes into her closet and got ready for bed, with her thoughts stuck on the surprise visit from John Mahoney and the unexpected request for her services. This time it was him asking for her instead of her being thrust into his realm of FBI criminal investigations. Caught off guard by his strangely suave demeanor, she couldn't say no and accepted the position to help Stewart Kincaid.

After getting settled in bed for a much needed night of rest she turned on the news to catch up on world events that were in perpetual motion with forest fire activity dominating the countries attention.

Within minutes Martine drifted off into a deep sleep that whisked her to the familiar mountain cathedrals of Southwest Colorado. Materializing in the era of the primitive old west dressed as a pioneer woman with a long heavy dress and white bonnet on her head was odd to her, but the huge abdomen with a child inside her was not. Recognizing she was very pregnant, she looked around to survey her circumstances and vulnerability beneath the peaceful pine forest canopy covering rugged undeveloped terrain.

Startled by the sudden loud squawking of crows above, she glanced over to her right—catching a glimpse of a paralyzed pack of wolves staring her down. Motionless, the wolves stood their ground like lawn ornament statues.

Hearing a slight rustle to her left, she laid eyes on another group of wolves taking their position as if cornering their prey—pack style.

Burdened with a big dress and bulging abdomen, running or climbing were impossible options to consider

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when determining a safe plan of escape. When more crows flew in and the screeching escalated, her attention was drawn to the forest area ahead of her where a group of charging Indians was closing in fast. Running straight for her with weapons in hand forced her to choose which foe was worst, the pack of wolves that flanked her, or the Indians aggressively coming for her.

More afraid of marauding humans on the war path than the pack of wolves standing in wait for her remains, Martine turned around and hobbled as fast as her compromised body would allow with both the wolves and Indians trailing her. After dodging and weaving through tall pines, she was forced to a breathless stop when a huge tear in the earth created a deep and wide divide, blocking her from going anywhere but down.

Cornered again, she looked deep into the canyon crevice that housed a moving body of water—contemplating another challenging obstacle. Hearing the wolves begin a low guttural growling, she glanced back at the Indians that chased after her, and the wolves that now occupied her perimeter. Panicked by the multitude of forces against her, she began backing up to the jagged boundary behind her.

As the sky darkened and rain fell out, she continued moving backwards, slowly watching the wolves who abruptly turned away from her and took attack positions against the advancing Indian hunting party.

Suddenly realizing the Indians were preparing to shoot arrows at her and the wolves, she frantically waved her arms and yelled at the animals, “Run, go!” Her voice echoed through the vast canyon as she turned and leapt into the waters below, plunging deep into the fast river.

Coming up for air, she swam to the opposite side of the canyon and pulled herself out of the icy stream.

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Stumbling her way to safety and shelter within the thick foliage of the canyon floor, she could hear the wolves at the top of the canyon howl back and forth. Sighting an abandoned covered wagon she headed straight for it in search of shelter and protection.

Rain that fell like a steady waterfall kept her drenched as she forged ahead, carrying the heavily weighted dress in her arms. Desperate and helpless, she walked hurriedly towards the only shelter nearby—a covered wagon with a team of horses tethered to the side.

After examining the wagon, she determined a wheel stuck in the mud had caused it to be stranded alone with a setting sun inching out of sight. Irritated by the clumsy big dress and her pregnant state, she projected her discomfort, “What in God’s holy name am I doing here?”

“There much power in a name,” a strong female voice came back, startling her. “You summon help when you call out to powerful Spirit,” a Native American answered her from the other side of the covered wagon.

Startled by the presence of another being, she looked around the wagon to see an Indian woman dressed in a light tan buckskin dress with matching knee-high moccasins held up by long strands of leather crisscrossing around the length of her footwear ride up to her covered wagon. Her exceptionally long black hair donned a delicately braided head band with a collection of colorful bird feathers dangling from the left side, gracing her beautiful face.

“No river can return to its source, yet all rivers must have a beginning,” she said wisely, approaching Martine on her white and sorrel Medicine Hat horse. “Where do you journey from?”

Caught in a predicament with no knowledge of where she had been, where she was or why she was here, Martine

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answered respectfully, "I'm sorry to say, but I'm lost. I came from the east," she supposed out loud, as a band of Indians on horseback spread out like a fence-line some distance behind the Native American woman that was now coming within reach of her.

With the rain stopping, the Indian woman pointed to the bluing sky and exclaimed, "Great Hopi say, rainbow make sign from Him who is in all things." Dismounting her steed, she approached Martine—bringing the distinctive characteristics of a middle-aged Native American Indian into focus.

"How do I address you?" Martine asked, studying her angelic facial appearance and Native American attire.

"I . . . , Mother Rainbow," she announced.

Pointing past her to the intimidating squad of Indians proudly perched on colorful painted horses, Martine asked, "Are you here to harm me?"

Mother Rainbow smiled warmly, "It is easy to be brave from a distance, like them. Do not worry. No harm will come."

"Are you Hopi or Navajo?" Suddenly, Martine winced from pain, grabbing her abdomen in shock. "I . . . think I'm in . . . labor," she stammered. Steadying herself with the support of the wagon, she realized water from inside her fell to the ground between her legs. "My water broke," she alerted her visitor. Staggering to the back of the home on wheels, she hiked up her big dress and tried to climb in.

Mother Rainbow dismounted her horse and came to Martine's aid, helping her into the wagon as the sun rested on the horizon sinking lower by the minute. "Day and night not dwell together. Do you have light in your tepee?"

Martine saw a lantern hanging overhead and directed her guest, "Please light that?" Small streams of water began

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trickling down both her cheeks as a stabbing labor pain escalated.

Mother Rainbow wiped the salty tears from Martine's face. "The soul would have no rainbow if the eye had no tears. Today a river of life will be born." Taking precious protection objects from her leather pouch, she began to strategically place them on and around Martine.

Huffing from another cresting contraction, Martine cried-out, "Why is this happening? I feel like I'm dying."

"There is no death, only a change of worlds. Yours will not be the same come the dawn of day." Mother Rainbow stroked Martine's hand in comfort.

Wolves outside began howling back and forth as the darkening night closed in tight and Martine's quick pants advanced her through intense cramps that gripped her muscles and compressed her insides. "They're getting so close, like the wolves out there. I want to push, but I'm not ready for this."

"Mother earth gives birth every spring . . . like you will now. Don't be fearful. Wolf is always out there waiting, and wolf is always hungry like the baby inside you. You brave to be alone like this."

Martine took solace in the Native American's confident wise way. "It's not easy being brave when I'm far from home, pregnant, and weak," she eked out as the next wave of pain clamped down, squeezing her body like a vice.

"Why you left here alone?"

Waiting for the paralyzing giant charley horse to subside, Martine puffed, "I don't know? Maybe they left when they saw Indians. I ran here to escape some."

Mother Rainbow smiled reassuringly—fanning a throng of feathers around Martine's suffering body. "No let

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yesterday use up too much of today. Great Spirit not let you be alone now. Feathers move bad spirits away.”

Martine’s voice cracked as she struggled through another excruciating contraction that rolled through her like a tidal wave, “I’m not alone, am I?” Tears and moisture forming on her face glistened in the lanterns light.

“Weakness from those who left you abandoned—make you stronger,” Mother Rainbow declared.

Looking pale, weak, and doubtful, Martine breathed her words hard, “I’m not feeling strong right now. They shouldn’t have left me alone and helpless.”

“You not helpless like baby inside you. Do not judge neighbor until you walk two moons in their moccasins,” Mother Rainbow corrected her.

Languishing in distress, Martine knew that in her normal state of mind, Mother Rainbow would be right. Delirious with another contraction, she blew-out her breath, “I’m pushing.” Bearing down as hard as she could, Martine pushed and yelled until the baby’s head appeared.

“Listen, daughter, or your tongue will make us deaf. Just one more push,” Mother Rainbow coaxed, “and shoulders will be out.”

When the next contraction plateaued, Martine screamed out in pain, “Dear, God, help me.”

“Better to have less thunder in mouth, and more lightning inside,” Mother Rainbow coached.

Pushing again as hard as she could, the baby’s shoulders came out and Mother Rainbow pulled the newborn free. With ease, she released the umbilical cord and wrapped the crying baby in a cloth. Holding up the child like an offering to the heavens, she proclaimed, “When you were born, you cried and the world rejoiced. Live your life so that

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when you die, the world cries and you rejoice. We thank Great Spirit for your river of life.”

Exhilarated beyond anything she could have fathomed in this moment, Martine gazed and sobbed at the sight of a perfectly formed beautiful baby. “Thank you, Mother Rainbow,” she wept.

Handing the infant to Martine, she explained, “We accept your thanks. When we see no reason for giving thanks, the fault lies within us,” she proclaimed with satisfaction.

Martine was coddling and admiring the baby when she remembered to ask a question again that eluded her during the child birth, “What tribe are you from?”

“I from all tribes,” she decreed with conviction.

Glancing up to look at Mother Rainbow, Martine only saw the emptiness of her covered wagon. Realizing that she was gone, she hollered out, “Mother Rainbow.” Hearing no answer, she peered down at the infant child in her arms, but only saw an empty cloth shawl hanging limp from both her arms. Shock and terror seized her. “Where is my baby?” Climbing out of the back of the covered wagon, her eyes search the outside with despair mounting from the fright of losing her baby. Agitated and shaking, she cried out again, “Mother Rainbow, where is the baby?”

Behind her a Native American beckoned her, “Come here,” he invited, predisposed in starting a campfire that was beginning to expel smoke.

Rushing up to him, she saw he was alone. “Where is Mother Rainbow?” she begged of him.

Appearing calm and aloof, he continued tending to his small campfire by adding sprinkles of dry grasses. “She more work to do,” he finally answered.

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Panicked like a crazed parent, Martine wiped her brow in frustration, "Where is my baby?"

"It take thousand voices to tell story," he replied patiently, "no time now."

Confused by the odd encounter and enraged from the loss of her child, she forgot her manners and seethed at him, "I just want my child."

"Each bird loves to hear himself sing," he said without answering her question again, "but, no need. You listen and learn."

Tempering her emotions and heeding his words, Martine complied, "I am listening. Please speak to me, or tell me the story," she urged.

"They are not dead who live in the hearts they leave behind," he spoke words like a wise man entrusted with sacred knowledge.

Martine watched him intently as he continued, "Your child not your own, but borrow to you from Great Spirit."

"Yes, I know that, but where is my child now, it needs me?"

"Not your child," he re-stated. "Tell you, you forget. Show you, you might not remember. Involve you, you understand."

"Understand what? My child is gone?" she blurted.

"You understand love and respect for Great Spirit gift."

"Yes I do, my child, right?"

"You must not forget. This will help you in seeking knowledge and wisdom for child."

Martine processed his words. "I won't forget, but what knowledge and wisdom do I seek?"

"You will know," he revealed. "Remember, knowledge is of the past, wisdom is of the future."

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Martine, a mother of two adult daughters, was jolted awake after experiencing the most profound dream she could recall. Contemplating the entire episode of giving birth to a perfect child and then losing it in the blink of an eye was a life altering event. It was pure horror when she searched her mind for a meaning behind it. Lingering effects of this ordeal surpassed the real life occurrence she survived after losing her husband to a tragic car accident that she survived. This felt more catastrophic and devastating than the loss of James.

Haunted by the genuine feeling of losing her own infant child in the way she did, likened to mothers who tragically lose their children to a complicated birth, illness, abduction, murder, custody fight, or accident. Feeling the devastating effects like any mother remained deep inside her, making her quest for answers unstoppable and unexplainable.

Having no known reason for having an unusual dream experience like that, she made notes of it in her journal before getting ready for her departure to the airport. Processing the events in writing was as much therapeutic, as they were customary.

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Chapter 13

Before little Jade celebrated her first birthday or took her first step, her precious mind and body were evolving perfectly in the care of her parent. Already sensing that her mother was the only important person in her life, she clung to her for love and safety and feared separation from her protector and home at a growing rate each day that passed.

Jade hadn't been on earth for very long—about five months, but she was destined to be here with a beautiful mother she was proud and happy to be connected to. Her hair was going to be long and auburn so they could look alike and she would be smart like her, too. They would do so many things together and have an amazing life.

Yawning, Jade woke up in her usual warm and loving home. Restless after a long nights sleep, she stretched and wiggled her feet. Soon she was moving about anticipating her meal, and the sounds of her mother getting up to feed her. Finding her thumb, she pacified herself till something more nourishing was provided.

At her young age she was already on a very routine schedule of napping and feeding, dictated by the melodic tones of her cherished mother and her own internal clock. She was an extremely agreeable child that eagerly responded to the adult voice of her loving and gentle guardian. Jade always anticipated the sounds of the alarm clock and noise of the cat meowing. When these triggers engaged, it meant the big day was started and everything was in motion.

Devoted to her mother, the little girl would stay awake as long as she could before the urge of a morning nap coupled with muffled sounds from outside her home lulled

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her to sleep. Every day resumed the same way, except Jade grew bigger and stronger—developing at a rapid rate.

Today was just like every other day as Jade and her mom finished breakfast, fed the cat, and got in the car for a drive. Riding in the car with up-beat music playing was her favorite activity—she even gurgled a bit before she suckled her thumb in the pleasure of the moment.

Each day was a new challenge as Jades' senses and brain developed more and more. She dreamt of doing all the activities her mom could do and was anxious to show her how she could feed the cat. Though she still was unable to understand everything her mother said, she was paying attention and knew the cats' name was Endora. Destined to be great, but unable to speak, Jade behaved perfectly and was always content—just eating and sleeping, day after day.

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Chapter 14

Martine finished zipping up her suitcase, readying herself for a trip to Texas. Practical and reserved, her ambitions revolved around hard work and purposefulness. More industrious, quick minded, and disciplined than most single parents, she raised her daughters in a caring, but responsible adult environment. Like their mother they were self-sufficient and faced challenges that others would shy away from.

“Are you almost ready?” Alexa sounded from the kitchen.

“Sure am,” Martine replied, snatching her purse and journal before joining her daughter.

“I made you some eggs for breakfast.”

“Great, we have a half hour before we head out.” Sitting down, Martine began making notes in her personal journal as Alexa served up eggs with avocados and cheese on top.

“What’re you writing?” Alexa inquired.

Pondering her thoughts, Martine finally answered, “Notes from a very real dream.”

“Really,” Alexa sounded interested, “what happened?”

Martine tapped her pen absentmindedly, saying, “Everything.”

Alexa sat down across from her mother. “You should tell me.” Her knowing expression meant she was aware something took place during the night that was beyond normal nonsense dreaming.

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“You know, you’re right. I should try and figure this out while it’s fresh on my mind. I was in the old west and there were Indians and wolves.”

“What part of the old west?” Alexa started mining for details. In school she wrote many essays about the western states.

“Had to be the Southwest,” Martine surmised.

“There aren’t any wolves in the Southwest.”

Justifying the possibility, Martine explained, “Well, there were, until they were eradicated by the 1940’s.”

“They killed the wolves,” Alexa began, “and left the coyotes?”

“Pretty much,” Martine answered.

“What’s the difference?” Alexa questioned.

“Wolves do look different than coyotes, but mostly they’re almost twice the size and more intelligent.”

“Okay, what were the wolves doing in your dream?”

“Boy, everything happened so fast. I must have been a pioneer traveling in the Southwest. I was alone until the crows started screeching in the trees and I noticed the wolves poaching me on the sides.”

“Were there any other animals?” Alexa implored.

Martine shook her head, swallowing her first bite. “No, just the crows and wolves,” she said, “Why?”

Finishing a bite of her hot breakfast, Alexa suggested, “They might have been animal spirits. That has happened to you before. What did they do?”

“The pack of wolves never hurt me, but it seemed like they could or might have. Then they ran with me to get away from the Indians. When I got away, they all started howling back and forth.” Martine stopped, pausing for a moment, “You’re right,” springing up from the table, she remarked, “I’ll be right back.” Going over to her

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bookshelves, she skimmed over the display till she found her guide to animal spirits. Opening the book as she walked back to her daughter, she exclaimed, "I can't believe this."

"What does it say?"

When Martine's eyes first glanced into the chapter on wolves, she only saw the face of a beautiful dog like animal gazing intensely at her. With a blue-eyed stare that could bore deep into a soul, Martine recognized the willfulness in the animal and its likeness to what she envisioned last night. Having never engaged with wolves like that before, it did cause an awakening. "This is exactly what it looked like," she replied, showing her daughter.

"Wow, they're kinda beautiful, like a big German Shepard crossed with a Huskey."

Martine began reading excerpts, "A pack of wolves means a foretelling of a situation or event. Howling wolves is a call to action or a cry for help. If the wolf spirit appears to you in a dream, the message is to use your instincts. It means you need to be wise and alert to nuances. It's a reminder to trust your natural abilities. Wolf spirit animal conveys strength and courage. It's a symbol of freedom and wisdom that often appears when you need to be guided on a journey of self-discovery. It's a popular clan animal, but it can also be a personal spirit guide."

"You might be doing more than just investigating a murder-suicide. Let me see that," Alexa returned, reaching for the book.

Martine got up and put her dish in the sink. "I'll take that book with me to Texas."

"It also says wolf dreams appear to remind you to turn to a specific person for guidance and support. You know that's Eva and me."

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“Yes I do,” she said with an admiring smile, leaning back into the counter. “What does it say about crows?”

Alexa paged the book. “They’re believed to be a keeper of the Sacred Laws and serve to teach right from wrong. Shamans are connected to crow spirits. They bring psychic abilities and the gift of transformation. The crow asks you to look beyond the physical to those things cloaked by darkness.”

Martine nodded affirmatively as she came back to the table. “Well, starting now, I’ll be doing that.”

Alexa revealed more about the Wolf Spirit, “She Wolf is strong, not naïve, and chooses her battles wisely.”

Martine laughed, “Now there’s going to be a battle?”

“And I’ll be here taking care of anything you need,” she promised. “I wish I could go, but I can’t work this case, and couldn’t get time off.” Staying optimistic, Alexa added, “I can do some thing’s under the radar with the resources I have available. They always let me check things out electronically-wise.”

“Don’t worry,” she comforted her daughter, “there’s nothing you could help with now. I’ll let you know if I need something.”

“You need to do that. You never ask anyone for help,” she reminded her mother.

“That’s because I’ve been taking care of you girls. It’s my job.”

“We’re not girls anymore. We’re grown up. You don’t have to take care of us anymore.”

Martine shrugged her response, “Maybe when you’re married. Right now we need to leave for the airport.”

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Chapter 15

Chaz, handsome, young, and with privileges most people would never obtain, prided himself on attracting high profile iconic type women that inflated his image and self esteem—until he hooked-up with one that turned on him and came back like a boomerang.

Raised in an environment of parental abuse deviated his psyche, making him oblivious to normal behavior. Taught by his own father the way to be a man is to be brutal and brutalize others, warped the development of his conscious. When a whispered secret was dropped in the night, he made sure it sank out of sight. Fearing the repercussions of a domineering father, Chaz Walsh wanted to be sure his trespass would never be discovered.

He met her on the last day of the year at the elite *Lemon Bar* where the music was loud, the dancing was seductive, and the girls wore dresses that answered questions not asked. Rhythm and lighting that blinked and strobed like Las Vegas around a dance floor that was too crowded to leave, brought them together for the first time. Intoxicated by sound, movement, and alcohol, they both let go of their inhibitions that led to intense kissing at the stroke of midnight.

Separated from their friends they eagerly found their way to his hotel room nearby. Stimulated by each other and the ecstasy drug taken earlier, barriers were laid bare till they finally fell asleep at sunrise.

When housekeeping woke them at ten o'clock, they scrambled to gather their belongings and depart in disgrace. Other than sharing each other's names and phone numbers,

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they didn't say much as they rode the elevator to the lobby
and got in cabs—heading in opposite directions.

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Chapter 16

Martine walked out of the bustling Texas airport into the inevitable grasp of suffocating heat. Searching the sea of vehicles for her ride, she heard a voice beckon her, “Martine, over here.” Putting her sunglasses on before stepping out from the shade, she headed to her right toward the sound of Mahoney calling again, “I’m four cars down.”

Spotting his tall figure standing next to the opened tailgate of a black SUV, she signaled him with a wave. “Wow is it warm in this place,” she commented while approaching him.

“Yes it is.” He hoisted her suitcase into the back of his vehicle. Moving to the passenger side, he opened her door with a friendly welcome, “It’s great to see you, was you’re flight good?”

“It was,” she answered before he closed her door.

Mahoney got in the driver’s side and pulled away from the curb before starting his briefing, “We’re going to the funeral service first, it starts in an hour. You’re my acquaintance, and we’re there to support Stewart. Only the three of us know we’re observing and looking for information. After the mass we go to the burial site and then the funeral reception that’ll be held at Stewarts.”

Confirming with a nod, Martine asked, “Did you get the results on the second autopsy you arranged in Texas?”

“Yes, and it’s helpful.”

“Like how?” she asked with interest.

“It confirms Charmaine was murdered first because her wounds could not be self inflicted.”

“Wounds,” Martine repeated, “like more than one?”

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“That’s right, Mahoney began, “the coroner will show me the report tomorrow.”

“And Levi?” she asked.

“Only one wound, so we can’t rule out self-infliction,” Mahoney reported like a criminologist.

“Well, it sounds like according to this coroner, it still leaves the door open to—if you’re suicidal you’re homicidal.”

“Right,” Mahoney nodded in contemplation, “did he simply guard the title of *husband* too much?”

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Chapter 17

Loud beeping from the same alarm that went off every day woke Jade up. She didn't sleep well and wasn't ready to be awake. Her mother stayed up late talking and crying. Something was upsetting to her mother, making Jade nervous and scared. With both of them lacking the necessary sleep, the routine of the morning was less eventful—for now. Breakfast was filling and caused a big burp, but it tasted good.

After saying goodbye to Endora, Jade and her mom took their usual drive in the car. Excited to be on the move, she contracted a bout of hiccups that were so subtle her own mother didn't even notice. Listening to the same songs her mom always played, her rhythmic case of hiccups kept beat until she started sucking her thumb and dozed off.

Lulled into a dreamy state from the combination of soft music playing and car motion, the tiny girl was unprepared for the sudden blow that impacted the car on the passenger side. Loud sounds erupted from the crash, startling her to a state of high anxiety.

Unable to hear her mother's voice, Jade kicked and screamed for her attention until a man yelled at them.

"Are you okay?"

Jade's mom didn't answer.

"I called 911," the man voiced loudly, "they're on their way." Blaring sounds drew closer as the man kept talking, "I'm going to get the air bag out of the way."

More people arrived to help, and Jade was relieved when her mother spoke to one of them, asking, "What happened?"

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“You were in an accident. Someone ran a red light,” a woman relayed in desperation.

“Move back please,” another voice ordered, “we need to get her out of there.”

Jade was so panicked she closed her eyes tight and turned her head away from all the commotion, hoping they would be saved.

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Chapter 18

Grief like the ocean rolling with their lives can take your breath away. Ride, ride, ride the waves or sink, so they seemed to say that summer. Once they were fast friends with everything in common. Beautiful, educated, interesting, challenging, and strong—before it all went down and the waves took on a bigger meaning. When it did—how would they each ride the wave? What would friends do? Three people can keep a secret if two are dead.

Charmaine Kincaid met Levi Norton on the shores of Corpus Christi, the perfect backdrop for romance. Stories abound in this city by the sea known for, spellbinding sunsets, and romantic strolls along the sandy shorelines. They were there separately, each with a batch of friends when a rousing game of beach-side volleyball brought them together.

Charmaine and her three friends were sunbathing at the beach when Levi noticed her contagious smile, long blonde hair, and glossed lips glistening like the coral reefs beneath the water. Both were playful, flirtatious, and attentive to each other, their mutual attraction was noticeable to everyone that day.

Spring break can be a breeding ground for young lovers or a life altering trauma for some. Funeral services for the girl most cherished and envied in the group became evident when Martine began observing the interactions of the young elite group of comrades coming together unexpectedly to pay their respects.

At Charmaine's funeral it was time to say goodbye to her, and reunite with each other. Because many were

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saying hello after time apart and others learning about each other for the first time, there was heightened energy and dynamic interaction.

Southern charm emanated from the prestigious manor that was home to Stewart. "Hello, John," he greeted his friend somberly.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," Mahoney replied. "Let me introduce you," he said to Stewart, "this is Martine, Martine, this is Stewart."

"Hello," Stewart recognized her with a forced smile, "I could see those blue eyes from across town."

Mahoney grinned thinly, discretely lowering his volume, "She's the investigator you hired."

Stewart responded in surprised, "This is who you recruited from Colorado?"

With more people descending on the residence, Mahoney whispered, "I guarantee you she doesn't have tunnel vision," glancing at Martine, he continued, "but she may be slightly unorthodox, and that's what's needed now to interpret the facts conclusively."

Perplexed, Stewart directed his attention to Martine with a perplexed look, "Welcome, Martine, I imagined a large man from Colorado that worked with John at the FBI . . . I believe the name was Grant—not Martine?"

Mahoney looked slightly sheepish. "Did I call her Grant? That's her last name," he explained to hide his deception.

Martine smiled cordially, glancing at Mahoney first before covering for him, "Just call me Martine," she directed Stewart. "I will do everything I can to assist, Mr. Kincaid. I too, am very sorry for your loss, and am here today to try and informally meet some of Charmaine's friends."

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“If you need anything you just let John or I know. I look forward to your findings. I need to know the truth, or be reassured the local police got it right,” Stewart stipulated.

“That’s why I’m here, now. I can learn a lot at an emotional gathering like this,” Martine explained.

Stewart nodded in agreement, “Today is perfect since they’ll probably all be here.”

“That was my thought, too, but John’s idea,” she pointed out. Excusing herself from the company of John and Stewart, she headed into the room where everyone seemed to be congregating.

Separated from them, Martine went in search of conversations between Charmaine’s closest acquaintances. Eyeing a group of three young men by the bar, she strolled over to them and requested a glass of wine from the bartender, “Chardonnay please.” Surrounded by the infectious Texas drawl, she waited for her beverage to be poured as a very attractive couple approached the three men she was standing near.

“Hello, Tim,” the girl accentuated to one of the young men.

“Hello, Clare,” he replied coolly, “what’s this?” he nodded in the direction of her companion.

She let out an audible sigh, rolling her eyes, “This is,” she paused, “you know, Chris.”

Tim smirked cynically, “So, I’m the *ex*, Chris,” he reached out his hand for a shake, “you must be the *next*,” he sassed sarcastically.

Chris accepted the offer and shook his hand. “I’m not the next, I’m the best,” he announced confidently.

“She’s all yours, buddy,” Tim replied cynically.

Clare interrupted the exchange between the two, “Hello, Blake and Ty.” She instantly redirected her attention

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to a few girls outside. "Get me a drink, Chris, I'll be on the patio," her voice trailed off as she pushed past anyone in her way as if the room belonged to her, treating the world around her as her own accomplishment.

"Hello, guys," Chris addressed Ty and Blake with a smile.

"Absolutely," Ty said meekly teetering back and forth on his heels.

Chris signaled the bartender, "Can I have a Pinot Noir and a Corona?"

Tim's hands fidgeted with irritation, before he insulted Chris, "Why would Clare be dating a guy that paints houses?"

"They don't paint themselves," Chris sparred back, "and, I'm actually a contractor." Snatching the drinks from the bar, he moved past the three guys and headed for the patio.

Tim raised his voice to carry across the room, "I don't care if you can make a house sing and dance you're still just a painter."

Blake grabbed Tim's shoulder in a gesture to stabilize him. "Take it easy, Tim, he's not worth it and neither is she."

Tim huffed under his breath, "What's she doing with that cement head?"

"Because he's breathing, buddy, ignore them," Blake suggested.

Tim's thick Texas twang could be easily heard, "We don't need his kind around." With the encounter fizzled out, the boys got silent and headed over to the food tables.

Martine discretely snapped a photo of the boys with her phone while processing the awkward exchange that she had just witnessed when an elderly woman inched her way

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to the bartender. "Excuse me," she said to the older gal, stepping sideways so the short portly-shaped women could pass through the crowd that began swelling up around the bar.

"Thank you, darling," she obliged cordially, addressing Martine with the delicate inflection of a distinguished southern matron. "Can I have a vodka tonic, young man? It's mighty warm out there today."

"My pleasure," he nodded affably.

"I love your dress," Martine complimented the older woman, "I'm Martine."

"Hello, deary, I'm Betty. How do you know Charmaine?"

"I'm an acquaintance of her father. I wish that I had known her myself."

"Oh yes, I could tell you many things. She was a wonderful child."

"How's that," Martine inquired.

Betty's face illustrated all consuming grief. "I was the house mother at her sorority. I find this whole situation unreal. Charmaine was such a bright happy girl. I just don't understand what happened. How could a girl like her stir something that dark in someone that they'd want to kill her?"

"I've heard that too," Martine concurred, "maybe you can tell me who those three boys are—they didn't seem too concerned about Charmaine."

"Which ones, my dear?" Betty asked, scanning the growing crowd edging towards them.

"That would be, Tim, Blake, Ty and Chris," Martine clarified.

"Well, I don't know Chris, but Tim, Blake, and Ty were good friends with the sorority girls."

"Were friends?" Martine shrugged.

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“I can’t say I know anymore than that. They just stopped socializing at the sorority.”

“What do you think happened?”

Betty paused a moment in thought, “I believe something happened after they all went to Corpus Christi for Spring break.”

“Why do you think that?”

“I overheard the girls talking in secret one evening. It was very serious and emotional. I never found out what it was about. I even asked one of them the next day.”

“Can you remember anything they said?”

“Something like, ‘I don’t think they’re smart enough for any of us,’ or something like that.”

“So, it was an issue with the boys?” Martine deduced.

“I really don’t know,” Betty said in bewilderment. “Excuse me, Martine, I see some people I don’t want to miss speaking with.”

Outside on the patio Martine noticed a group of girls engaged in an animated conversation that centered on a tough looking girl that appeared to be the odd-one-out. Extravagant lifestyles and attractive looks would make most people believe they had it all and the girl that didn’t fit their typical profile was a trouble-maker, and not acceptable in their clique. Curious about the source of contention and what had instigated the rousing debate, she meandered outside.

“You’re a loser, Devon,” someone alleged, drawing Martine’s complete attention, “you shouldn’t even be here.”

Without being conspicuous she moved close enough to overhear another leggy girl meticulously dressed and groomed, escalate the drama, “Just go back home, I told you not to come.”

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Spiked-up chaotic dyed red hair stood out among the elite group of gorgeous well-groomed women with long, precision-cut, highlighted tresses. “I knew her too, Rena,” the young girl bantered back, “Charmaine’s not in your sorority anymore.”

“And neither are you,” Clare sounded, standing next to Rena.

“I just want to know what really happened to her,” Devon hurled back.

Clare stepped into Devon’s space. “We all know what happened to her,” Clare snapped at her, “she married down. I’ve never met a man I couldn’t handle, but, but, Charmaine was different—let it go.”

Devon twitched in frustration, “I don’t know anything about that, but I’d like to know where you’ve been, Rena?”

“Is that your bliss?” Clare smirked, cutting her off.

“What?” Devon remained angered and perplexed at the same time.

Clare tossed her head in disgust, “Ignorance? You don’t belong here, Devon, and what’s wrong with your hair? Is it afraid of your face, or did you go to DIY hair salon?” Clare heckled. Turning away from the girl she just insulted, she ordered her posse of friends, “Let’s go, she’s just here to make trouble. Let’s see who else has come.”

Martine watched the young women, matching the age of Charmaine, meet up with Chris and drift off into the home. Noticing a burly built man resembling a bearded extra in the show *Hee Haw* lurking around the girls, she texted Mahoney to check him out before approaching the girl left behind. “Hi,” she greeted, approaching the hostile obstinate Devon, “are you okay?”

“What’s it to you?” she fired back.

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“Who were those girls you were talking to?”

“Talking to? You don’t talk to people like that. They’re too good for anybody but each other.”

“How do you know them?” Martine inquired.

“One of them is my step-sister,” Devon revealed.

“Aw,” Martine sounded, as she got next to her, “What’s your name?”

Sounding annoyed, she answered, “Devon.”

“I’m Martine. “It’s nice to meet you, Devon, what’s your stepsister’s name?”

“Rena,” she said in disgust.

“What does she do now?” Martine pried.

Devon scoffed, “Hair, I guess.”

Martine chuckled, “Seriously?”

“Yep, that’s all they worry about.”

“Ugh uh,” Martine sounded doubtful.

“I gotta go, lady.”

“What a minute, Devon, I had a sister too. It can be hard.”

“Had a sister? What’d you do to her?” Devon smarted back.

“I didn’t do anything to her—she passed away when we were young. I miss her every day, even though we had disagreements too—like you and your sister.”

“I don’t need a psychological pep talk. I don’t want to get along with my step-sister, or like her. She’s not worth it.”

“If you have time I’d like to visit with you. I really don’t know anyone here.”

Devon laughed, demeaning her, “Then why’d you come?”

“I’m with a friend that knew Charmaine and her father,” Martine explained, “who do you know?”

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“Charmaine,” she responded obstinately.

“I’d love to know more about her,” Martine tried to entice the one girl she cut from the herd. “What was she like?”

“It doesn’t matter now,” Devon returned.

Martine pressed a little harder, “You must have a story or two about Charmaine.”

Devon replied, “Not really.”

“I didn’t know her personally, but I’ve heard a story or two now,” Martine alluded.

“I can’t think of one now.”

“I understand,” Martine surrendered, “but, I’d love to tell you a story my grandfather told my sister and I when we quarreled.”

“Not really interested,” Devon replied bluntly.

“It’s not helpful to be alone or lonely at your friends funeral,” Martine offered encouragingly.

Remaining defensive, Devon shirked the consoling, “Lonely is just a six letter word.”

Martine knew better than to agree with her. “You know those girls can look as perfect as possible, and be toxic inside. It’s your choice what you do with that because they’re not going to change for you,” she said sympathetically. “My grandpa made sure I knew why.”

Devon relented, “Tell me quick before I change my mind.”

Offering up a bit of her past, she went on, “Grandpa didn’t like us arguing at all. Let’s sit down for a minute.”

Devon’s demeanor relaxed slightly, “Yeah, we can sit out here. I’m not going back in there.”

“Great.” After they were both seated she continued, “Well the story is about a wise old Cherokee Indian teaching

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his grandson about the two wolves we each have inside of us.”

“Wolves,” Devon mocked the notion.

“Mm-mm, he says one is dark, angry, ugly, mean, and negative, the other is kind, generous, bright, positive, and full of light.”

“Yeah, what’s the point, we’re all good and bad?”

“Not that,” Martine clarified. “They’re always fighting with each other. When we don’t control anger and negativity we’re just making ourselves and everyone else unhappy. Likewise, when we feel good about ourselves, we feel happy for others. The wolves are always fighting, but only one will win.”

“So,” she said defiantly.

“The same fight is going on inside you, and inside every other person you know.”

Devon, remaining belligerent, thought for a minute, “I suppose you think I’m the bad wolf.”

“No, I actually have no idea,” Martine projected with a shrug.

“Then how would I know?”

“The one you feed is the one that prevails.”

Devon, in stark disbelief, stared hard into Martine’s eyes like a frozen robot in need of a reboot.

Martine snapped her out of her trance, “Tell me about your mother.”

“What mother?”

“You have a mother, Devon—you weren’t delivered in a shopping cart.”

“Oh, that mother. I don’t remember her. My father says she was wonderful and beautiful. I have a photo of her when she was prom queen.”

“What do you mean, *was*,” Martine asked.

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“She died years ago and my dad married Rena’s mother.”

“I’m sorry you lost her when you were so young. I want you to straighten your crown, princess, and remember who’s daughter you are.” Whether Martine could or should edit her words as they came out of her mouth, she couldn’t make them more sensitive, “I sense a warrior in you, but anger will not serve you well in this lifetime. You can do better by redirecting your energy to something other than antagonism and spite.”

“Yeah, I could,” Devon reckoned.

Martine opened her purse. “Here’s my number,” she said, handing Devon her business card. “You can call me anytime, and I’d like your number.” Martine handed Devon her phone so she could enter her number in it. “I’m gonna check up on you to see how you’re doing.”

Leaving with eyes watering from the sun and emotional distress, Devon didn’t look back when she walked away excusing herself, “I gotta go now, there’s nothing for me here.”

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Chapter 19

From the outside looking in, he had it all. Now with his trusted son by his side the renowned bachelor in his early fifties was all about success and control that he believed would elevate him up to a position among the most influential.

Eric Walsh stood tall in his office, addressing his only son Chaz, “More state restrictions are coming down this year.”

“That can’t be good,” Chaz commented back.

Editorializing, the latest headline he held in his hand, Eric disagreed, “They’re wrong about one thing—the restrictions they’re passing will not shrink the size of the market. It’ll be bigger and better because we have the solution that resolves the problem they can’t make disappear through legislation.”

“How do you figure that?” Chaz challenged. “You make it sound like the market is getting bigger, not smaller and they can’t affect it.”

“It is getting bigger and they can’t stop it,” his father rebutted, “because most people lie about their medical backgrounds, and they don’t know what to do until it’s almost too late. We can compensate for those errors with our protocol. More restrictions will make them turn to us,” he concluded confidently.

Chaz grinned, “Well, that’s what I’m here for.”

Eric changed the subject, “How do you like working here, son?”

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“I’ll like it better when we can discuss public or private placement.” Chaz thumbed his fingers, gesturing money in them.

“Soon, need a little more time and no mistakes.”

“You know they’re getting closer and closer to overturning the Federal law entirely, and that’ll most likely affect the market value.”

“That won’t matter either, the market will still exist here and everywhere else. Our formulated cocktail of medications and sedations will create the perfect out-patient procedure in the sweet spot nobody has conquered. We’ll outperform everyone just in the cost alone, not to mention the most important concern every patient requires—their complete anonymity. They’ll never face the stigma that is feared when their privacy is breached because of financial needs and hospital procedures,” he opined. “We’ll have the cure.”

“How do you know privacy is the most important thing they want?” Chaz challenged his father further.

“The whole law passed because they divined a right of privacy issue,” Eric rationalized. “That’s what they can’t undo,” he gloated.

“We’re going to market when the patent application is accepted,” Chaz supposed, “right?”

“No, son, we can’t go to market until the FDA approves the drug. We’re nearing our last trial, the final stretch of an eight year process to prove we’re ready.”

Anxious and concerned about their triumph in publicizing the break-through medical opportunity, Chaz tried to gauge their success, “How long before others can copy our product or go generic?”

“We will own the market for 20 years. Correction, we will own the world market and the doctors and clinics

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that use it,” Eric bragged, basking in his rise to fame and fortune.

“What about the pain? You said there would be guaranteed pain management that wouldn’t cause addiction.”

“We’ve handled it—and our formula is patented. Plus, our protocol includes rectal suppositories for pain management afterwards, as well.”

“How affordable will this really be?”

“More than a consultation fee and less than a car payment, its win, win. Profits in this country alone would be one billion a year,” he enumerated. Expanding on the scope of his *Golden Egg*, Eric elaborated, “Worldwide, multiply that by fifty and you’ve got fifty billion a year.”

“So, the more restrictions put on the market, the more expensive and limiting the services will become for everyone else,” Chaz deducted, rocking on his heels in contemplation.

“That’s correct, son,” Eric praised his boy, “but, not for us.” Eric grinned greedily, “Pharmaceuticals is the money of the future, and we will control the pricing of our creation for a long time. It’s like communism, steal from everyone and give it to who we want.”

“What about a company that is trying to do the same thing we are?”

Indignant, Eric Walsh spat, “Those copy cats are years behind us.”

“Not if they steal one of our medical engineers out of development,” Chaz feared.

“Don’t be ignorant,” Eric Walsh sharpened his words, “if one of our employees tries that, I’ll come at them so hard, they’ll cough up bones.”

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“Got it,” Chaz acknowledged his father’s intimidation tactics. “Aiden is coming tomorrow with some results. Are you sure you don’t want to be here?”

“You can handle that. I’m out of town for the day. My job is meeting with the FDA. You’re gonna call me after you meet with Aiden. Everything is riding on these last trials.”

“No problem, Daryl and I have this,” Chaz said confidently.

“Good,” his father replied, “I’m out of here.”

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Chapter 20

Rena's life seemed ideal, but was that an illusion? People and friends had no idea about her depression and the dramatic changes a love affair could do in transforming her future events. Always in charge of her thoughtful plans for school, work, and love, she never anticipated the repercussions of a romance gone wrong—before it was all too late.

Blind passion would create more than the promise of finding Mr. Right and staying together 'happily ever after' like every Disney princess, it would ultimately produce life-changing opportunities and choices for Rena. Whatever happened to all the princesses that found their prince and kissed him? What really happens after a prince takes her in his arms?

Hope sprung for Rena when something new and unexpected entered her world and romance was more than a novel she read, it was real—all too real. Sparks flew when straight-laced, long-locked, leggy Rena met an older boy with height, good looks, and money. Her poise and beauty complimented his handsomeness and suave confidence.

Enchanted by her provocative prince, Rena fell hard and fast—willing to change and do anything for him. When he stopped calling her she took it upon herself to find him.

Months ago when, it was a normal day in Texas she tracked her mysterious prince down, calling him on his cell. It was a brief conversation—not the one she was hoping for. Cool and collected, he made no effort to see her or acknowledge their recent liaisons.

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Devastated by his lack of interest in her she contacted her dearest friend. Far away in another state, when her friend was still alive, Rena Skyped her sorority sister Charmaine at their prearranged time.

After returning home from the sad funeral events she attended, she opened her computer and searched for a personal exchange they shared via Skype. Privy to the personal conversations that were recorded and saved on her computer—she decided to play one so that she could once again see her friends beautiful face and great spirit.

Laying heavy on her mind was locating a private chat they had recently. She paused in anticipation before selecting it. Sitting back on her sofa with her computer ready to engage, Rena sniffled and clicked on the play command, prompting a screen that displayed both their images.

“Hi, girlfriend,” Charmaine smiled bright as she greeted her long-time best sorority sister on their preordained video chat.

“Hi,” Rena sounded glum.

“What’s going on?” Charmaine’s face showed sincere concern.

Rena looked sad. “I don’t know. I guess it’s just life.”

“Can I help?” Charmaine made a sympathetic pout.

“Nobody can,” Rena stated, “I just have to deal with it.”

Charmaine made a guess, “Is it your job?”

“No, jobs good,” Rena clarified.

Sensing depression, Charmaine asked, “Is this about a guy?”

“Not really,” Rena danced around the issue, “I don’t feel like being with anyone.”

“I wish you were here. We could rent a movie and eat popcorn,” Charmaine proposed with a brimming smile.

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“That doesn’t seem to work anymore.” Rena changed the subject, “How’s your job?”

“I’m really excited about my new position here,” Charmaine beamed with excitement. “I’m studying Hypnotherapy.”

“That sounds interesting. Can you make people cluck like a chicken and crow like a rooster?”

“No,” Charmaine giggled.

“I thought you were a psychologist.”

“I am,” Charmaine verified, “but now I’m training to be a Certified Medical Hypnotherapist.”

Rena looked confused. “How’s that different than what you were doing?”

“We work with clients on getting their own mind to make changes that have caused phobias, anxiety, and basic stumbling blocks,” Charmaine explained. “Blocks we can identify through the process of Hypnotherapy.”

Rena expressed skepticism, “How can that reduce stress, if the stress is still in their life?”

“That’s a good question,” Charmaine validated, “because our mind and body connect through our thoughts. Psychologically speaking, we can address someone’s stress and anxiety more quickly if they can identify it for themselves and there is a way to fix it. Unfortunately, that’s not always the case.”

Rena tilted her head, signaling her lack of understanding, “What do you mean?”

“One, they don’t know why they’re unhappy, or two, they don’t have a way to work through it because they lost someone or something that they can never get back. It keeps them in a hopeless state.”

Interested, but regrettably unclear about the need for this therapy, Rena asked, “What are you talking about? We

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all lose friends and family—it doesn't make us hopeless, does it?"

Charmaine clarified herself, "Of course everyone doesn't become consumed with hopelessness. We have a lot of clients that have lost someone in their lives that left a void. They consciously didn't realize that it was the problem, so through hypnotherapy we uncover the source behind their despair."

"Ah," Rena injected, "have you actually hypnotized anyone yet?"

"No I haven't, but the hypnotherapist here has. I'll be working in her department."

"How do you know it really works?"

"Well," Charmaine shared a recent story, "this clinic helped in the recovery of a girl who came to us after suffering from an act of criminal assault. Being a victim of a violent attack left her physically and mentally damaged. During the life-saving measures that doctors performed, part of her brain was permanently damaged. That type of recovery and rehabilitation is virtually unknown."

"Are there medical doctors at your clinic too?" Rena asked.

Charmaine shook her head, "No, and if there were they couldn't have helped either."

"Why?"

"There are no protocols to follow when dealing with severe brain injuries or traumas," Charmaine stated. "Sometimes the patient is left with paralysis, retardation, memory loss, blindness, or deafness. There is the possibility of the brain rejuvenating itself overtime. That's basically how brain injuries are treated."

"Hope I never have a brain injury," Rena exhaled.

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“Exactly, but that’s where we’ve made breakthroughs. Our therapies can rewire the brain back to where it was in its healthy state of operation,” Charmaine professed. “We were part of an informal study done with the Hypnotherapists that revealed the medical benefits when the case is hopeless. We followed the studies’ protocol on our client and it worked perfectly.”

“Sounds like a happy ending. I could really use one of those,” Rena hinted without sharing her deepest sentiments.

“Rena, something is obviously wrong. Did somebody hurt you?”

Rena started weeping, “Not really?”

“Rena, what’s wrong? Can I help?”

“Why do some people just suck the life out of you, and you realize you’re not going to have the future you’ve always dreamed of?”

“Rena, something’s wrong. Tell me what it is.”

“I can’t.”

Charmaine’s concern grew in her voice, “Why can’t you?” Hearing no response, Charmaine nodded encouragingly, “Okay, I get it, but you could come and visit. You’d love it here. The garden is growing and I found a horse.”

Rena sniffled, “Aren’t you working?”

“Not on the weekends. Get in your car and drive here, it’s not that far.”

“Sure, I’ll text you when I’m coming.”

“Perfect, I can’t wait,” Charmaine glowed with a smile.

“Bye, Charmaine.”

“Bye, Rena.”

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Reality set in when the computer screen went dark and Rena was left alone with her thoughts—all of them.

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Chapter 21

Martine departed with Mahoney from Stewart's home after hours of meeting numerous acquaintances to the family. "That was enlightening," she said, breaking the silence.

"Yes it was," he concurred, "anything helpful for you?"

"I have some suspicions," she said.

"Who would that include?"

"The crowd from college feels dubious."

"Are you sure? We can stay longer," Mahoney offered.

"Well, they're gone now and I can't be sure until I'm sure. I don't think that sisterhood is as advertised, but I don't think they can pull off a double homicide."

"Do you want me to check anyone out?"

"There is a girl named Clare."

"Why her?" he asked.

Martine shook her head in contemplation, "I'm not sure those girls tie their tennis shoes without consulting her."

"I can do that," Mahoney offered, "what else?"

She took a deep breath, "There were a lot of characters—a lot of charisma in that house today. As of now we got names and numbers—no suspects."

Mahoney chuckled, "Then we have an investigation."

Martine deliberated with a couple of nods, "You can add friction to that. What we need is a string that we can start pulling on. I'm probably not done here, but I do need to go to Oklahoma tomorrow since nobody from there attended."

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“Everything I was able to check-out about Charmaine’s Oklahoma connections was benign. Just couldn’t weed-out anything suspicious. If you could be discrete, in an unofficial capacity, you’d probably find more,” he suggested.

Martine gave a look of knowing disapproval. “Ya think?” She replied sarcastically.

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Chapter 22

After the long day at Stewart Kincaid's, Martine and Mahoney checked into their rooms for the night. Outgoing flights were early and her mind was already feeling numb from all the information coming in her direction.

Once inside her private room, she kicked off her shoes and unpacked her phone charger immediately, plugging her phone in for a quick boot. After clicking through the TV channels for a news station that had some local happenings, she plopped on the bed to relax when she heard the vibration on her phone go off. "Hello, Alexa," she answered.

"Hey, mom, how's it going in Texas? Do you like it there?"

Martine muted the TV. "Yes, it's really nice."

Alexa asked, "How'd it go after the funeral services for Charmaine?"

Rubbing the back of her head in contemplation, she replied, "Very sad. I hadn't been to a funeral since your father died. It was hard not to think about him today."

Sounding sympathetic, Alexa asked, "Do you think her father will be okay?"

"Maybe . . . but not for a long time," Martine uttered slowly.

"Did anything unusual stand out?" Alexa asked.

"There were a lot of people to observe and it's too soon to know. No one stood out specifically, but I did snap photos for future reference."

Alexa cleared her throat, "Are you still going to Oklahoma?"

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“Yep, tomorrow,” Martine answered while digging through her suitcase for pajamas.

“Who’s going with you?”

“Going alone,” she replied, pulling out the clothes she was going to wear tomorrow.

“Mahoney isn’t going with you?”

“He was already there and didn’t get anything helpful. It’s better I go without someone they already know. I’m not with the authorities and would be able to get information more organically than they could, especially when I check out where Charmaine worked.”

“About that,” Alexa paused, “I’ve been looking into it for you and Mahoney. It’s a place called *Brain Fitness* that specializes in brain therapies. They have some very unique methods and ideas.”

“Really,” Martine commented.

“It’s a pretty big clinic,” Alexa advised, “with lots to check-out.”

“Well, I’m going to have to figure out how to do it with very little time there,” Martine reckoned. “I have to be back to work in a week.”

“I have an idea that could help,” her daughter offered.

“You want to meet me there?” Martine returned enthusiastically.

“I can’t, I’m still not on this case.”

“I know that, just thought you could take some days off.”

“I can’t, but Eva can,” Alexa blurted fast.

“Eva? She’s training horses in Steamboat right now.”

“Yeah, I know, but, she could come for a few days if she’s back by the weekend.”

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Chuckling, Martine recounted Eva's capacity for criminal investigations, "If there was something with four hooves and a long tail at the clinic I know she would definitely love to get involved."

Alexa laughed now, "I get that, but they have an opening there for one of their Brain Training sessions. It's only a few days. She could meet you there."

Martine thought about it for a few seconds. "That's an interesting idea, but I don't think so."

Trying harder to pitch her plan, she conveyed more, "She wants to do it. It could really help her with focusing."

"You talked to her about it?" Martine said in surprise.

"Of course," she replied with certainty.

"Alexa, was this your idea, or hers?"

"Does it matter? Oh, Mahoney approved it. It's being paid for by the client."

"I don't want to drag her into this."

"I don't think you can stop her. You know Eva, she's already packed."

"That was very smooth, Alexa, when is she coming?"

"Tomorrow morning. Her sessions begin tomorrow afternoon."

"When did this get approved?"

Slyly evading the inevitable, Alexa informed her mother truthfully, "Just now. I'll text you the details. Love you, and sleep well, bye."

Shaking her head in amazement, Martine heard the call end.

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Chapter 23

Falling into a deep sleep by ten-thirty, Martine was awakened by the bold beating sounds from kettle-styled drums. Finding her body clothed in an ancient robe and head covering of a primitive time, she blended into the general population of local citizens that began to converge towards her.

Contemplating the location of the desolate desert terrain upon which she stood and the style of clothing worn by those around her, she could only surmise it was the Middle East. Noticeably barren except for the masses of people descending towards her and the object of their desire located downhill from her, she moved slowly with the crowd to the structure that loomed alone on the infertile land.

Resembling the stature of a Minotaur, the humongous metal figure that drew this throng of people had the body of a human and the head of a bull. Outstretched arms with open hands protruded from the huge statute that seemed to be reaching out to the multitudes gathering in front of it. In the belly of the metal beast was a large opening that served as a fireplace.

Falling to their knees in homage, patrons shouted their monotone praises in beat with the drums. Dismal and dark from a blackened moon-night, except for the glowing fires burning within the massive deity they venerated, Martine felt sadness and remorse for the misguided worship of a false god. Familiar depictions of pagan rituals found in Old Testament readings and literature sprung to mind.

“Where’s your offering?” An adolescent woman asked in an ancient Hebrew sounding dialect. Although the

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language being spoken was foreign, Martine understood her as she spoke, "Did you bring something?" Looking at Martine with expectancy, she continued, "You have nothing in your arms." Young like a child, the beautiful girl couldn't have been more than fourteen years old. "What have you brought?" Her soft brown eyes looked into Martine's while she swaddled a baby in her arms. Clothed in a long sheep colored garment with a generous blue shawl flowing down from her head to her knees, she looked biblical with dark skin and glimpses of long wavy black hair showing on the sides of her head scarf.

Distracted by the men stoking the fire that threw red and orange flames, Martine didn't answer immediately. Smiling sheepishly, she searched for the words to say, "I don't have anything, is it necessary?"

"Why, yes," she said slowly, "of course, he is our king."

Martine focused in on the chanting to discern their words. "Molech . . . is king?" she uttered questioningly.

Sounding a disbelieving laugh, she asked, "Your speech is different, are you a Canaanite?"

Floundering in the confusion of loud chanting and intense drumming, Martine tried to ignore the awkward question, and sprung her own on the young mother, "What is your sacrifice?"

"Our first born," she answered proudly without hesitation.

"Your child," Martine's voice shook, "This one?"

"Yes." Repositioning the baby that looked to be about a month old, the girl introduced herself, "I am Anat what do they call you and where are you . . ." Louder sounds came from the crowd, drowning out Anat's last word.

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Avoiding personal exchanges, Martine crouched down to adjust the loose thin leather strap on the scantily covered sandal she now wore. Resuming her stance next to Anat, she asked from her heart, “Don’t you love your child?” Straining to listen, she said nothing more.

Anat’s clan was chanting “Molech,” in unison now.

“Yes,” Anat replied solemnly, “I love this child, it’s my first.”

“Then why give your child?” Martine questioned gravely, adding, “I did not sacrifice my daughters.”

Anat defended her culture, “We are promised prosperity in our lives and for our children when we make this sacrifice. We must do this or our family could perish,” she whispered nervously.

Observing a glimmer of doubt and discomfort, Martine struggled with an issue she could not fathom was ordinary in this society. “Why must this child suffer for you?”

Unable to contemplate a reason, Anat called out with her clansmen, “Molech,” but it came out a sob.

Disgusted by the barbaric act, Martine glanced back at the giant metal statute that was now a furnace emitting smoke and heat—driving the people back. Turning a bronze shade as the grey metal heated up, the hands and hollowed-out eyes of the figurine began glowing red. Looming above the crowd, Martine winced at the menacing form awaiting its first sacrifice from its adoring followers. “Do you need to offer up your first child so that you can have more?”

“Molech will make me fertile for all my days and bless us abundantly with this great sacrifice,” Anat tried to assure her as she wiped away tears coming down her cheeks.

Repulsed further, Martine stumbled on her own words, “Why . . . why do you choose this?”

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“We will prosper from this.” Crescent-shaped eyes met Martine’s when Anat professed her obedience, “We must honor Molech, or we will be punished.” Coddling her child like any loving mother would, she continued weakly, “I will have the greatest offering here . . . it is a boy.”

Martine saw that Anat was reluctant and frightened for her child’s suffering, it was undeniable. “May I hold your baby?” she asked with intense concern. She knew there was a wrong way and a right way to offer up a sacrifice, and it was not supposed to be at the expense of an innocent life. That would be self-serving, or evil. Growing restless with the archaic ritualistic belief system, Martine became desperate. “May I?” Reaching for the baby, she complimented the childish mother, “He looks like you.” Once in her arms, she rocked the child side to side, singing passionately,

	“Twinkle,	twinkle,	little	star
How	I	wonder	what	you are
Up	above	the	world	so high
Like	a	diamond	in	the sky

Twinkle, twinkle little star.”

Martine changed the last refrain too, “*How I wonder ‘who’ you are.*”

“Oh, please teach me that,” Anat begged.

“You don’t need to know this song if you do that.” Martine nodded towards a young couple with their baby in the mother’s arms approaching the sweltering statue with the intentions of burning their child to death, as well. Knowing this act alone would bring her God to anger—she changed the subject, “Where is your husband?”

“He is there,” she said proudly, pointing to the drummer closest to the false deity, “waiting for us.”

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Martine recognized Molech had formed an alliance with these people that couldn't be breached and it contradicted everything written and told since the time of Moses. They knew nothing different than what they'd practiced and believed for centuries, and now she was experiencing the magnitude of Molech's power over a culture that found a reason to justify and sacrifice life to his malevolent power.

Looking on as the first parents proceeded to place their infant child into the burning hands of the metal monstrosity, she squealed, "No . . . no . . . !" Hearing the painful wail of an infant in agony, that no mother could tolerate, Martine was yelling, "Stop . . . stop . . . !" as she was lifted away from the site before the moment of extermination.

Clawing free from her sleepy nightmare, she panted out loud as she came down from a rolling boil to gather her thoughts. Flabbergasted by the practice that was undoubtedly death to a mother's dream, Martine cringed at the prospect of couples that regularly made this choice in those days.

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Chapter 24

Today was different than all the rest, Jade awoke to loud beeping sounds and a bright light. Hungrier than usual she felt weak and starved. Her mother didn't feed her the night before and now she found herself subjected to strange noises and a penetrating light that glowed around her. She tried to hide her face to avoid the intrusions, except it seemed to follow her anyway. Her predictable schedule deviated so much that she didn't understand or comprehend how to cope.

"What a pretty little girl," a strange woman said, scanning a light over Jade.

Suddenly her mother spoke, "Where am I?"

A friendly female voice answered, "You and your baby girl are in the hospital. You're both fine. You had a minor concussion so we had to keep you overnight."

"My little girl is fine?"

"Yes, and she's perfect, right here where she belongs."

Jade's mother said. "When can I go?"

"We're working on your discharge papers now. You need to eat. Your breakfast is here, and we need a urine sample when you can produce one."

Jade was so ravenous, she couldn't wait to eat. After she was full and nourished, she heard her mother talking softly before she found her thumb and fell into a peaceful slumber.

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Chapter 25

“What time do you have?” Eva whispered impatiently while staring ahead at the company’s name *Brain Fitness* boldly displayed on the wall behind the receptionist. “I made an appointment for four o’clock.”

“We got here early, so we haven’t been waiting too long yet,” Martine tempered her daughter’s angst. “Maybe you’re just nervous now.”

“Absolutely not,” Eva countered. “I’m gonna love this. I learned about it in college, of course I mean ‘read’ about it. My professor didn’t have any actual experience to relate with. Don’t you think they should if they’re going to teach it?”

“Yes I do. If professors are going to profess, they should have real life familiarity with it. My favorite professor was a lawyer that left his practice to teach law classes. I took every one of his classes and loved them.” Martine looked back to the receptionist when Eva’s name was called.

Eva stood and walked up to the attractive looking woman in a lab coat. “Hi, I’m Eva.”

“Hi, I’m Noel Parker. Let me take you to our intake room and start your assessment.”

“Great. I’m really looking forward this opportunity. Can my mother come with please?”

“If you want her too, sure,” Noel replied. “We don’t ask any embarrassing questions. But you may want to share something that could be. Are you okay with that?”

Eva addressed her mother, “Absolutely.”

“This way then,” Noel gestured.

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Martine joined in, "Hello I'm Martine." She held out her hand for a formal shake.

As they walked the short distance from the lobby to the inner sanctum amid a maze of halls and numerous private rooms, Noel began explaining their services. "This is where we conduct the brain balancing sessions." Her hand motioned to the left where a long hallway serviced numerous windowed doors in close proximity to each other indicating small compartments inside. "Down at the end is where we provide counseling," walking forward she continued, "and this area in the center is where we do group therapy with children and adults."

Through the windowed door Martine and Eva could peer in and observe the activities of young children and teachers interacting peacefully.

Without warning, a tall woman charged past them like her hair was on fire. "Who's that?" Eva questioned.

"She's one of our custodians," Noel answered.

Eva expressed worry, "Is everything okay?"

"Absolutely, my guess is one of the younger children had an accident. We'll be using this room," Noel indicated as she ushered her guests into the small dimly lit room with a glowing orange Himalayan salt rock perched on a counter that housed a sizeable computer monitor and retractable keyboard. "Please sit," she said, directing them to a small round table with chairs. "I'll grab us some waters and we'll get started."

When Noel left the room, Eva commented, "This is really exciting. I can't wait to hear what she says about me."

When Noel returned she began her questioning, "So this is your first time. How'd you hear about us?"

"Charmaine, I met Charmaine and she recommended your services because I have some issues with anxiety and

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phobias. Can you tell me how it works here? I've tried Polarity, Reiki, Acupuncture, even Chinese tea therapy," Eva's quick answer got Noel talking.

"Well, all those modalities are excellent and highly respected by our practice. The difference is that we can rebalance your own brain the way it was before certain traumas were introduced. Healers try and do the same thing, in a way, but our method makes it possible to accomplish it in a week—not over a life-time. You'll have results by the middle of the week," she said confidently.

"That's fascinating," Martine finally spoke-up. "Is that what Charmaine does here?"

Noel lowered her voice, "I'm sorry, didn't you know that Charmaine passed away?"

Eva acted stunned. "What, and when?"

"It was recent. I don't know what happened, but to answer your question, Charmaine was working in the hypnotherapy division."

"Huh, that's different than what I'm doing," Eva surmised.

"Correct, I'm trained in the brain balancing that is done with sophisticated computer software, and she worked in the clinical studies that combined Hypnotherapy with Brain Balancing. "When she first started here she did this, but transferred to that division."

"That's why she told me so much about it," Eva finessed artfully. "Why did Charmaine transfer to something else?"

"It was actually a promotion," Noel explained. "We're focused on restoring our client's brains to their most fit states. That's why our clinic is named *Brain Fitness*. Through our advances in research we found that some of our clients can't experience the full benefit of our Brain

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Balancing sessions because something very traumatic severely altered their neurons and they would gradually relapse.”

Eva interrupted, “Does that happen to all of us?”

“Usually not,” Noel said quickly.

“Then when?” Martine asked.

“We’re always initiating studies to advance lasting benefits,” Noel began clarifying, “and streamlining protocols that produce optimal results for all imbalances. Charmaine moved into an area where our recent studies showed great successes for our most challenging clients. This occurs when Hypnotherapy is introduced in difficult situations.”

“Like what kind,” Eva asked.

“We found that was helpful during some studies we did with veterans suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.”

“That’s fascinating,” Eva relayed energetically.

Noel redirected their attention to the assessment processes. “I’m going to place some electrodes on your head and let you relax in this reclining chair while the computer basically creates a mapping of the state of balance you are currently in.”

Eva moved to the reclining chair. “This is nice,” she commented.

“We will do this in several different areas on your head. The intervals are about ten minutes each time.” Handing Eva a set of ear buds, she instructed her further, “You’ll wear these buds during each session so that you will hear sounds generated by your own brain, though they will sound like piano notes.” She strategically placed some electrodes on Eva’s head and stepped over to her computer

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console. “While I load your protocol, you can put the ear pieces in, and tilt the chair back.”

“How do I recline this chair?” Eva asked, fumbling to find the control for the first time.

Noel assisted her in reclining the chair and spread a blanket over her legs. “Close your eyes and relax. We’ll leave the room while your session is running. You may fall asleep.” Noel started the assessment and turned off the light while motioning Martine to leave with her.

Martine started making small-talk with Noel in the hallway, “How do you know beyond a reasonable doubt if a client has PTSD or some other disorder?”

Noel took her to the empty room next door. “When we do the initial assessment the electrodes placed on your head will produce a Baseline Stress Balance Score. If the left side of the brain is overly active and not balanced with the right side we can deduce a “Freeze” response which is indicative of severe or prolonged stress. Basically “Flight”, or “Fight” impulses. When this imbalance occurs it does stay stuck. We see it a lot.”

Intrigued, Martine asked, “Can you really detect if someone is emotionally compromised and how badly?”

“More or less, we don’t know how severe until we determine if the corrections we made lasted. We offer refresher sessions to all of our clients.”

Intrigued, Martine asked, “How do you correct it?”

“Each of us is unique. Kind of like our fingerprints. So the assessment portion of the protocol will fingerprint your brain. Our software uses your own brain to bring it back in balance,” Noel explained.

“How long have you worked here?” Martine questioned.

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“I’ve been here over five years,” Noel reported with a grin.

“You’d definitely know what you’re doing by now,” Martine shared a smile.

“I love working here,” looking at the wall clock, she added, “and all the clients I’ve helped. I need to get back to your daughter. Do you want to wait here while I change the electrodes?”

“I’d rather watch you do it,” Martine said as she followed her back to Eva.

Noel quietly entered the room and turned on the soft overhead lighting. “Eva, you can tilt your chair back up,” Noel instructed, as she artfully removed the electrodes and repositioned them on Eva’s head before going to the computer to reset a new protocol. “How did it go, Eva?”

“I think I fell asleep. The sounds are very interesting, what are they?”

“Those sounds are from your brain, even though they sound like piano keys playing. You can tilt back again if you’re ready.” Noel reminded Eva, “When you put the ear buds back, in I’ll start the next assessment.”

Martine followed Noel out and back to the room they had been in. “I am very interested in knowing more about the Hypnotherapy, too. I’ve dealt with a lot of criminals in my career,” she exaggerated. Her specialty was not criminal law, but she was curious because of the particular cases that had come to light recently, the one involving Charmaine, but also the one from her youth back in Minnesota, as well. “I’ve had to understand more and more about the defective minds that seem to be rampant.” Martine said.

Noel nodded agreeably, “We’ve taken notice of that as well. One type of treatment is not necessarily adequate for everyone.”

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“How do you mean?”

“We participated in a very tragic case involving a young man that had been beaten beyond recognition and left for dead—forty-some stab wounds. Because he was found in time by a civilian walking his dog they were able to get him medical attention in the nick of time. In surgery they had to resuscitate him a dozen times and remove part of his brain,” Noel Sighed, “There were numerous stab wounds to his head,” she paused and looked up as if in reflection, “but they did save his life.”

Martine gasped, “I had no idea you could survive if part of your brain is removed.”

“I guess you can, but most people with that much brain trauma would never get their memory back and are left with paralysis and retardation.”

“Of course,” Martine agreed without hesitation, “how did you help him?”

“The boy did intense physical therapy and after about a year his brain started to rewire it’s self. Miraculously, he was able to talk, walk, and achieve the maturity of a first grader.”

“Did he get any memory back?” Martine inquired.

“No memory from before the attack—at all.”

“Could you help with that?”

“We did. We weren’t involved in his therapy until the police contacted us a year later when he progressed to the mind of a high schooler. They couldn’t solve the crime and were certain it was personal, meaning the boy knew his attacker. They felt sure they could solve it if there was a way to tap into his memory. His identity was confidential and location protected. The family was desperate because they didn’t feel he was safe from his attacker, so they wanted to try something more.”

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“Yikes,” Martine reacted, “I’m not sure about that, isn’t there a risk of shock? People block bad memories all the time. It’s a defense mechanism.”

“Absolutely, that’s how they found us. We are a treatment center for restoring the client to a healthy mind-state. They had heard about what we were doing for Veterans.”

“How were you helping them?”

“Brain balancing and Hypnotherapy,” Noel replied, briefly glancing at the wall clock. “I’ll be right back. I need to relocate Eva’s electrodes.”

When Noel returned Martine picked up where they left off, “Is Hypnosis the same as Hypnotherapy?”

“No, there’s a difference. Hypnosis refers to the inducing of a passive state of mind, or trance that promotes communication between the conscious and the subconscious mind that causes a reaction or outcome. Hypnotherapy is the psychological healing process that uses hypnosis to achieve a desired lasting result.”

“So a little similar,” Martine guessed.

“Yes and no, a Hypnotist isn’t trained to do the extensive therapy that an extremely damaged or injured mind would require. They can try and help you stop smoking or eating too much—maybe.”

“Gotcha,” Martine indicated she understood. “But, aren’t you concerned about the shock of him reliving the event?”

“Yes, but our therapist has dealt with this precise type of trauma and recommended they start treatment soon because he was at risk of creating false memories or planted ones from ideas he got from being questioned too much about the event.”

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Martine recognized the correctness of her deductions, citing her own experience, "That's very accurate. I've seen the wrong person admit to a crime they couldn't have committed because of too much mental duress created by investigators. Weak minds or minds under the influence of substance abuse make it possible for innocent people to be manipulated."

"Exactly, it's a fine line."

"What happened, if I can ask?"

Noel went on, "Repressed memories are fragile when they're really bad. But, only through Hypnotherapy could they know if he had repressed memories or, if there was a permanent disability from the damage and loss of brain matter. Nobody knew that answer."

"There was a lot at stake," Martine chimed in, "if he remembered the event he would re-live the pain and fear."

"Exactly," Noel confirmed, "and that's not all that's at risk, he could have things mixed up and be confused or inaccurate."

"Were you successful?"

"Yes," she shared optimistically, "they were able to solve the crime, or I couldn't even discuss that much with you."

"Who operates the Hypnotherapy department?"

"Gemma Stone," Noel relayed.

"Can I have a consultation with her tomorrow when Eva and I are back?"

Noel shrugged in compliance, "I'll check on that right now."

Martine stayed quiet while she waited for her answer.

"Looks like she's available," Noel announced, hanging up the office phone.

"Thank you," Martine obliged.

Kathi Bjorkman

Third Eye Witness-

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Chapter 26

He wasn't a hunter or predator that you would run and hide from—he was worse. Raised and manipulated by a narcissistic dictator instead of nurturing parent, Chaz Walsh was conditioned to do his father's bidding and follow orders without reserve. Anything less meant discipline and abandonment. Rejection by his father was a devastating experience that began at a pivotal time in the young boy's life. Only ten at the time his father divorced his mother, he was ill-equipped to handle the grief and despair caused by parental alienation.

With a domineering father in charge of his life and behaviors, Chaz grew steadily and forcibly to be the person his father wanted. Withholding love and stability from his only child for decades accomplished everything his father wanted and nothing of value for Chaz.

"Oh, my God, where is he?" Chaz Walsh complained anxiously. "How much longer do we need to wait for this guy Aiden to get here? I cleared my whole morning for him. I really need him to update us on the latest trial results. My father is going to be calling me any minute."

"Relax," Daryl, his co-worker, countered, "he would've called if he wasn't gonna be here."

Chaz paced in his office, talking fast, "Where could he be? Does he have something to hide," he continued, glancing at Daryl, "or, something he doesn't want us to know?"

Daryl tried reassuring Chaz, "Maybe traffic was bad, or he was hungry," making more excuses for the delinquent visitor, he went on, "Maybe he needed to pick something up

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before he meets with you, or take an important phone call—we are on a deadline.”

Chaz rejected the notion and wielded his concern, “Using a third party contractor for the baboon trials should make us all concerned. I’ll never be relaxed until it’s over. I thought you said his flight landed a few hours ago—so where is he?” Ornerly at Aiden, he posed his greatest concern, “He could be selling our trade secrets right now—for a lot of money.”

Checking his watch, Daryl reiterated his scenario, “You assume he’s coming straight here. Maybe he just stopped somewhere first.”

“Where else would he go?” he shot back. “Call the lobby and ask if he’s arrived.”

“Sure, sure, buddy, I’m on it.” Picking up the office phone he contacted the main reception area, asking for Aiden Shelby’s whereabouts. Listening to the response, he yelled, “What? He’s where?” Slamming the phone, he gave Chaz an alarming look. “He’s here, he’s in the lab.”

“Call the lab,” Chaz ordered, “and ask him to get up to my office,” he softened his voice a bit with a distinct, “now.”

Provoked by Aiden’s disrespect of his authority and the chain of command, Chaz didn’t hold back his frustration, “Give me a break.”

Grabbing the phone like a trained monkey, Daryl called the lab and instructed them to have Aiden report to their office. “Okay, he’ll be right up,” he relayed to Chaz.

Pacing in front of his desk, Chaz rambled on, “Why would he talk to the lab first? Does he have something to hide, or something he doesn’t want to tell us? Maybe cover-up a mistake?”

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Daryl tried to decompress his neurotic associate, “Maybe he had a question for them. Maybe he just had to retrieve something to show us.”

Remaining suspicious, Chaz ranted some more, “I never wanted to trust this outfit with the trial that makes or delays us going to full human trials.”

“You had too,” Daryl countered, “No one else could secure a facility for baboons in this country.”

“Please, don’t remind me, it still doesn’t make him trustworthy,” Chaz bantered back.

Aiden, untidy like a man that hasn’t slept in days breezed into Chaz’s office. “Sorry for the delay, I didn’t know you were waiting for me.”

“Who else would I be waiting for?” Chaz snapped. “Geez, man, you know how important this is and the security measures we’ve taken—can’t even use a phone to talk to each other. So, what’s with the lab?”

“Oh, that, well I needed to know the exact dose of Phenobarbital that I administered.”

“Ah, no, you don’t,” Chaz smarted back to him, “that’s privileged proprietary information protected from you and the competitors that stalk us trying to poach information during our trials.”

“Mm-hmm, do you recall how we agreed to sedate the baboons before administering the suppositories—which is part of your protocol being tested?”

“Of course I do.”

“Well, we had a hard time waking the baboons up. These animals can never be sacrificed like lab rats. It took two days for the clinic to bring them out of what amounted to medically induced comas.”

“Um, that’s not good,” Chaz conceded.

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“No,” Aiden said wearily, “it’s definitely not the greatest hits you were waiting for.”

“I get that,” Chaz replied curtly.

Unaffected by his anger, Aiden persisted, “We actually have some good news though. All three baboon trials were basically successful, though it took some time to wake them up.”

“Okay then,” Chaz relented, “let’s not take our eyes off the ball and lose our momentum. I’ll talk to the lab myself and get this worked out. We have three more left to do, right?”

“Exactly, and if this gets handled differently, your results will pass you to the next level,” Aiden alleged. “We’re ready to help with that, too.”

“Well,” Chaz conceded a bit, “based on your success with the first three baboons, you better be ready with the human trials then. FDA lets us move quickly after this trial is concluded.”

“That’s what I presumed. We’re ready to go and plan to do the last three baboons when I’m there tomorrow. We just don’t want them out cold for two days again.”

More enthused than before, Chaz nodded in agreement. “Yes, get that done tomorrow and the human trials will be at a building we own right here.” Addressing Daryl, he began finalizing implementation, “Can you go find out when the equipment will be here?”

Walking out of the room, Daryl nodded in agreement, “I’m on it.”

“Right,” Aiden confirmed.

“Your subjects are ready, aren’t they?” Chaz inquired.

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“Of course,” Aiden confirmed, “that was the easy part. Compared to the baboons, you could complete your human trial in a day.”

“We need you to arrange the subjects—and your staff immediately then. Your staff will monitor and administer the medications as arranged. I don’t want you to hold us up.”

“FDA likes it when you stay at arm’s length—keeping ‘clean hands’ during your trials. You won’t regret using us—we’re very good at what we do,” Aiden boasted.

“Sure, sure,” Chaz prodded him along, “just get it done.”

“You can count on us, just like that other matter you wanted handled,” Aiden remarked slyly.

“Good, good to know. Call as soon as you finish the baboon trials.”

Aiden was already departing, when he saluted Chaz, “Yes, sir.”

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Chapter 27

Driving into the one traffic light town that you'd miss if you were speeding, Martine listened to her phone navigation that directed her to the home of Charmaine and Levi.

Stewart Kincaid arranged for Martine to review the crime scene before anyone else would have access to the home. Waiting on the porch swing, Martine watched as the local Sheriff drove up to the home in his squad car, parking next to hers. "Hello," she called out from the porch to a swarthy man with a leathery weather-beaten complexion from years spent in the harsh bright sun.

"Good morning, ma'am, I'm Sheriff Gaines, you can call me Richard." He mosied over to the porch deck and took a good look at Martine. Without his distinguished law enforcement uniform with a holstered gun, badge, and patches, he could easily have been a tall weathered cowboy with spurs, chaps, and a western hat.

"I appreciate you meeting me here this morning," Martine smiled politely.

"Seems like your boss man wants you to get inside our crime scene," Richard replied.

"I hope that's going to be okay with you?"

"Don't see no reason to stop you." Richard's older features creased heavily when he forced a smile. Sauntering up the steps, he joined Martine and shook her hand. Unlocking the door, he took a sharp intake of air before entering. "So you're close to the family I suppose?"

Following behind Richard, Martine only saw the back of his thick closely cropped hair when he tipped his hat,

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ushering her in. Smells fumed in the closed-in sun baked home, and the coppery taste of blood was felt in on her tongue the moment she entered, causing her to react, “Oh, my goodness.” Stepping past him, she took in the heartbreaking emptiness of a country-styled home furnished for a young couple in their new beginnings.

Moving in front of her, Richard toured her through the disheveled home. “There seems to have been a slight altercation,” he narrated as he led her to the bedroom, “and this is where we found the bodies.” Pointing to the two blood soaked stains on the flooring, he swayed his head slowly in grief.

“You were first on the scene, weren’t you?” Martine mentioned.

“Yes,” he replied reverently.

“Can you describe it to me?” Martine asked congenially.

“This was where she was found,” he said nonchalantly, pointing to the biggest and darkest staining. “This is where he was,” he detailed, indicating a small area of discoloring.

Martine studied the crime scene. “Do you really think it was murder-suicide?”

“Well, ma’am, we don’t have cases this bad in these parts, but we do know the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach, but sometimes its a little lower.”

Martine looked puzzled. “So, you think this is a crime of passion?”

“Yes, the worst my officers have ever seen.”

“Why’s that?”

At a dizzying rate the rich details were relayed to her by Richard, “This stabbing was savage like a sewing machine murder blitz. Her abdomen had a gaping wound

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from the kitchen knife left right here.” Pointing to the area where Levi’s right hand would’ve presumably been, he continued on, “There was nothing left inside her for the coroner. That’s really personal, don’t you think?”

Imagining the carnage, Martine shook her head in disgust. “Yes, it certainly is,” she had to agree.

Richard next directed her attention to the left of the big blood stain. “He was next to her with a bullet hole in his head and a gun in his hand.”

“Was it his gun?” Martine questioned.

Richard retorted, “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Not everyone owns a hand gun,” she reminded him.

Richard corrected her, “Not everyone registers their hand gun.”

“And why would he do this? I assume you have a theory.”

“Rage, toxic rage,” Richard spouted. “These two weren’t in love, they were in crisis.”

Questioning his deductions, Martine deliberately tested him again, “How do you know that?”

“Experience, I keep my expectations low. That’s why I’m never disappointed or shocked. Love,” he snickered to himself, “You can give it, you can make it—you can take it.”

“Did you ever consider any other possibilities?”

“Ma’am, you either believe what everyone tells you to believe—or you believe your own eyes. My eyes see a husband killing his wife, and turning his gun on himself,” he described his conjectures with an ominous tone. “Coroner agrees, what did he call it?” Richard adjusted his hat for a moment, “Oh yeah, he called it ‘Impulse Emergency Murders,’ yep that’s what he called it.”

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“Well,” Martine weighed-in, “psychologically speaking that is possible. Did you do any DNA testing with the blood to prove that?”

Self-assured, Richard fired back, “We did. They found her blood on him.”

“Have you ruled out theft?”

“There’s nothing here that anyone would take, and the vehicles are still here. The only robberies we’ve had were at our gas station and grocery store—years ago. Like I said, there’s nothing worth taking in this town.”

“Just two lives,” Martine tiskied, “so you’re sure there’s no foul play?”

“Each clue might only be a brick, but when you put them together we have a smok’in chimney.”

“I’m just not sure you had all the bricks,” she boomeranged back.

Scrutinizing her with one eye cocked, he spurned her, “Dressing like a prom queen doesn’t make you one, anymore than owning a horse makes you a cowboy. What makes you a detective in my crime scene?”

Martine recognized the tension building and changed the subject, “Did you recover any electronics?”

“Just a computer and two cell phones,” he stated.

“I see. So, you’ve never considered any motives for a stranger related murder.”

“You ask a lot of questions for a fancy lawyer,” Richard’s brackish demeanor retorted. “You can save the grilling for steaks, like I’m saying, the case is closed.”

Martine retorted respectfully. “Not really. I just realized that anyone that used a knife like a sewing machine usually gets themselves cut or worse. I saw the coroner’s report and Levi didn’t have any cuts.”

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“Ma’am, handing me a paint brush and canvas doesn’t make me an artist. Visiting my crime scene doesn’t make you an authentic skilled investigator now, does it?”

“Right, right, that’s fair,” Martine silenced herself.

“This may be a small town, but it’s a big county I take care of,” Richard defended his credibility. Determined to keep her in her place, he didn’t waste the moment, “Fair? You want fair, be a taxi driver.”

Ignoring his snide comment, Martine refocused her efforts. “I was told I could retrieve the possessions you have in your custody since the case is closed now. Did you bring them?”

“Sure did, Ma’am. What do you think you’ll find—secret messages written in code?”

“Can’t say till we examine what you have.”

Leading Martine out to the porch, he probed her again, “What do you think you’ll find?”

Martine breathed the fresh air, before exchanging words, “I don’t know, but it’s a great narrative if you’re the only one telling the story. I will be verifying your conclusions.”

“Well, yah know we checked all that ourselves and there wasn’t anything on them.” Richard helped her off the porch, grumbling his last sentence, “I hope ya ‘all get this place cleaned up or burnt down now.”

“I’ll look into that,” she said, receiving the bag of electronics he promised her. “We’ll be in touch, thank you again.”

Tasked with the conundrum of agreeing with this investigation, or proving otherwise—weighed heavy on Martine as she drove away. Unsure what more she could glean from this department of law enforcement, she drove

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slowly down the county road that connected Levi and Charmaine's home to all their neighbors.

Noticing a large ranch with beautiful paint horses for sale, she briefly stopped her car to watch and write down the number and address—just as a herd of young ones streaked by in a playful gallop. “Eva’s gonna love this, *Rainbow Paint Farm*,” she mumbled in her car as she accelerated away from the fields of horses and hay.

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Chapter 28

After having a quick dinner out, Martine and Eva returned to their motel room and readied for bed. Switching on the TV and turning the volume low, Martine watched the news while Eva chatted on the phone about horses.

Falling asleep quickly to the droning sounds around her, Martine lifted out of her body, landing in a desert land with flat-topped mesas and deep canyons with slow moving tributaries. Dressed in a plain knee-length cotton dress fastened together on her right shoulder, leaving her left shoulder bare was indicative of a primitive Indian culture of the Southwest. Light colored knee high moccasins covered her feet and a cloth headband held her long hair in place.

Busy at the stream were many female maidens washing cloths and conversing in excitement. Steep-sided canyon walls on both sides of the creek contained adobe style cliff dwellings connected to each other with ladders and ropes. Resembling the elaborate Cliff Palace at Mesa Verde National Park in Southwest Colorado, Martine suspected she was in an ancient time when the peaceful Pueblo Indians inhabited the waterways of the Colorado and Rio Grande rivers. At some point in time the water dried up and the ruined remains of the famous cliff dwellings survived, making way for mysteries and theories about the disappearance of these people to be speculated and imagined.

Glimpsing the men nearby that wore nothing more than breechcloths, and the primitive pottery being carried by women, she also presumed it was an almost prehistoric time where the Pueblo peoples survived in isolated regions by

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waterways. Peaceful communal life was vibrant with men, women, and children smiling and visiting in harmony beneath their cliff-style multi-story fortresses.

In this reality, Martine was able to speak and understand the language as she joined the girls by the water, hearing one say, "It's almost time," pointing to the sun setting behind a tall mesa, she added, "we need to leave."

Without further delay the group gathered their items and swiftly departed for their concealed dwellings in the cliffs of the canyon walls.

Only about twelve years old, a sweet and innocent girl asked her friend, "Will you sit with me tonight?" Appearing fearful, she continued, "I'm scared."

Grabbing her friend's hand, the older girl obliged, "Yes, I will sit close to you." Encouraging the younger girl with a smile, she added, "You have nothing to be afraid of. No harm can come tonight."

Martine found herself following the two girls into a large Kiva located up a ladder and inside the cliff-style village where elders were preparing the site for a ceremonial ritual. Taking her place behind the two girls she watched as the large community of primitive Indians gathered in silence. Men dominated the spiritual rites while others assembled around the circular fire glowing in the center of the exceptionally large Kiva.

Ceremonial dances and rituals have always been customary in Native American communities, so Martine would have to wait patiently as an observer to comprehend for what traditional ceremony this might be.

Historians of the Southwestern United States have long questioned and theorized the events and purposes of the civilization that inhabited the mysterious dwellings that still exist in National Parks. Kivas—round ceremonial rooms

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with an entrance hole in the ceiling, symbolized the pueblos' subterranean prehistory that was taught to her growing up in Southwest Colorado.

"Atahsaia," an adolescent boy yelled, excitedly pointing at a monster that entered the Kiva.

Making a dramatic entrance, a man donning a huge dark mask with frightening features painted on it, long stringy black hair, and a large mouth with jagged shark-styled teeth entered the ceremonial Kiva dancing with a bounce to the steady rhythm of chanting and drum beats. Moving in slow oblong loops the man wearing a bulky deerskin and terrifying mask with thick red circles where the eyes were, stirred up the young crowd of children who reacted with sobs of fear. Waving a large wooden knife colored with red paint in their faces, made them screech in horror.

Panicked, a young girl yelled, "Don't let him take me." Covering her tearful face in the lap of her mother, she tried to hide from the over-sized beast that shook the large weapon at her.

Another child bellowed, "He wants to eat us."

"Look," a girl called-out, "maidens."

Two young girls came walking into the circle, oblivious to the terrible creature that awaited them on the other side.

"Màtsailèma, Ahaiyùta," the children called. Reminiscent of a theatrical performance, more characters appeared—chasing the wild faced beast away from the two small girls.

"Kill Atahsaia," a boy shouted.

Older children jeered together, "Kill Atahsaia."

When Atahsaia was subdued, all the children chanted the names, "Màtsailèma, Ahaiyùta," over and over again.

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“Is he gone?” A young girl, positioned in front of Martine, asked her hand-holding friend.

“You can look, Atahsaia is gone.”

As the two girls rose to look at what happened to the beast, Martine felt her body dissolve from the scene before anymore information was revealed.

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Chapter 29

Far from the spotlights that captured her after winning a few monumental cases in her career, Martine felt groggy from sleeping poorly on an overly stiff hotel mattress. Morning showed through the cracked curtains in the motel suite they rented, signaling her it was time to rise-up from her deep sleep.

Before scooting out of bed, she grabbed her journal and pen that were lying in the bed next to her—writing feverishly about the extremely lucid vision she had just woke up from.

Joining Eva at the small table near the window responsible for the bright sunshine, she pushed the curtains open, asking her daughter, “How’d you sleep?”

“Great,” Eva answered cheerfully, “I need to be at that ranch in half an hour,” she announced, walking over to her suitcase. “They’ve actually got three horses for me to check out. If they’re as good as they sound, I’ll get to purchase them for June and Ray.”

Martine got a cup of coffee and started digging through her suitcase for a pair of jeans. “I knew you’d get excited about these breeders. Aren’t you looking for horses with speed?”

“Yes, we are,” Eva grunted, tugging on her tight-fitting riding boots. “The clients they have right now need horses for team penning, barrel racing, and junior jumping. You’ll have to shoot the video from my phone so I can send it to them. These horses I’m checking out were all bred and raised at the ranch here.”

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"It always seems like we find horses wherever we go together," Martine mused with a smile.

"It's perfect for me since I'll be here a few days. That gives me time to really vet these horses before deciding."

"And I'll get to know the neighbors," Martine added as she finished dressing.

"I knew I would look at horses while I was here." Eva looked adoringly at her mother who was applying makeup. Sharing the bathroom mirror, she reflected, "I just didn't know you would arrange it so soon, but it doesn't surprise me in the least."

"It does seem to work that way," Martine admitted.

Eva poured another coffee and sat down with one of her horse magazines, waiting for her mother to finish in the bathroom. "How'd you sleep last night?"

Martine joined her at the table, rubbing the nape of her neck. "Not sure."

Eva eyed her mother with concern. "Oh-oh, you had a dream, didn't you?"

Pouring herself a cup of coffee, she furrowed her brow. "You could say that."

"Well?" Eva maintained an unblinking stare while setting her reading down.

"I'm thinking I'm more confused. It just doesn't make sense." Martine tried to shake it off with a head toss.

"You know it might make sense if you tell me about it."

"Okay," Martine tried to muster up the words to describe the dream in a way that Eva could relate to it, "Remember when we spent our vacation time at the ranch by Durango?"

"Of course," Eva sparkled at the great memories fostered there throughout her childhood.

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“Do you remember when you saw Kachina dolls for the first time? You were really young.”

Eva looked thoughtful. “Yeah, sorta.”

Mining for Eva’s near photographic memory, she probed deep, “Do you remember what you said to me?”

“Icky?”

“Yes,” Martine pitched a laugh, “basically they scared you. I didn’t really like them either, but we liked kokopelli art.”

“Oh ya, the guy with a flute,” Eva remarked. “He wasn’t scary at all.”

With a relevant connection made, Martine began describing her dream, “Last night I was at an Ancient Pueblo style ceremony ritual in a big Kiva like the one you saw at Mesa Verde National Park. The main actor was dressed like a very evil looking Kachina doll.”

“You’re right, that’s really weird.”

“Exactly,” Martine exclaimed, “because I never knew much about any of those Kachina dolls.”

“Well I don’t either. Is there more?”

“It had to do with a specific Kachina.”

“Do you know the name? We could find something on-line now,” Eva offered.

“Yeah, I do.” Martine opened her journal. “Atahsaia was the bad Kachina. Let’s focus on his role.”

Eva took Martine’s journal and entered the name Atahsaia into her search browser. “He . . . he,” she stuttered, “is an evil cannibalistic demon.”

“Are you kidding?” Martine opened her laptop and searched Atahsaia’s name, too. “Zuni,” she whispered to herself. “This makes sense, he’s a legendary cannibal demon that is killed by twin Zuni war gods after they save two young maidens that he wanted to eat.”

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Eva added, "He eats children by tricking them."

"He's known to be a liar," Martine added.

"Did he look big and ugly?" Eva questioned.

"Yes, the costume really scared the children."

Eva read aloud, "It says here that he is a spiritual creature that has the physical form of a giant with long, wild hair on his chest and hands. His head has bristly hair like a bison's mane and a big mouth with bloody teeth."

"That sounds right," Martine nodded somberly.

"Ehh, it says he had bulging eyes that didn't blink."

Martine blurted, "Here's the story I saw them act-out." She began paraphrasing the mythological story she found online, "He lied to the two young maidens, telling them he was their grandfather. Then he lured them to his cave and tried to trick them into eating his delicious soup they could smell, but they saw the tiny hand bones of a baby in their bowl and knew it was human flesh. When they were leaving he tricked them again by offering to comb their hair. Just when he was ready to bite their heads off, the twin warriors killed him."

"Well, what could it mean to know about this demon or the story?" Eva inquired sincerely.

Still reading when she answered, Martine moaned, "There aren't that many cannibalistic demons in historical mythologies. But, they're really bad if you encounter one. So, based on characteristics of this demon spirit, it may make some sense."

Eva blinked her surprise, "Like what?"

"They utilize the façade of being good and helpful to lure victims into their perimeter and then consume them. It relies on the energies of others to live and it has an unspeakable appetite. It has a terrifying influence because it

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is very dark and powerful with an unrelenting urge to fill its quota.”

“How can it do all that if it looks so bad?”

“Well the ancient civilizations have the depiction of it because back then I think these types of entities were visible,” Martine speculated. “In our physical realm now, we can’t see the demons that they could. Only their stories, customs, and rituals are preserved throughout eons of history. Those legends told throughout time probably describe their true looks and characteristics. It is said that fallen angels, evil spirits, and demons were void of physical form after they were cast out of heaven. That may imply they did have form.”

“In a way that makes sense to me. Your dreams are more like pretend places that you go. They don’t seem real or possible—more like a myth.”

Martine interrupted her daughter, “Here is a very unique quality this demon has—it has the ability to demonstrate genuine feelings on something substantial, when in reality it’s based on a lie. It’s an expert at misleading and deceiving.”

“How?” Eva questioned.

Martine read on, “On the surface this dark force would present itself as a good and righteous person whose character could not be questioned or challenged because they can spin the biggest fallacies of all the demons. It creates a beautiful powerful façade and a minefield of temptations that can’t be resisted, and then leaves the victims destroyed in many ways, like financially, spiritually, physically, and emotionally.”

Eva got up to get more coffee. “I wish I could be more help. I don’t know anything about demons.”

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“No one should have to know about them, but we do, or we become an object for which they can take advantage.” Martine jerked her head back from the computer screen, commending her daughter, “You are helping more than you realize. I think I just figured out how this relates to all these other dreams.”

Hurrying back to her mother, Eva sparked, “Spill.”

“A mythological legend that in a more modern civilization is reduced to ceremonial storytelling to scare children into obedience under the guise of a child eating monster that can swallow children whole—could’ve been a real event eons ago. The problem is we can’t see this monster anymore. Martine pondered her thoughts while she got up and paced.

“Well, yeah,” Eva concurred, “nobody worries about children being sacrificed to monsters like that anymore.”

“Sure, but just because we can’t see it anymore doesn’t prove it can’t or isn’t happening,” Martine deduced.

“Okay,” Eva said, “but how?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t think this demon has ever really been abolished. There are conspiracy stories about child sacrifice and cults that practice it.” Martine stopped herself, “I don’t get how that relates to Charmaine and Levi. There’s no possible way this farm boy and his new bride participated in that. It’s a stretch to think they would.”

“Not unless she was pregnant,” Eva suggested.

“She wasn’t pregnant according to two autopsies, so that’s not what happened.”

“What else could your dream mean?”

“I don’t know at this point,” Martine admitted, “but I’ll have to pay attention and not discard it completely.” Thumbing through her journal that summarized several dreams, she noticed a theme. “Something is going on that

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involves children, souls, and this demon—that can truly lure people into believing that child sacrifice is a good choice, or bait children into its snare.”

Eva tiskied, “Actually, it sounds like it did back then, but not now.”

Martine kept processing, “You’re right, but what if it was being done in our society because we choose to, but don’t realize it?”

“We would never do that,” Eva stated.

“Wait,” Martine exclaimed, “you and I wouldn’t, but something called Pro-Choice would,” she reasoned.

“Abortion,” Eva guessed, “that’s crazy.”

“It fits,” Martine began formulating the possibility, “it’s been legal since before you were born. Before 1973 it was illegal. Think about it, we are deemed horrible if we disagree with someone’s choice to abort a baby. Because we can’t see what is happening to a dying fetus, or the demon that wants it, the practice perpetuates and the demon grows. Its parasitic nature affects families, friends, partners, and relatives—drawing energy from entire societies. It has consumed the energies of countless babies at this point, and hurt so many people emotionally. This has only made it bigger and stronger, more in control than ever. Abortion has never been a small problem to our human race—so why isn’t it a bigger problem now,” Martine asked herself.

Eva cringed, “When you put it that way, I can’t imagine all the victims affected by this demon.”

“Victims that were used and victims that were consumed,” Martine groaned, “I just feel ill. There are literally no obstacles in getting one now. If you want one, there are advocates ready to help.”

“Wow, you’re right,” Eva agreed.

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“Finding participants that don’t think they’re doing anything wrong while providing it victims for its unquenchable thirst for death is its greatest power,” Martine formulated. “They will believe sincerely they’re doing what’s right and acceptable.”

“What a monster,” Eva expelled.

“Yes,” Martine acknowledged, “I wish we could all know what happened on this planet eons ago. Zuni and the Pueblo people knew about this land and kept the historical memories alive as best they could. Their cautionary tales have stood the test of time, but as the centuries passed they were reduced to mere folklore.”

“Along with the evil demons they had to cope with,” Eva added.

“Let’s go then,” Martine said, grabbing her purse and phone as she headed out the door with Eva.

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Chapter 30

Again the annoying sound that woke her in the morning began its startling beeping noise. Jade stirred around until her mother woke up. After breakfast she heard her mother talking to someone that wasn't there. She could only make-out the hysterical cries of her mother being tormented. Anxious for her mother's wellbeing, she used her favorite thumb to appease herself. She wasn't big enough or strong enough to help more.

Somehow they got into the car for the musical ride that she had grown to look forward to and like. Soon Jade was napping to instrument sounds that calmed her into submission and total relaxation. Rocking slightly in her slumber, she didn't know how much time had passed before the car stopped and her mother got out with her. Walking a short distance they entered a building with phones ringing and many people engaged in conversation.

"Have a seat over there," an unfamiliar person directed her mother, "someone will be with you shortly."

Because this was a new place with different people, Jade paid close attention to everything in case her mother needed her help. She felt so safe with her mom—the fear of being separated frightened her. Even while they were sitting quietly together, she stayed still so nothing would go wrong—it was important to stay together, and they always had.

Jade started processing a pattern that seemed to occur when they had a new activity. Some of the strange places like this that were noisy with a lot of new people meant she might try some new taste, like the odd one that turned her

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stomach, or the yummy one that kept her up all night. As she got bigger that possibility seemed to happen more and more, and she found it interesting.

“Miss James,” another voice called.

“That’s me,” Jade’s mother answered as she stood up from her seat.

“Hello,” the voice said, as they walked with her.

Hearing the door close behind them, Jade was relieved it was quiet and peaceful wherever they were. She wanted to be brave, but didn’t believe she was ready. As her mother moved around she stayed alert, anticipating a new adventure or meal.

Suddenly a man came in, speaking very fast while he was examining them, “Okay, everything looks good.” He left them alone and the door clicked shut.

Without anyone else speaking to them, they left the room quickly and got back in the car for the ride home.

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Chapter 31

Outside the motel under the bright morning light they got in the rental car and headed back to the lazy country road that led to Charmaine and Levi's home. Only about twenty miles away by car, Eva did the driving while Martine directed her and studied the surroundings more thoroughly as they neared their destination.

Pointing ahead to the sign, Martine told Eva, "Take the next left." It didn't dawn on her until now, but the name *Rainbow Paint Ranch* must have some relevance to the Indian and carnival dreams she had recently. It was too much of a coincidence for there to be a concentration of paint horses and the word rainbow associated with it.

Suddenly aware that she might obtain something of relevance at this location, other than horses her daughter might want to purchase, gave her a renewed urge to visit with whoever might be in charge at the ranch.

Horses on both sides of the driveway were contently grazing on thick green pasture grass as they rolled past them to the stables. Eva oohed loudly, "They're beautiful, and look really well cared for."

"We need to be leaving in less than two hours," Martine gave Eva a heads-up. "There'll be time tomorrow morning too."

"No Problem," Eva replied.

Parking the car next to the barn, Eva jumped out and walked briskly into the building.

"Hello, I'm Trina," a woman in the isle greeted cheerfully.

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"I'm Eva," she returned with a glowing smile, shaking Trina's hand, "Who is this?" Petting the horse that wanted her attention, she giggled, "He's very friendly."

"This is Ranger. We bred him here ourselves. He's been started as a barrel racer. Do you want to try him first?"

"Sure do," Eva opened the stall door and led the horse out by his halter, clipping him up in the cross-ties where she inspected him and his stunning white and sorrel markings like a used car. "I love his four white legs and long blaze," she complimented the paint breeder.

"Hello," Trina acknowledged Martine hospitably when she noticed she had joined them.

"Hi, I'm Martine."

"I'm Trina," she replied. Turning back to Eva, she offered, "I've got my saddle ready for you since you don't have yours." She pointed to the nearby saddle rack hanging off the wall. "This black and white horse next to Ranger is Jack—short for Blackjack, and he likes the cows. Across from Jack we have Apollo, and he's good at everything. He's only three and hasn't been trained in dressage, though he does like jumping and can do lead changes."

"Looks perfect," Eva conversed openly as she began saddling Ranger, "but, I'm just a little concerned about Apollo's age. He might be too green for the client. They need a well broke horse that's ready to compete in about ninety days."

Trina started putting the bridle on Ranger. "Apollo's pretty well broke. I did it myself." Observing Eva's confidence with handling the horse, she quizzed her, "Will you be able to do the finishing on his training?"

"Absolutely," she assured Trina, "that's my job." Making the final adjustments to Ranger's tack, Eva began leading the horse out of the barn.

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Motioning to her left, Trina advised Eva, “We’ll go out to our training arena where you’ll be able to ride him through all his gates. Do you want me ride him first?”

Hiking herself up into the saddle, Eva gathered the reins, and checked her stirrups for length. “No, I got this.” Starting the big sorrel and white horse off at a walk, she praised the striking mount, “Good boy, Ranger, show me what you know.”

Martine stood with Trina inside the gate as Eva walked the horse a distance before cueing a trot out of him. “You have a beautiful place here. How long have you had it?” she asked.

Trina sighed, “Several years. We bought it when we moved to Oklahoma.”

“Really,” Martine remarked before discreetly prying, “did you know the couple that was living down the road from you?”

Trina looked through the glaring sun. “I did. Why do you ask?”

“We were hoping to see Charmaine when we came for a visit. We recently learned of what happened?”

Appearing dismayed, Trina shaded her eyes as she looked toward the property that now stayed abandoned. “That’s a shocker to me.”

“Why do you say that?”

“They seemed happy,” Trina shared.

“So, you got to know them, huh?”

“After I welcomed Charmaine and Levi to the neighborhood she spent a lot of time here with me and Jim.”

“Why’s that?”

“She wanted a horse. She was waiting for Levi to get a pasture and barn built so she could buy Charlie.”

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Martine let out a giggle—let me guess, “Charlie Horse.”

Trina exchanged the laugh, repeating Martine, “Charlie Horse, that’s good.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I thought it was intentional.”

“No, but it is now,” Trina smiled at her. “He’s a great horse and he’s missing his rider,” she relayed, sounding a little forlorn.

“No doubt,” Martine agreed, “they’re very sensitive and intuitive animals. Eva’s a titch of an animal communicator. You’d be surprised what they know about us,” Martine intimated as they both watched Eva lope the horse another lap around the arena before Ranger was transitioned into a more demanding routine. Capturing Ranger on camera doing a fast figure eight pattern requiring quick lead changes, she continued conversing with Trina, “I heard it was a murder-suicide, are you satisfied with that conclusion?”

“Not really. I just don’t see why or how that could be possible.”

“We find it a big stretch too—especially since you just told me she had a friend named Charlie here, and had plans to buy him.” Martine lowered the camera phone as Eva trotted up to them. Trusting in Trina’s insights, she mined for more personal information, “Can you think of anyone that might have done this to them? Is that a possibility?” Martine read her daughters mind and handed her the video she had recorded.

“I don’t know,” Trina said, “but who would do that? This is the most rural area in the county. Nothing ever happens here.”

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“This looks good,” Eva approved, handing the phone back to Martine. “I’m gonna ride Jack next,” her voice trailing off as she trotted off to the barn.

Walking side-by-side, Martine and Trina followed behind Eva and Ranger. “Did Charmaine ever confide in you about any problems?” Martine inquired.

“None,” Trina sounded adamant, “that she ever shared with us—same with Levi. He’s helped Jim bail hay. We really liked those kids.”

Trina’s last comment triggered Martine’s memory of Charmaine’s abdominal wounds, asking a more personal question, “Did they plan on having children?”

Stopping inside the barn where Eva was finishing the final touches to Jack’s tack, Trina divulged Charmaine’s plans, “They were actually trying to get pregnant. She wanted to be a mom, especially since she never knew her own.”

Realizing that Trina clearly had been her friend, or she wouldn’t know Charmaine’s true intentions and past life regrets, Martine supposed, “They both wanted a baby, didn’t they?”

“Of course,” Trina digressed a bit, “about two months ago they thought she was for about two weeks, and were so excited.”

Wasting no time, Eva mounted Jack. “He’s absolutely beautiful. He’s got more white than black—too bad he’s a gelding, he might have made a great Homozygous stud.”

“Thank you,” Trina replied, “his stud is Homozygous, but Jack isn’t.”

Trotting past them she called out to her mother, “I think he’s a Pegasus.”

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Laughing, Martine shook her head as her daughter fearlessly charged into the arena. Noticing Trina's confused expression, she offered an explanation as they returned to the arena, "Some of the horses are actually unicorns and Pegasus's, according to my daughter. She seems to be able to spot them." Focusing the camera on Eva, she started filming Jack as he effortlessly performed with a loose rein and a collected body—both good signs of a horse and rider connecting instantly.

"I've never seen Jack look like that under saddle," Trina observed in awe. "Wow, it's wonderful to see someone ride a horse like that."

"He does look great," Martine concurred as she focused on capturing his performance digitally. "Riders can't see what we do, so I record for her so she can see the good and bad. There's always room for improvement for both horse and rider."

"I guess you're right, I should have Jim do this for me."

"It does help," Martine validated. "So, you and Jim traded the noises of a busy city for the whinny of horses," Martine small-talked during Jack and Eva's work-out."

"We sure did. It's harder here with few conveniences, but it's peaceful and calming."

"It is very remote," Martine stated, putting the camera down as Eva trotted past them back towards the barn. "It's hard to imagine that Levi or Charmaine could be unhappy, and you wouldn't know. It sounds like you were their friends."

Walking behind Eva and her fast paced horse, Trina stopped moving and questioned Martine, "Why so many questions about them?"

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Martine finally pacified the woman she had been interrogating, “We know the family and they had a lot of questions that haven’t been answered. The one I have is—could there have been foul play, or is it murder-suicide?”

Trina exuded relief with a resounding sigh, “Jim and I made the call to 911 for the welfare check. We hadn’t seen them, and Levi didn’t show up to help Jim that weekend,” she blurted out.

Martine froze-up a moment. “Really, why didn’t you say so?”

“If something was wrong, we didn’t want to be blamed or brought into the problem. This is a small community and people never spread the truth. We didn’t want people treating us like suspects or murderers.”

Suddenly suspicious of what else Trina had been keeping to herself, Martine guessed, “You knew something happened, or you saw what happened.”

Trina sputtered, “No, not like you think. We went in the home and found them dead.”

Shocked by the revelation that they had entered the crime scene without law enforcement awareness, Martine verified Trina’s admission, “You both went into the home and found them deceased, and then called 911.”

Hanging her head in embarrassment, Trina acknowledged their actions conclusively, “Yes we did.”

“Trina, did you touch or move anything?”

“Just the vegetables that were lying on the porch,” she explained. “I thought she dropped them so I put them back in her basket and brought them in the house. That was before I knew anything was wrong.”

“Where did you put that?”

“I put it in the kitchen when we went in.”

“Anything else you remember?” Martine asked.

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Appearing shameful, Trina revealed the unthinkable, “Well,” she began, “when we found them, Charmaine had a knife sticking out of her stomach and Jim pulled it out to help her.”

“What did he do with the knife?”

“I don’t remember. He dropped it, or threw it—he certainly couldn’t put it back in her, could he?”

“Of course not,” Martine reassured her, watching Eva zip past on Apollo, the last horse she was testing out. Tall and leggy, Apollo was a gorgeous golden colored tobiano palomino paint with dramatic white markings that matched his mane and tail. “Wow is he a looker,” Martine gasped at the show-stopping horse that pranced proudly under saddle.

“I think he’s one of our best. I know he’s young, but he is talented, beautiful, and agreeable. I think she’s gonna love him.”

Filming the graceful young gelding as he trotted and loped around the pen, Martine resumed conversing, “Are they all from the same stud?” she asked Trina.

“No, but they are all tobianos,” she stated.

Capturing Apollo in his flying lead changes, Martine complimented Trina, “He’s one the best tobiano palomino paints I’ve ever seen. All your horses are well marked. You have a very colorful herd.”

“Like a rainbow,” Trina returned reflectively. “It is a herd that we need to thin before winter. All the mares took this year, so we’ll have a lot of foals to work starting in March.”

“Congratulations, you must feel like a mom every spring.”

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“I do,” she stated as Eva trotted up to preview Martine’s camera work. “How’d he do?” Eva asked hopefully.

“Breathtaking, Eva,” Martine answered.

Trina concurred, “I’d show him if I could.”

“He might be my favorite,” Eva admitted. “I do like them all though, I just need to contact the buyers for approval.” Handing the camera back to Martine she approved the footage, “That’ll work.”

“Great,” Trina sounded enthusiastically, “tell them Jim can transport horses, too, if they need a shipper.”

Nodding in agreement—Eva dismounted Apollo and started leading him back to the stable. “Wow, they might really like that. How about you, Apollo? Want to come and train with me? We have a big covered arena.”

Martine interrupted the horse talk, “We need to get going right away, or we’ll be late. You two can talk later, huh?”

“No problem,” Trina obliged, “I can take care of the horses and give them a good brushing. You two get going. Call me, Eva,” she said, waving goodbye.

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Chapter 32

Morning with horses came and went quickly. Getting in the car for the drive to *Brain Fitness*, Martine suggested, “We both need to get closer to the staff today. No one seems too concerned about Charmaine’s departure. I’m hoping one of us can find out more about her personal life and what is being said. Eva, you’re the one closest in age to the employees there, no one would suspect you of anything other than what a concerned friend might ask.”

Eva, with her capacity to befriend anyone at any age, reassured her mother, “I’ve got this. I like it there. I’ll find out everything I can.”

“It’s imperative you stay discrete because it affects both of us if you’re not.”

Eva grinned like a cat with a canary, “Noel introduced me to my practitioner before we left yesterday. His name is Trent.”

Martine glanced over to Eva’s wide grin. “Let me guess, he’s young and cute.”

“Yep,” she gleamed.

“Well, he’s yours for a few days. I will want details, all of them. I know how you can affect people.”

“Of course,” she said. “Did you have a dream that could help?” Eva angled flirtatiously.

“Dream, yes. Help? I doubt it,” she said flatly.

Eva elaborated on profound dreams her mother would have, “Why do you think that the dreams never make sense right away?”

“I have a theory—dreams are answers to questions we haven’t figured out how to ask,” Martine theorized.

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“That sounds hopeless.”

“It feels that way,” Martine concurred. “Let’s keep trusting we’re going to get the answers we need. I suspect whatever they are, they’ll be the truth.”

“I don’t see how a dream like you had last night can help anybody,” Eva critiqued.

“Well, I don’t know that answer yet either, but it must be relevant,” Martine defended her encounter with the Zuni cultures storytelling of a child eating monster. “It’s very easy for individuals and societies to be conditioned into believing anything and following the instructions handed down.”

“No it’s not,” Eva disagreed vehemently.

“Afraid so,” Martine refuted. “The younger the subjects, the easier it is to mold them. That’s why colleges are a breeding ground for grooming social norms—or abnormalities into impressionable minds. It has happened this way throughout history, even when you were a little girl in Montessori school you did something that was so innocent and adorable I wrote about it in your baby book.” Martine reached out to hug her daughter.

“Please don’t embrace me,” Eva pleaded.

Martine smiled. “I can—no one’s here but you and me.”

“How old was I?”

“Probably about four years old, anyway, I had to take you and Alexa to work with me because school was closed that day. You had to go to the restroom, so Alexa and I went with you and waited. You were in a women’s public restroom in your own stall with the door closed. That was the first time you were alone in a toilet stall. We waited and waited for you while I fixed Alexa’s hair. When it smelled bad enough, I finally asked you if you were done and you

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said yes. I asked you if you could flush the toilet then, and you said you couldn't. I asked you why and you said because it says 'Don't Flush' and you didn't want to get in trouble."

Eva gasped, "I did not."

"Yes you did," Martine countered, "and I suddenly realized you could partially read the sign 'Don't Flush Sanitary Products' that was posted inside each stall door."

Eva let out a big, "Really?"

Martine was laughing, "Really, it was so cute. I was so impressed how well they were teaching you to phonetically read. They had a very unique method and it worked."

"Yeah, that's a pretty good story."

"Exactly, Jesus taught with parables, just like the Zuni's and many other cultures. They are memorable ways to condition young minds for both good and safety. In the wrong hands it can cause problems and social divide. All I know is there is a lot of meaning in the story for me to process—sometimes you have to look behind to move ahead. But not now, we're here," she finished as she parked the car.

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Chapter 33

Deep inside, closed off from the world around, a hive of lab technicians worked diligently under bright lights—testing their concoction in a pristine sterile environment.

“Ed, do you have a minute?” his boss Eric Walsh flashed harshly.

Looking up from his microscope, Ed eyed Mr. Walsh. “Yes, sir, what can I do for you?”

“I need to know how this formula is going. I heard there were some special considerations made for the baboons.”

“Yes, we took care of that so Aiden could finish up today as planned.”

Eric nodded in acceptance, “Do I want to know what you did?”

“Probably not, but the baboons will be fine and we should know by tomorrow how it went,” Ed disclosed.

“So, we’re still on schedule to start as planned,” Eric verified.

“I believe so,” Ed confirmed.

Using the code name given to their patented drug, Eric embellished, “This is the big one for *Terminator*.”

“Yes it is, Mr. Walsh, everything has been looking great so far.”

“I hope you’re right, because if you are, our last trial will get us over the finish line ahead of schedule.”

“Yes,” Ed said modestly.

“I want to make sure the modified sedative suppository is here.”

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Knocking his forehead with the hull of his hand, Ed admitted, “No, I’m sorry I forgot to order that.”

“Well, get it done, man. You have to mix the Phenobarbital with our compound for this trial. No substitutes.”

“Of course,” Ed acknowledged, “it will be our patented formula.”

“Don’t make me stay down here and do your job, too,” Eric humiliated the man as he walked away.

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Chapter 34

Eva and Martine walked into *Brain Fitness* together, checking in for their scheduled appointments. Noel came out first and greeted them both before taking Eva back for her session with Trent.

“Martine,” a soft voice called her.

Standing up, she replied, “I’m Martine.”

“Hello, I’m Gemma—so glad to meet you,” she introduced herself with a broad smile.

Martine was greeted by a professionally dressed woman of her own age, with short brown hair and a slender frame. Joining her at the reception desk, Martine reached for her hand and shook it. “I’ve been looking forward to this meeting, too. It’s really amazing here. Very state-of-the-art,” she praised.

Ushering her to a tastefully decorated private office, she offered Martine a bottle of water, “Here, please take this unless I can get you some coffee.”

“No to coffee, this is perfect.”

Gesturing for Martine to take a seat, she began by asking, “You’re new here, have you ever experienced a Hypnotherapy session before?”

“No, I just learned about it,” Martine answered politely.

“I see. Today you want to have a consultation, is that correct?”

“Yes, since it’s different than traditional counseling, I had a lot of questions first. The concept is intriguing.”

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“It is, and the results are remarkable. At *Brain Fitness* we can produce outstanding benefits in weeks and months—not years and years.”

“That’s not all that fascinates me. I’m curious about how this could help some other people I have in mind, so some of the questions I have might not be for me.”

“Certainly, we can cover anything you want in our consultation.”

“Yesterday Noel gave me valuable information about brain balancing. Because you’ve had results using both treatments in difficult situations I wanted to consider both.”

“We can do that.” Gemma said.

Curious about Gemma’s qualifications, Martine got personal right away, “What has convinced you to become a practitioner of this type of therapy?”

Gesturing to a framed replica of Michael Angelo’s ‘The Creation of Adam’ hanging large on her office wall, Gemma addressed the famous art fresco, “Do you see where God is pointing to Adam?”

“Of course,” Martine affirmed.

“Look closely to where God is, what do you see?”

Martine scrutinized the details of what most people presumed to be a heavenly station in the sky. “God is clothed and not naked like Adam and He is surrounded by angelic looking Cherubs?”

“Anything else that looks familiar?” Gemma coaxed.

Studying the most renowned art depiction of creation displayed in the Vatican’s Sistine Chapel ceiling, Martine strained harder at the art piece. “It’s not a cloud,” she surmised, “though I always thought it was a cloud. Is yours different?”

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“No,” Gemma moved over to the art to explain, “but you’re right it’s not a cloud.”

Unsure what she was suppose to see, she admitted, “I really don’t know what it is.”

Gemma interpreted it, “It’s a brain, a human brain and this is the medulla,” she stated, while highlighting it with her finger. “I will forever be intrigued with the mysteries of our brains.”

Nodding in agreement, Martine shared her awe, “Wow, that’s amazing. Does the Pope know,” she joked.

Laughing, Gemma said, “I hope so, but I doubt it. The mind is the real frontier,” she finished thoughtfully.

“Let’s talk about you and what we can do for you.”

Martine had to think fast, “I know a twin that died. I was close to her and sense her presence all the time.”

“Did the twin die before she was born?”

Confused, Martine asked, “Um, why do you ask?”

“It makes a difference on what we could and should do.”

“How do you mean?”

“I’ve worked with clients who were connected to tragedies that weren’t in their control, basically . . . innocent bystanders. I need to prepare you properly if the twin died in utero.”

“In utero,” she repeated in surprise. “Are you saying you’ve had to deal with that?”

“Yes, and my experience has shown that a lot of trauma occurs while in the womb, or from a soul’s past life. Just like you wouldn’t be capable of dealing with severe trauma until reaching out for help.”

Curious, Martine dug deeper, wondering if something Gemma said might trigger relevancy to her

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dreams or this case, “I’ve always wondered how abortion affects a soul. Do you know?”

“I have incredible compassion and empathy for anyone who ever had to face that choice. I wish we could be there and help heal the ones that choose abortion and believe it was the right thing to do at the time. But, the sad truth is, I’ve witnessed firsthand the souls destroyed by this decision when they were rebirthed in the next life. They are literally torn apart both physically and spiritually.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes. Abortion has created issues with souls we’ve worked with. Some of these souls were re-born missing part of their soul or body. There are, however, lasting emotional repercussions that we’ve been successful in healing.”

“I hope you can accept some of my skepticism, I’m Catholic and we are taught not to believe in reincarnation.”

“Ah, I see. We didn’t either, but it is apparent to us now and most other religions, that the soul is immortal.”

“Yes, Catholics believe that as well.”

Gemma revealed, “I’m Catholic too. This is not a conflict for me because we’re told that the soul is the subject of human consciousness and freedom. The soul and body together form one unique human nature.”

“Yes, Catholics are taught that the soul and body are separate at death.”

“And that the soul doesn’t die with the body,” Gemma completed the concept. “It is individual and immortal, created by God and with which it will be reunited in the final resurrection.”

Martine added, “You taught confirmation, too?” The two laughed together.

“We do not use the term reincarnation here. We’re dealing with a soul’s progression. No one person or religion

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knows all the mysteries of a soul. But, it does seem like you have complete awareness of what we can do here differently than at a therapists or hypnotist's office."

Martine suddenly realized that Gemma was discussing something that clearly related to her dream and could be relevant. "Interesting, you've got my attention. You're healing souls here."

Gemma signaled with a nod, "We do, and souls have families. A Hypnotherapy regression is a journey back in time to recover memories and explore events from the souls' past that is causing a problem. The soul, being different than the body it's in during this lifetime is the focus. It's very transformative, and helps with the biggest problems and the slightest ones. It also might uncover a problem that is ancient in your soul's existence that has been stuck, like in the mud, or it could be really easy and have been an event in this lifetime."

Shying away from correcting her assumption, Martine sequestered her for more, "What are the consequences to a soul that is torn apart?"

"That seems to create a darkness, or void, with which they have the most difficulty."

"Are you saying that aborted babies retain the pain and suffering their soul endured in an abortion?"

Listening intently, Martine let Gemma tell the gruesome details, "I know some of my clients were poisoned, pulled apart, and sucked to their death. But, it was the pain of rejection that needed to be healed the most. Brain Balancing alone was effective with most clients in dealing with mental and bodily traumas encountered in this lifetime, but the abandonment and rejection issues from another time went too deep, and often was a result from abortion or other sudden and tragic deaths."

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“I’m assuming you know the twin that survived?”

“Yes,” Martine said sadly, “me.”

“Oh,” Gemma returned with surprise, “you were the twin and your sister died. Was it traumatic for you? Are you dealing with grief or guilt?”

“Not sure. I was old enough to know it wasn’t her fault or mine. I felt lonely and lost without her. Our parents were affected more and changed dramatically.”

“Did you feel abandoned by your parents?”

“I would say it’s possible, but I really can’t say for sure.”

“Hypnotherapy is a journey back in time to recover memories and explore events from the past. All of our experiences from birth and before are recorded in our bodies, minds, and souls. Memories will float up from the subconscious mind in an effortless way. You don’t know the answer now, but you will.”

“How will that help me now?”

“Losses and abandonment issues typically translate to feelings of rejection.”

“I lost my husband years ago and I’m okay now.”

“We can make sure you are. Your subconscious might say otherwise,” Gemma said convincingly.

Martine relayed more of her past, “We were very close. Michaela was only a young girl when she passed. I wasn’t there and was probably too young myself to completely comprehend the magnitude it had on all of us.”

“I think this process will help you if it has created a block in your unconscious-self,” Gemma disclosed.

“How do you mean?”

“Well, we’ve learned that young minds retain information that was repressed due to their age and helplessness,” Gemma began explaining, “but, when you’re

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a fully developed being with a mind, and have no way to deal with a trauma, it stays repressed.”

“How do you know that?” Martine questioned.

“It’s not unusual to encounter several life experiences from a single soul. Your soul may not have an issue in this lifetime, but does carry a block from a previous time, even while in the womb.”

“Seriously?” exclaimed Martine.

“Dr. Ian Stevenson spent forty years researching and documenting more than 2600 cases of children’s past life memories. We are deeply indebted to him for his insights. Not that it’s new to the world—it’s new to our western culture. His point was that the children were innocent and unimpressionable souls that wouldn’t be capable of reacting or fabricating false memories. They just were being themselves and the rest of their family didn’t take it seriously. They disregarded their past memories, or thought it was funny. Children outgrow this age of innocence and the ability to remember their past-life experience.”

“Have you ever encountered this yourself?”

“Absolutely,” Gemma sparked, “as a Hypnotherapist working with children and adults, I can say I’ve heard amazing events from their lives that were life-altering and transforming.”

“Can you tell me about some of them?”

“One of my clients had been in therapy most of his life for depression. We found out after a couple sessions here that he had a twin in the womb with him that wasn’t born. It’s not uncommon to have a twin in the womb that doesn’t survive naturally. They say it’s not the parents fault, but that some souls decide they’re not ready to be born. Unfortunately, in another session we discovered the twin was intentionally murdered. They both experienced the

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suction of an abortion and he saw his twin go to her death. He then experienced the force of the suction pull at him until a powerful force pushed the suction away from his little form. He immediately realized his phobias of fear and abandonment were related to this horrific event, when he was the most vulnerable.”

“Do you have another example?”

“I have many,” Gemma offered, “but this one will never be forgotten by me. The client was a woman that was adopted. She had this wonderful life and fantastic parents, but she couldn’t find happiness as an adult. We found that her soul had a previous existence where the pregnancy was terminated at four and a half months. This was the source of her constant fear of dying and rejection. Her soul recounted the event and the cold darkness that followed her death. Once she could face this as an adult seeking help, she began an amazing transformation that led to finding love.”

Martine questioned Gemma further, “How will I know what I experience in this regression therapy if I’m hypnotized?”

Nodding agreeably, Gemma explained, “Some people remember everything, but some don’t. Every session is recorded.”

“This is extremely fascinating,” Martine admitted, “I can think of a few people that would be very interested in this type of therapy. How do you do it if we live out of state?”

“We do want to do the first session in our controlled environment here. If that goes well the clients can continue the therapies via Skype.”

“Skype?” repeated Martine.

“Yes, Skyping with each other is virtually the same thing as being here as long as the client is in a quiet and private environment. We could do it over the phone, but

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someone else would have to be observing and speaking to the client. When they are in a hypnotic state they can't be trusted to operate a phone or respond adequately during the session. We have great results with Skype because we can see, hear, and monitor the client continuously and it's recorded on their device and ours."

"I'm intrigued. I can use your services while I'm home in Denver," Martine concluded.

"That's correct," Gemma validated, "we can do a session here while you're in town, and continue the therapy at your home if our first session is without complications."

Martine felt her phone vibrate in her pocket and looked at the caller, "Ah, she said, I'm going to have to cut this short—it's my office calling."

"Certainly, call me if I can be of further assistance. We'd love to help you."

Martine let herself out, saying, "Thank you very much, I'll be in touch."

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Chapter 35

Crickets chirped in chorus outside the motel room when Martine finally turned off the lights and TV. Eva was already asleep in the bed next to her when she found herself dozing off to late night sports news.

Lifted from her form, Martine transcended into another forlorn and dank place, finding her body sitting high in the saddle atop a tall dark steed. Strong and spirited, the fiery horse pawed the ground in anticipation of a fast gallop or charge. Gathering the reins with a tight grip, she steadied the animal to stay in its place while she assessed her whereabouts.

Visually impaired by darkness and thick hedges of thorny bushes, she couldn't see anything of significance, excepting some worn metal fencing with a doubled door gateway to her left. Seeing nowhere else to go, she instinctively tried to cue her horse to proceed towards the clearing at the gate so she could better see inside. Nudging the powerful horse with her heel, she tried to cue it to turn left. Rambunctious with anticipation, the animal spun in circles till she calmed it down with soothing words, "Whoa, whoa, boy. Steady now."

Hindered by weight and clumsiness, Martine glanced down to see moonlight reflecting off her metal-encased legs that caused her lack of mobility, and difficulty in prompting her muscular horse to feel her usual subtle leg promptings. Struggling with her anxious mount, that was ready to bolt, she held it back until her horse's impatience caused it to rear in the air and whinny, breaking the silence around them.

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“Who goes there?” a commanding voice called to her. “Come hither, knight,” he ordered.

“Who is there,” she queried in a panic, struggling with the stiffness of an armor suit while struggling with an intimidating gigantic horse preparing to run off. Threatened by an unseen stranger’s presence and the awkwardness of her attire complicated her abilities to focus. She knew from a renaissance festival she had attended, that knights who fall off their steeds do not get back on.

Stepping out of the darkness, a bearded darkish-skinned man in the brown robes of a cleric stood ready to guide her with a primitive looking torch—providing the only light the forsaken place offered. Odd in appearance to her with a generous sized hood covering his head and most of his face, he answered with reserve, “A fellow warrior.”

Martine accentuated, “A warrior?”

Moving closer to her, he elaborated, “We come in all types and sizes. You are smaller than me, are you not? Yet you ride in battle, too.”

In the glowing ambiance of the primitive lighting she could now glimpse the medieval body armor she wore—including a sheaved sword on her right side, and a Romanesque shield with a symbolic cross on it—strapped to her left arm. “What am I?” she asked him.

“One of God’s army, are you not?”

Martine’s horse quieted down in the presence of the gentleman who appeared to be a parson, and nickered to the mysterious man. Without the need to guide the animal, it followed behind him to the rust-ridden gates. “Where am I?” she questioned the tall stranger. Hearing no reply she rode through the gates he had opened with a large skeleton key. “Can I know your name?” Flustered by his silence and

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mystifying demeanor, she tried to assess her surroundings inside the enclosure while she waited for him to speak.

"I have many names. You may call me Leviticus," he finally answered.

Under the glow of the primitive lighting, Martine surmised she had entered into a period of the 'Middle Ages' when the Catholic Church ruled before the fall of Constantinople when the armies of Islam spread into Europe for the first time. Suspicious of the desolate and lonely place she was in, her curiosity wanted to correlate where she was, "What is this place?"

Directing her attention to the dark recesses in the center of the enclosed grounds, Leviticus lit another torch in a stand next to him and led the way. "Here is where sacrificed victims are interned." Thousands and thousands of small ceramic pots heaped in mounds appeared to serve as the resting place for the burnt remains of small children and infants. "Stories that can't be untold reside here," he uttered with poignancy.

"You say your name is Leviticus," she stated, seeming less sure and more confused by the fact *Leviticus* was a renowned book in the bible. Met with silence she swayed gently in the saddle as the horse carried her further into the grounds which at this point in their journey appeared to be sacred burial grounds.

"Do you possess knowledge, or seek it?" he inquired.

Self aware about that, she replied immediately, "I seek it—always."

"Then you should find out why you asked to come here," he replied with a riddle.

Confused further and sensing the dread of what must have happened to create such a massive site for the internment of small infant sized children, she questioned its

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existence based on her recent visit with an ancient Israelite woman, “Are these the sacrifices to the god Molech?”

Without making eye contact, he answered her, “You ask good questions. It is more important to know the truth than to avoid it, or be misled so they may not know it in good time.” Leviticus clarified more, “When you turn away from the truth, you turn away from God.”

Processing his words of wisdom, she queried again, “Is this a cemetery for Molech’s victims?”

“Yes, the innocent souls that did not offer themselves up, but were abandoned due to misguided beliefs,” his sad voice relayed. “Over here there are many more souls forgotten by people on earth.” Lighting the way with his torch, he kept his head down in reverence as he proceeded further into the grounds.

Martine’s horse passively followed behind the monk, as if it knew the significance of the hallowed land and revered it like a wise creature. “Why do you show me this place?” waiting for his response, she gasped at the sight of tiny skeletal remains heaped in another massive pile. Hearing no explanation from Leviticus, she pried further, “Why are these different?”

Pensive in speech, he explained, “The further a culture drifts from the truth, the more it will despise those that speak it.”

Martine contemplated the gravity of his words, “Yes, we become conditioned to the lie, or accept it as the truth?”

“Yes, you do understand. You can see how the archaic practice of human sacrifice is savage and barbaric, yet they did not consider it so in their time.”

Wide-eyed, Martine blinked hard. “That’s why we haven’t seen that practice in ages.”

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Moving further into the recesses of the grounds, Leviticus remained silent until he lit much larger vessels of fuel that flared high in the air lighting up a mound of small child sized remains. “There is more here than you can see with your eyes,” he proclaimed, lifting his arms towards the heavens.

Straining to see the top of the gigantic pile, she gasped, “There is no end in sight.”

“No, there is no end in sight.”

Assuming he was a religious monk and should be taken literally, she pried into his position, “How did you come to be here?”

“I am one of the keepers of knowledge.”

Thinking hard about his purpose, she tried to clarify, “Esoteric knowledge, right?”

“We guard eternal truths that are free of human traditions, influences, false teachings and practices.”

“These are about ancient practices, right?”

Shaking his head, he denied it, “No, this continues.”

Seething inside at the overwhelming carnage before her, she angered in disgust, “How can this have happened? Can’t you stop it?”

Finally looking up to her, he spoke with resolve, “Those who have been initiated in the mysteries of knowledge are said to be able to offer help to the souls of the departed.” Nodding in an affirmative way, he signaled her level of awareness, before continuing, “They can recite prayers over the corpse in hopes that the spirit will hear it and follow instructions that may help them rise up beyond the spheres of fate that trap the human soul on Earth. They can also offer prayers to the Virgin of Heavenly Light on their behalf, so that she will give them a more merciful assignment in the next life.”

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Perplexed about her role and his instructions, she shook her head in denial. "I do not have the power to free these souls?"

"Only a living soul can," he lobbed back at her.

"How," I wouldn't know what to do," she objected.

Staying still, he replied, "I can't respond to a question you already know the answer to."

"Or," she paused, "one I should or could know," she theorized in contemplation.

"Yes."

After some thought, Martine spoke from her heart, "I am offering up this intention for each one of the soul's that have lost their lives and been frozen here." Bowing her head, she prayed, "Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death, Amen." To Martine's amazement, the humongous mound began glowing as one single unit until a tiny spark broke free rising up and away. Breaking off one-by-one millions of small orbs followed behind until all the luminosity began floating away from all the mounds of boney remains.

Gazing in amazement at the show of lights flitting away, she imagined the accomplishment done for these lost souls, asking the bearded monk respectfully, "Can I do more?"

Clasping his hands inside the lengthy sleeves of his robe, he bent his head, prophesying, "For the souls who led especially wicked lives on Earth, or the ones who choose to practice the ways of our Creator, but who slide back repeatedly into immoral behavior—a particularly terrifying fate awaits. You have helped the pure souls that have never

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practiced or chosen a misdeed. Much more is required, if possible, to help wayward souls.”

Aware now that she was in the presence of an enlightened being that could guide her, but not tell her what to do, she verified his meaning, “I have helped the souls I can, but cannot save the wayward ones. Is my work done here?”

“No, work is never done when so many need saving. You will do more.”

“I’m not sure about that,” Martine replied, “I don’t know what else can be done.”

Leviticus proclaimed eternal teachings available to all, “God uses you because you honor Him. Seek the truth and use your divine intuitive knowledge. Your spark created by our Supreme God glows bright and bigger when you trust in Him.”

“I do trust Him, I don’t trust anyone else to do the same,” she admitted.

Leviticus nodded in agreement, “Man’s law changed with his understanding of man. Laws of the Eternal Father remain same.”

“What would happen if souls weren’t forced out before their normal existence was experienced?” Martine was asking when she noticed that everything began to shimmer like a mirage.

“You will find what you seek. Never stop looking for what is hidden and can’t be seen,” his voice fading away with the surroundings.

Waking up to the sound of water running, she knew it was dawn, and Eva was using the shower before heading back to Trina’s for more horse evaluation and bargaining. Laying still her eyes slowly opened and regained focus like a post surgery haze—remembering the last words Leviticus

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said, ‘Never stop looking for what is hidden,’ lingering in her mind, she had a thought and prayed for Saint Anthony to help, “Tony, Tony, turn around, something’s lost that must be found.” Her fast prayer intention to the patron saint of lost items had never let her down, though she always knew what she had lost.

Instantly she sprung up with the notion of where to look first. Mostly out of touch with the Old Testament, but fresh on her mind, Martine pulled the bible out of the night stand in her motel room and went to the book of Leviticus—reading that the book was legislation given by God to Moses for the priests of the tribe of Levi.

Roused by the idea that she may have been in the presence of Moses during her etheric venture last night, she paged further into the book to find Molech’s name in Chapter 18. “Whoa,” she said out loud, reading, “‘You shall not offer any of your offspring to be immolated to Molech, thus profaning the name of your God. I am the lord.’” Hurriedly, she paged further to Chapter 20 and read that the Lord told Moses, “‘Tell the Israelites: Anyone, whether an Israelite or an alien residing in Israel, who gives any of his offspring to Molech shall be put to death.’” Martine slammed the book closed. Boy, did God detest the human sacrifice practice. God’s intervention came directly through Moses, indicating it was an urgent and serious matter.

For Martine, this seemed more paramount than the parting of the Red Sea, but why are these dreams subjecting her to this issue? Being too significant to ignore, she scribbled notes into her journal and lunged for her computer resting on the chair by her. “Knowledge,” she murmured, “wait, intuitive knowledge.” Pausing in thought, she searched her mind. “Divine spark with Supreme God,” she whispered to herself as she started a search in her browser.

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Eva opened the bathroom door and came prancing out like a horse with giant towels wrapped around her body and head. “Can you be ready in an hour, so you can drop me off at *Brain Fitness* early?”

“Sure, sure,” Martine mumbled absentmindedly.

“What’s going on?” Eva questioned with suspicious brows.

“Research,” Martine returned.

Eva kept conversing while Martine searched websites, “On what?”

“You know,” she said vaguely.

Eva rested her hand on her hip, staring her mother down. “A dream?” she guessed.

“Yes, and this is interesting,” Martine expounded. “Do you know what a Gnostic is?”

Eva played back the word, “Gnostic? Absolutely not, do you?”

“I do now. Gnosticism was the ancient form of Christianity. It borrowed elements from Persian religions, Jewish Christianity, and Buddhism. They believed that the God of Abraham was an imperfect God, and saw Jesus as sent by the Supreme God.”

“That’s sorta interesting,” Eva said as she combed her hair out.

“They believed in possessing knowledge and seeking it. The opposite of a Gnostic is an Agnostic—something similar to an atheist.”

“So, you think that’s helping you?”

“Not yet, but there is something very meaningful that I need to explore when I can know more. We’ll see what happens, it could be important or maybe it’s not. I’ll figure it out later,” she said as she headed for the bathroom.

Kathi Bjorkman

Third Eye Witness-

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Chapter 36

Comforted by the subtle soft vibrations of Endora's melodic purring, Jade knew the cat was very near her. Still unable to turn her head very far, or see clearly yet, she moved her legs in excitement.

Morning breakfast hadn't come soon enough for baby Jade, so Endora's soothing presence appeased her as her mother continued to sleep and hunger pains started in. Restless with the gnawing urge to feed, she extended her long legs and kicked. She could tell new strength in her developing muscles was letting her limbs do more to express her mood each day. Sucking hard on her thumb and jerking her legs in and out for amusement consoled her while she waited for her big meal.

When her mother stirred—getting out of bed in a hurry, she heard the cat meow loudly. She wouldn't have to wait long for her mom to care for her and start their day as usual. With the cat prodding her mother along, she heard her scold Endora, "You can just wait another minute. You don't have to be the first one to eat at every meal."

Jade flexed her legs in a joyful stretch, anticipating the food and care she would soon be getting.

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Chapter 37

Something bad was coming and it was in her mind, in her dreams, and in her life. Short of someone else spelling it out for her, Martine wasted no time if there was an opportunity to understand the true facts that seemed hidden from everyone involved—including her.

After departing from Trina's horse facility the day before, Martine quickly realized the importance of reassessing the murderous events that were presented to her by the local Sheriff. Triggered by the revelation that Trina's husband had altered the crime scene before the investigators had discovered it, she wanted to reevaluate it with Sheriff Gaines. With the assistance of Stewart Kincaid she was granted another visit to Charmaine and Levi's home to consider other scenarios that could fit the actual evidence found.

Waiting for her in his squad car with the windows down, was the reluctant Sheriff that already seemed to detest her. Martine got out of her car and approached him since he didn't seem in a hurry to meet her. "Morning Chief," she said merrily—trying to cheer up his disgruntled nature towards her.

"So we meet again," Richard said with a hint of disdain, "I thought we were done here." Getting out of his car, he looked down at her. "Seems you aren't satisfied, ma'am."

Martine's lips flinched slightly. "I'm really sorry, but I have good reason to have you re-evaluate the scene before anyone else touches it."

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Leading the way into the house, he asked, "Why is that exactly?"

"I suppose the most obvious reason for me is there just isn't a motive, and it's keeping me up at night."

"Ma'am, people marry for love and murder for money," he said cynically, stopping in the living room. "That's just what happens."

"They didn't really have any money," Martine refreshed his facts.

Posed like a cowboy with his thumbs tucked in his belt, he kept wrangling with her, "Her daddy did, ain't that why you're here?"

"Yes, you never forget the people you love the most. He's doing what I would do if one of my daughters were found in the same way. I suspect you'd do the same. Regardless, why would Levi kill himself, too, if he thought he could profit from her death?" Martine challenged him.

Richard's scowl said everything, but he replied anyway, "People do a lot of foolish things I don't understand."

Martine tried to schmooze him a bit, "I need your expert opinion on something."

"Really, what's that?"

Heading for the bedroom, Martine prompted Richard, "Remember how you told me you found the bodies?" Martine shook her head in disgust—imagining the carnage which she had seen in the photos.

Posturing himself inside the doorway, he concurred, "Yes, of course I do."

"You found the gun in his hand—a gun that wasn't registered."

"That's right."

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“You found her over here, but the knife was next to him.”

“Yep,” he recollected, “he was next to the knife.”

Staying rooted in the bedroom Martine went on, “I think you said it was all their blood and a crime of passion.”

“That’s right.”

“Arguably, he could’ve done it, but, I just don’t think so because most people don’t shoot themselves between the eyes.”

Richard’s irritation peaked, “Why is that?”

“It’s hard to do that, and I’ve looked at all the photos and Levi didn’t have bloody hands. Forget that he didn’t cut himself, he didn’t have bloody hands and clothes like you would if you had bludgeoned someone with a knife like that and shot yourself.” Her eyes darted around like she was inside an ‘Escape Room’ challenge.

“But it’s possible,” Richard demonstrated by point his index finger to his forehead.

“And why not shoot her instead of knifing her to smithereens?” Martine argued back.

“Rage,” he countered.

“Can I borrow your flashlight,” she asked.

Chuckling to himself, he pulled out his flashlight and handed it to her. “What are you going to find with this?”

Scanning the floor and walls with the intense light, she explained, “I know you didn’t really look for cast off or perform trajectory analysis, but I’m looking for something that may have seemed insignificant and been overlooked.”

“Like what?”

Closing the bedroom door to look behind it, she revealed, “I think he was killed first.”

Richard repeated her, “You think he was killed first?”

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Focusing the light like a laser she studied the wall behind the door, answering evasively, "I think that might be the case." Directing the beam of light to the dark wood door, she suddenly froze. "Do you see this?" Martine pointed to an indiscernible darkish stain on the backside of the door.

"What is it?" Richard reached out to touch it.

Snatching his hand away before he could make contact with the surface of the door, she cautioned him, "Don't contaminate that, it might be evidence."

Surprised by her reflexes, Richard reeled with annoyance, "Evidence of what?"

"I think its blood, and I don't think they put it there."

Completely bewildered, Richard spouted, "Why's that?"

"You said the bedroom door was open when you found them. It's not likely he killed her, shut the door, opened the door and killed himself." Martine paused as she looked at crime photos, "And don't forget, his hands weren't bloody at all."

"He washed them," Richard rebutted.

"There's no evidence of that, and why bother if you're going to kill yourself."

"We did find her blood on his shirt," he asserted.

"Was it a trace amount by any chance?" Martine cross-examined him.

Pushing his hat back slightly, Richard scoffed, "I don't know, blood evidence is blood evidence. What are you saying?"

"I'm saying Levi was murdered first, she heard the shot, came running toward the house, spilled her vegetables from the garden, grabbed her own knife from the kitchen and tried to defend herself."

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“Well, that’s a gross exaggeration of what could’ve happened,” he pitched loudly.

“The evidence you cataloged says it was their kitchen knife.”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t mean a stranger did this,” he snipped at her.

“It does explain how the home got tossed, and she ended up trapped in the bedroom where she was overtaken by a murderer. He probably lost control of his gun during the struggle. When she fought to get away and escape to the bedroom. He followed her, took the knife from her, stabbed her at least once and slammed the door closed—trapping her inside. When he finished killing her, he cleaned up the scene to stage it—forgetting about the indiscernible hand stain on the door with—I’m guessing her blood and his DNA. He probably wouldn’t have noticed it or remembered briefly touching the back of the dark wooden door.”

“Vegetables from the garden?” he repeated facetiously.

“Well, the neighbors picked up the spilled vegetables on the deck, put them in the kitchen, found them murdered, pulled the knife out of her stomach, threw it down where it landed on Levi first before resting by his hand, and then anonymously called 911,” Martine rushed her condensed version.

“What?” Richard blared.

“I spoke with the neighbor,” she informed him. “I suspect the blood on Levi was trace amounts left from the knife momentarily hitting him.”

“You’re saying it was murder?”

Martine proposed a different outcome, “I’m saying it’s a more realistic possibility, Sheriff.”

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He nodded in contemplation, "So you want this case reopened, don't you, ma'am?"

"Well, if this is what we do know today, can you imagine what we don't know? We've lost so much of the evidence, but we need to pursue this blood stain. Like save the whole door as a sample for now."

Richard still struggled with her deductions, "But this type of crime profiles like a crime of passion. If you're right, there's one crazy guy out there. I suppose we do have few bad drunks in these parts that can't hit the ground with their hat."

"There was a brutal attack, but it could be staged—as you yourself can see is possible now—right? And it reads more like a professional did this."

"Then why wasn't there blood on the door handles, he would have left signs of her blood when he left," he reminded her.

"He would have used a washcloth or rag to wipe his hands clean," she imagined.

"Yeah, well we didn't find one of those."

Martine overcame his objection, "Doesn't mean he didn't use something like that and take it with him."

Richard looked around thoughtfully, mumbling aloud, "I really thought this was another match made in hell—might be wrong." Shaking his head slowly, he added, "I'll preserve the door—let me know what you want done with it. I thought I had you all figured out, ma'am, does drama follow you, or do you create it?"

"I can't say for sure," Martine conceded, "but I'll let you know when I get this door analyzed. Hopefully science will catch us up with someone who has the capacity to do this, so I will have your answer."

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“Huh, I’ve never seen a murderer clean up his crime scene.”

Martine walked over to the nightstand that had Charmaine’s romance novel on it. Lifting the book up to inspect it for blood, a narrowly folded bulletin stuck to the back of the book fell to the floor. Satisfied that blood was not present on the book or nightstand—she picked up the paper and opened the tri-fold, exposing a class schedule for religious classes at a remote monastery. Showing the document to Richard, she inquired, “Do you know where this is?”

“Yeah,” he replied, “that’s at least an hour south of here.”

“Huh,” Martine uttered, “I saw a postcard on the refrigerator that had this monastery on it. Do they make wine there?”

“Yeah,” Richard answered, rubbing his chin reflectively “and, I might have a murdering maniac in the county.”

Martine shook her head as she began profiling the type of person or monster she would be hunting, “Not if this is a contract killing.”

Richard tisked, “Finding the truth will mean peeling back more layers than an onion.”

“Yes, it will,” she replied. “I’m taking this with me if you don’t mind.” Without waiting for an answer, she headed out of the bedroom and down the hall. To her left she looked into the bathroom for any other unusual stains or items that may have been discarded. “What’s wrong here?” she asked, pointing to the toilet that was overfilled.

“Oh,” Richard suddenly remembered, “the toilet was over flowing when I arrived on the scene. We shut the valve off because it had saturated the hall carpet.”

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“Like if someone had tried to flush a rag or wad of tissue down it?” she intimated.

Retreating back towards the kitchen with the Monastery’s class schedule in her hand, she added, “This wine making class makes me think that your local watering holes may have some interesting gossip about who might have done this, or who might have come through here that didn’t belong,” Martine inferred diplomatically.

Richard relayed his personal sentiments, “I really thought this guy held his marriage vows in contempt.”

Martine smiled sympathetically, asking, “Richard, are you divorced?”

“Yep, are you?”

“Nope,” she replied, “widowed.”

“It’s been a pleasure knowing you,” Richard relented to helping her, “if there’s anything you need, you call me. I’ll check out some of our local riffraff. The nail that sticks out is the one that gets hammered here first.”

“I appreciate that,” she said sincerely.

“I underestimated you,” he admitted. “I do believe you’ll find the monster and put him away. Like my by barber says, ‘hair today—gone tomorrow,’” Richard affirmed his opinion with a quick nod.

Martine chuckled at his grassroots humor, “I hear you. No journey is without its steps.” Flattering him, she added, “You’ve been a big help, and I greatly appreciate it. In my experience, sometimes the truth is as murky and dark as an Oklahoma night.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he obliged, turning to go.

Walking towards her car, Martine scanned the class schedule she took from Charmaine’s and called the number for information—too curious to ignore the synchronicity of

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a dream and literature that seemed to intersect on the same day.

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Chapter 38

Emotions erupted among the contented rhythm of elevator music when Chaz confronted his father, “You can’t allow this to happen.”

“Son,” he addressed the young man, “We can’t stop this—we need to make sure everything goes perfect.” Exiting the elevator, he went on, “This is part of your job.”

Long shadows veiled the walls as they proceeded down the sterile hallway after hours. “I don’t see how anyone can make this part of my job,” Chaz returned.

“It is . . . if you want to keep the best position you’ll ever secure at your age,” Eric seethed at his son’s weakness. “Since you believed you were ready for this high-level position, you’ll need to prove that now,” he snapped passive-aggressively.

“I don’t understand why I’m involved in this part of your product development. You know I’m not qualified or interested in what goes on behind the curtain. My expertise is to construct the stock offering on Wall Street.”

“Listen, son, there won’t be one if we don’t manage every step in our last trial. Your job is to make sure there are no mistakes when the trial begins. You wanted to be a kick-ass executive—well, this is what you do. I’ve arranged a few dry runs for you. They can’t be counted as successes, or as failures—there just can’t be any connection back to us. We’ve got three eager volunteers lined-up right now.”

“How does that work if I’m supposed to be there?”

“You’re not going to tell them who you are. You’re just the driver. There won’t be any questions because we’re

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using the doctor I told you about earlier. He'll try the drug on three subjects without asking for details."

"How do you know he won't tell anyone?"

"Let's just say I don't think he's smart enough to know if something goes wrong and he gets paid even better during the trial. He operates under the radar and does anything for the right price." Eric coached his son, handing him a white lab coat, "You're there to deliver the product and observe. He's already been paid."

Alarmed, Chaz objected again, "I'm not the right person for this assignment."

"You're the only person for this. Please don't flaunt your ignorance. I can't trust anyone else to do this. It's just a few days."

Chaz retorted, "Haven't I already done enough regarding this part of your operation—and successfully?"

Eric stopped in his tracks and stared down his son. "Sleeping with a girl doesn't make you a father anymore than painting a house makes you an artist. Seriously, son, we're doing the world a big service here. Why buy the cow when they're giving the milk away for free," he finished cynically.

Appalled at the insinuation, Chaz grimaced at his father, "How can you say that?"

Chastising his son, Eric went-on, "Nobody wants to live with a mistake that can ruin lives, you should understand that much."

"Was I a mistake?" he asked his father.

"Of course not, but now it's time to prove you are focused enough to be in this arena with the big boys. How else will you prove it to yourself," Eric slugged his boy playfully in the shoulder. "Let's get this done. We only have

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to get through it once and we'll own the best treatment and the biggest market share in the world."

"Fine," Chaz compromised, "but just for these three."

"Good, boy," his father replied, walking away.

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Chapter 39

With his trigger finger on the phone, FBI Chief John Mahoney called Martine to check in. Waiting for her greeting, he bit his bottom lip in apprehension. Hearing her voice, he smiled, "How's it going?"

"Better," Martine replied wearily.

"Really," he said with skepticism.

"Yes, I'm driving back to the motel now."

Making small talk, he asked her, "How's the traffic?"

"Traffic?" she laughed, "The only things crowded around here are the stars in the sky."

Chuckling at her wit, he kept her talking, "Do tell me what you're doing today."

"I went back to Charmaine's with Sheriff Richard."

"You're kidding," he expounded, "he actually met you again? You made him sound like a natural born sloth."

Martine laughed at Mahoney's lighter side, "Yes, I did meet him today, and no, I did not call him a sloth."

Making a resounding clap noise as he hit his desk, Mahoney inquired, "Why'd you go back?"

"I had a hunch, and it paid off."

Remembering how Martine had outwitted him long ago, he supposed, "You set a trap and he fell in."

"In a way, I guess that happened," Martine laughed with Mahoney, their personalities meshing and feeding off of each other.

Reflecting on the past, he remarked, "When they fumble, you rumble."

"Hey I'm picking up Eva right now. I did want you to know that Sheriff Gaines has a door you need examined

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for blood DNA & prints. Can you arrange that with him? There's a red stained palm with possible finger prints on the backside of the bedroom door. I don't believe it belonged to either victim. If you arrange for some sophisticated forensics you might get palm and finger printing—possible DNA too. The blood is probably Charmaine's."

Mahoney sounded impressed, "Wow, that could tell us a lot."

"Exactly," she confirmed.

"Are you saying it's not murder-suicide?" Making himself a note to follow-up on getting the door taken care of, he reiterated his ask, "You're saying its double murder isn't it?"

"Not saying."

"I'll take care of the door and we'll give it a complete work-up." With absolute trust in her judgment, he teased, "It probably won't be as good as yours." Referring to a time she lifted her own prints with blush and tape.

Martine laughed at the inference, "Well, you're in a good mood, if you can remember that."

"I am now that you've given me something I can do."

"I feel the same way. Wish I knew what to do next here."

He chuckled at her, "Funny, it never seems like you don't know what to do next."

"I'm here, gotta go," she said.

"Go where now?"

"I'll call you later," she replied, ending the call.

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Chapter 40

Eva fast walked up to Martine's car and jumped in. "Hey, I had lunch with Trent and found out something about Charmaine."

"Wonderful, what is it?" Martine asked as she pulled away from *Brain Fitness*.

"She didn't have any WIFI signal out where they lived."

"Or, they couldn't afford it," Martine surmised.

"Sure, so, she used the office WIFI to Skype her friends," Eva reported.

"Okay, did he see this?"

"No," Eva clarified, "but he knew she did when she wasn't working."

Martine remained mildly interested, "Did he ever talk to her about it?"

"It seems like they were good friends, but he didn't act like he knew anything personal. All he told me was she didn't have any friends here, and she did have close friends in Texas."

"You just gave me a great idea," Martine replied.

"I did?" Eva said in surprise.

"Yes you did," Martine smiled.

"Give."

"We just need to watch them," Martine lilted.

Eva looked over to her mother, asking, "How?"

"We've assumed that the home didn't have any computer activity. I just got their electronics back from the local investigator. He said they didn't find anything helpful on the devices. I figured Charmaine's communications were

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in there somewhere, or she used the company's computer," Martine premised.

"What good is that going to do if the important communications were Skyped?" Eva protested.

"Alexa can recover those types of transmissions if we can locate the device."

"Really, she can do that?"

"Absolutely, when I worked at the FBI, I had a case that broke in our favor when we captured those communications. You know . . . the Cloud."

"Interesting, but you still need the right computer," Eva presumed, "right?"

"Right, we need that, and now before we leave."

"You mean tomorrow, right?"

"Sure, can you dig deeper with Trent to find out if she had her own device," Martine pushed, "or if it was shared?"

"Easy."

"Eva, we need to capture Skype recordings within thirty days or they're probably gone," Martine insisted, "so, it's critical we get this immediately."

"Ah, that's what you mean by now."

"That's what I mean. I'll let you figure that out when I drop you off with the horses. Today's your last day to decide which ones you like."

"Why are you dropping me off? I need you to help me decide," Eva objected.

"You really don't, and I have an appointment with someone that I think can help me with some theological issues I'm dealing with, okay?"

"Sure, we can talk about the horses when you pick me up."

"Perfect."

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Chapter 41

Having dropped Eva off with Trina and the horses, she took advantage of the few hours she had available to seek theological information in the nearby community of Catholic monks. Driving through the sparsely populated countryside distracted her as she sailed along the lonely road as if she was exploring a new land to be discovered.

Although the temperature outside was warm, fickle storm clouds appeared cold with a bruised purple hue that soon darkened—hanging low from the heavens. Following the first drops of water hitting her windshield were machine-gun strength pelts of rain that blinded her for about fifteen minutes.

When the clouds finally parted letting rays of sun shine through, she was already turning into the private road leading to her destination—a stone faced looking palace with pointed steeples holding crosses at their peaks.

Healthy rows of grapevines stretched long and wide on both sides of the dirt driveway—connecting outsiders to the large private community of religious men. Round purple grapes recently rained on glistened in the emerging sunshine magnifying their maturity as they ripened in the warm air and rough soil.

Having researched as much as possible on her own dreams and the new scientific evidence of a soul's journey learned at *Brain Fitness*, Martine located a renowned theologian practiced in the teachings of all the major religions. Historically, when religion and science converge it becomes acceptable to society. When the two disciplines disagree, no consensus is possible. Here she hoped a learned

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scholar could shed more light on what could or should be acceptable without conflicting with her own Catholic Christian faith.

Stalled at a crossroads where traditional Christianity which she was familiar with disagreed with the scientific investigations pioneered out of advances in therapeutic technologies, polarized her. Seeking the insights of a revered theologian at a remote monastery less than an hour away, was a perfect solution for her logical mind.

Upon her arrival, she cradled the standard bible from her motel room and rehearsed to herself, "Hello, I'm here to ask about a couple of homicides." Rethinking that approach she got out of her car and surveyed her surroundings. Lush vines masked a couple of monks that stood up to greet her when they saw her approaching them.

"Can we help you?" a young robed monk asked.

"Yes, I'm looking for Brother Patrick."

Upon seeing her, she was quickly introduced to an averaged sized man in a brown tunic. "Welcome," the older monk greeted her, "I'm Brother Patrick, but you can call me Patrick." Brushing sand off his shoulders from his gardening chores, he reached his hand out and shook hers.

Dressed in a monk's habit she couldn't help but revere him like a priest, though their sacred vows of chastity, poverty and obedience do not make them one, she knew she was in the presence of a holy man. "Hello, I'm Martine. Thank you for seeing me." Familiar with this order, she knew these clergy were consecrated religious who dedicated their lives to helping Gods children, and that's what interested Martine the most. Their hierarchy didn't prevent them from studying all the books and scriptures of the past because they also supported themselves through the school they ran and the grapes they produced for their winery.

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“Your monastery is absolutely amazing and beautiful. What made you choose to grow grapes?”

Patrick laughed at the notion as he began walking with her towards the arched opening to their courtyard, “Well, when we received the land almost a hundred years ago we didn’t need to financially support ourselves like we do now. Eventually we did need to generate funds due to the rising costs in food, utilities and healthcare, so we sent in our soil samples to the agricultural cooperative to find out what would grow the best on our land.”

“Really,” Martine exclaimed, “they said grapevines?”

“Not at all,” he sparked, “they said bricks.”

Martine shook her head in amazement. “Well, your prayers must have been answered when the citizens of the United States finally realized we could grow grapes and make fine wine in this country too, huh?”

“Yes, you could say that. Before we could sell our wine commercially, it was made for communion wine—and still is. But, you didn’t come for the wine, did you? Please, let’s sit down in our atrium,” he offered, leading her further into a centralized patio shared by several buildings. “We can talk here,” he directed, pointing to a round wrought-iron table with chairs off to the right. “Now tell me how I can help you with your case.”

Martine wasted no time diving in, “Recently I was brought here to handle the affairs of a young girl that was murdered in a town sixty miles from here. I noticed a postcard of your monastery was taped to her refrigerator.” Glancing at the gift store she was sitting near, she suggested, “It must have come from here.”

“We do sell postcards,” he affirmed.

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"I also found a class schedule on her night stand. I think she was planning on taking a course here in the fall."

"Do you know what course?"

"She had a check by a course called 'A Soul's Progression?'"

"Ah, a subject that's been pondered by every religion and civilization I'm aware of," he chuckled facetiously. "I teach that course," he admitted.

"That's why I'm here," Martine said with a questioning look, "there's obviously a lot to study and consider if it's known or taught by so many, and I think she had a lot of questions because her job was showing her more than what the Catholic Church teaches. Now I'm here with the same concerns I fear."

"Ah yes," he sighed, "denying the souls purpose or existence would leave me without a job. Maybe you could be more specific."

Nodding agreeably, Martine tried again, "It seems unanimous in my studies of the subject that the soul enters the human body while in the uterus, agreed?"

"Agreed," he said without hesitation.

Martine rifled another question, "When does that occur?"

Brother Patrick paused. "Why is that important to know?"

"I'm working off a couple theories and this would help nicely," she tried to stay vague.

"Well, there doesn't seem to be a right answer," he acknowledged. "I mean all are correct when you combine all the religious faiths."

"I'm Catholic and we believe it begins at conception, right? That's why we don't believe in abortion, right?" she reasoned.

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“That’s correct. That’s why we don’t support abortion as a right.”

“But how do we know that?” Martine persisted.

“When St. Fulgentius in the sixth century was asked when the stain of original sin attached to a person, he replied that it begins with conception. This resulted in concern back then that the fetus must have a soul at conception and must be brought to term so that it might be baptized. All Christian theologians including Martin Luther considered the sacrament of Baptism a must for salvation.”

“Except in the case of martyrdom,” Martine reminded him.

“Yes, you can be baptized in the blood of martyrdom,” he concurred. “From that time at which our Savior said, ‘If anyone is not reborn of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven’ [John 3:5].” He scanned her reaction and went on, “No one can, without the sacrament of baptism, except those who, in the Catholic Church, without baptism, pour out their blood for Christ, receive the kingdom of heaven and life eternal. This does not apply to suicide,” he stipulated.

“I’m not concerned with suicide,” she made clear. “Abortion isn’t wrong just because the soul isn’t baptized, is it?”

“Certainly not,” Brother Patrick replied hastily, “St. Fulgentius created such concern that the fetus be brought to term that several things resulted. Abortion wasn’t just murder, it was worse, and it was decided that it was more important to let a mother die in child birth, rather than perform an abortion to save her.”

“That’s what I thought.”

Brother Patrick continued, “The theologians were so sincerely concerned about saving an innocent soul that in the

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nineteenth century they invented a baptismal syringe, so that a fetus in utero could be baptized in the event of a spontaneous abortion or miscarriage.”

”I’ve never heard of that, is it practiced anywhere?” she asked.

“Yes,” he replied matter-of-factly.

“So it’s the Churches’ opinion the soul enters at conception,” she restated. “Do others agree?”

“Well,” Patrick explained, “The Jewish community does not accept that we’re all conceived with the original stain of sin from the fall, but they do believe the soul has its first attachment to the body from the moment of conception, and remains with it until the moment of death. Death is, therefore, often called *Yetziat HaNeshama*, which in Hebrew means, ‘departure of the soul,’ but, orthodox rabbis in the Talmud, and some Jewish scholars, don’t agree at which point the soul stays attached to the fetus.” Patrick spelled it out clearly, “Connecting and attaching are not one in the same to them. They can’t agree on whether it’s the moment of conception, or later, that the soul permanently attaches.”

“Huh,” Martine mused in fascination, “what about the second largest religion, Islam?”

“Let’s see,” he started, “Muslim legal scholars were the ones who have fairly concluded through their scriptures that the soul fully enters the fetus at around three to four months at the latest.”

“Phew,” Martine exclaimed, “there’s no disputing we have a soul. We also can’t precisely know when it completely attaches to the body, but as of today it probably happens before most abortions are performed,” she summarized.

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“Yes,” he returned sadly, “and you can add science to the mix now. For the fetus, the first evidence of a functional nervous system with reflexes begins to occur at about eight and a half weeks. With the ability to feel pain, and all its organ differentiation almost completed, the fetus acquires the shape of a human body that most likely has a soul connected and probably attached.”

“So, your conclusion is the soul is for sure completely attached sometime between conception and the start of the second trimester?”

“It was,” he answered with a curious expression arching his brow.

“What do you mean?”

“Advances in science and the study of energy seem to suggest that there is an electrical spark or charge that does ignite very early in the womb, suggesting the soul does make contact immediately. Attachment could vary a bit from soul to soul, but I suspect it’s very present at conception.”

Martine couldn’t help but share her findings and hear his reaction, “Interesting you should know that. Yesterday I visited a specialist in the Hypnotherapy community, and became aware of specific cases regarding souls and their life progressions.” Seeing he appeared interested, Martine went on, “Aborted souls that speak through hypnotherapy describe the events better than any of us can. These souls were definitely present when they experienced the horror of an abortion. Apparently the psychological damage is so great that the soul carries the trauma forward.”

Nodding agreeably, Patrick asked, “Well that’s interesting, how do they know that?”

“Horrific stories are surfacing during these hypnotherapy sessions,” undaunted in her search for sound theological reasoning, she presented what she knew, “and

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during sessions the clients recall the trauma that is responsible for their ailment. This typically involves going back in time to find the source behind the initial disturbance.” Martine took a deep breath, “Past life progressions ferret out the cause that usually requires going back to a previous lifetime for the soul.”

Looking curious, Brother Patrick nodded slowly before breaking silence, “How many lifetimes?”

Surprised by his reaction regarding past lives, she continued carefully, “Depends, these sessions have revealed that abortion is more than violence done to a flesh and blood human body. Abortion is equally painful trauma to the soul because it suffers deeply when inflicted with rejection. Rejection cuts like a knife to the heart, and that affliction could have happened many life-times ago.”

Patrick affirmed, “Rejection would cause serious harm.”

“It really seems to,” Martine alleged. “Realistically, if you don’t want to error in when the soul comes into a fetus, or compromise a soul’s existence, the Catholic’s have been correct—no abortion.”

“I would say so, definitely. We have not changed our position on this,” Patrick validated.

Martine asked the toughest question facing the Catholic Church, “It appears you are aware of souls progressing, why not reincarnation of the soul?”

“Probably for a couple reasons, like it’s not in the bible, and we don’t believe in reincarnation.”

“I never disagreed, but after what I learned yesterday, it’s hard to ignore the possibility. I’m suddenly very conflicted,” she confessed.

“It is a topic many struggle with today,” Brother Patrick expressed sympathetically. “Modern science and

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technology seem to indicate that the soul does return in another body. It just can't be proven."

Martine processed what he said, slowly reiterating it out loud, "Because it's my soul that would be coming back . . . my everlasting invisible soul, and not by body, it would be very hard to ever prove. Is that what the church is waiting for—proof?"

"Possibly," Patrick confirmed, "how else can they change doctrine?"

"Speaking of that," she interrupted him, "They've changed doctrine before regarding souls and reincarnation."

"Yes they have," he confirmed "so, you know about that."

Getting closer to the answers and her theories, she resumed her questioning, "Why isn't it in the bible anymore? Before the bible was created by theologians—Socrates, Plato, and all other ancient belief systems were well versed in the notion of our souls returning to some future lives here. Apostle Paul even says that we should 'seek immortality.' Wasn't wording deliberately removed from scriptures and the bible?"

Patrick pursed his lips. "You're talking about the Second Council of Constantinople in 553 AD, I presume?"

Surprised he readily knew what she was referring to—she nodded eagerly, taking out her notes tucked in her purse. "It sounds like the Roman Emperor Justinian had a lot to do with influencing this major change, didn't he?"

Appearing regretful, he recounted the events, "After the Roman Emperor Constantine became the first Emperor to accept Christianity, Europe became Christian in 330 AD. The New Testament and early Christianity did incorporate the belief in man's rebirth or reincarnation for 553 years."

"I knew it," she flared, "what happened and why?"

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“There were many Ecumenical Councils that followed between 330 AD and 553 AD before they debated rebirth.”

“Why did they do it? I have a couple theories of my own, starting with politics.”

Brother Patrick cocked his head in amazement. “Not bad, you tell me.” Schooling Martine in one of the Churches greatest mysteries of ongoing conflict, he leaned into the table on crossed arms, “In 553 AD Emperor Justinian convened the Ecumenical Council of Constantinople with the 16 Western Bishops and the 159 Eastern Bishops. Bishops from the Oriental East didn’t like the notion of reincarnation, but the Western Bishops accepted it. Pope Vigilius was not in favor with Emperor Justinian and didn’t attend the Council of Constantinople. The 159 Eastern Bishops convinced Emperor Justinian that reincarnation was bad for business. They argued that it made people lazy in their Christian ways, and that they might be reborn into another religion, and would not need an Emperor.”

“So it was political,” Martine verified with the scholarly monk.

“Basically you’re correct, because Pope Vigilius even issued documentary orders that the convoking of the Council by Emperor Justinian was not valid. But, it’s actually more like a Byzantine tale of tragedy.”

“Really,” Martine commented, “tell me.” Knowing this was the best source of truth she was gonna find, she sat back and listened.

“Theodora was a young prostitute that slept her way to the top. Before Justinian was Emperor, Theodora was his concubine and then his wife. She could never be recognized in death as a goddess if reincarnation was accepted. They say she was the force behind condemning the belief.”

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“So, the real actor in the shadows was this woman who was stained with the mortal sin of adultery preventing her from coming back as a goddess,” Martine calculated. “Reincarnation teachings would suggest she comes back as something else less deserving, right?”

“Yes, so Bishops removed fundamental dogmas from all the Christian scriptures, dogmas, and writings.

“So the New Testament was definitely amended,” Martine said sadly, “like a legal contract—making it binding in the eyes of man.”

“So it would seem,” Patrick stated.

“History tells us so much—we shouldn’t disregard what it teaches us.”

“Or, what’s inconvenient,” he added.

“So, not a rumor, this really happened and references to afterlife were disregarded. You know, some people twist the Scriptures and say that Jesus Himself taught reincarnation or ‘cyclical rebirth.’” Martine recited from her little motel bible. “In Matthew 11:14, for example, Jesus said, ‘and if you are willing to accept it, [John the Baptist] is the Elijah who was to come.’ Likewise, in John 3:3 Jesus said, ‘I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again,’ seems to imply rebirth.”

Patrick took her bible and contributed his interpretation, “Regarding Jesus’ words about being ‘born again’ in John 3:3, the context clearly shows that Jesus was referring to a spiritual rebirth or regeneration, which could only mean the soul or spirit is reborn. In fact, the phrase born again carries the idea of ‘born from above,’ and can even be translated that way. Jesus clarified His meaning by affirming that ‘flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to Spirit.’ I can say for certainty that the Catholic Church

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doesn't believe in the reincarnation of flesh. Debating on the rebirth of the soul is confusing to many."

"I concluded that as well," Martine agreed, "because of the different therapeutic modalities that exist now, it's a very debatable concept that lingers unanswered."

"Cardinal Mercier of the Roman Catholic Church, an eminent scholar and theologian of the conservative Christian Tradition, in his book *Psychologie* defines the three views of reincarnation. I recommend it," Brother Patrick referenced his source more thoroughly, "because he more or less says, a series of repetitions of existence under the twofold condition that the soul maintains consciousness of its personality will conclude with a final unit in the series of transmigrations."

Martine added, "There are many biblical passages that support the notion of spiritual rebirth, and the quest for purifying the soul for immortality. Likewise, it's true that nothing in the Bible directly rejects reincarnation, or rebirth of the soul."

"You're correct, the Jewish philosopher, Philo Judaeus, whose lifespan included that of Christ," Patrick shared, "wrote in detail about reincarnation as a normal belief, he said the air is full of souls who are nearest to earth, descending to be connected to mortal bodies, return to other bodies, desiring to live in them. Reincarnation is a tenet of Orthodox Judaism."

"I've been to Israel and the guides were always quoting their famous historian Josephus. What did he teach about it?"

"Do you mean the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus?"

"Yes," Martine said, "they referred to his writings everywhere we went."

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“He was a contemporary of Christ,” Patrick explained, “a highly regarded historian that documented everything extensively. He recorded that both the Essenes’ and the Pharisees believed in rebirth. The Pharisees believed that all souls are incorruptible, but only the souls of good men moved into other bodies. The souls of bad men are subject to punishments lasting for ages. Theoretically, the good quickly reincarnate to work out their destined return to God.”

“Whereas,” Martine interrupted, “the wicked undergo suffering in the underworld.”

Patrick nodded, “Yes, only getting the chance to return to the earth for further spiritual hope after the lapse of ages.”

Martine asked, “What don’t we know about reincarnation that we should. It’s been 1400 years and our Church has avoided the subject. Brother Patrick, I feel a little robbed?”

“Like you said, I believe it was officially condemned by the Church in 553 because it was a very political time in the history of the Church that relied on theologians and a variety of churches trying to unite. During and after Christ’s life on earth it was a common teaching and knowledge. But, most Gnostic texts, like the *Pistis Sophia* claim—human souls are trapped in a cycle of reincarnation.”

“What do you know about the progression of a souls’ rebirth?” Martine probed.

“Yes, well, a lot from other religions I’ve researched,” he clarified. “Like we must drink from a cup of forgetfulness, and the soul is led back to be born into a new body, and whether they are assigned a good destiny or bad one reflects their conduct in the previous life,” Patrick schooled her.

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“It would have been a very tough subject to educate everyone on back then,” Martine acknowledged. “I can see how the Church fathers were trying to get people to mend their ways with the teachings of the bible. Reincarnation complicated their purpose with followers, so they dodged it.”

“Yes, like a nip and tuck,” he chuckled.

“More like a slip and duck,” Martine joshed back. “They didn’t have the answers and didn’t want to be burdened with the responsibility of having to explain, prove, or defend what can’t be seen. Instead, we continue to let it be a controversy that divides us.”

“All we really know scripturally,” he said with certainty, “is that our flesh and blood body will be reunited with its soul.”

Martine jumped to her other pressing question, “There is a finite number of souls aren’t there?”

“Ah, yes, the treasury of souls or as the Talmud calls it the Guf.”

“Don’t all the souls need to descend before the second coming of Christ?” Martine questioned, raising her brow.

“Presumably, that’s what we’re waiting for. The Messiah will not come until the Guf is empty of all its souls.”

“I can see why the dark forces would actively try and prevent live births them, don’t you? That’s my second theory,” she shared with conviction.

His eyes widened at her proclamation. “Now I understand your questions and concern. You’re correlating the loss of innocent souls with prolonged delay of Jesus’ return.”

Martine suggested more “I personally don’t see him joining us down here when this practice is thriving around the world. Where would He belong?”

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Brother Patrick's jaw slacked suddenly. "I've never had that debate with anyone yet."

"Neither have I," Martine confessed. "Thank you, Father Patrick. This has really helped me in this unusual case I'm working on. I wish I could stay longer, but I have someone waiting for me."

"The Lord Be With You and all the souls you will help," he said, blessing her.

"Brother Patrick, if the Lord is with us, who is against us? Planned Parenthood, and the lost souls that serve it?"

Patrick nodded, saying, "And false leaders that believe they can absolve us from a grave sin."

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Chapter 42

Leaving the monastery in her rear view mirror, Martine put her blue tooth device in and called John Mahoney.

Answering her on the first ring, he said, “Martine, where have you been?”

She sighed, “Research.”

“Anything you want to tell me about?”

“Not really.”

“Got an update for you,” he stated, “I just found out that Charmaine’s friend Rena was in a hit and run.”

Martine expelled shock, “Oh my goodness! Is she alright?”

“She’s in the hospital.”

“Is she conscious?”

“No, It’s not good,” he divulged. “She might not make it through the night.”

“What do you know about that investigation?” Martine asked.

“It happened in Texas, so I’m not in the loop.”

Martine sighed, “I don’t believe in coincidences.”

“You mean, we don’t believe in coincidences,” he corrected her.

“I think security should be arranged for her,” she suggested.

“I’m on that already. When are you going to be done there?”

“Tomorrow,” she replied, “but, I’m heading back to Texas. I have some thoughts.”

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"I'll meet you there," Mahoney informed her without hesitation.

"Perfect," she exclaimed, "I need to be back in Denver by Tuesday, I've got court."

"That was good thinking when you went back to Charmaine's house," he commended her. "I'm really glad you did that. I'm having the testing done right now before they move the door."

"Yes," she sparked with glee, "thank you for arranging it."

Mahoney shared his insights, "I know you like to do and see things for yourself, but we do have to go through the local authorities."

"I do like to do things for myself," she said flatly.

"Are you going to tell me how it really went with the local authority for you?"

"Like, he's high on opinions and low on resources?" Martine jested.

Mahoney laughed, "Did you piss him off, or is he happy?"

"Happy? Seldom, I presume."

"So, do you feel like stepping down after your adventures in Oklahoma?"

"No," she said quickly, "I feel like stepping up."

"Good, good," he sounded, "I had no problem arranging my investigators with him and the door. He'll let me know when it's all done. Anything else I should know before he calls me back?"

"Yeah, he wants the place cleaned up or burned down."

"Do you think there's an ulterior motive in this town that we should look at?"

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Knowing that her other senses were taking her in a different direction, she declined that notion, “No, it’s so remote out there the cows can’t find their way home.”

Mahoney laughed again, “Martine, you and I agree.”

“The story here is tragic, amazing, and solved, if he’s the only one telling it. We’ll figure this out,” she finished.

“Do you think he’s questioning his original conclusions?”

“Possibly, he seemed more amenable today. I believe you will have his complete cooperation from now on.”

“Okay, I’ll stay on this. Anything else I can do?”

Martine’s phone signaled her that she had an incoming call. “I’ll let you know. I have to take this call, sorry. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

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Chapter 43

Only a day ago, Alexa's mother Martine arranged for the examination of the bedroom door at Charmaine and Levi's. With John Mahoney's connections, immediate assistance of forensic analysis was conducted at the location before the door was removed for future research and evidence. Because of her specialty in the area of investigating DNA and other crime scene forensic materials, she had offered to evaluate any results that may be obtained.

Anxious to receive any outcomes that may be extracted from the door being examined by a remote crime lab investigative service, Alexa hurried through her usual work assignments in the event she may be asked by John Mahoney for any special assistance. Having initially worked in Arizona under the leadership of Mahoney, she would readily assist him in a case that involved him and her mother.

Alexa's phone stayed quiet while she rifled through numerous files setting on her desk, assessing what was most important to work on in this moment. When her personal phone finally rang, breaking the silence, she reacted with an involuntary jerk before answering, "This is Alexa."

"Agent, we are calling with the results on the Norton door examination," the female caller said.

"Thank you for the rush, you've made my day. Did you get something we could use?" Alexa implored.

Sounding unenthusiastic, the caller replied, "I don't think it's what you were counting on exactly. We were able to extract some DNA off of the object, but it doesn't match anyone in the CODIS System."

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Alexa sighed slowly, "That's disappointing, does the sample come close to anyone in the system or to the two subjects found at the scene?"

"No, the blood belongs to the female victim, and the DNA is male—not the victims," she stated boldly.

Alexa verified the results, "So the male DNA doesn't match or come close to anyone in the system, right?"

"Not at this time," she stated. "Out of about fourteen million profiles in the database it is male—like the majority of the DNA in CODIS. Your sample that we submitted to the FBI's DNA Index System doesn't compare to any identical matches. The system only identifies with concise matches to the profile submitted. There should be a way to generate matches that are related to the sample, but as you know there isn't. Likewise, you know CODIS results are dependent on all agencies and states participating, and they aren't. The ones that do don't always do it in a timely manner."

"I know," Alexa aired, "the information just isn't there today, but it could show up in time."

"Exactly, that's why we'll keep trying by rerunning it every week."

Alexa exhaled, "How about the print?"

"Same news there, we did get some prints on three fingers. No match there either."

Chagrined at the disappointing news, she obliged the technician, "I appreciate your speedy analysis, thank you very much."

"Have a great day," the tech returned.

"You, as well," Alexa returned, hanging up.

Drumming her fingers, she waited a minute before dialing her mother with the disappointing results.

Martine answered immediately, "Alexa, any news?"

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“Yes, but not the good news you wanted,” Alexa sounded disheartened. “Where are you?”

“Driving,” she responded, “Tell me what you’ve got.”

Alexa explained the results obtained, “There was DNA extracted from the door, but no match in the system.”

“That’s okay,” Martine replied.

Disagreeing, Alexa reiterated, “There’s no match.”

“It’s still there when we do find the right person. I presume it doesn’t belong to one of the victims, right?”

“That’s true,” Alexa conceded, “it will help if you do find a suspect, but for now it’s a dead end and it was potentially your best evidence.”

“Actually, it’s more important than you would’ve thought,” Martine wagered. “I didn’t expect to get a match if the suspect wasn’t already a criminal in the system. I definitely got the impression that there aren’t too many of those in that county. My hunch has been it’s a crime against Charmaine or Levi. This kinda shows that it’s still very likely the case.”

“You’re right about that,” Alexa agreed.

“This profile might be what gets us closer to that individual which is a male, and not Levi.”

“And not Levi,” Alexa repeated. “It does help if you have a person in mind, do you?”

“No, but DNA is the greatest game changer since electricity.”

“True,” Alexa concurred, “but today this DNA is like finding the right star in the universe.”

“A universe of about 400 billion stars,” Martine asserted.

Alexa scoffed, “You just made it sound impossible.”

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“That’s just how it is today—not tomorrow,” Martine stressed. “We could try something really creative right now if we register it with the ancestral genealogy sites to find relatives.”

“Have you ever tried one of those sites yourself?” Alexa turned to her computer, scrambling the mouse to wake it up.

“No,” Martine admitted, “but I’ve heard how it’s helped when some detectives got really creative.”

“Do you know how many there are that the FBI can access?” Alexa turned away from her computer screen.

“No,” Martine had to concede.

“It’s a big round number—0.”

“I get you can’t access it through any resources available with the FBI, but there might be another way to do it,” Martine coaxed.

Alexa supposed in a thoughtful tone, directing her attention back to her computer, “I could create a fake John Doe identity.”

“Yep,” Martine concurred. “Call him Justin Case. It’s not a common name at all and he should present himself as a guy looking for relatives due to his adoption at infancy. That’s a common scenario.”

Alexa clicked away at her computer, updating her mother as she looked at the trendy ancestry sites, “I’m looking at the two most popular sites I should pick from, but they both use saliva test kits. Pausing a moment, she hypothesized, “I’m going to have to request the lab convert the DNA profile to a data file and use this site called GEDmatch. They’ll compare it to the other sites. I think we should start there.”

“Perfect,” Martine sounded encouraged, “we’re looking for siblings, parents, aunts, uncles, and close kin like

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cousins. We don't care if his great grandparents are from Russia, or he has Eskimo lineage."

More elated than defeated, Alexa plotted her next move, "I'm calling the lab now. Talk later, I gotta figure out how to submit this." Picking up her office phone she started entering the number to the lab to request the database file while listening to her mother's parting words.

"Remember your doing this on your time and at Stewart Kincaid's expense—not the FBI's."

"Got it," Alexa confirmed, "I'm keeping receipts if I have expenses."

"Good, I gotta go for now," Martine finished, as she drove up to Eva.

"Bye," Alexa replied as she put her cell phone down and completed her call to the lab.

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Chapter 44

It was warm and the night moon rose high in rural Oklahoma, spilling light down like a dimly lit day. Martine marveled at the silver pale sphere seen through her motel window, as she was wishing she could find some way to help with resolving this case. “Why is nothing coming together or relating to her dreams?” she thought to herself.

Martine was left alone to sort through all the events that had been stacking up in her mind—searching for some resolution regarding the numerous issues that remained unrelated. Praying for divine guidance and assistance, she fell into a deep sleep with her laptop computer still perched on her chest.

Drawn up through the ethers, Martine was soaring like a winged bird, materializing in the Indian lands of the Southwestern United States within the vision of the distant and famous San Francisco Peak Mountains.

Dressed like a Native American Indian squaw sitting on the back of a mostly white paint horse, she surveyed her surroundings and noticed the glaring finery of her horse’s decorations. Plumes of eagle feathers were interwoven in the mane and tail—fluttering gracefully from the slightest breeze that swept through. Fantastic embellishments of beads and shells were strung together, hanging gracefully from the head, tale and reins. Under her seat was a soft light colored fur with more splendid trimmings.

Having seen everything there was to see in the desolate desert terrain, she clicked to her horse—prompting it to proceed through sparsely-grassed land towards the seclusion of the forested area ahead. As she moved the horse

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into a fast lope across the prairie field, two large wolves beautifully adorned with beads and feathers around their necks and tails swooped in alongside her—as if they were her companions, too.

Off in the distance, a single Indian rode towards her on a white horse with bright markings painted on its face and chest. As he drew nearer, her newly acquired eagle eyes discerned more distinguishing characteristics of the middle-aged man with a masculine build. Clothed in the fur trappings of a formidable hunter suggested they were in an area like Colorado.

Wild and fantastic in appearance, Martine dared to ride toward him. Based on his attire and the décor on the animals, she imagined they were in the seventeenth century—when Indians owned the land and horses had finally flourished into their society.

Drawing nearer she could see his head glisten from the shiny bird feathers bound with leather to his long black hair and the life-sized crow headdress he wore on top. Without slowing her horse down, she was soon within his reach. As they both reigned their horses in, the two gallant looking wolves positioned themselves at her sides.

Regal looking with the crest of his headdress sprouting crows' wings spread-open on top of his head—indicating he was a Shaman, he greeted Martine in her native tongue, “Why you come to Great Spirit world?”

Realizing she had prayed for higher guidance, she answered respectfully, “I think I’m here to learn . . . and understand.”

“Learn what? Understand who?”

Still not sure what kind of help to ask for, she shook her head, “I don’t know.”

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Laying his sights on the wolves, he wondered aloud, “Why you travel with two wolves?”

Having no idea, Martine guessed, “They’re my spirit guides on this journey I suppose?”

“Yes, one finger cannot lift a pebble.” His horse anxiously pawed the ground. “You were wise to ask for help.” Moving in closer, he shared his observation, “I see they have been with you for many moons. Your spirit animals tell much about your work and needs.” Expressing sympathy, he continued, “You lost your wolf partner.”

Acknowledging his accuracy, she nodded, “Yes, I suppose you’d know that and more. Can I know your name?”

Up close to each other, he uttered softly, “You like wolf without mate. You don’t want to be alone—you want to be left alone.” His eyes met hers and bore deep. “I am called Medicine Crow.”

“Medicine Crow,” she repeated.

“Do you know why you have chosen to seek *their* help?”

Mystified, she exclaimed, “I have asked for *their* help?”

Solemn faced, he explained, “Yes, you summoned them with your prayers to Great Spirit. Wolf is guardian of these great lands. Because of its pack behavior, wolf spirit represents not just successful hunting, but also the ability to work together for the good of the group . . . this is exemplified in wolf pairs. Wolf parents represent loyalty and family values. Wolf is teacher, protector, pathfinder, and represents a sharing of knowledge. He teaches us inner guidance and clarity.”

“I’ve been seeking the answers to my dreams, but fear I’m not capable of understanding them correctly.”

“What is your greatest fear?”

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“For me its failure . . . , failure to do my job well . . . and not being able to know how to help the people that trust me, basically, not knowing what to do.”

“Ah, uncertainty, when we fear what we don’t know. If we accept uncertainty, it becomes adventure.” Pointing to the wooded area, he said, “Come, we go there.” Cueing their horses they galloped side-by-side up to the dense tree-line, slowing to a walk before entering the woodlands.

Zigzagging through the magnificent Aspen grove was so peaceful and serene, she didn’t think about anything other than what was happening in the moment. Even the crows perching in the wispy branches kept silent as they progressed from limb to limb—following Medicine Crows trajectory.

Concealed inside the village of white-birch trunked trees with spinning leaves that moved from the slightest breeze, Martine discerned the mighty grove stretched as far as her acute eyesight could see. Contrasting colors in the forest and striking bright paint markings drawn on his horse were so vivid and illuminating that it defied reality and attained the unimaginable—rivaling anything else familiar to her.

Out of sight from any possible intruders, Medicine Crow introduced her to his secreted tent-shelter suspended from a jutting rock formation, “We stop here.” Dismounting his horse, he walked over to her and took her horses reins. Helping her down from her mount, he reminded her why she was here, “What more guidance do you seek?”

Martine led her horse, following behind him. “I don’t know what to trust.”

Tethering his large white horse to a tree, he clarified, “Who to trust?”

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Nodding apprehensively, Martine answered, "Yes, and my own inclinations and dreams." Tying her horse to a neighboring tree, she added, "I don't know what to believe."

Joining her, he stood tall—towering over her. "When you no trust yourself, you create doubt, and doubt will take control."

Martine reflected on that, "That is hard to overcome."

Stroking her horse's neck, he complemented the animal, "Your horse animal spirit is very strong and proud. It has much power and stamina. Most hard working animal—carry you great distance on roughest journey."

Surprised at the revelation she had been riding a splendid spirit guide, her eyes blinked wide with amazement. "I didn't realize," petting the soft white muzzle of the stunning horse, she resumed, "but, I should've known."

"Horse overcomes all obstacles on path and in face of adversity." Fondling the array of fanciful decorations affixed to the mane and forelock, he elaborated, "She has many honors bestowed on her. People should be more like horse." He patted the mare with approval.

Admiring the horses' perfection, Martine conversed back, "She is beautiful, but I don't know her name."

"She has great majesty and nobility, I call her Noble." Crossing his arms, he nodded the affirmation. "So much meaning in horse spirit guide that it stirs the heart and sets imagination wild. You need strong guide for rough road and many hurdles. Noble can carry you through anything. Horse never gives up under any extremes, and always gets you to your destination."

Martine cringed at the notion of a tougher more arduous passage to come, engaging Medicine Crow further,

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“Does that mean I’m going in a good direction and I can trust my dreams?”

Turning to face his campsite, he directed his guest, “We share fire and warm drink.”

Following him to a smoldering fire pit surrounded by wooden log-seating, she sat down, waiting for his response while he stirred the ambers and added kindling.

Satisfied with the flames he conjured, he prophesized, “Everyone that succeeds—dreamed first.”

Martine divulged her shortcomings, “I wonder if I have the information I need.”

Medicine Crow countered, “If we wonder often, the gift of knowledge will come.”

Martine disclosed another frustration, “I have thought and wondered, but haven’t found anyone that can help with what I’m missing.”

Purporting a more divine solution, he offered his counsel again, “Ask questions from your heart and you will be answered from *their* heart.”

“That sounds great if I knew who to ask,” she objected, her eyes following the two wolves that were pacing outside Medicine Crow’s personal space.

“You are not accepting what is beyond your control,” he advised. “Accept what you do know,” he urged, pulling her attention back to him, “then inspiration and control will return.”

“Your answers are good, but hard,” Martine remarked.

“So are the best trees.” Giving her a knowing glance, he added, “Your dreams are good and hard too.”

“Some have been very hard and make me angry.”

“Anger is not accepting what is happening. When you do accept, you build tolerance.”

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“I could never tolerate what was shown in some dreams,” she countered immediately. “What is so bothersome is the fact that it is really happening, and I hate it.”

“Too much tolerance dulls the mind. Dull minds fall asleep.”

“Yes, it is about too much tolerance. Innocent people are being hurt, and abused.” Moving cautiously toward her, the two wolves positioned themselves by the fire at her feet. Their long thick coats of creamy white hair with highlights of black and grey shined from the dancing flares emanating from the pit.

He nodded, stirring up the robust flames. “Yes, you do know. Wolf like you—are intelligent, with instinct and intuition to overcome fear.”

“Your wisdom and guidance is greatly appreciated. I welcome your promptings. Can you tell me more?” she asked.

“Horse spirit will take you on a journey of faith that links confidence, desire, and strength as you progress through rigorous obstacles that the rider must overcome by controlling the willing horse. Wolf couple will be strong and help overcome your deepest fears and doubts. Never mistake their silence for ignorance, their calmness for acceptance, or their kindness for weakness. You are wolf.”

Both wolves rose and submissively rested their heads on her lap, allowing her to touch them. “They are beautiful,” she exclaimed, petting each one of them.

“You have many animal spirits, but these will serve you well and help you to place trust in others that can assist you. Help you take control and get job done.”

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Martine looked at him quizzically, “You said ‘take control and get job done.’ How big is this job? That’s the real question I have.”

Pointing to a large grizzly bear pelt being dried and stretched up on the hill in full view of his campsite, he looked upward and professed to the Great Spirit, “I ask that my enemies be big and strong, so that if I defeat them—I have no shame.”

Martine frowned, “I hope my enemy is never a giant bear,” she said seriously.

“No, it is not.” Gazing in a trace-like state, he enlightened her, “Man’s laws have changed. Only the laws of spirit remain always the same. Man should understand spirit more.”

Calm and relaxed in the mystical experience, Martine thanked Medicine Crow, “I feel so much better and appreciate all your wonderful insights. You have provided special guides that suit me perfectly. What can I do to thank you?”

“When we care more about others than we do about ourselves we are helping them unconditionally, that is love. I do this for love. You will learn the power of love on your journey.”

“You made me believe my prayers are answered and it won’t be as hard as I imagined.”

Medicine Crow warned her, “We can help and guide the seeker, but the way of the troublemaker is thorny.”

“Troublemaker?” she eked in surprise, “There is a . . .,” her words faded off as she was whisked back into her body.

Waking from the profound dream, Martine laid still processing the words spoken and the thoughts of how learned the Native American culture was in the teachings of

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the eternal laws of Spirit. It saddened her that the Native Americans never assimilated with us spiritually. “That kind of bond would have benefited both our cultures,” Martine reflected.

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Chapter 45

Martine woke early and took advantage of using the shower first. Temporarily alone with her thoughts while Eva was taking her turn in the bathroom, she got a second cup of coffee and looked through her journal's notes—adding some more from last night's dream experience. Hearing Eva open the door, she called out to her, "Last day here for both of us. Pack everything up because we head to the airport after your last session."

"Got it," Eva returned, "I'm so excited about the three horses I found here. I might come back with June and look at a couple more," she hinted, "if they like the ones I picked out for them."

"Has it been worth it for you to come?" Martine got up and threw clothes in her suitcase.

"Absolutely," Eva lilted, "how about for you?"

Zippering her bag closed, Martine dropped it off the bed and wheeled it to the door. "I think so, but I've got a lot more to do."

"How'd you sleep, mom?"

"Same," Martine sounded discouraged, as she gathered up her phone and charger.

Peeking her head around the corner, Eva asked, "A good dream or a bad one?"

Martine crinkled her nose. "Not great, but okay. I definitely do not have this figured out," she divulged, watching her daughter hoist her bag on the bed.

Shoving all her personal belongings into her suitcase, Eva remarked, "I should be able to help more, I feel so

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focused and balanced after three sessions. I think everyone could benefit from this type of therapy.”

“I can think of a few clients I have that could,” Martine said in jest. “And, you’ve helped me more than you realize. Because of you and the horses I met Trina and figured out what probably happened in Charmaine’s home. You found out from Trent that Charmaine used Skype at her work place.”

Eva smiled proudly, closing up her bag and wheeling it to the door. “I did help a little.”

Leaving their keys on the table, they exited the room and loaded the car together. “Well, I’m going to talk to Gemma today while I’m waiting for you. There’s not much time left if there is anything on their computers to be viewed.”

“Let’s go then,” Eva said sliding into the driver’s seat.

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Chapter 46

Waking up to loud troubling sounds coming from her mother, Jade stretched and kicked. Agitated by her mother's sorrow-filled noises, she anxiously squirmed and jerked until her mother started rubbing and massaging her in a soothing gentle manner. Having distracted her mother from making the frightening and unsettling sounds, she relaxed her tensed muscles.

Pacified by the loving attention she began experiencing, she sucked her thumb to comfort her fears and calm her confusion. Listening intently to the sounds around her for her favorite tunes, she wiggled her little body when lively tones began playing as her mother prepared food for the two of them.

Familiarity with sounds and touch that pleased her was becoming increasingly important as she simultaneously was exposed to more unusual or stressful events. Unable to escape or avoid odd disturbances did make Jade uneasy and nervous, whereas, Endora's purring, musical melodies, and her mother's voice, comforted her in times of upheaval.

Jade already could sense that her mother—the person that carried her everywhere was the only important thing in her life. Fear of separation from her and the safety of her home did create some anxiety when patterns changed, but it never lasted long because her mother's voice was always near.

With food being served, and her mother no longer making horrible distressing racket, Jade relaxed and enjoyed her hardy meal.

Kathi Bjorkman

Third Eye Witness-

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Chapter 47

Entering the tranquil *Brain Fitness* center was comforting with positive energy that Martine readily took in before embarking on another leg of her journey. After Eva checked in with the receptionist, she asked if she could visit with Gemma while she was waiting for her daughter.

“Let me check for you,” the young perfectly manicured girl offered, dialing Gemma on the interoffice phone. After asking the Hypnotherapist if she had time to meet with Martine, she nodded and said, “I’ll send her back.”

Relieved by the good news, Martine waited for the girl to terminate the call. “I can find my way, thank you.”

Outside her doorway, Gemma was waiting for Martine with a smile and cheerful greet, “So glad you could come back.”

“I am, too, thank you so much for seeing me.” Following her into the familiar office, Martine began explaining her impromptu visit. “You have been extremely helpful and informative—I even went to a monastery to visit with a theologian regarding the various teachings on the soul and its attachment to the fetuses. What you’re doing and learning is proving what the four main religions in the world have been teaching for centuries.”

“That’s interesting.” Gemma looked amused and curious. “I’ve never studied other religions myself,” she commented.

“When science and religion merge, it’s very powerful, Gemma, but that’s not the real reason I needed to see you.” Martine shared from her heart, “I’m actually helping Charmaine’s family.”

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“Really,” she exclaimed, Gemma’s happy grin slumped into serious concern.

“Well, I’m here investigating her death.”

“Oh, I thought that she was murdered by her husband.”

“Possibly, but I don’t think so. I’m trying to verify if she had use of a computer here for personal reasons. There weren’t very many communications on the devices found in the home because they had really poor reception where they lived. Is it possible she used her office computer to communicate with friends?”

“I suppose it’s possible,” Gemma alluded slowly. “We don’t have a policy against it.”

“You mentioned that you Skyped with clients, so I thought she would be capable of doing that socially with her friends,” Martine tactfully insinuated. “I’m interested in learning of any problems she may have had that could have caused this tragedy.”

Gemma looked shocked. “I never considered someone else would do this. It’s such a safe area in this part of the state. I mean Oklahoma is pretty darn safe as it is.”

“I know. I’m looking deeper than the local authorities. Checking out her device at *Brain Fitness* will help me cross my T’s and dot my I’s.”

“Of course, let me get you her computer. I doubt if anyone has used it since she did.” Shaken a bit, Gemma went to her cabinet and grabbed a laptop and charger. “It hasn’t been charging for some time now.” Returning to Martine she opened the lid causing a small card to fall out. “What’s this?” she exclaimed in surprise.

Martine rushed over to pick it up off the carpet. Opening the fancy store bought ‘thank you’ card, she read the well scripted personalized message inside, “Dearest

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Charmaine, you are my best friend. Sorority sisterhood was disappointing, until I met you. You have known when I needed your help before I did. You thought of me before you thought of yourself. You cared for me when I didn't know how. Thank you my greatest friend for all you've done for me. I don't deserve you." Martine's eyes watered and her voice cracked, "Love Rena."

Gemma, frozen in motion, shook her head in amazement, and stammered, "Oh my, that was beautiful. Charmaine was a wonderful girl. She did have a special spirit."

"I certainly felt that when I read this note," Martine agreed.

Rubbing the touchpad—Gemma tried to wake up the dormant device. "Come-on," she sweet-talked to the computer, "wake-up." Negatively perplexed, she glanced at Martine, "I'm sorry, but it's not charged enough."

"Gemma, can I please borrow it? My other daughter works for the FBI and is excellent at forensic technology. I'll sign for the computer and guarantee its safe return."

Gemma closed the sleeping device. "What about privileged materials?"

"I'm a lawyer and I've spent many years working for the FBI, too. We're not going to cross that line or violate anyone's privacy. I'm looking for a personal alliance with someone she knew, unless you believe a client of hers is capable of murder."

"No, not that I know of," she replied without hesitation, "in fact, she really didn't have her own clients, yet. She just finished her training."

"Excellent, if we decide there is incriminating or helpful communications that we can't get off the device—

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her family will replace it with a brand new laptop and we'll have your company data moved over to the new one."

Handing Martine the computer, her usual smile drooped. "Please let me know what you find out. I adored her and want to help."

"Of course, I will. I have your number, and I can't tell you how much I've learned from you."

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Chapter 48

Martine was sitting near gate A7 at the airport waiting for her flight to Texas when she heard an agent announce boarding at gate A8.

“Will passengers to Minnesota prepare to board?” Young and confident, the girl wearing airline regulation clothing smiled brightly as she invited the first rows to proceed, “First Class passengers may board now.”

Instantly she had a thought when she was reminded of Minnesota. Noticing her flight wouldn’t be boarding for twenty minutes, she dialed up Agent Jordon Cain with the Minnesota Cold Case Unit.

“Agent Cain here,” he answered.

“Jordon, its Martine, I called a while ago about the Reker case—do you remember me?”

“Yes, yes, I do,” he stammered absentmindedly.

Martine looked perplexed and butted in, “I see you’ve accessed the juvenile files. Someone sent me the links to recent media coverage, but it doesn’t say what you found. May I ask if any of the items I had hoped were there did survive decades in storage.”

“You can ask, but I can’t tell,” he said craftily.

“Was it helpful to your case?”

“It will be if we can get an eyewitness to put him with or near the girls,” he replied evasively.

“Can you at least get his DNA before it’s too late?”

“We just need someone to come forward and we’ll have him. He’s not going anywhere.”

Martine lowered her voice, noticing the people around her were listening, “How do you know that?”

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“He’s not that well.”

“That doesn’t mean he can’t run and hide,” she disputed.

“Can he run 1700 miles an hour? Because our bullets can, and we’re surveilling him right now.”

“I doubt if he can, I don’t know anyone that can dodge a bullet,” Martine kidded, “except in bad action movies.

“That’s right, we’ve got this,” he stated.

“I don’t understand why you need an eyewitness at this point-in time,” Martine argued further. “You obviously know he’s the guy. Is this your first cold case? Evidence doesn’t typically get better as the years go by.”

Jordon controlled his rehearsed response, “We’ve got a handsome reward for someone to come forward.”

“They’ll be too embarrassed to do that now,” Martine persisted, “or too guilty if they were involved. I’m not trying to be critical, but most cases stay cold because investigators didn’t have a body to prove there was a homicide. You have bodies . . .,” she paused mid sentence and recalculated, “but . . . you didn’t recover much, or anything in the juvenile records—did you?” Without hearing a reply, she proceeded, “You know it’s him now, but still can’t prove it with hard evidence because it is lost, destroyed or missing.”

“We need an eyewitness,” Jordon repeated. “Do you know one?”

No,” Martine sounded dejected, “and if I’m right you can’t prove what you do know and you’re trying to flush someone out, or get him scared enough to confess.”

“I obviously can’t comment, but I do want to thank you for your tip,” Jordon maintained a professional and reserved tone. “It really helped us and the family.”

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“Good, that’s why I did call you in the first place. Thank you, Jordon, for taking me seriously. It is a bridge too far if you don’t have any reliable forensics.”

“Yeah, I was getting a lot of calls because of the reward, but tipping me off to the juvenile records was a game changer. He probably wouldn’t have served any time because he’ll be in God’s hands very soon.”

Martine laughed, “I highly doubt it. He’ll be in someone else’s hands—not God’s.”

“Right, right,” young Jordon said agreeably.

Martine realized she could do no more and neither could they. Too many mistakes were made throughout the years and justice would be served somewhere else and likely tenfold. “I think your efforts have really helped the family and me. It bothered and haunted me since that long cold winter I survived there. If this was your idea, it was great—it still may pay off someday.”

“Well, thank you. What do you do for a living,” he asked her in a friendly manner.

“I’m a lawyer. I was with the FBI for a long time.”

“Ah, now I understand why you were so determined, and detailed,” he premised. “I’m new to the state of Minnesota and look forward to the ice fishing I’ve heard so much about.”

“And, the fifty-shades of grey you’ll experience all winter,” she humored him.

Jordon chuckled, “Not a problem as long as the ice is good and strong.”

“Oh it will be,” Martine promised. “You know, Jordon, I didn’t have any answers to the biggest mystery in my life, and I always wanted to understand what really happened during those couple of years where my life overlapped with the tragedy of the Reker sisters. It’s a

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devastating ending if he is never charged and convicted,” she finished with a lingering eye on the long line of people getting on her flight. “But, I think you did a lot to bring some resolution to this very cold Minnesota case, so thank you.” Martine heard the airline agent call her boarding zone. “I gotta go, my flights boarding. Bye, Jordon.”

“Bye,” he said, hanging up.

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Chapter 49

Erratic clouds melted into the darkness of the Texas sky as Martine was seated in the restaurant in which she planned to meet Devon. Having just arrived in the big state, she barely made it on time from the airport to her hotel and subsequently left her bag with the bell boy.

Wafting through the room was the aroma of fresh baked bread and grilled steaks being served to the large group seated down from her. Watching the door for the feisty girl that had agreed to meet her only lasted minutes. Average sized with pronounced red hair the girl's entrance was undeniable. "Devon," Martine beckoned, waving a hand in the air.

Devon scooted around a few tables till she reached Martine's. Taking a seat across from her she looked up with a quivering lip. "I can't believe this has happened," she whimpered.

Reacting to her dismay, Martine sympathetically reached for her hand, "I'm so sorry for your loss."

"I can't believe you wanted to see me. My family is a mess and I don't know what to do."

Offering more comfort, Martine advised, "You don't need to do anything right now, but sort and organize your own thoughts."

Glancing around the fashionable dining room, she asked, "Why did you want to meet here?"

"I'm staying here. I just got in town an hour ago."

"You're not from here?"

"No, Denver."

"What do you do in Denver?"

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“I’m a lawyer,” Martine answered back.

Seeming bewildered, Devon questioned her again, “Am I in trouble?”

Eyeing the server that approached their table with menus, Martine laughed, “Why do people always assume that when they find out I’m a lawyer?”

Taking a menu for herself, Devon remarked, “I don’t know, maybe because you said you wanted to talk to me, and I didn’t know you were a lawyer.”

“It’s on my card I left with you—that you apparently haven’t looked at yet. I do want to talk to you, but you’re not in trouble,” Martine reassured as she accepted her menu.

Addressing them both, the young server asked, “Can I get you anything to drink?”

Martine answered first, “Water, please.”

“Me, too,” Devon replied.

“So, I’m not in trouble,” Devon sounded relieved.

“No, are you doing okay?”

“No, my sister died yesterday,” she said in angst, “she was one of a kind, and I feel terrible.”

“Devon, everyone is one of a kind, even you,” Martine tried to bolster the girls’ self-esteem.

“My parents don’t think so. I hate my job, I live with two other girls, and my mother’s house is too full of company to let me stay there,” she rattled off.

Martine empathized with Devon’s situation, “I know it sucks to be on the sidelines and keep getting hit by the ball. I’m sorry it feels like that.”

“It does feel like that,” Devon echoed.

“How about you and Rena, did you get anything resolved before the accident?”

Terminated

“Not really, but the last time we spoke, we didn’t quarrel. It was nice. We were gonna get together, and then this happened. I guess I’m angry, so angry.”

“Yeah, that is hard, but it’s not as hard as guilt. I’m so glad you two talked.”

“That was good, you’re right.”

Martine looked inside her menu, deliberating what to order, “Everything looks good, see anything you like? They even have pizza.”

Devon looked up quickly. “I like pizza.”

“Should we split their house Euro Pizza, it looks great,” Martine enticed her with a grin.

“Sure, sounds good to me.” When the server returned, Devon placed the order and handed her menu and Martine’s back to the girl.

“Tell me something good about your stepsister, Rena.”

Devon forced a smile before reflecting, “She was so important to me when we were young. I always wanted a big sister. She practiced hair styles and dance moves with me. One day there was a carnival in town and Rena got all dressed up to go with her friends. I helped her pick out her clothes and watched her put on her new makeup—she even put some on me. When her friends came to pick her up she saw how sad I was and let me come with. I’ll never forget that.”

“I love that story. My daughters are really good friends that look out for each other, too.”

Devon relapsed into sadness, “I wish it had never changed.”

“What changed?”

“I don’t know. She changed when she was in that sorority.”

Terminated

“Have you gone to college, yet?”

“No, I decided it wasn’t for me,” Devon relayed without blinking.

“It doesn’t have to be for everyone, but you should ask yourself if you’re doing what you want to be doing. Without a decent degree you limit yourself and most likely will work in a job you may not like. What did your parents suggest?”

Shrugging off the idea, Devon justified her decision, “They wanted me to go to college, but my grades in high school weren’t that good. My parents don’t care what I do as long as I’m working somewhere.”

“Devon, you can create a fascinating life if you apply yourself, but there is no substitute for a college degree that you can put on a resume. Start with a community college and make the grades so you can get into a four year one and get a degree.”

Devon appeared thoughtful for a moment. “Is that what you did?”

“Yes,” Martine stated, “that’s how I got a business degree and then a law degree.”

“So, you need a business degree to get a law degree?”

“Not necessarily, but that’s what I would recommend. You’ll never work harder if you do it, but you will be well equipped to do a great job anywhere.”

“I’ll think about it,” Devon conceded.

“You have my number if you ever need to talk to someone about that,” Martine offered. “I did want to know more about Rena. I was hoping you knew something, or that she confided in you about a problem.”

Devon expressed confusion, “Why do you want to know that?”

Terminated

“I find it extremely unusual that two friends have died so tragically. It’s a motherly instinct that wants to be sure nothing else could have happened.”

Intrigued, Devon guessed, “Like a serial killer or stalker?”

“Yes, so that means I’m interested in people she knew socially, or at work. Did she date or have a boyfriend?”

“Why don’t you ask our parents?”

Martine rejected the idea, “Parents can be the last persons to find out if there was a problem. Supposedly, the parents and authorities don’t have any idea who would hurt her deliberately, or accidentally. I find that Rena’s death and her friend’s death very suspicious.”

Devon lowered her voice, “Wait, Charmaine was killed by her husband. This means you don’t believe that, and you think this is a murder mystery?”

Martine sat back in her chair and grinned, “That was really a good deduction,” she complemented the girl, “do you see why you need college?”

“Damn,” Devon expelled, “it is odd that they both died this month.”

“Yes,” Martine agreed wholeheartedly, “it truly is.”

“I wanna help,” Devon aired loudly.

“You can, if you know some details about her life that you can share with me.”

“Like what?”

“Where did she work after college? Who were her boyfriends? Did she make new friends after college? That’s how you can help right now.”

“After college, she couldn’t find a job right away. That’s why I don’t think it’s for me. What good is it if you can’t get a job anyway?”

“What was her degree in?”

Terminated

Devon thought a moment, "Art."

"Was she an artist?"

"No, she could draw really good, and paint pictures, but she wasn't trying to be an artist."

"Well, Devon, I wouldn't and didn't suggest you get an art degree. It would be really hard to get a job with that education. Did she find a job?"

"Yeah, she got a job doing computer generated graphics for a large promotions company."

"Did she like her job?"

"She said she did," Devon replied with a shrug. "It was free-lance work she could do from home."

Martine quizzed her again, "Any problems at work?"

"Not that I know of, she didn't really work in an office with people."

Martine started digging for personal information, "Any boyfriends?"

"Rena could always have a boyfriend. In high school she dated Paul, but they broke-up when they both went to college."

"Is he still in her life at all?"

"No, he's married and lives in California."

Martine probed deeper, "How 'bout in college?"

"She dated guys, but nobody that I know anything about."

"Did she have a boyfriend after college?" Martine asked.

Devon thought hard, "I know she was seeing a guy, what was his name?" she murmured out loud. "It'll come to me in a minute, but they stopped seeing each other after she caught him texting another girl."

"She ended it?" Martine said suspiciously.

"Yep, she definitely did."

Terminated

“So, did he know Charmaine, too?”

“No way,” Devon said firmly, “Charmaine was married and far away.”

“Can you think of any girls that would be angry with Rena and Charmaine? Girls can kill with a car.”

“I can’t think of anyone, she was a really good person,” Devon said in admiration. “She was popular in school and had lots of friends. Everyone liked her, but . . . now that I think of it,” she paused again, “I haven’t really been around her for months—except at the funeral.”

“Why didn’t you get along with her then?”

“We did, but she told our parents about my new hair style and the tattoo I got—after I made the mistake of sending her a photo of me at a party. They freaked out on me, and I blamed her. Wouldn’t you?”

“Depends,” Martine answered.

Insulted, Devon flared-up, “Depends on what?”

“Whether they were correct, or not.” Martine took the opportunity to reckon with Devon, “Only the people that love you and care the most about you will tell you when they see you’re not doing yourself any favors. People that don’t care just tease, scoff, laugh, or tolerate it. Parents and sisters will tell you the truth. You can do whatever you want and they can’t stop you. I’m pretty sure they couldn’t relate to the change, and they shouldn’t be expected too.”

Martine’s words hit Devon hard, “I should be able to do what I want, especially when I’m paying for it.”

“Of course you can. They just don’t have to agree, which means you can keep doing it your way and ignore them, or be brave and find out why it bothers them. Try not to be obstinate,” Martine advised, “information is knowledge.”

“Maybe I will,” Rena relented a bit.

Terminated

“Will you still help me?” Martine cajoled with a smile.

“Yeah, I’m gonna help.”

“Great, so glad you can. I need the key to Rena’s apartment, and the address. Do you have it?”

“I know how to get it to you. Can I come with?”

“Please don’t, you’re not involved and you need to stay that way. I just want to rule everything out while it’s still a crime investigation.”

Devon hung her head dejectedly, expressing her one condition, “I want to know what you find.” Using a napkin, she began writing out the address and instructions to finding the key. “Don’t forget to call me,” she reminded, sliding the information over to Martine.

“Of course I will. In the meantime, I want you to go do something that you and Rena would have done together. She’ll be with you when you do it.”

While the server placed their pizza in the center of the table, Devon brightened up with a big grin, “We would have had pizza together, thanks for doing this with me,” she said to Martine.

Terminated

Chapter 50

When the sun rose Sunday morning, one more resident didn't, and never would. Summer heat was bearing down when Martine met Mahoney in the lobby of her hotel. "Good morning," he greeted her.

"Hello," she said with a smile.

"So, we're really doing this?" he said.

"Yeah, I met with Devon last night and she gave me everything I need to get into the apartment."

"What do you think you'll find?"

"I never know. I wouldn't know what to look for in my own daughter's apartments. This is just something we need to do or rule out. You didn't need to do this with me."

"I think I do. I'm sorry I couldn't do more."

"That's because your hands are tied. You can't be associated with a case you have no authority to be involved in," she reminded him.

Mahoney nodded his regrets, "I know you're right, and I wish I could find a way in."

Martine looked at the street sign they passed as she listened to him. "I wish you could, too," she said regrettably, navigating them to Rena's apartment. "Turn left at the next light."

Mahoney pulled his car over to the curb in front of the apartment complex, and turned to face Martine. "It's not going to be a problem if I go in with you, is it?"

"Of course not, Devon gave me instructions. I have permission, and you drove me. Let's go, but not without evidence bags and gloves," she cautioned.

Terminated

Taking the elevator to the third floor, they followed the numbering system to Rena's apartment. Grabbing the knob before inserting the key that was hidden on top of the neighbors door jam, Martine found the door unlocked. Surprised, she turned to Mahoney and whispered, "It's open—you go in first."

Checking his side arm, Mahoney entered first with Martine following into the unit's narrow hallway. Clearing the rooms in the small one bedroom apartment, he returned to her and reported, "We're good. No one's here, but I think someone has been."

Martine walked into the apartment. "Huh," she sounded, "Devon said nobody has been here yet, except the neighbor that took the cat to her apartment. I'm going to snap some photos with my phone and send them to her so she knows how we found it. I can't say if anything is missing, but it does look tossed." Photographing the rooms before touching anything gave her time to consider what she would be looking for. "Okay, I'm finished documenting. Let's do some sleuthing," she joked. "I'll take the bedroom and bathroom."

"Works for me," Mahoney agreed, surveying the living room.

Martine started with the bed area; above, below, and in-between. Finding nothing unusual, she proceeded to check the nightstand inside and out. Dreading the closet with a swayed rod from the weight of an over-abundance of clothing, she went to the dresser drawers next. Again, she methodically went through everything until—wrapped in a tissue, tucked in a sock—hidden in the back of a drawer was the missing clue. "Mahoney, found something here," she rang-out.

Terminated

Martine was removing the item from its hiding place when Mahoney walked through the door. "What'd ya got?"

"Don't know yet," she replied, examining it closely as she removed it from inside a sock with playful horses on it. Unbundling it from the tissue wrapped around it, Martine revealed the contents that had been secured in secrecy, "It's a pregnancy test." Her surprise brought him nearer. "And it's positive."

Mahoney rubbed the back of his head in puzzlement. "She wasn't pregnant, I spoke to the coroner myself," he confirmed.

"No, I don't think she was pregnant now, but I think I know when," she insinuated.

"Are you kidding?"

Martine showed a sign of relief. "Not kidding. I believe you can help us now."

Mahoney threw his head back in surprise, "How?"

Rapidly changing her location to the closet overstuffed with clothes and accessories, Martine whipped through the hangers looking for the right item. "Here," she said, showing him some oversized tops, "She was very pregnant. All I need to do is show that a conspiracy exists, and the FBI can step in."

"What conspiracy?"

Martine rubbed her temple. "I'm working on it. No one I've spoken with knew she was pregnant, but I have a feeling someone did. We need her computer, too. Did you see it?"

"No," he answered.

"Did you look through everything out there?"

"Sure did."

"Can you check and see if it was impounded with her mangled vehicle?"

Terminated

Mahoney made the call as they left the girls apartment, requesting an inventory of items recovered from the car in the fatal accident.

Terminated

Chapter 51

Handsome to a fault with working class roots, the quintessential American businessman was a master at reinventing himself when he found more lucrative opportunities. Eric Walsh enriched his thirst for success through all the advantages his businesses and political connections afforded him.

“Sir, Chaz is here to see you,” Eric’s assistant announced through the office intercom, “are you available?”

“Yes, of course.”

Entering the office through the closed door, he began, “Do you want the good news or the bad news first?”

Eric looked up to his son, saying, “The good news of course.”

“Well, the second subject did have better results than the first one.”

“You mean it was more successful?” Eric said, expectantly.

Chaz answered carefully, “That depends.”

“Depends on what?”

“Well, the combination of our patented formula was effective, but the side effects varied.”

“So the increased dosage of three drugs was successful on both subjects, but there were varied complications?”

“Yes, in one patient, and since this is an in-home procedure, medical assistance shouldn’t be required.”

“What’re you saying?”

“One of the subjects has hemorrhaged a lot of blood and is still under the doctor’s care,” he blurted.

Terminated

“Where?” Eric snapped.

“Don’t worry, it’s our clinic,” Chaz reassured his uptight father.

“Well that’s good. I thought you were going to tell me the subject died and it was in a community hospital,” he remarked coldly.

“That’s still a possibility, since a blood transfusion may be required.”

“It’s easier to heal a broken body than no body. If that’s the only thing that went wrong, we’ll be fine. If anything else goes wrong, the clinic will likely be blamed now,” he surmised boldly.

“By who?” Chaz sounded panicked.

“Us, so, we’ll blame it on anything else, because we can.”

“You think you can sway the doctor to go along with that?”

“I sway outcomes, not people,” he corrected his son tactfully.

“Can you do that with the FDA, because they will shut our clinical trials down during the investigation, if there is one?”

Undeterred, he formulated his next move, “Not if we can prove something else caused it.”

Chaz expressed puzzlement, “Like what?”

“I need all the medical records, I’m sure there’s something in there,” he construed craftily as he stood up from his desk.

Catching on, Chaz questioned him, “What are you looking for?”

Pacing in front of his office window, Eric asked, “Was there a history of Meth or Cocaine? Wouldn’t that

Terminated

skew the medical procedure enough to cause the complications?"

Chaz supposed, "I guess it could be argued."

Nodding in agreement, Eric hinted, "It only took one bite of the apple to make Snow White go away. We do what we have to do. See what you can find." Liking his idea more, he elaborated, "We can't let this one incident in our pre-trial fail. Now you know why I put you in charge of this part."

"Well we still have one more to go," Chaz reminded him, "we should wait and see what happens to this subject."

Justifying his actions, and dodging defeat, he concluded, "No, we're going to do the third subject and see what happens before we change anything." Perverse satisfaction thinly grinned across his face. "This isn't the time to give in—this is when we go all in."

"What a minute," Chaz said, hearing his phone vibrating. Looking at the screen, he recognized the name—and took the call, "Chaz here." Listening to the caller for a long minute, he ended the call saying, "Thank you. I'll pass that on."

"Seems like she'll be okay, the saline IV did the trick."

Terminated

Chapter 52

Martine dialed Devon as promised after her and Mahoney left Rena's apartment.

Devon answered with bated breath, "Martine?"

"Ah," Martine chuckled, "you put my number in your phone."

Devon answered proudly, "Yes, I did."

"I'm going to be back at the hotel this evening, and wanted to see you again."

"Does that mean you found something?"

"Depends," Martine paused, "I really need you and Clare."

"Clare?" Devon objected in disgust.

"I will call her, or you can bring her—your choice."

"I don't know about her. I don't even have her number."

"What does she do?"

"She says she's a model," Devon scoffed in disdain.

"Where," Martine questioned.

"You mean when, I've never seen her model for anything."

"Never mind, Devon," Martine sounded irritated.

"No," she said eagerly, "I'll find her and bring her."

"Okay, great, I can't wait to see you at seven in my lobby," Martine finished and hung up.

Mahoney's eyes questioned her, "Do you really need these girls?"

"I have a feeling they have a united interest in helping. There is something I need to figure out." Unable to understand what was really in play with this situation,

Terminated

Martine imagined these girls may have the mysterious link that could tie the menagerie of dreams and events into a collective agenda that was eluding everyone at this point.

Mahoney shook his head in bewilderment and kept pace with her to his car. "So, we're not having dinner alone," he teased.

"I hope not," she replied absentmindedly, looking at her text message. Hearing no further exchange, she realized what she said and looked up to him. "I'm sorry," she smiled in disgrace, "I meant that I hoped the two girls would be there."

Begrudgingly, Mahoney admitted, "I know that, I guess I wanted you to say something else, but that would've been awkward, too."

Flattered, she smiled affectionately, "First things first, can you find out if Rena was pregnant or had an abortion?"

Using his phone he began the task of tracking down Rena's remains.

Terminated

Chapter 53

Phil elbowed his way into Eric Walsh's offices like a bully in the high school hallway. Abrasive and bold on the inside—large and bulky on the outside—Phil intimidated everyone in his path as he made his way up to Eric's desk, blurting out, "Surprised to see me?"

Irritated by the intrusion of the criminal who barged his way into his private space brought Eric to his feet, demanding an explanation, "What are you doing here?"

Pockmarked with rough bristly features, Phil shut the office door and heckled, "I'm here to collect. I finished the job—as you must know by now. I believe your rich ass owes me a little bit more than I got."

Disciplined with an icy razor-sharp demeanor, Eric berated the intruder, "You can get your fat ass out of here, old buddy. You've been more than compensated since you botched the job in the first place. That has cost me extra already, so I'm asking you to go before I call for some security."

"I will go when you pay me what I deserve," Phil shot back.

Eric tried to neutralize the escalation, "I advise you to check out of here immediately—I mean the town."

Tough and stubbly, Phil grunted, "Now why would I want to do that?" Throwing his hands in the air, he chided Eric, "The place is starting to grow on me."

Unyielding in the threatening presence of a hardened murderer, Eric's less than malleable nature formulated a more favorable outcome in light of Phil showing himself

Terminated

publicly in his place of business, “What is it that you think I owe you for?”

“Secrets,” Phil smirked.

Eric’s clean-shaven face contrasted the rugged thug. “There are no secrets. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I’m sure you’re poor son will not agree,” Phil bantered back. “I also didn’t realize how much you must be worth. See, you told me you had a little paternity problem and you needed some help. I thought I was helping you out of a personal problem. Why didn’t you tell me you were such a big shot?”

Normally aloof, Eric gave him a steely look that could crack glass. “I didn’t think it was my place to correct your mistake.”

Phil needled the privileged man he envied, “You didn’t think I’d figure out what the connection really was here—did you?”

“I see,” Eric uttered under his breath, “let’s have a drink and talk about that.” Collecting his faculties, he turned to his credenza and slowly poured an inch of scotch in a couple of glass tumblers, remarking to his unwanted guest, “This is from my special reserve.” With his back to Phil he fished in his pocket and dropped a couple tablets into one of the glasses, stalling as he watched them start to dissolve. “It’s excellent poured over the rocks. That’s how my father liked it, too.” After adding ice cubes to the tumblers, he carefully topped both cocktails off with more scotch and gave them both a stir. “Here,” he offered, handing a drink to the vile man, “let’s enjoy this before we discuss your concerns.”

Accepting the peace offering, Phil took a sip. “Ahh, that is rich,” he expelled loudly.

Terminated

“Now what is this all about? I don’t see what my son has to do with anything.”

“Mm-hmm, I’m sure your son, Chaz, doesn’t know everything you’ve done,” Phil chastised his host as he gulped on his drink. “I wonder what he’d think of his daddy if he knew what you rearrange for his future.”

“What’s that suppose to mean to me?”

“The clock is ticking and when it strikes midnight I better have a couple hundred thousand in my hand,” Phil threatened, “that’s what it means.”

Eric sparred back, “Or what?”

Phil’s hard-edged façade stared Eric down. “Time will tell.”

Grinning at the inferior tough guy, Eric gloated, “The clock might be ticking for you, but not for me.”

“You put on a very convincing performance, but wait till you see mine,” Phil warned.

“You can’t possibly think you can blackmail me for your expert handiwork, do you?”

“I do,” Phil acknowledged, “and you can’t afford to ever let what I know come back to haunt you. It costs you almost nothing right now,” he said while glancing over the prestigious surroundings within Eric Walsh’s premier office space, “compared to what you could lose. Now I’m not leaving this town without my money.”

“So, you’re going to extort me now that you’ve already done the work and been paid handsomely?”

“Yes,” he chided, “just give it to me and I’ll leave you and your entitled son alone.”

“You’re going to leave us alone starting now,” Eric declared with certainty as he sipped his drink.

“What am I going to have to do to prove to you how serious I am and who you’re dealing with?”

Terminated

Resolute and stiff-lipped, Eric reversed Phil's claim when he made himself a rival, "I think you're the one that doesn't know who you're dealing with."

"Oh," he laughed, "is that a threat?"

Eric set his drink down, straightening his lapels. "Not a threat—a fact," he hurled.

"Since when did a man in a three piece suit scare me?"

"Today works," Eric mumbled under his breath, remaining steadfast as he watched Phil down the rest of his drink. Turning his back to Phil he began preparing another cocktail of scotch and medication. "Let me make you one for the road," he offered the man he now loathed. "I'll need some time to get your cash. Meet you in the parking lot here at ten tonight."

"That sounds more like it," Phil started to slur his words, "I knew you'd see it my way."

"Yes, of course I do," Eric said cunningly.

"I wouldn't want our friendship to end in a eulogy, ya know what I mean?" Phil alluded to his intentions.

"Oh, I sure do," Eric muttered to himself, as he slowly turned and handed Phil the spiked roadie. "See you at ten, friend." Watching the man that just made himself an enemy of Eric's dynasty swagger out his office, he snickered perversely, "Need my help getting back to your room?"

"I'd rather look into a loaded pistol," Phil exerted his fearless, violent, and flagrant life-style as he walked away from Eric.

Terminated

Chapter 54

Jade didn't sleep well and woke up starving. Something was wrong with her mother because she didn't sleep well, either. Hearing the beeping alarm, she imagined her mother would get up and feed them both. Relieved that they both would get better when they ate, Jade relaxed and sucked her thumb.

However, after her mother showered and drank some water, they went for the car ride. Jade knew she had to eat soon or she wouldn't feel better. She listened to the music in the car, but couldn't sleep to it today. Soon the car stopped and they walked a short distance, entering the same loud noisy place they had been the day before.

"Miss James," a women's voice summoned, "you're late, the doctor is waiting."

Jade and her mom went to the quiet room and used the bathroom. Her mom was not feeling better and sat on the toilet until someone called her again.

After her mother flushed she moved into another room where she laid down on a bed before more people hurried in the room. There was so much commotion Jade couldn't rest or understand what was happening. Without any warning, the strange bright light she had tried to escape before was shining all around her. Because she was weak and fatigued she couldn't maneuver away from it and just tried to hide her face.

While exposed to the light something worse started happening that made her flinch and jerk. Coming for her was a long hard very cold object that began poking at her. Aggressively trying to avoid it she pushed away with her

Terminated

little feet, but the further she distanced herself from it the faster it jabbed for her. Every time the probe touched her it stung and hurt.

Beating like a piston, baby Jade's little heart was about to burst from fear and pain as she screamed and fought for her life. When she didn't think it could get any worse, the intruder clawed at her so hard it ripped her arm off. Out of balance and in excruciating pain, the sharp monster swiped at her again—taking her other arm.

Wounded and disfigured her little body tried once more to push off and get away. Like a swimmer trapped within the confines of a small hot tub, she squirmed and lunged from side to side until an extraordinarily strong pull sucked the water and her limbs away. Exhausted and defenseless, teeny Jade felt the agonizing pain of her legs being cut off and sucked away next as she cried for her mother.

Under the bright light of an ultrasound machine, Jade was attacked with chilling accuracy and deadly intent. Her cries in the womb and her pounding heart were unmistakable to those who observed while she was held hostage in the grip of metal prongs and the beast that tortured her. Mouthing a silent scream—her head was decapitated.

What seemed like infinity for Jade, amounted to minutes before her life was dismembered and extinguished under the worst and harshest methods possible. Hurt that can last an eternity was inflicted on her loving nature in the most vulnerable setting a soul can reside in and now no one will ever know she existed—it was already over. Harmed in every way possible she was taken from her mother and the life she knew.

Now her soul—unsettled—stayed to watch over her mother.

Terminated

Although Jade's young life ended some time ago, her spirit, void of form, remained lost and scared. Unfinished affairs in her soul's life kept her stuck in limbo without a home and afraid to go far.

Terminated

Chapter 55

Martine got back to her hotel at seven o'clock sharp. Waiting for her in the lobby was Devon sporting a brand new hair fashion. Shocked by the transformation, Martine headed straight for the girl who now donned blonde hair with high and low tones blended to perfection. Her new hairstyle was so tasteful and classy—it drew Martine's breath away.

"Well," Devon sparked with a wide grin, holding a glass of wine.

"I'm taking a picture, because words can't describe this. I love it," Martine praised the young girl's choice, snapping a pic with her phone.

Excitedly, Devon explained, "You told me to go do something Rena and I would do together, remember?"

"Of course I do," Martine agreed.

"Her favorite place was *Hair Craft*, and that's where she took me on my sixteenth birthday. All the models get their hair done at *Hair Craft*. So, I went there and this is the new me."

Martine flushed with emotions and her eyes teared-up. "I'm amazed. You're going to feel different, you know."

"I do," she said throwing her arms around Martine, "and I felt my sister with me the whole time, and her hairstylist did my hair."

"Whoa, honey, what a gift," Martine rejoiced, sharing Devon's enthusiasm.

"It was, wasn't it?" Stroking her hair, Devon shared her best news, "They didn't even charge me."

"Wow. Doors do open if you're ready to walk through them," Martine alluded.

Terminated

“I have a surprise for you—Clare is waiting in the bar.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” Martine expelled relief.

Locking arms, Devon led Martine to Clare who was nursing a martini on the solitude of a nearby bar stool. “Clare, this is Martine,” Devon introduced.

Looking sad, Clare greeted her begrudgingly, “Hello.”

Martine took a seat next to Clare, while Devon sat on the other side. “Clare, I’m so sorry—please accept my condolences. I know Rena was your dear friend. Do you mind if I ask you some questions about her?”

“Sure, I’m here aren’t I?” Clare murmured, twirling the olive in her drink.

Martine faked a smile. “Yes, thank you for coming on such short notice.”

“Well, I didn’t have a choice when the little monkey here came and got me.”

Devon triumphed with enthusiastic pride, “I knew *Hair Craft* would know where she is.”

“I actually hope you both can help with my dilemma.” Martine acknowledged the bartender that approached her, “Just a house Chardonnay, please.”

“Like how?” Devon piped-in.

“It’s really personal,” Martine cautioned the two girls that barely had a connection. “Personal means we don’t share this with anyone right now.”

“Why,” Clare protested, “she’s dead. What can be that personal now?”

“In your case, I wouldn’t want anything to happen to you,” Martine suggested, offering up very few details she didn’t want disclosed.

Terminated

“Like what?” Clare’s mercurial temperament erupted, “I don’t have anything to hide.”

“Two of your friends are dead, and that’s just not likely to happen by coincidence, in my opinion.”

“Fine, what do you need to know,” she conceded with a defiant stare in Martine’s direction.

“I have good reason to believe Rena had a serious boyfriend. I’m looking for information relating to her dating. Clare, you are the best and last friend to speak to her about personal goings-on.”

“You think a boyfriend ran her down?” Clare’s doubtful tone rejected the notion, “Rena didn’t ever have a serious boyfriend.” Signing to the bartender for another drink, she added, “There would never be a reason to deliberately do that to her because she didn’t have a boyfriend.”

“Why?” Martine quizzed.

“I guess she didn’t need one. Don’t get me wrong, she liked boys and they liked her, but she never thought they were good enough to get serious with. She was a really smart girl that could do anything. She was waiting for Mr. Right, not Mr. Wrong. That’s why she named her cat Endora. She knew she’d keep the warlocks away.”

Martine logically explained, though Clare did make sense, “Sadly, even casual boyfriends can become obsessed, it happens, but it could also be a girl, or girlfriend. Just fill me in on her private life. Can you think of any relationship that could be suspicious?”

Clare sipped her martini in a reminiscing manner before her words began to flow, “I don’t know what really happened, but on New Year’s Eve we all got really wasted. My guy had to take me home and Rena stayed. Everything

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seemed good until Valentine's day." Clare staled in contemplation.

Devon spoke-up, "What happened, Clare?"

Paralyzing emotions gripped Clare, breaking up her words, "She . . . told me . . . she thought she might be pregnant."

Devon screeched in amazement, "Geez . . ., Clare, is that true? Is that why Rena avoided me and our crazy family?"

"I was sworn to secrecy, Devon, she didn't want her family to know. That might be why we haven't seen her for a couple months."

Devon reached over to hug Clare, comforting her in the moment. "I won't say anything. I'll keep her secret like you did," she said supportively.

Clare pouted a bit, "I like the new, Devon."

"That's not the whole story, is it?" Martine interrupted, cocking her head.

"No," through the fall of tears Clare revealed the details that spawned selfish behaviors, "I didn't want to change my plans. My date was on his way and he was taking me to the Valentine's Ball. He had made reservations weeks in advance. I wasn't there for her when she needed me. When I called her a couple days later, she wouldn't return my call."

Martine's antenna went up higher. "Who else knew about that?"

"Just me, I think. She didn't want anyone else to know. I probably did the wrong thing."

Martine kept asking for more, "Did Charmaine know?"

"I doubt it," Clare shook her head with disappointment. "This better not be my fault."

"Why do you say that?" Martine asked.

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Clare raised her drink, and tossed her guilt, "Because I'm a rotten friend." Lowering her drink, she justified her actions, "I didn't think it was such a big deal. I told her we'd get rid of it before anyone knew. Charmaine wouldn't have said that to her."

Devon tried to comfort her. "It's okay—I've done things I'm not proud of, too. I've grown up a lot this month."

Martine addressed Clare again, "Who's the father and what happened to the baby?"

"I don't know."

"Why don't you know?"

"She refused to talk about it." Clare downed her martini. "When she finally spoke to me, I had to agree to leave it alone or we couldn't be friends. She said if I told anyone, she'd disown me," Clare hung her head, finishing, "Rena was the only real friend I had left in this town."

"Clare, are you sure you don't know who the father is or what happened to the baby?"

"I'm sure." Shoving her empty glass away, she projected loudly to the bartender, "Hey, isn't this happy hour? Make me happy." Looking back to Martine, she offered some insight, "I'm not sure, but I don't think she had the baby."

"That helps," Martine said. "She lost it, or it was aborted then."

"Guess so." Clare shrugged a shoulder.

"You don't know, do you?" Martine deducted.

Clare slumped in humiliation, "No, not really. All I did was keep her secret. I didn't know if she was keeping the baby or not. When I saw her at the funeral, she wouldn't tell me what happened."

"Oh," Devon rejoined, "I found something out at *Hair Craft* today."

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Martine directed her attention to Devon, “What is it?” she asked, knowing hairdressers know more than they probably should about ones very personal matters.

“It might make sense now—Rena’s been going to the Catholic Church. She been spending time there with a priest named Father Nicholas.”

Martine dove deeper, “What exactly did they say about her relationship with Father Nicholas?”

Devon searched her mind, “All they said was she talks about him and they think he has been teaching her.”

“Like classes?” Martine guessed.

“Do priests teach classes?” Clare chimed in as she gulped her powerful Martini.

“Yes,” Martine explained, “if someone wants to become a Catholic, you need to go through the classes before you are confirmed, or receive Communion.”

“Ah,” Devon replied, “I didn’t know that.”

Devon observed Martine’s crucifix that showed over her top. “You’re Catholic aren’t you, Martine?”

“Yes.”

Clare stared at the crucifix. “Why do you wear it?”

“Simple, Clare, it’s for protection, but it does need to be blessed. It’s not jewelry to me,” Martine explained.

Clare looked remorsefully into her drink, slurring her words. “So, what do I do now?”

Devon leaned into Clare, whispering softly, “We’re gonna help each other—if you want, I’m gonna start by driving you home.”

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Chapter 56

With the lights out, Martine went to bed praying for the knowledge she needed regarding the souls of Charmaine and Levi. Falling asleep quickly, she lifted out of her slumbering body. With darkness surrounding her, an unearthly wind took her up to a frosty vortex that funneled down deep into the earth. Robed in white, Martine's billowing gown contrasted the blackness inside the abyss that awaited her entry.

Taken aback by the ominous sight of Outer Darkness—the same Outer Darkness which Jesus described in the Gospels as a “place of wailing and gnashing of teeth,” she looked around for guidance.

Unlike popular depictions of Hell as a place of fire and brimstone, Martine experienced the Outer Darkness as described like the deepest level of Hell in Dante's *Inferno*, as a place of terrible freezing cold. It will be there that the souls of the wicked will be frozen until the end of the world, at which time they will cease to exist.

Standing resolute at the mouth of a tunnel derived from the darkest of evil, Martine's eyes could see nothing of light except for flickering flames above her that grew larger as they drew near.

Descending down from the black sky, three flames morphed into young figures that materialized in front of her—blocking the entrance into the cavernous tunnel. As the figures took radiant forms, she could recognize them as the three girls that she met in her dream more than a week ago. Their dazzling faces grinned at her in acceptance and joy.

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Greeting her first was the middle girl, “We thank you for helping us.”

Surprised they were back, Martine acted pleased to see them. “How did I help you?”

“You brought a greater knowing and awareness to our families. They have answers to what holds them in pain.”

“Are you the girls from St. Cloud?”

“We were, but now we’re free.”

On the right, the tallest girl obliged her, “Our souls are not bound to the pain and suffering caused by the harm that came to us in a time of innocence. We are thankful and are free to help you.”

“How can you help me?”

“You warrant greater assistance to understand the mysteries of a soul’s journey in the beyond.”

“How will that help me?”

“We will be here to receive you when you return,” the same girl replied.

Whisked away before she could speak, Martine zoomed into the darkness—sinking deeper and deeper into the recesses of the cavern of molten looking stone. Landing on her feet after the lengthy fall, she took in her surroundings that were cold, frigid, and desolate.

Alone and chilled in the arctic environment, she moved quickly towards the sounds ahead. Winding tunnels with recessed caves were populated with various souls still in their human forms and occupations for her to see. Doctors were with patients, nurses were assisting doctors, women were being counseled, lawyers argued before judges, politicians rallied constituents, couples argued, and prisoners were shackled in irons.

Unable to discern a connection, she kept going deeper until the tunnel opened up to a large chamber housing

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a dignified looking man hosting a formal Victorian event. Handsome and alluring, his charisma enchanted his banquet room full of prestigious looking guests. Noticing Martine, he turned to her and raised his glass of red wine. "Join us my dear. Everyone is welcome here."

Skeptical of their abnormally white skin, Martine stayed at the entrance, "No, I don't know anyone."

"There are no strangers, we're friends, family, and business associates." Gesturing with his arm he presented his distinguished array of formally dressed company; Women with big stylish hair pieces wearing fashionable gowns with flat-fronted tight fitting bodices that bore their upper chests flanked the garish host, fancy colorful fabrics enriched the long gowns that touched the ground, Men in stove-pipe hats, long-tailed jackets, and ties and vests made of rich tapestry, appeared impeccable with their styled facial hair and gothic apparel. "Don't make the guests wait, please come in." He motioned for her to join him.

Not comfortable with the odd assembly, Martine looked around behind her to find an escape route. Magically, her white gown was noticeably more formal and glamorous. Though it was still white, the bodice was snug now with sparkling rhinestones. Her skirt was much fuller with a bustle and train in the back.

Pulling his watch out of a vest pocket, the striking stranger beckoned her again, "We don't have much time. Dinner is served."

"No," she corrected him, "I'm leaving." Certain she was in a lair void of any light—she turned to go without causing a scene.

"Stop," he commanded her as the doors to the room slammed shut, "don't be rude."

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Glancing back at him she observed everyone laying their eyes on her alone. "I really must go," Martine stated.

"Nonsense, you'll be sitting by me." Positioning himself at the head of the table he gestured again for her to join him on the right. "Come everyone," he summoned, "dinner is served."

Having no other options, Martine reluctantly moved to her seat at the table that was set for the standards of an imperial dinner. Candelabras perfectly spaced down the center of the long table were lit and dripping wax, while ornate dinnerware trimmed in gold glimmered from their light. Endless touches of refined elegance defined the formal celebration he convened that rivaled any royal affair. "What is the special occasion?" Seating herself at the table, she glanced around for someone to answer.

"I'm sure you will be quite satisfied with our planned menu," her host assured, reaching for her hand.

Cringing at the notion of touching the albino colored stranger, though remarkably handsome with steely grey eyes, she refused his advance. Martine was well aware that accepting any idea, object, or connection with an unknown entity could result in them overpowering the naïve human they desired. With her hands kept securely under the table, she merely faked a smile—avoiding his forwardness.

Looking past her to the others seated, he re-enumerated the fine cuisine he had arranged, "You asked for the best and purest that could be found, and we have prepared it in our first course."

Forced to be very near him, she looked at him for a better solution, "I prefer to order my own food—when I'm hungry. Please tell me what's being served."

Ignoring her, he stood raising his glass of wine and toasting his guests, "I salute you and all the little people that

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made this dining experience possible. Tonight we'll be starting with a soup that is a tradition in my family. Enjoy every spoonful." Signaling the parade of servers standing by, he sat back down to be the first served. Breathing in the aroma of the steaming broth-based concoction, he exhaled his delight, "Mm! Mm!"

Martine was the next served, but sat still while the others received their portion. Noticing their greediness and anticipation for the treasured sweet smelling recipe, she watched on as they all began aggressively devouring their feast. With disgust building inside her from the sloppy ill-mannered consumption of this unusual soup, she couldn't help but look into her own bowl and stir it till it's chunky ingredients rose to the top. Unsure what she was staring at she scooped some into her spoon for a closer examination. Shocked, she squealed, "Oh no!" Dropping the spoon and its contents of tiny baby-sized fingers back into the bowl, she tried to rise up and run.

"Not so fast," he warned her as he grabbed her arm forcibly, "you haven't even tried it."

"Why would I?" While pulling her back into her seat, she vowed to him, "I will never eat that. You must be monsters."

As he began laughing in a macabre manner, "Bwahahahah," the rest joined him in unison till their blended sounds resembled wild animals. Jerking his head back to her, his eyes blazed a hideous red as he bore them into her like a hot iron.

Jumping up to her feet again, she yelled, "Who in the name of God are you?" For the first time, Martine noticed a huge mirror hanging on the wall behind the host that reflected all the guests at the long banquet table. Delusions crumbled when she called out the Lord's name, exposing the

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demonic beings that they were—reflecting their true grotesque character from the mansion-sized mirror. Horrified at what was happening, she suddenly realized they had portrayed an attractive fantasy for her, disguising their true nature. “What are you? What are you eating?” Fixed on their reflections in the mirror that showed the hideous creatures they really were, she denounced them for what they do, “You’re cannibals in every way.”

“You would be, too, if you knew the power derived from such a potent, abundant, and innocent source of energy.” His true existence as a huge cannibalistic demon looked back to the mirror that refracted his hairy fanged face dripping with blood from his mouth—which she could clearly see for the first time. Exposed by the wall of glass, the red-eyed parasitic creature revealed its flailing long tentacles used to capture and control unsuspecting victims for its bidding as they reached out for her.

With dark slithery feelers grabbing for her, Martine courageously called them out for what they truly were, “You are entitled leaches with no talents or goodness. I see you—you drain the life out of innocent victims for your selfish existence.” Pushing her chair to the ground, she backed away from the demonic foe coming for her. “You have no power over me in the name of Jesus Christ,” she yelled while grappling for her crucifix that was hanging around her neck—concealed between her cleavage. Lifting it up for him to see, she held it firm, proving who she belonged to. Standing tall, she further warned him, “You have no power over Jesus Christ Crucified, and he is with me.”

Still coming for her, the ghoulish demon and his progeny of life-sucking vampires screeched at her insolence, “He can have you.” Getting close to her, he composed his conniving defense, “We do nothing wrong when we don’t

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interfere with their choice. That's why this is so delicious for us now. You can thank your God for Free Will and the 'right to choose.' It has never been easier and we are never going to be accountable for our feast or any consequences when it is given to us."

Clutching her holy weapon, Martine's resolve strengthened as she backed away, "You're going to regret this one day."

Boasting with a loud echoing voice, he roared as he began pursuing her, "Not us, we prosper from their regrets too." Prideful and arrogant, the disfigured demonic creature had completely shed the mystique of a fine noble aristocrat, revealing the grotesque beast that he was—void of all human characteristics.

"Whose regrets," Martine sparred back as she began dissolving into the ether. Finding herself free of the cavern and in the company of the three girls, she breathed out a big rush of air.

Clutching a baby in her arms the oldest girl, spoke first, "It's easy to hurt someone if you can't see or feel their pain."

"Not for me," Martine wailed, "that was the most horrible thing I've ever seen."

Holding out the little baby for Martine to take, the girl went on, "She suffered the fate of which many souls succumb."

Martine took the newborn child swaddled in a fine-looking white luminous blanket, "She's magnificent," she said admiringly.

Together the three girls recited to Martine.

*"Little Jade
Could not evade
The evil throes*

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*Of monstrous foes
More will die
When all abide
Soon one day
You'll slow their way"*

Awakened by the sound of her annoying alarm clock, Martine blinked her eyes open with the lingering images of a dream experience that was burnt into her mind like a hot branding iron. Tortured by the horrible memories of her nonsensical dream, she pressed her head deep into the pillow.

As in the past, Martine felt confused by the etheric borderlands between the material realm and unearthly ones. Deciphering profound teachings of knowledge instilled in her while using her connection between both realities was mostly bewildering.

Becoming part of both worlds at the same time allowed greater teachings and understanding to be obtained when tackling complex evil practices—hidden from the masses of people sharing the planet. Exposed at a specific point in time—like stars aligning, Martine had experienced the wonder of an awakening when all the clues came together like snapping the last pieces into a giant jigsaw puzzle. Until that happened, it resembles a massive scavenger hunt.

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Chapter 57

On the heels of Rena's suspicious death, Martine followed bread crumbs wherever they led—bringing her to the impressive place of worship that Rena had been known to visit. Arched Romanesque splendor formed stained glass windows and heavy wooden doors, connecting Bible belt Christians to the sanctuary of a prominent Catholic Church. Reminiscent of the motif that prevailed when the Spaniards and monks initially settled what would be named North America, she marveled at the authenticity brought by original settlers.

Entering the church through the ornate wood carved double doors, she passed thru the vestibule—entering the sanctum of the Catholic Church. Dipping her fingers in holy water, she crossed herself before proceeding through the isle of wooden pews.

Spotting Father Nicholas kneeling in the first pew, she walked up near him and genuflected before seating herself next to the priest.

With her presence known to him he sat back in the pew, joining her in a relaxed manner. “Welcome to our house of worship,” he conveyed reverently. Young and handsome, the cleric displayed perfect decorum for a practicing priest.

“Thank you for seeing me,” she obliged.

Looking straight ahead, he addressed her, “What are you so concerned about tonight that you need to have a confession? We can do it right here, since no one is in the church this evening, or we can use the confessional.”

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Dressed in his robes and collar, it was apparent he took his vocation seriously.

With her eyes directed at the sizable crucifix suspended behind the altar, she confessed to him, "I'm here with some concerns, but they're really not my own. I think you can help me with them though—would you mind?"

"Of course, I'm always here to serve God's people. I was led to believe you were a visiting Catholic that needed confession before receiving communion."

"I am, and I do, but," Martine cut to the chase, "did you know a young girl named Rena?"

Father Nicholas calmly replied, "You know as a priest I cannot answer that."

Doing the same, she turned to him and questioned, "Were you aware she was in an accident recently?"

"Who exactly are you to this girl?" Father Nicholas questioned.

"I'm an acquaintance to her and the family. I'm just trying to help them," Martine revealed. "Being a lawyer from Denver makes my mind suspicious of unnatural occurrences. Certain awareness's have led me here," she admitted with discretion.

He lowered his head in sorrow, unveiling, "Yes, I did hear that. It was very tragic. Why yes, she has visited us," he acknowledged as he shifted his position to face her.

Nodding in agreement, Martine shared her news, "Were you aware she passed away?"

Appearing shocked with sadness, he kept his gaze on her. "No, I had not heard that."

Studying his reaction, Martine restated the incident, "She didn't survive the hit and run."

Dismayed, he looked back to the Crucified Christ. "I didn't know she lost her life. We've been praying for her."

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That's what I was doing when you arrived." Redirecting his attention to her, he shook his head in disbelief.

Tilting her head slightly, Martine confronted him face to face, "I truly apologize for this, but here's the thing, I think you do know her personally because she's spoken so highly of you it brought me here. She's been talking to you." Sounding confrontational, Martine kept going, "Why is that?"

Father Nicholas relented slightly, lowering his voice, "She was struggling with her faith."

Martine countered his vague response, "We all do that don't we, but she wasn't Catholic. Was it more than that?"

Father Nicholas looked stunned by the insinuation. "No, absolutely not," he refuted with certainty, "that would never happen in this church."

Pursing her lips, she urged the priest again, "Father Nicholas, I don't have a lot of time. If she wasn't Catholic, why was she seeing you?"

Following a pressing of his lips, he divulged his involvement, "She was interested in becoming one."

It was Martine's turn to look perplexed. "Father, I have to ask you why she would do that."

"You know I can't tell you," he abstained with a stubborn flatness.

"Why can't you tell me? What could be so protected that a reason for becoming a Catholic is a secret?"

Father Nicolas fortified his situation, "Because, what someone confesses is sacred."

Like a lawyer, Martine argued harder, "She wasn't Catholic and didn't have the Sacrament of Reconciliation. You were her advocate, counselor, friend, teacher, but you couldn't hear her confession."

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Bantering back, he defended Rena's confidentiality, "I really can't betray the privacy of someone that comes to me in distress because of a technicality. I consider it a sealed confession for all who see me."

"That may be, but the sanctity of the confessional is reserved for Catholics that have received the sacrament," Martine opinioned her legal understanding of the confessional and its privacy issues. "You are not bound to withhold something that could help me and her loved ones that wonder how she could die like this. It doesn't make sense."

Standing his ground, he couldn't be swayed, "I just can't, and I don't know anything."

Martine laughed, "Father, I'm truly sorry for giving you the tenth degree, but I have reason to believe there was foul play, and it involves more than just Rena. It could also mean you're in jeopardy since she confided in you."

Letting out a deep sigh, he exclaimed, "So that's what it feels like to be on the witness stand, huh?" Surprised by the notion he could be in danger, he discounted her warning, "What do you think I could know that caused her possible murder?"

"I'm looking for a motive," Martine replied. "I mean this in the most sincere way, but are you the motive?"

"Of course not," he revolted defensively.

"You can see how this could be misconstrued if someone else was speaking with you. I believe it's in everyone's best interest," Martine paused, looking up to the crucifix, "if you could help me in any way."

Father Nicholas signed deeply, redirecting the conversation, "Let's light a votive candle for her." Rising from the pew he waited for Martine to stand and exit the row.

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Following the priest, she walked up to the numerous tiered rows of votive candles that served as vigils for special intentions or individual people. Most of the candles were lit and glowing within the display maintained by small donations. She watched as Father Nicholas took an unlit votive and moved it over to sit by a tall eight inch sanctuary candle meant to burn for seven days. "Who is this for, Father?" Martine slipped a dollar into the donation box.

"For Rena," he specified respectfully as he lit the little votive candle.

They both stayed quiet in prayer for a long minute before she noticed the tall seven day candle next to their votive had the name Jade written on it. "Jade?" Martine whispered in the solemn silence remember that was the name of Rena's unborn child she had seen in her mystical experiences. Her mind raced, staring into the array of flickering flames. "This is Rena's candle," she spoke softly. Glancing over to Father Nicholas to validate her conclusion, she kept her eyes fixed on him.

Catching him off guard he glanced at her, stuttering, "How did you know that?"

"Like you," she started, "I have my ways of knowing right from wrong, but I needed a little more information."

"So, you didn't need me to tell you anything."

"That's not exactly true," she corrected him with a shrug.

Exhibiting a degree of confusion, he asked for clarification, "What is exactly true?"

Shocked at another huge revelation she was having, she tried to appease him, "I did suspect something like this. It is good to know for sure. You can tell me if anyone else knows, can't you?"

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“No, not one person I know of,” he confirmed with certainty. “She didn’t want her family to know anything. She was dealing with pain, regret, sorrow, guilt, embarrassment, and . . .”

Martine finished, “Secrets and despair,” her tone sad for the raw truth of every emotion a person could handle in a lifetime, concluding with, “that at least one other person besides you should have known about.”

“I’m speaking of the father,” Martine surmised.

Father Nicholas remained silent but listened to her words intently.

“I’m very interested in who the father is,” she sparked. “You don’t owe him any privacy, do you?”

Appearing chagrined, he shook his head slightly. “She didn’t speak of him.”

“Did he hurt and humiliate her?”

“I think so,” he divulged regrettably.

“Father, I really want you to comprehend how horrendously painful this type of betrayal is for women who find themselves pregnant by someone they loved and then discover the ultimate pain of rejection and treachery from them—while compromised in their most fragile hormonally charged state of being. Men can never know what a female experiences when they remain oblivious to all the emotions that rally together in the woman’s body. There is a chemical change and reaction that requires support and love. It’s just not the right time to break-up, cheat, or worse—coerce them into having an abortion.”

“I only met her a couple times. Her friends and family were apparently very pro-choice and she wasn’t anymore. She felt safe connecting with the Catholic Church because of our unwavering position against abortion.”

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“I can understand her reasoning. George Orwell said, ‘The further a society drifts from the truth, the more it will hate those that speak it.’ I wish everyone understood the true ramifications of such a violent practice before they made their choice to support it. I think the pro-choice following would decline substantially if all the facts were known.”

“So do I, even though I’ve had to counsel many girls in similar situations, I know the peer pressure and social conditioning paved the way for their decision. We are trained for this, but we can never be completely empathetic to their emotional state since we are forever denied the gift of growing life and bringing souls into the world. I thank you for your insight. If I think of anything that could possibly help you, you’ll hear from me.”

“Thank you, Father. I’m probably leaving the day after tomorrow. I need to get back to my job in Denver. Truth is never a bad thing, its medicine for the heart and soul,” Martine reasoned encouragingly as she handed him her business card. “Preventing the truth does hinder the process though,” she hinted with a smile. “Thank you again, I’ll let myself out,” she said solemnly with a nod of goodbye.

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Chapter 58

Martine was lunching with John Mahoney when she received an unexpected call. "Hello, Father Nicholas, this is Martine," she answered.

"Martine, you recognized my number," Father Nicholas replied.

"It's always good to have a priest's number in your phone, of course I kept it. Is everything okay?"

"I was wondering if you were still in town and could visit with me before you leave."

"I can be there shortly," she arranged, while eyeing Mahoney for approval, "say an hour?"

"That would be good. I will look forward to seeing you."

Enthused for the first time, she explained, "That was Father Nicholas, and he is asking to see me. Priest's don't ask to see people, we ask for them to help us."

Mahoney studied her with questioning eyes. "You think he knows something, don't you."

"I really do, but I think he had to figure out what it was he knew. It wasn't apparent to him when I was there. Our mind processes information constantly, so after I was with him it's very possible something got triggered."

Mahoney suddenly had an 'aha' moment while listening to her, reacting like he passed an exam, "I just figured out why you wanted to interview every suspect and lead in my cases you worked on, even though we got nowhere with them ourselves. You already suspected they knew more than they did when we talked to them the first time or two."

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“Well, I wouldn’t hire anyone after a single interview. They need to be seen three times if you really want to know what’s what under the hood.”

Agreeing with a nod, Mahoney signaled for the check. “We don’t want to be late.” As he was finishing up his meal, a call came in for him, “Mahoney, here.” Listening to the caller, he gave Martine an enthusiastic nod. “Thank you,” he said, hanging up, “Good news,” he shared with her, “They recovered her computer in the wreckage. “I can sign it out.”

“Wonderful, you don’t have to go with me. I can do this if you still want to go to the game.”

“I’m not going to the game without you,” he relayed immediately. “Baseball is great if you have someone to watch it with.”

“Fine, but this could be a big let down, too. I don’t have high expectations he can help the way you think.”

Leaving the restaurant behind them as they walked to the car, he asked her, “Do you consider him a suspect?”

“No, it would shock me if he was. It just doesn’t fit any of the events. He might have a bit of key information, though.”

Mahoney backed the car out of the crowded parking lot and headed for the highway. “You’re right, what priest could murder Charmaine like that without a huge motive?”

“Even with a motive, this priest wouldn’t do it or arrange to have it done.”

With the church parking lot empty in the early afternoon, Mahoney parked at the entrance, accompanying Martine in through the Spanish styled double doors, admiring their significance, “You don’t see handcrafted workmanship like this anymore.”

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Passing through the vestibule to the inner church, Martine dipped her fingers in the font of holy water and signed herself. "He's waiting for us," she said pointing to the same pew he was in when she first met him.

Walking together down the empty isle their echoing footsteps alerted the priest of his two visitors, causing him to rise and exit the pew. "Good afternoon," he greeted them.

"Hello, Father," Martine said reaching out to shake his hand. "This is John Mahoney."

"Ah, I noticed you were married, is he your husband?"

"No, I'm widowed and he is also investigating Rena's death."

"Follow me," he instructed, leading them in silence to the sacristy where the priest's vestments, sacred vessels, and private church records are stored. Because of the sanctity of this room, it is reserved for the priests and altar boys to use prior to the mass being performed in the sanctuary. "Breaking the quiet, he began, "I did a lot of prayer and meditation regarding our visit about Rena. I still am overwhelmed by her death."

"I'm sorry about that," Martine injected, "I really presumed you knew more. It must have been hard for you to learn that from a stranger," she consoled him as best she could.

"I realized the initial reason for Rena finding us, was because she came to an open group counseling session we hold for grieving mother's who have lost a child. She didn't really participate, but attended the support meetings. She learned about the tools we can use when coping with the loss and beginning the healing. As you know Catholics have seven sacraments and she was devastated to learn she and her child received none. She wanted my help with that."

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Martine squinted, asking him, "How?"

"Well, thanks to the vigorous and contentious debates in our state, she was allowed the cremated remains."

Martine surmised, "Her baby was more than sixteen weeks old then."

Father nodded sadly. "More like twenty-something."

"Oh," Martine gasped at the thought of how connected she would have been to that child, possibly capable of a live birth.

"But when she found out we couldn't bury the child's remains here because she wasn't Catholic, and a Certified Medical Death Certificate is required, she was devastated."

"Is that when you became more connected to her personally?"

"Yes," he confirmed, "I was her sponsor for the RCIA instruction course."

Martine turned to Mahoney to explain, "It stands for Right of Christian Initiation of Adults. Every year the course is offered to people who choose to become Catholic, but you do need a sponsor."

"Correct," Father Nicholas said, "and then she could have her child buried in our cemetery."

Martine gave him a longing look of anticipation as she watched him open a secured file drawer.

Pulling a manila folder out with Rena's first name on it, he handed it to Martine. "This is what you're looking for."

Inside the thin folder, Martine examined the legal document declaring the existence and death of Jade. Sharing the contents with Mahoney, they murmured the name together, "Chaz Walsh." Martine looked at the young priest's concerned face. "Father, this could truly help. I know truth is medicine for the soul, but too much of any medicine

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doesn't feel good. I'm so sorry," she consoled him, "for the loss of your parishioner, and friend."

"Thank you, they are both with God now," he said reassuringly.

"Is there anything else you can remember about the abortion, like when and where?"

"No, I don't have any knowledge about that. Remember, girls don't come to a Catholic Church for abortion consultations, we see them after, usually many years after. But I do have the name of a woman who is very connected to the workings of the local abortion practitioners and facilities." Handing her a note with a name, he validated her credentials, "She's been a pro-life advocate in this state for a very long time. If you have more questions, she may be able to advise you better than anyone I would know."

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Chapter 59

John Mahoney had worked extremely complicated cases with Martine in the past. They weren't conventional type investigations like everyone else would have thought who had been involved. Her unique insights unveiled much deeper diabolical enterprises at work—that would have been unseen and never discovered by the typical investigator. Unable to understand how she had the ability to comprehend the bizarre workings of corrupt groups that operate undetected for decades, he grew to trust and admire her in a profound way.

Even now that she was merely assisting his friend, a grieving parent, on the possibility of a double homicide versus murder-suicide, he suspected something else was brewing in her mind. He was familiar with how oblivious she was to all the others around her when she was following her own inspirations or deductions. Like a champion Sudoku player, she didn't quit until each square housed the correct number and she waited for no one to catch up to her. For Martine he knew only one solution was possible and she wouldn't stop for anyone or anything until it was resolved to her satisfaction and everyone was held accountable.

Today he realized that they were on that kind of a case. She was onto something he wasn't privy to and he would ultimately have to trust her again to bring the full truth out—when everyone else involved only saw a normal insignificant crime of passion. With only the name of a boy called Chaz Walsh, Mahoney would go all-in to unearth everything he could on a young man he had never heard of until now. Certain he had to act fast, he contacted Martine's

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daughter Alexa for the quickest possible help on a weekend when regular staff would be unavailable.

Pulling out her ear buds, she answered her cell, “Hello,” stopping in her tracks—she huffed into the phone, “Alexa here.”

“Alexa, its John Mahoney.”

“Hi, how’s it going?” Still catching her breath, she panted, “I heard you’re back in Texas ,too.”

“Sure am.”

Breathing hard, she sounded concerned, “Is my mother okay?”

“Yes, she’s doing fine. We could use a little help though. What’re you doing right now?”

“I was running around the park. Sorry I’m so out of breath.”

“Listen, I need the rundown on a Chaz Walsh—ASAP.”

“Anything specific,” Alexa asked.

“No—just everything you can find like family, job, friends, girlfriends—I want to know who cuts his hair and what his favorite drink is.”

“Okay,” she eked out a laugh, “I’ll find out what he eats on Sunday and what he doesn’t like on Monday, as well.”

“Good.”

“When do you need this?”

Certain about the urgency, he was clear in his delivery, “Today.”

“Looks like I’m going into work then.”

“If you would, I did clear it with your agency. Your mother did find a loophole that the FBI can use to work together on this.”

Alexa laughed, “Well, if anyone could, she would.”

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“I really appreciate you doing this on your day off,” he obliged.

“I was going in anyway,” she said, while stretching her leg muscles before finishing her run, “Eva brought back a computer that Charmaine used while at work, and I was going to see what I could find on it.”

Slightly dumbfounded, Mahoney questioned her, “What does your mother think is on it?”

Alexa thought a moment, before responding, “Oh, she thinks Charmaine did Skyping on it. I’ll see if there is anything like that, and any other communications that are personal or suspicious.”

“Uh,” he uttered, “I want you to call one of us when you get some of that information sorted out.”

“Will do, sir,” Alexa formalized the respect she had for her old boss, “I’ll update you as soon as I find anything.”

“I sure hope you get something, we’re running out of options—actually, I think we are about out. I don’t know if we’ll find a better lead than this.”

Alexa laughed, “Well, I’ve learned that nothing is truly lost until mom can’t find it.”

“You might be right, thanks,” he replied, “I’ll talk to you later.”

“Bye,” Alexa said, hanging up and placing her ear buds back in for the run back to her car.

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Chapter 60

Alexa was still in her jogging pants and tennis shoes, when she booked into her office on warm sunny day on the weekend. Rummaging through the large bag she hauled in that contained the laptop that Eva brought with her from *Brain Fitness* caused enough noise to alert others that may be in the office that she was present. Flipping on her computer for an in-depth look into the life of Chaz Walsh kept her attention so focused she didn't realize another agent was in the office quietly doing some extra work, too.

"Alexa?" a husky voice resonated in the quiet offices that were normally bursting with phones ringing and people chattering.

"Wayne, is that you," she called out to the familiar voice.

"Sure is."

"What are you doing here? Isn't this your day off?"

"It was," Wayne returned. "I'm preparing for a court case they have this week. I'm just reviewing the CAST report I prepared. No peace at home with three small kids. What're you doing here?"

"Working on a profile for one of the agents," she explained, as she typed in her login and password.

"Okay, I'm glad I'm not the only one working on a beautiful day. Let me know if I can help. It's been pretty boring in this place and I could use a break."

"Sure will," she replied as her computer came alive loading her sophisticated software. Accustomed to multi-tasking, she opened the *Brain Fitness* laptop and logged into that as well—giving it time to load its programs. With her

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office computer fully operational, she began her search for Chaz Walsh. “Huh,” she mused to herself as she used her FBI keyboard and cursor to hunt down his life’s accomplishments and personal data. Finding only basic information on his age, date of birth, college, and address, that she could get from the DMV in any state, she was frustrated.

“Are you sure I can’t help?” Wayne surprised from behind her.

Startled by his intrusion, she swung around in her chair to face him. “Jeez, Wayne, you scared the crap out of me.”

“Sorry, but I wanted to see if you needed my help.”

“You really don’t want to go home, do you?” Alexa joked.

“Would you, if your wife wanted you to babysit three kids under five?”

Laughing, Alexa replied, “No, but it’s probably the right thing to do. Here,” she said, handing him the laptop, “I’m looking for Skype communications on this device that were recorded or can be retrieved. I’ve never done it, but it’s supposed to be possible.”

“It’s definitely possible if they were recorded,” he confirmed. “Let me see what I can do. If I can’t locate anything you’ll have to let the technology wizards downstairs have a crack at it. Who’s the guy you’re checking out?” Wayne pointed to her computer’s photo of a handsome man of about thirty posed with a smile on his divers license ID.

“Chaz Walsh,” she answered, turning back to read his brief biography.

“Boyfriend?” Wayne asked eagerly.

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“No,” she refuted in disgust, “he’s under investigation, but I can’t find anything suspicious or unlawful.”

“Pretty boys like that don’t have to participate in illegal activities to get themselves in trouble,” he smirked.

“No, they don’t,” Alexa concurred as she resumed her investigation. “I can’t figure out where he’s working though. I know he’s living in a very opulent place. You’ve got to have a decent salary to pull that type of housing off.”

“Not if daddy has a lot of money,” he alluded.

Alexa shared what she knew, “Well, he did work for a finance company in California after he graduated from Berkley, but he left there a few months ago and is living in Texas.”

“What do you know about him?” Wayne asked.

“I know he’s not missing, but somehow it looks that way.”

Wayne rubbed the nape of his neck, “He either made enough money to stop working, or he’s working for family and hasn’t updated his social media sites. I had a friend who did that. He didn’t want his college buddies to know he ended up working for his old man, so he ditched his social media to hide it. He knew it’d be really embarrassing if it didn’t pan-out with dear old dad, and it didn’t,” Wayne gossiped.

Taking a cue from Wayne’s perspective, Alexa did a search for his dear old dad—Eric Walsh. “Huh,” she breathed, “daddy does own a business—actually more than one it seems.”

Colluding with her find, he suggested, “You said he worked for a financial firm. Check the companies for the financial officers and employees.” Wayne took the laptop

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and started back to his cubicle. “You’ll probably find him there.”

Alexa had already started a search window into one of the companies. “On it—thanks, Wayne,” she said, flipping through the first company website that didn’t make any mention of Chaz. Locating the second company headquartered in Texas, she did find Chaz listed as an officer in finance and private investments. “Bingo,” she aired loudly, “got you.”

Wayne rejoiced, “Hurray, get’em girl.”

Cutting and pasting pertinent information into a document, she created a report with a photo, bio information, work, and home life details, plus anything she could find on social media that could be helpful. After saving the file she immediately e-mailed it to John Mahoney—copying her mother. Having completed the basic assignment of profiling Chaz Walsh, she headed over to Wayne to get a look at his progress. “Got anything?” Alexa asked.

“Think so . . .,” he told her with satisfaction, “wait for it.” Wayne flicked his forefinger at the play button in the middle of the touch screen.

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Chapter 61

Martine scanned the busy street lined with small mom-and-pop sized shops until she spotted the one that had the image of a tall clock tower mounted above the entrance with its suitable name—*Big Blend*. Having arrived first at the crowded café-restaurant they agreed to meet at, she selected an empty table by the window away from the busy counter where people ordered their food and beverages.

Within moments a tall middle-aged woman in a skirt and short sleeved top entered the cozy deli. Wearing her long brown wavy hair in a ponytail as promised, Martine identified her easily and signaled with a greeting, “Hi, I’m Martine, are you Joy?”

Exchanging eye contact, Joy smiled brightly and acknowledged her, “Yes, I’m Joy.” Joining together at the table, she set her satchel and purse on an empty chair as Martine rose to shake her hand. “Father Nicholas spoke well of you.”

“Ah, you called Father after we talked on the phone,” Martine laughed.

“Sure did, I don’t want any trouble if I’m being set up by an angry pro-choice reporter. I’m very curious how I can help you though.”

Martine pressed on her bottom lip. “I’m not sure yet and I know you’re doing this on your lunch break. I’m going to order an iced tea and sandwich, what can I get you?”

Joy looked at *Big Blend’s* menu displayed on the wall and formulated her order, “I’ll have lemonade and their roast beef special.”

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“Great, I’ll get this and be right back.” Martine grabbed her purse and headed to the counter.

“Thank you, I’m going to run to the restroom.”

After placing the order and paying, Martine returned to the table and sat down, waiting for Joy to return.

“Oh, that’s much better,” Joy announced as she hurried up to their table. “We’re so busy at work we don’t get more than one break in the morning,” she explained. “So, how can I help you?”

Martine tried to be concise, so that Joy would have enough time to completely inform her, “I’m working on a situation that involves abortion. I’m pro-life,” she stated with confidence, “so I’m not here to debate the issues with you—you already have me. What I’m trying to understand is what are the mechanics involved in selecting an abortion facility and the method of terminating the fetus that would be utilized.”

“You’re asking a loaded question there. Every state is a little different, but the Federal Government says anything goes whenever you want one.”

“Right and I don’t know what state this abortion actually happened in. It could be here in Texas, or a neighboring state.”

Joy jumped-in, “There are several methods that are considered for each mother—depending on the age of the child. Not every clinic or doctor will perform all the procedures that are used. The cost and method are different after the child is twelve weeks old. The head is too large for the dissection and suction method.” Joy shivered at the thought. “The vast majority of abortions are done for social reasons, such as the woman isn’t ready to raise a child, or the partner doesn’t support the pregnancy. Enumerating, she continued, “Basically, between 93% and 97% of all

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abortions are for economical or social reasons and happen later rather than sooner—meaning harsher methods are the norm.”

Martine waited for the server to place their food on the table before asking, “What are the methods that are available?”

Joy took a big sip of her lemonade. “The RU 486 pill—the so called abortion pill—is used when women are five-to-nine weeks pregnant—never more than sixty-three days. Most girls don’t use it because they don’t realize they’re pregnant until later than that, and it’s horrible for them to go through. There are risks to this one, just like all the others.”

Martine took a bite of her sandwich. “Mm, this is really good.”

“I love this place,” Joy exclaimed enthusiastically. “Affordable and fast,” she added.

“I can see that, wish there was something like this where I work.” Changing back to the subject, Martine asked, “What are the risks to the abortion pill?”

“Basically, they use a progesterone blocker to starve the baby to death. It doesn’t always terminate the baby and then they’re born deformed. It’s also a very painful and traumatic experience for the mother.”

“If that’s not so popular, what is?”

“The most common method is the dissection and suction method,” Joy said matter-of-factly, chewing between words.

“Why’s that?”

Joy’s response was quick, “Because the majority of abortions occur closer to the twelfth week of gestation.”

“That’s about three months along,” Martine calculated.

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“That’s right,” Joy swallowed her food, “most of the abortions that happen are too late for the abortion pill, but feasible for the dissection and suction method.”

“What’s that procedure like?”

“The doctor goes in with a scalpel and cuts the child apart as it sucks the limbs and body pieces out of the mother through a suction machine.” Joy continued devouring her meal.

Pursing her lips in disgust, Martine questioned further, “What happens when the fetus is more than twelve weeks?”

Correcting her, Joy said, “I call them children.”

“Of course,” Martine agreed, “my mistake.”

Joy continued, “Well, when they’re over twelve weeks old they’re removed by Dilation and Evacuation, but I call it dissection and evacuation because it’s like the suction method in a way. They use forceps with sharp metal chomping jaws that twist and tear apart the baby—pulling the parts out one-by-one, like ripping apart a raw chicken when it’s alive. When the child is older the bones are forming fast and the scalpel isn’t going to do the job and the parts won’t fit into the suction machinery. Anyway, then the head is crushed and decompressed so it can be removed. The women are sedated for this procedure, making it much more expensive. It’s dangerous and equally disturbing.”

Martine had completely lost her appetite at this point, gulping the food in her mouth. “Any others I should know about?”

“Yes,” Joy said sadly, “some clinics perform the Instillation method during the third trimester. This isn’t as common because 91% of the pregnancies are aborted at thirteen weeks or later. This Instillation procedure uses chemicals and drugs that are injected through the abdomen

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or cervix into the amniotic sac. The child is chemically burned to death.”

Sickened by the details, Martine forced herself to get more information, “What chemicals?”

“Salt, Urea, and high levels of Prostaglandins,” Joy listed.

“Prostaglandins?” Martine repeated.

Joy explained without missing a beat, “It’s a type of hormone that causes severe contractions and cramping.”

“Urea, what’s that?”

“It’s a nitrogen type product that breaks down amino acids and proteins. It’s basically urine, or ammonia,” she made clear.

“And the salt is toxic when digested or saturated in,” Martine concluded on her own, sticking to her ice tea and avoiding her food.

“Yep,” Joy stated emphatically, “the babies swallow the poison and are saturated in the chemical solution. It takes an hour or more for the child to be painfully burned to death, then within the next three days the mother will go into labor and deliver a dead, burned, and shriveled baby.”

“Isn’t that a chemically dangerous and poisonous concoction to put inside a woman?” Martine imagined.

“Absolutely, and it has caused serious side effects, like coma, seizures, blood clotting, hemorrhaging, and nervous system disorders. I think it’s all abominable—but we suspect less than one percent of the abortions are probably done this way.”

Sensing the people at the table closest to them could hear, Martine lowered her voice, “These seem like the same methods they’ve been utilizing for a long time, are they?”

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“Well the pill became legal and approved here in the year 2000. The other methods have been around since the seventies.”

Martine was curious about the anti-abortion film that shocked her decades ago, never forgetting the horrible pain a child endured through the open expression of strong emotion seen by an ultrasound machine during an abortion performed decades ago. “You’ve seen the documentary called *The Silent Scream* haven’t you?”

“Of course, you’d think that film alone would change everyone’s mind and heart,” Joy said with deep conviction. “That was a twelve week old fetus being aborted with the dissection and suction method.” Expounding on her knowledge she divulged her point of discord, “Our media can show a bad execution of a murderer on death row and the public wants to outlaw capital punishment, but a real live documentary on an abortion can’t change a pro-choicer. Dr. Bernard Nathanson credits President Ronald Reagan for inspiring him to make that film. Dr. Nathanson was Pro-Choice and performed abortions until he heard President Reagan speak about how much a child suffers and agonizes during an abortion,” Joy said with pride for her president.

“Really,” remarked Martine, “when was that?”

“1984,” Joy reported accurately. “It has changed many people’s viewpoint—I can’t fathom why it hasn’t changed everyone’s.”

“Because they haven’t seen it,” Martine suspected.

“You have?” Joy pushed her empty plate to the side.

“Yes, I’ve recommended it, but nobody wants to see something they can’t stomach.”

“Like your sandwich,” Joy joked, eyeing Martine’s abandoned meal sitting off to the side.

Martine acknowledged her situation, “Yes, like that.”

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Joy returned to the subject—campaigning her cause, “Watching that film should be a Federal Law requirement.”

“Joy, I know you need to get going, but I was wondering if you know of any other methods, drugs, or new franchises that are in the works that can capitalize on the abortion industry. If the Federal Law is never overturned, someone might be trying to find a humane approach.”

Joy tiskied, “Interesting that you would ask—the reason they haven’t had to do anything different is because the Federal Government has backed the abortion industry and the cheapest and fastest way to perform an abortion is the way they’re doing it. With abortions on the rise around the world, and states passing restrictions, I’ve heard that there are new methods being worked on to make it cheaper and easier to get an abortion.”

Theorizing the potential for more extreme methods, Martine supposed, “Like if states start making it hard to get a late abortion, there would be a new product or method that could be used without a doctor?”

“Exactly, because the abortion method with the RU 486 pill does not require a doctor, something like that could resolve the issue without involving doctors that would lose their license to practice. For about \$350 Planned Parenthood can sell you an abortion pill.”

“And that is only effective up to sixty-three days,” Martine finished her sentence.

“Yes, you’re exactly right,” Joy complimented her. “Do you think someone is producing something like that for later term abortions?”

“I don’t know, it’s just a feeling I’m having.” Martine had to ask, “Do you know any rumors like that?”

“No, but it does make sense. I’m going to put my ear to the ground.”

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“I really want to thank you for your time in giving me a crash course on a subject I don’t like.” Martine praised her new acquaintance, “You really know your subject matter and would make a great expert witness.”

“Thank you, I appreciate that,” Joy acknowledged.

Martine took her phone out and scrolled around for a picture. Showing it to Joy, she asked with apprehension, “Do you know this girl?”

Joy looked at the photo in disbelief. Expression drained from her face as she struggled for words, “Yes, I have met her, why?”

Taking her phone back, Martine explained briefly, “She’s recently died, and it was tragic. I’m certain she was pregnant prior to her death—meaning she probably had an abortion. Do you know anything about it?”

Joy sounded disappointed, “She did visit with us at the Pro-Life center. I thought she was keeping the baby.”

Surprised at the revelation, Martine tried to know more, “What do you remember?”

Joy reflected on the interaction with Rena, “She didn’t know what to do about her pregnancy. The father changed his mind about having the child. Because of her late decision she would’ve had to undergo the dismemberment and evacuation method, which as you know is really a surgical procedure requiring sedation and assistance. It’s a lot of money and someone has to go with you and bring you home. I truly thought she was going to keep it.”

“Apparently she didn’t. Where would she have this done?”

“Not here. Under Texas law, after 16 weeks post-fertilization, your abortion can only be performed at an ambulatory surgical center or hospital. She didn’t want her family and friends to know. We counseled her in everything

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we could, including adoption. She was going to keep the baby as far as I can recollect.”

“Well, I suspect someone talked her into something completely different. Where would she have to go?”

“California.” Peering at her watch, Joy shot out of her chair. “I’m going to be late, sorry. We should get together again,” Joy added as she gathered her belongings.

“I will if I’m ever back in Texas,” Martine replied. “Thank you so much.”

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Chapter 62

It all started when Martine's past caught up with her, ejecting her into the bowels of a multi decades-old murderous crime-spree where she held the missing links needed to solve a notorious cold case. When she and her roommate averted the murderous plan intended for them while attending college in Minnesota, she became the sole survivor in possession of material knowledge that could conclusively connect the lives of three deceased victims with hers, consequently bringing to light potential evidence stored and forgotten in the juvenile court system.

Rising to the call from beyond, Martine helped officials identify an evil murderer that had eluded detection for over thirty years. Once he was exposed, a divine connection with the abused and deceased souls that reached out to her for eternal justice was activated.

After bringing closure to the old unsolved case in St. Cloud, Minnesota, she suddenly was thrust into additional work that was needed of her when the three innocent souls she helped asked for more—introducing her to a little child named Jade.

During the arduous journey that went on both day and night, Martine was submersed in the eternal teachings and truths regarding the precious, vulnerable, and exploited souls of the innocent—before they even take their first breath of earth's air. It would be Jades perilous story to tell someday, but Martine's calling to reveal it.

Mysterious Jade had led Martine to a surviving parent for some unknown etherically urgent reason. Unable to fathom what was so important that massive amounts of

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gravitational pull was necessary to guide her to this place, she could never explain it to herself, much less John Mahoney. With Alexa's help they located his Texas residence and she made the impulsive decision to visit Chaz Walsh early in the evening—alone.

Exiting a car in front of the medium sized home in an affluent part of the city, she walked up to the door and rang the bell. Bright lights switched on inside the foyer of the house when she pushed the door bell a second time, indicating someone was making their way to her.

Within a minute, a young man dressed in casual sweat pants and a t-shirt opened the door, saying, "Can I help you?"

Martine forced a smile. "Hi, I'm Martine, a friend of Rena and Devon."

"Yeah," his arrogant demeanor exuded irritation through his hasty response, "is that supposed to mean something to me?"

Martine's stare and tight-lipped grin showed her impatience with his insensitivity. "I'm sorry, I thought you knew them. I just got in town and found out about Rena's accident," she fibbed a little.

Looking past her, he rubbed his hair back, repeating her, "Accident? I can't help you. I don't know those girls," he returned as the door began to close on her.

"Yes, you do," pushing on the closing door—Martine couldn't have been more candid.

Defying her accusation, he disagreed again, "I said I don't."

Martine used her foot to block the door from closing all the way. "Cut the crap, Chaz, you can't pretend that you don't know Rena, so please don't try."

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Surprised that she stopped the door before he could shut it closed completely, he disavowed his association with the young girl like Peter denied Christ three times, “Lady, I don’t know a Rena or anything about an accident, and you’re an idiot if you think I do, so let go of my door.”

“Well,” she countered, “you aren’t very smart yourself if you don’t know the woman you got pregnant with your child.”

Shocked by the exposure of an unplanned pregnancy, he angrily deflected her accusation, “You have no idea what you’re talking about.” Adamant about defending his honor, he criticized her, “You should get your facts straight before you spread foolish false lies about me. People like you need to get a real job and leave people like me alone. Now get out of here.”

Martine ignored his insults and squelched his plea for anonymity, holding out the birth certificate with his name on it. “We need to talk, Chaz, right now.”

Chaz took the paper and studied it in disbelief. Scanning the area outside his home, he spat, “Are you alone?”

“I am right now. I do have a driver picking me up shortly.”

Suspicious of her, he glanced around the street again looking for a parked vehicle before opening the door all the way to let her in. “What do you want from me?”

“Information,” she stated bluntly.

Chaz appeared irked when they stood face-to-face inside his foyer—still unable to make eye contact with her. “Is this a blackmail situation? Because there’s nothing I’ve done wrong and you’re not getting anything from me.”

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Martine rejected the absurd notion, “No, I have no interest in doing such a thing,” emphasizing, “Blackmail is illegal.”

“Really, I had no idea,” he let-out sarcastically, “what do you want then?” Walking away from her, he allowed her to follow behind him into his living room.

Remaining calm, she cleared her throat, “I just want to talk to you about Rena.”

“Who are you?” he demanded, “and what’s your name?”

“I’m Martine.”

Angrily, he ordered, “Martine, who?”

Trying to be discreet, she revealed as little as possible, “Grant.” Taking in his bachelor-pad life-style colored in shades of brown with black accents, she offered to explain more, “Let’s have a seat—I just have a few questions.”

Gesturing to his seating area, he indicated some willingness to hear her out, “You’ve got five minutes. I have somewhere to be.”

Analyzing the room like a crime scene, she took a seat next to an end table with a couple of beer bottles on it. “Your home is beautiful and mighty tidy for a guy, any roommates?”

“No, and I’m not looking for one,” he stated without pause.

“I can understand that. Roommates are complicated and usually messy, I can see your not.”

Anxious about her nosey presence, he obliged reluctantly, “Thanks, I guess.”

“Hey, I’ll take one of those if you don’t mind,” she smiled, pointing to the beer bottles next to her.

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Chaz looked annoyed by her forwardness and shook his head in amazement, "I'll be right back." Walking to his kitchen, he hastily opened his refrigerator and grabbed a bottle of beer. Returning to Martine he twisted the top off and handed it to her as he instantaneously sat himself across from her.

"I have something else for you to read," she revealed, handing him the programs from Charmaine's memorial and funeral services. "Do you mind if I get myself a glass of water, too? I started getting a headache on the way here," she bluffed.

Taking the papers from her, he absentmindedly replied, "They're by the sink."

Martine nonchalantly took one of his empty beer bottles with her to the kitchen and ran the water full blast as she looked under the sink for the garbage receptacle. Locating the container filled with beer bottles and trash, she quickly grabbed a half eaten piece of pizza and some napkins—tucking it in her purse with the empty beer bottle. Filling a glass to the top, she turned the gushing water off and returned to Chaz who was still reading the programs. "I really needed a drink of water and a pain reliever more than a beer," she explained innocently.

"What is this all about?" Dropping the papers on his coffee table, he glared at her.

"This is Rena's friend," Martine responded. "Charmaine was her best friend from college."

"You're here to tell me that Rena's best friend has passed away."

"Yes."

"Why are you here to tell me that? I didn't know her, Rena did. Go tell Rena."

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Martine gave a look of astonishment. “Rena’s passed away too.”

“What?” Chaz exclaimed in sincere surprise.

“That’s what brought me to you. I can’t figure out how two girls that were best friends could pass away within weeks of each other. It just doesn’t seem plausible.”

“Are you the police?”

“Absolutely not, here’s my contact information.”

Taking a business card out of her pocket she handed it to Chaz. “As you can see, I’m an attorney out of Denver. I’m helping the family settle Charmaine’s affairs which led me to Rena, which led me to you,” Martine spelled-out truthfully. “It seems you may not have known about these two deaths. Did you?”

“No,” he rang loud without hesitation, “I had no idea.”

Martine’s phone began vibrating in her purse. Without taking it out, she started her adieu, “That’s my ride, I need to get going. Please call me if you can think of any reason these two friends would die so suddenly. You may not realize it now, but I think you may actually know something. You have my number.” Standing up first, she momentarily eyed the dazed Chaz before he slowly stood up to face her—this time he actually looked her in the eyes.

“Sure,” he emitted with vagueness as he led her to the door, “I’ll call you if I think of anything.”

“Oh,” Martine exclaimed, “I’m not driving.” Darting back to the living room, she deliberately grabbed Chaz’s beer bottle instead of her unused one and hurried back to the front door, pronouncing, “Might as well finish my drink on the way back to my hotel.” Seeing her driver with the lights on and engine running, she smiled big. “Uber drivers are

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fantastic in Texas. Look at the size of that ride,” she regaled. “Bye,” she added, briskly walking to the car.

Scooching into the back seat of the vehicle, Martine waved goodbye to Chaz as the car drove off.

“Well,” the driver said to her, “did you get what you wanted?”

“I did,” Martine relayed confidently, “and he has no idea.” Pulling the large Ziploc bag out of her purse, she itemized the contents, “I got his beer bottles, some napkins, and pizza crust. Should be all his stuff—there’s no roommate, so we’ll see.”

“Beer bottles, you say.”

“That’s right, Mahoney,” she affirmed with satisfaction. “Might get those prints we’re looking for too.”

“Great job, Martine, do you want to sit up front now, or do you like having a driver?”

“I do need you to pull over so I can dump the beer out of his bottle and get it in the evidence bag.”

“Pulling over now, ma’am,” he teased.

“Thanks.”

Mahoney look a right into the corner gas station, stopping the car by the large dumpster at the edge of the building. Getting out first, he opened her door so she could get out and empty the contents of the beer bottle that had been half full. “We’re going to have to mark these that have your imprinting on them.”

“I thought of that. Do you have a pen or something?”

Frisking himself for a writing utensil, he located a pen in his jacket. “Here, let me put an X on the bottles.”

After the bottles were identified properly, she sealed them up in the Ziploc with the other items. “I took these because I was certain he had been drinking out of them

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tonight,” she justified, reasoning why the bottles were so meaningful to the evidence she collected.

Back inside the car, he made an assessment, “You’re kinda a natural born profiler—so what’s your take on this kid?”

Staring straight ahead she reflected on her observations, “I’ve got a feeling we may be eliminating him from the actual crime scene in Oklahoma. His home is not dysfunctional, and he is financially secure if he can afford to rent there. I also saw a very disturbed man react to the death of Rena. I’m not sure he knew about it till tonight.”

“Well, that’s interesting. Did we waste our time on him?”

“Can’t say, but ruling him out was necessary anyway.”

“Of course,” he agreed.

“Likewise, if he is spoken to again there may be more information to gather. It just wasn’t necessary, yet. We can’t accuse him of anything based on what we have now.”

As Mahoney swung into Martine’s hotel, he glanced over to her as he stopped the vehicle. “I’ll get this processed down here and call you with the results.”

“Perfect, I’ll see you tomorrow then.”

Mahoney digressed a bit, “I almost forgot, Stewart wants us to come over before we leave town.”

“Oh, I wish we had something to give him before we do that.”

“It’ll be fine. We do have information to give him.”

“Okay,” she relented.

“It’s just dinner. We’ll discuss it in the morning.”

“Yep,” Martine sounded fatigued as she exited the car, “tomorrow then.”

Kathi Bjorkman

Third Eye Witness-

Terminated

Terminated

Chapter 64

Dapper Eric Walsh calmly escorted his glamorous date up to the fine restaurant, tossing his keys to the valet as he wisped by him. "Take care of it," he said, opening the door to the revered dining establishment. "Reservations for Walsh," he pronounced to the hostess.

"Certainly, this way please." Escorting the couple to their table by the window that overlooked a beautifully landscaped water feature, she informed them, "Your server will be with you shortly."

Eric's phone vibrated, drawing his attention away from his gorgeous date. "Excuse me." Identifying the caller, he answered immediately, "This isn't a good time."

"Dad, we have a problem," his son annunciated.

"What is it?"

"I'm with the last subject," his voice cracked, "and she has aborted in the toilet."

Eric could hear his son weeping, "What are you whining about," he said harshly.

"I'm sending you a video."

Anger rose in Eric's voice, "You're what?"

His son whimpered, "I'm sending it now, bye."

Hearing nothing more, Eric looked at his screen as the video message arrived. Flustered with irritation, he rubbed the back of his head, deciding what to do. Leaving the dining area for the patio, he signaled his date to give him another minute of privacy.

Alone outside under dim lighting, he opened the message and pressed play, watching the small framed movie

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of a newborn in the hand of his son as he reverently removed it from the toilet.

Perfectly formed, the tiny baby boy appeared asleep. Wet and reddish in color with fresh wounds from a torturous chemical burn, the baby suddenly moved its mouth, struggling to scream. Wiggling its feeble limbs, the preemie in distress fought for its mother and existence. Simultaneously, when the video ended and he closed the window, a text came through from his son.

“Terminated.”

Making his way back to his oblivious companion, he offered his apologies, “Sorry, it was important.”

“No problem, I ordered us a bottle of wine.”

“Good, good,” gritting his teeth, he continued, “Let’s order two.”

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Chapter 64

With the local news broadcasting from her hotel TV, Martine wound down by saying a clearing, kindof like a prayer to purify herself, that was very familiar to her. By the time she got to the part where she requested her intentions, she drifted off to sleep.

Instantly, she felt herself propelled upward and back into the hidden recesses of deep space where she felt as light as the air she breathed. Finding her body able to effortlessly float anywhere, she looked around and saw the biggest brightest star visible in the night sky—many times larger than earth's sun. Identifying it with her mind as the luminous star to the Boötes Constellation was all it took to make her body sling-shot its way to the mysterious race of Arcturians occupying a blue planet orbiting the radiant red sun.

Landing in the midst of a busy courtyard surrounded by buildings of white crystalline materials that glowed and sparkled in the strong sun light, could only mean she was in a highly advanced civilization that nearly resembled Earth with its lush green plants, trees, and flowering foliage—but wasn't. Thrilled at the more modern, clean and ideal community that could never be replicated on Earth had her spinning in circles—marveling at the dazzling shine that caused rainbow prisms to naturally flash across the tall glass-type structures.

Taking in the magnificent display of architecture and the perfectly groomed and uniquely clothed citizens was like a young girl visiting Disney Land for the first time—only, though they looked human—their skin was a beautiful shimmering opalescence blue. Bewildered by the odd color of the native population, and the space-age attire everyone

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wore, she questioned whether she had been teleported to an alien planet, or a future version of Earth.

Noticing her own clothing for the first time that consisted of a purple, fitted, short spandex-type dress with matching knee-high boots, it allowed her to blend in with the crowd milling about in the courtyard.

“Come on we’ll be late for class,” a bouncy woman wearing a similar outfit in red, addressed her casually like an old friend.

“Excuse me?” Martine replied.

Linking elbows with Martine, she giggled, “Come on we’re going to be late for class,” she repeated.

“Class, what class?” Martine remained confused.

“The Elders won’t think this is funny if you miss the last session,” the girl returned in frustration.

Martine was at a disadvantage in this strange and foreign land that seemed to know her, though she had no familiarity with it. “What’s the class about?”

Pulling Martine along with her, she said in-jest, “You love games. You said you’re the one that’s going to solve the puzzle and put the last piece in.”

“Sure,” Martine muttered under her breath, “I can do that.”

“You bet you can,” her friend cheered.

Martine tried to pull her back for a moment, asking in haste, “Do you have a mirror?”

“Of course not silly,” stopping abruptly, the friend looked at Martine, “Are you unconscious?”

“What do you mean?”

Her iridescent green eyes twinkled as they looked into Martine’s. “Do you know my name?”

“No,” she replied truthfully.

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“You’re unconscious which means you’re working on something, how exciting for you.”

“I don’t know what that means,” Martine’s anxious tone projected.

“Of course you don’t, not right now. Let’s go,” she urged.

With her secret out, Martine breathed deep, asking, “What is your name?”

“Martine, my name is Elsa. You can do this,” she encouraged, hurrying her forward.

Shifting her focus to the large building they were about to enter, Martine instructed Elsa, “Let’s keep this between us.”

“I’ve got your back, don’t worry.”

Inside the round room that was somehow lit with an ambient bluish light source that was emanating from the walls, floors, and ceiling, were three perfectly square tables that were also plain and luminous, except for a mound of small pieces in the center of each table. “Divide yourselves into three groups. Together you will work to assemble your puzzles,” their teacher directed.

A young man quipped loudly, “How can we work together, there are three tables and three puzzles.”

“Are you sure, Jacob?” Older, wiser and robed in a long gold colored tunic, the Elder in charge asked. Putting the student in his place, he went on, “Because you can’t possibly know the answer to anything in this space if you do nothing to expand what is present.”

Jacob bantered back, “I think more direction on this test is necessary. How will I maintain my perfect record without more information? Didn’t you teach us to assume nothing?” Tall in stature donning a dark green skin-tight jumpsuit, he heckled with his buddies, “My father would

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want the exam to be reasonable.” Clearly the instigator and youngest in his group of both male and female, he commanded all the attention of a child gifted with intelligence, personality, and privilege, but lacking in purpose.

“Wouldn’t you rather attempt something great and fail than attempt to do nothing and succeed?” their teacher returned.

Jacob sounded dejected, “Yes, teacher.”

“You may be accustomed to performing at your regular pace, but that is not the case on this exam. Time as you know it is irrelevant in most situations, however, today you will be under the constraints of a denser reality requiring quick and decisive actions. Are we ready to proceed?” Looking over the group of eighteen students, he heralded with the two quick loud handclaps, “Let the exam begin.”

Pretending to understand the task at hand, Martine joined Elsa at her table, uttering slowly, “Have you ever done this before?”

“No,” she sparked excitedly, “but you have.”

“Was I conscious then?” Martine whispered to her friend. “Because I think I have amnesia right now.”

Elsa laughed, “That’s for certain, but I know you and that won’t matter.”

“Wonderful,” Martine replied with reluctance.

“What do we do first?” asked a confused young mild-mannered man positioned across from Martine.

Realizing they were standing around a pile of jig-saw puzzle pieces and nothing else, Martine suggested, “We put the pieces together.”

Elsa picked up two of them and examined the odd shaped forms that had color on one side and none on the

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other. "How do you do that?" Trying to put them together wasn't working for her.

"Ah," Martine sighed, "You've never done this before, have you?"

"No," the group at her table said together.

"Hurry and spread them out with the colored side up." Martine started first, flipping them as fast as she could. "Then we find all the ones with a flat side and put them together, making the outside border," As the group quickly assembled the border, she directed them on the next step, "Now we sort the remaining tiles by color and try to put them together."

"This isn't so hard," Elsa shared, "it's actually fun."

With the group making progress, Martine detailed the next step, "We are going to have to keep building the sections until it all comes together and begins to form a painting or picture of something." Since the puzzle tiles were of substantial size and there were only about 150 of them, she estimated their progress, "Looks like we'll need to start putting our sections together now."

"What do you think ours will look like?" Elsa asked as she connected another piece to her work.

Martine could recognize Elsa had the beginnings of a classic car that probably was popular before she was even born. "I see an old convertible," she offered as she completed a large sign that went somewhere. Handicapped without the benefit of a picture of the actual puzzle made it extra challenging for all of them. "Logically," she began, "my section will go over the car." Moving her work up above the red convertible, she easily connected it to the top of a white building that another student was putting together.

"Does anyone have some tiles that will fill in here?" Elsa pointed to her blue colors that were forming another car.

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"I do," another student answered, handing Elsa some of the tiles that didn't work for her.

As the group began joining the jumbled collage of tiles together at an accelerated rate, they could enjoy the realization that they were creating a small masterpiece as a unified group.

"Teacher," Elsa shouted, "we're done."

"My, my, my . . ." the teacher mused, "looks like one of our groups has completed their puzzle." Walking over to Martine's table he looked over the picture they had created that depicted roomy red, blue, and green classic cars parked outside a drive-in type diner from the era of the 1950's. Young children with their families were licking on ice cream cones, and students holding their books were visiting with friends. Perched on top of the square building that glowed from yellow florescent-tubes of light was the marquee sign *Frozen Dairy Bar*. "Well done students," he praised. I wonder what you can do to solve the puzzle mysteries you are tasked with."

Jacob, who still hadn't stopped talking and interrupting others chimed in, "So they haven't won yet, have they. We can still win," he championed his group.

"You're correct, they haven't finished, and neither have you, Jacob, because it's not a contest—it's a test."

Proud eyes burned holes in his competition as Jacob pledged his resolve, "I knew they couldn't beat us, we will easily get the highest score."

Elsa's excitement collapsed immediately. "You're wrong, Jacob, you will not get the highest score."

One of Jacobs friends joined in, "Theirs was easier than ours. I can tell our puzzle is more complicated."

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Hearing the exchange of words, the teacher corrected the situation, “Those who can—do, those who can’t—complain.”

Elsa respected his words and lowered her head, “Yes teacher,” she said weakly.

“You are here to master control of your conscious mind so that you can expand it. If everything can be connected back to its source, what should you do next?”

Martine’s thoughts mushroomed, “We help the others when we can.”

“Yes,” he said in astonishment, “you have correctly answered the first of three questions.”

“Let’s go help them finish their puzzles,” Martine suggested as she started moving to the table next to theirs.

“This is almost done,” Elsa said, observing the puzzle missing pertinent sections that were needed to connect the busy looking picture that seemed to contain large sized people. “Can we help you?”

“Yes,” the group said together.

Elsa and two other students began helping the group while Martine and two others went to Jacobs’s table. With more hands on deck each group managed to complete their puzzles within seconds of each other.

“Hooray,” Jacob sounded, “we’re done, now what?”

“Tell us about your puzzle, Jacob,” the teacher instructed.

“It looks like a store packed with books on every wall,” he answered.

“Anything else?” the teacher asked.

Martine studied the picture, adding her observation, “There are people, like a mother with small children, a pregnant woman, a dog, a baby in a carriage holding a bottle,

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oh, and a man using an old cash register. Based on the attire and cash register it looks like the 1950's."

"Very observant," the teacher acknowledged with an affirmative nod.

Elsa rang-out, "We're done, too."

"Ah, let's see your work, Elsa," he replied, walking to her table with everyone following him. "What is in your picture?"

Having earned the position of spokesperson, Elsa started with a giggle, "We have a family with a little dog holding the dad's shoe in his mouth, a pregnant mom with a cake she baked, two little girls, and a boy. Dad is sitting in an old looking chair smoking a pipe and reading a newspaper."

"Anything else," the teacher probed, "that might be meaningful?"

Martine was the first to add something, "It looks like life in the 1950's."

"Yes it does. Now for the second question, what is the greatest thing you can bring into our society and the world?"

Seeing no clues in this puzzle all the students began shuffling around to study each puzzle again, until Jacob started guessing, "It's got to be the 1950's," he kidded.

"No, I'm sorry that's not it, but it is the theme."

Elsa started guessing, "Reading, school, books—it's learning."

"No, I'm sorry it's not."

Martine, who was consciously aware of her motherhood and the family she had raised, yelled-out, "Its children—life."

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Surprised again, the teacher applauded her, “Very good, and now for the last question. What was the lesson today?”

Everyone started moaning, especially Jacob, until Martine, cleared her throat, suggesting, “Symbolism, we can share and communicate anything through symbolism,” she processed her own answer aloud while realizing that was how her dreams were meant to help her. She finally understood.

“You are correct,” he boomed, as the class cheered for her.

Elsa ran up to Martine and hugged her. “I knew you’d get the best score.”

“Have I ever been unconscious before?” Martine whispered in her ear.

“We all have,” Elsa said shaking her head.

As Martine let go of Elsa’s embrace she felt her body’s form begin dissipating. Materializing to the location she had originally met the young girls, she looked over her surroundings and type of clothing she was donning. Still dressed in the space-age type clothing she wore in the unique school she had left, she surmised she hadn’t gone far.

Peaceful and serene with the same identifying pathways and rolling hills she had visited a while ago, Martine wasn’t alarmed when the same children approached her—the oldest holding the baby Jade in her arms. “Hi,” Martine greeted.

Remaining silent in their approach, it was the youngest girl who held the scroll that was handed to Martine. Opening it up carefully, she read it out loud.

*“Like a book before its read
Secrets stay hid so evil spreads*

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*Take the meaning of the past
Expose the lies that the wicked cast
Hear the voices that have called
To reveal what needs to fall
Shine a light on what's been sown
You can't unknow what you've been shown."*

Martine glanced up to her audience to speak, but was instantly transported back into her waking body in a Texas hotel room. Confused by the encounters that took place while she slept, she nabbed her journal and documented, the events, conclusions, and the poetic message, handed to her by young innocent girls that 'do not' completely rest in peace.

Wishing she had the vibrational medicine they required, she realized it was time to turn to her numerous journal entries from nine different psychic dreams—knowing only she could interpret how they all integrated into a complete understanding that needed to be addressed.

Before she could begin, her phone rang—distracting her once again from studying the hard to understand symbolic messages and relevant clues that needed to come together cohesively at the right time and place.

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Chapter 65

There was a killer out there though others would beg to differ. Martine couldn't say or prove anything to the contrary, making each day a new challenge complicated by vision quests that bore no viable clues to help her. Yet the insights from each successive episode seemed to imply there was a monumental caper in the works. Tender and taboo subject matter appeared to be converging toward a more profound understanding or awakening that wouldn't be easily exposed or apparent if not for the nightly experiences she embarked on.

No stranger to the learning's of eternal laws observed in the higher realms, she imagined these circumstances would soon relate to a serious violation of God's plan—God's laws. Equally evident was her responsibility to keep going, persisting, and moving for as long as was necessary. Certain she was not resolving personal issues—she welcomed her daughters call when her phone, always on silent, vibrated in her purse.

“Hi, Alexa,” Martine greeted.

Sounding anxious, Alexa asked, “Mom, I haven't heard from you, is everything okay?”

Martine's disappointment showed, telling Alexa, “I'm not getting anything that logically explains why Charmaine or Levi would be murdered, but I'm also not getting any information that justify murder-suicide. I'm really stuck.”

“Well, can I ask what you are getting?”

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Consumed with melancholy, Martine uttered, "It just seems so irrelevant—I haven't been able to process its meaning."

"Tell me, I've helped before," Alexa reasoned.

"All roads keep leading back to the subject of souls."

"Souls?" Alexa released in surprise, "that's it?"

"Well yes, except, they're very young innocent souls," Martine clarified.

Alexa attempted to interpret her mother's cryptic words, "Children?"

Martine elaborated more, "Little babies."

Alexa guessed again, "Newborn baby souls?"

"Yes," Martine honed in, "but maybe it has to do with unborn baby souls."

"I'm confused," Alexa confessed.

Martine explained what she knew, "Well, let's assume that souls connect with the fetus at conception, and completely attach during the first trimester. That means babies aborted by nine weeks or later definitely have souls connected and attached that will endure the pain and repercussions of a devastating murder of the worst degree."

Alexa hesitated a moment before, suggesting, "Are you sure that Charmaine wasn't pregnant?"

"More than sure, even though it seems certain that her friend Rena was," Martine returned. "I'm thinking there is an underlying issue with abortion."

Well" Alexa started, "it could be the thing that connects the murders together."

"It very well could be, but it's becoming more apparent to me the subject of abortion is the present issue—and on a larger scale than has become evident yet."

Alexa opened her lap-top, while talking, "I'm looking it up online."

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“I can’t believe you have the stomach for this. Most people just let their eyes glass over if you bring up the subject,” Martine reflected.

“It says they can’t use the abortion pill after nine weeks. Basically, they starve the baby till it dies with this pill.” Alexa continued, embellishing, “It’s really nasty for the girl, and the baby. There are risky side effects.”

Martine responded, “Nothing nice about that.”

“Yeah, it can cause lasting damage for future pregnancy’s, or malformations in future children. There are plenty of risks. Some babies are born alive and are deformed.”

“So, basically there’s the pill, or dismemberment,” Martine summarized, “and nothing humane in either of them.”

Alexa read off some facts, “Did you know that there are over a million abortions every year in the US alone? Not all states report an abortion, so they really will never know the actual number per year.”

“I was four weeks pregnant when I saw your heart beat on the ultrasound,” Martine passed on nostalgically.

“What did I look like then?”

Martine laughed, “Like a little pulsing source of light.

Opening another page in her browser, Alexa shared her observations, “There are so many abortion clinics—it’s like a fast food franchise. Did you know they start at \$350 dollars?”

“Sure did,” Martine replied solemnly, “it’s cheaper than going to the dentist. But, a dentist is much more humane.”

“Why does the government allow something so barbaric?” Alexa pondered out loud.

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“I don’t think they want to debate it at all. There’s too much bad and ugly,” Martine commented. “Nobody wants to look under the hood of a smoking car.”

“They estimate that forty to fifty million babies have been aborted since Roe V. Wade.”

“Did you know that about 400,000 soldiers are buried at Arlington cemetery?” Martine correlated. “I’m just saying there’s a really big picture to look at in retrospect.”

“Not sure how this helps you,” Alexa confided, “since you’re working on a specific case for Mr. Kincaid.”

“I know,” Martine acknowledged, “but it does amaze me that our society can be in denial and oblivious about the ramifications done to these babies and the mothers. If they comprehended how barbaric it is, they wouldn’t be so agreeable. They passed Roe V. Wade in 1973 before the ultrasound technology was available or widely used in our country, but when they did obtain it, the harm was undeniable and professionals stayed silent. How do they manage to suppress this knowledge from the public?”

“I don’t know, but I’m still going to keep helping no matter what you find,” Alexa pledged.

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Chapter 66

Before today, the only note worthy news Martine had noticed was O.J. Simpson had been recently paroled. That all changed when her cell phone rang and she saw the call was from Sheriff Richard Gaines. “Martine here,” she answered dubiously, knowing the crusty law enforcement officer, hardened from years of dealing with delinquent, disturbed, and irrational criminal behaviors that spawned skepticism in the career lawman, had the same serious reservations about her and her role in Charmaine and Levi’s death. Waiting for him to speak, she held her breath in dread of bad news.

“Hello, missy,” he said in an unusual up-beat tone. After tip number twenty-nine came into Sheriff Richard Gaines county headquarters forty-eight hours ago, he took it upon himself to pursue the lead personally—leading him to make a phone call—no one expected.

Noticing she had graduated from ma’am to missy, Martine answered back with less apprehension, “Good morning, Sheriff.”

“I hope you got some evidence off that door you were holding onto like a bone,” he embellished her tenacity.

“Yeah, about that,” she started, “there is foreign male forensics on it, but can’t connect it to anyone yet.”

Richard sounded a little cocky again, “Might be because you don’t know how to find a suspect.”

“That’s our thoughts, as well. What can I do for you? You don’t want that door back, do you?” Martine couldn’t resist jabbing back occasionally.

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Richard chuckled, "No, we don't have room in our evidence vault for that."

"Oh, you do have an evidence room there," Martine teased again.

"Not only do we have one of those, but I think we found your suspect," he jostled back, grinning into the phone.

"Are you kidding?" Martine flashed.

Richard sounded like a Wild West advertisement, "We always get our man, missy."

"That's wonderful," she signaled with a quick cluck, "tell me what you got."

"After you left here I supposed that it could have been a murder, so I started checking out some of our local troublemakers."

"That was quick," Martine said.

"Well they're not too hard to locate when the bar has drinks named after them."

"Yeah, I guess not."

"They seemed like credible leads, but their cooperation lasted about as long as a Canadian summer and they were holding their alibis together like peanuts in a shell, until I reminded them that their illegal moonshine enterprise we found was going to turn them from soul mates into cell mates."

"It was two perpetrators?" Martine uttered in surprise.

"Nope, you were right about that, it looks like there was just one."

"One of them did it?"

"Nope, since they wouldn't be smart enough together to change a tire, I got them to start asking around at the bars

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and motels—the kind that a stranger might frequent if he was planning a crime of that magnitude.”

“Great,” Martine injected, “I like where you’re going with this. What changed your mind to make you want to do that?”

“Well, missy, I decided if I had a prize filly in the race, I wouldn’t rein her in till she won it.”

Martine couldn’t help but laugh, “So, now I’m a filly, your filly. That makes me very proud,” she flattered Richard for the first time. “I can’t wait to hear what a cowboy like you got for us.”

“Uh-huh, since you need to be in the race to win the race, you might really like what this cowboy wrangled up for you folks. After I checked out a good lead from my new informants that led me to the local motel and watering hole, I started getting some tips on our hotline—like how to find a better job, where the raccoons are stealing garbage, and why I should wear my seatbelt, but I did finally hear about a fella that rolled into town during the time these folks were murdered. The place is called *Al’s Meet Market*, so I spoke with Al himself.”

“Excuse me, Sheriff—is this like a meat rendering market?”

“No, M, E, E, T,” he spelled-out, “not M, E, A, T.”

“Ah, Al’s is the local bar and gossip center,” she deduced.

“The best we have, it’s like a trail mix of nuts, crooks, and kooks,” he elaborated. “Al says a guy came and spent one night and registered with the name Dr. Phil Good.”

“Great, we’ll check that out,” she replied excitedly to Richard who was exactly the same with a refreshing twist.

“Not so fast, little filly,” he said endearingly. “Al runs a rough place and always gets the license plate number

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off the car of a stranger that rents a room. That led me to the rental car company at the airport, who had the actual driver's license which is for a Philip Goodman."

"Ah, excellent work, I love it."

"That's right, you do. I got his address, , since no one rents a car in this state without disclosing a physical address. We don't believe anyone can live in a post office box and drifters don't fly into this town for one night—actually, drifters don't fly at all. I really think we got you a good lead."

"Tell me how you did this so fast," Martine signified her interest in his accomplishment.

"If you were correct and it was a contract killing, I needed to rule the local yahoo's. Luckily, it did lead me to a realistic perp that wasn't from here and never has been here before. So, I knew he had to get here in something. I just followed his trail like a tracker. If you chase two rabbits—you won't catch either one."

Martine genuinely laughed at his joke, "I respect your deductions—greatly. I find myself doing that, as well. I can work with this," she added with satisfaction.

"Now you have someone to match with your mystery DNA to," he stated.

"I will be doing that when I get his DNA. You can change your name, but you can't change your DNA."

"I like that," Richard returned the first truly positive acknowledgment that she could recall. "Sheriff, I really want to thank you for this. "I desperately needed a lead I could follow—this might be it."

"I wouldn't have called you if I didn't think it was. I expect you to keep my department informed when you close this case."

"We certainly will."

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Chapter 67

Mahoney pulled up to Martine's hotel at the prearranged time, and place. While he waited for her to come out of the building, his phone rang. "Mahoney here," he answered without hesitation.

"John, I got DNA and prints off the beer bottles," the caller divulged.

"Really," Mahoney exclaimed, "is there a hit in the system with either of them?"

"No, and they don't match anything off the door. No connection between them. I can't give you anything on any of this today, but it's all in the CODIS database while you wait for a match to come in or . . ."

"Or, until I get someone to compare them too," Mahoney completed her sentence. Disappointed in the outcome, he tapped the steering wheel with his thumbs. While deep in contemplation, Martine swung open the passenger car door and slid in.

Mahoney addressed the caller, "Can you hold on a minute?"

"Sure," she said.

Muting his phone, he filled Martine in, "No match in the system on his DNA, or any prints in the system, basically no match with the door."

"Mm-hum," she returned, "how about Rena's pregnancy stick?"

Mahoney connected back with the caller, asking, "Anything on that pee stick yet?" He pulled his car out into the empty driveway and exited the hotel property.

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“No, that’s gonna take some time, and we may not get both DNA’s.”

Mahoney shook his head, signaling Martine that the results are not available. “Okay then,” he sounded disappointed, “I guess we’re done here.”

Tapping her index finger on his forearm, Martine signaled an interruption, “Wait, can she send the DNA data file to Alexa?”

“Did you hear that?” Mahoney asked.

“Yes, like the one I sent her a couple days ago?”

Mahoney looked at Martine with surprise, who was nodding in agreement. “Yes, just like that,” he stipulated. “Thank you for calling me, it’s always appreciated.”

After terminating the call he smiled and glanced over to Martine. “So what does Alexa need a DNA data file for?”

“Well,” Martine explained her new strategy, “we’re checking ancestry sites on the other DNA to locate the person, or relative to the person, who left DNA on the door.”

“Huh,” he chuckled, “so, maybe not a total dead-end yet.”

“Exactly,” she concurred.

“I should be more interested in how you two came up with this considering we’ve never done that before, but we need to discuss our time with Stewart.”

Martine looked out the front window as they whizzed down the highway to Stewart Kincaid’s prestigious home. “Absolutely,” she conceded with relief. “But first, I want you to know Sheriff Gaines just contacted me with a lead he dug up on a man called Phillip Goodman.”

“Really, how’s that possible?”

“It’s a pretty good story, but for now can you get some background on him? His residence is supposedly Clearlake California.”

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Making a call from the car, Mahoney requested they run a background check on Phillip Goodman. Glancing at Martine, he asked, "Anything else?"

"Nope," she shook her head.

Mahoney nodded in agreement, "Okay, send me what you find." Ending the call he resumed their conversation, "What do we tell Stewart?"

"You mean," Martine revised, "what are you going to tell him, right?"

"Oh, no," he laughed, "I protect—you detect."

"Is that how it is. You know I'm not a detective."

Mahoney rebuked the notion, "You're much more than that." Turning into Stewart's driveway, he added, "You've got this, and I've got your back. We might not look like we have anything to show and tell, but we're not done."

"We're not done," she repeated as she got out of the car.

Together they stood outside the home admiring it. "You know, I have the best and worst memories of my life on this land," he reflected thoughtfully. "I want to help this friend more than you could know. I owe him everything and admire him above any other man I know."

Martine sighed big, "Then let's not quit until we have his answers."

Ringling the doorbell, Mahoney stressed his concerns, "We need to give him an update and encourage him that more can be done."

"Agreed," Martine was saying as the door opened.

Stewart personally welcomed his guests, "Thank you for coming. I have really been looking forward to seeing you both again." This time he greeted Martine like he knew her, "I can't wait to hear about everything you've been doing this week, I thought about it every day." Offering her his elbow,

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he led her into his living room and gestured to a large comfortable chair. "What can I get you, Martine? I already know what John wants."

"Just a white wine," she replied, nodding to the male server standing near Stewart. Watching him whisk away to make their drinks, she offered her respects to Stewart, "I really am so sorry for your loss. I feel like I know so much about the amazing daughter that you raised and loved. It is the most unfortunate thing I've dealt with since I lost my own husband."

Stewart's cheerful façade withered as he melted into a chair across from her. "I appreciate that. She was everything to me—my reason for living. I wish words and love could bring her back."

"I do, too. I'm a God-fearing girl, but I ask myself, if love is so powerful why can't it bring our loved ones back to us?"

Mahoney injected, "I guess we all have that in common, don't we?"

"Yes," Martine agreed, "and it's not a club I would choose to join."

Stewart's watery eyes glanced at both of them. "It does make life lonely. I feel weak and sick inside."

"It does do that," Mahoney added as he took his drink from the server, "and the only cure is time."

"And answers," Stewart amended. "I want to know what happened."

"Of course," Martine replied as she received her glass of wine, "anything that brings closure will speed up your personal recovery. I would want the same for me if I was in your place."

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“Good, what can you tell me about your findings in Oklahoma? Was it murder-suicide?” Stewart asked anxiously.

Looking at Mahoney first for permission to speak openly, she began with, “I can’t give you anything conclusive about that—so let me fill you in on what I do know.”

“Please, tell me everything,” he projected eagerly.

Martine first championed his daughter, “Charmaine’s home was delightful in a true country setting with giant trees, and lush fields. It was absolutely beautiful and tranquil with a garden full of produce.”

Stewart nodded proudly, “Yes, that’s what she said.”

“I also spent a lot of time at her place of work.” Martine tried easing into an awkward subject, “What did she tell you about her job?”

“She was doing therapy or counseling and seemed to like it.”

“That’s what I found too. The organization is really progressive and advanced in the study of brain traumas. She was being trained to do Hypnotherapy.” Martine paused, formulating what to say next, “She was very involved in the regression of a person’s soul in order to find the source of a person’s illness or phobia. Did you know that?”

“No,” he answered with hesitation, “we never talked about that.”

“Okay,” Martine said, “I can understand that—it’s really progressive thinking.”

“What do you mean?” Stewart looked confused.

Sympathizing with the same dilemma she had initially, she chose another question, “Are you and Charmaine Pro-life?”

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Stewart sat back and laughed, "Is the Pope Catholic?"

Smiling through her relief, she explained, "I think her job led her to a Monastery where she planned on taking classes in theology."

Surprised by the notion, Stewart exclaimed, "What? Please tell me they had nothing to do with her death."

"Of course they didn't, but I went to see them and found out she was interested in the progression of a soul and . . ." Martine paused with a little shrug, "reincarnation."

"Really?" Mahoney and Stewart said in unison.

"Why?" Mahoney asked.

Martine highlighted the importance and the dilemma it caused for Charmaine, "Because her job required her to accept the concept of rebirth so that she could treat people that were compromised by an incident that happened in another lifetime." Sighing deep, she expelled, "Phew, I said it."

Everyone sat in silence as the server came in, offering fresh drinks to the party of three. "Sir, dinner will be served in thirty minutes."

"Thank you, Robert." Rolling the rocks of ice in his cocktail, Stewart directed his attention back to Martine, "So, how did they convince my daughter this was possible? It really sounds unbelievable, and what does it have to do with her death?"

"Good questions," Martine replied, "I had them, too. I'm not here to convince you of anything, but it is truly compelling. The institute she worked for treated people that were very disturbed and could not find help. Through hypnotic regression they were able to bring them back in time—as in lifetimes, to find the source of their problem. In the process of this, the Hypnotherapy industry discovered

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that many patients were permanently traumatized during an abortion.”

“Oh, my God,” Stewart blurted.

“It is the most barbaric way to die,” Martine justified the seriousness, “when you’re trapped inside something and ripped apart. They believe the severe rise in young children that are literally born with PTSD, phobia’s, mental disorders, night terrors, physical defects, and serious illnesses can be attributed to the huge increase in the abortion rate.”

Mahoney cued-up, “It does make sense. I’ve seen a huge difference year after year. So much crime and craziness is happening with adolescent boys and girls. Troubled youth are increasing exponentially.”

Martine added, “Apparently, depression and dissociative behaviors in children can’t be explained either.”

“I had no idea my daughter was dealing with this,” Stewart admitted.

“If you’re over the shock of what Charmaine was learning, you need to remember how compassionate and vested she was in helping others,” Martine praised his daughter. “Personally, I was grateful I learned who she was and what she was destined to do.”

“Then what went wrong?” Stewart cried out.

“We don’t know, but we have suspicions.”

“Did her job have anything to do with this?”

“Doubt it,” Martine returned.

“Did Levi?” Stewart huffed.

“Really doubt it,” Martine deemed. “Some stories are written and some are told—I’m so sorry for telling you all this, but you had a loving and conscientious daughter that would have changed people lives for the better. She did nothing wrong and didn’t deserve to have it all taken away from her.”

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“What do I do now?” Stewart relented to the prospects of an unsolved murder as pain spread across his face. Standing, he walked over to Martine, took her hand, and lifted her up for a strong embrace. “John chose well,” he whispered in her ear.

“We are not done working this case. Please be patient,” Martine implored the grieving man.

Robert entered the room, summoning them, “Dinner is served.”

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Chapter 68

Later that evening when Martine and Mahoney were back at the hotel, he took a call and left Martine sitting at the bar. Walking back up to her while still talking on his phone, he could be heard saying, “Okay, sounds like the guy we’re looking for. Make sure I get prints and DNA immediately, and rush the rest. Please call me with everything as soon as you can, this is urgent,” he said terminating the call.

“What just happened,” her curiosity peaked when she saw the intense look he gave her.

“Well, when I tracked Phil Goodman’s flight back to here, they put out an APB on him. Guess where they found him?”

“They already found him?”

“Oh, yes, they did, they don’t mess around in Texas. Here, the crooks wear handcuffs, not law enforcement.”

“Mm, I love it.”

“I think you might,” he replied factitiously, “I’m thinking of retiring here, you could, too,” he hinted.

Martine changed the subject, “Where did they find him?”

“You mean where and how did they find him. He was in a cheap seedy motel—dead in bed.”

“Are you kidding,” Martine blurted out, “how is that possible? Was he murdered?”

“Don’t know,” Mahoney returned, “but it looks suspicious.”

“How do you mean,” she asked.

“No break-in and no obvious signs of wrong doing. Could be natural causes—I rushed the autopsy to get the real

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story,” he explained what he knew before the bartender approached him. “Crown and coke, please,” he ordered.

Martine shook her head. “Wow, have we just hit another dead end?”

“We have before and still found a way to close a couple of extremely complicated cases,” he reminded her.

“It does seem plausible that it could be a suspicious death since I can’t see how that guy would fly there and murder two people unless he was hired by someone else,” she theorized.

“I’ve seen that before, too. Really bad guys don’t want any loose ends, so I had the local law enforcement seal off the room until the autopsy results are in.”

“When do you think that will be?” she asked.

“They already called the coroner to get it going as soon as possible. They all have my number and know I’m in town. Stewart and I have a good relationship with the local Chief, so we’re better off here than when you were in Oklahoma.”

“That is very good news. Do you know anything about the crime scene?”

“Yep,” he divulged, “they filled me in until I can come look for myself.”

“What’re your thoughts?” Martine probed him.

“Well, I don’t have a magic ring decoder, like you must have, but it doesn’t make sense that he passed away shortly before we located his position. He was dressed, watching TV from his bed, with a drink in his hand. The room was not broken into, and he wasn’t entertaining anyone as far as they could tell. Basically, a clean scene, except for the messy joint he had rolled for later.”

Martine reeled, “Well that means he didn’t kill himself.”

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“Why, because he was going to get high later?” Mahoney guessed.

“Exactly,” Martine stipulated, “he would never leave it behind after he rolled it up and left it out—he definitely was planning on getting high.”

Mahoney couldn’t resist teasing his comrade, “What do you know about rolling joints and getting high?”

Martine let out a laugh, “When I roll a joint it’s my ankle—thank you very much.”

He had to laugh, too, “I guess that’s me, as well.”

“Too much of a coincidence for me, Mahoney,” Martine’s tone was serious again, “I never thought for a minute he was the master mind behind this after I saw his handiwork. Do you have anything on his background now?”

Mahoney tapped on his cell phone screen and showed it to Martine. “This is him.”

Martine let out a gasp, “That’s the guy I saw at Charmaine’s funeral reception that I texted you about.”

Surprised by the revelation, Mahoney recalled the events, “I do remember, but I never located him after you saw him. He must have actually been there scoping out Rena’s whereabouts.”

“Oh, my goodness,” Martine shuddered at the thought, “what did they find in his criminal record?”

“Nothing noteworthy—lived in one of the poorest parts of California.”

“Sounds feasible,” she calculated, “prowling the dark side of California’s streets let him blend into hard luck neighborhoods—and not get caught for anything serious. Engaging in other states to this degree doesn’t make sense. What was his motive,” she asked—still convinced he had a part in all the murders. “He hasn’t done anything serious

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enough to do time or get his DNA entered. I'm sorry if I'm letting you and Stewart down."

"No, you haven't," he commiserated with her, "I've probably let you both down. I just couldn't do anything in Oklahoma and put it all on you."

"Then it's a draw, but we've never let that stop us before," she added, clinking her glass to his.

Nodding in agreement, Mahoney took aim at his favorite suspect, "I didn't think Goodman could have had a motive either. Whoever put him up to it must have balls the size of Russia. Someone much more sophisticated with a personal and financial motive—like that Walsh kid."

Martine pursed her lips in contemplation. "Sometimes it's what you don't see that will ultimately convict the real culprit. If it leads us to Goodman it may help again."

"Are you taking about the DNA?" Mahoney took a sip of his drink. "You're probably right, but I think we know his DNA will match the door—so what?" he said dejectedly as their fertile brainpower began to perk over the evening cocktail. "This is a marathon and not a sprint. We both need to get back to our jobs and we don't have the guy that could probably tell us everything we need," he relayed his angst taking another sip when his cell phone rang, startling them both. "Mahoney," he answered into his phone. Noticing all the people milling around them he signaled to Martine he had to take the call—getting up and walking away from her and the public area.

With Mahoney out of earshot, she quickly got on her phone and called Alexa. After many rings she was about to hang up when her daughter finally answered.

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“Mom,” desperation rang-out, “I’ve been waiting for you to call me. Am I still picking you up at the airport tomorrow?”

“Sorry, it’s been a long day and I didn’t know until a few minutes ago.”

“Is that a good thing?” Alexa asked.

“My work is done here for now,” Martine sounded dismayed. “I’ve got a few minutes before Mahoney gets back. Do you have anything I need to know?”

Alexa sounded disappointed, “What happened, I thought everything was going okay?”

“Well, it was for a while, now—not so good.”

“What happened?”

“Thanks to Sheriff Gaines, there’s a guy, Philip Goodman, who is a viable suspect if his DNA is a match to Charmaine’s crime scene. What I can’t figure out is how to put him at Rena’s crime scene since the car that hit her wasn’t his, and on top of that—now he’s dead.”

“You found him?” Alexa echoed in surprise.

“Mahoney did—but he was deceased in his motel room,” Martine reported in a lower voice. “Now we can’t do anything with him to find out who would’ve hired him. He’s too sleazy to have his own motive for going to Oklahoma and committing,” Martine looked around before finishing, “you know—multiple murders. I really am certain he had something to do with Rena’s death too, but can’t tie him to it because it was a stolen car that was wiped down and abandoned.”

“Maybe this guy is a tool in life and death,” Alexa suggested ominously, “which gives me an idea,” she paused in thought, “if you can get me all the cell phone numbers of everyone you have reason to suspect, and the victims phones, I can see who was in proximity of each other.”

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“Really?,” Martine said in surprise.

“Yeah, I can try,” Alexa offered. “We’ve made great advances in tracking both suspects and victims phone activities to specific times they were in the same location. Since I doubt Philip Goodman knew or called these victims, cell phone coordinates might be what is needed now. There’s a new methodology we’re pioneering, it’s called a CAST report.”

“What’s that?”

“It stands for Cellular Analysis Survey Team. They’re a specialized team that can precisely track the movement of a phone by utilizing more specific measurements that involve signal strength and timing that can account for its movement between towers—it’s a serious analysis. They’re more like physicists that can enhance the location and movement of a phone with unbelievable accuracy.”

“That’s very different than the GPS coordinates we’ve always relied on,” Martine remembered.

Alexa elaborated, “It’s much more telling than the GPS coordinates that land by a cell tower with a huge multi-mile radius to consider.” Pausing in thought, she also relayed the limitations, “It’s still in the study and development stage, but we are starting to use it. We can begin the process by getting the basic locations of all the phones which could lead to more questions that we may be able to answer later and prove with a CAST report—we’re looking for projects to test it on.”

“Hum, so you could help identify Goodman’s movements, and ultimately who put him up to this and why,” Martine imagined aloud. “That might have to be the way we connect this guy to Rena and the person or persons behind everything. Even though Phil is dead and we can’t talk to

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him or punish him, the family deserves to know what happened.”

“Exactly, I know someone on the task force here that might help. They’ll want to know if the cars used had a GPS navigation system that we can also track with accuracy,” Alexa instructed.

“Awesome, Alexa, you’re a genius.”

“Listen, I don’t have a background in physics—so I can’t do it myself, but I can research whose phones were by each other within some degree of certainty. Wayne, who helped me recover Charmaine’s Skype calls, can help with this. We’ll eventually get the phone records on the deceased victims, but you can speed it up if the cell phones are sent here, especially Phil Goodman’s phone,” she suggested.

“Okay, I think we can do that right away. Local law enforcement seems to be cooperating. I can’t get you Chaz Walsh’s cell phone, but I can get you his cell and work phone numbers. I’ll be able to text those to you. He could be behind this—if you can put him by any of them.”

“If I have the phones, we’ll see if anyone contacted him in anyway—including any deleted messages. I think that could be a big help. I know I can work on this right away,” Alexa promised.

“How do you know that?”

“The CAST task force can’t perform real time investigations until actual circumstances are brought to them.” Alexa got more excited, “I think you meet the parameters for the study being done right now.”

“Ya think,” Martine sighed. “Four victims that may be connected if we tie them together is a great study for this task force. It’s one of the hardest things to do in criminology.”

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"At this point anything will help." Noticing Mahoney had returned, she closed the conversation, "I'll call you tomorrow."

Hanging up from her daughter, Martine shared her new idea in detail, ending with, "Let's get her everything we got. She'll work on it immediately if she has to use vacation time. I need to get back to work as well."

Mahoney conceded, "I do, too, and I don't think there is anything more I can accomplish at the moment. I'll take you to the airport as planned."

"Don't worry," Martine reassured him, "I'm still on the case. I know we're meant to solve this and we do have people working on it with us. Ya know, only days ago—it was just me," she reminded him.

"You're right," he denoted, "I can stay on top of Texas and make sure the motel room is properly processed."

"I'm thinking Phil may have had a guest—possibly some surveillance on-site or nearby could be found," Martine intimated, "I doubt if Texas is looking for a suspect right now—like we are."

"Yes, I can convince them—especially if the DNA matches Charmaine's crime scene. So, you're sure you need to go?" he asked sadly.

"I really do," Martine explained, "I've got a preliminary injunction to file, a hearing to schedule, and a motion for summary judgment being heard the day after tomorrow. I can get a lot done while we wait for some forensics to materialize. Is that okay with you?"

"Yes, but it surprised me that you were the one that wanted to leave. You're the one that doesn't put down a case until it's solved."

"Not putting it down," Martine affirmed with an intense stare. "Let's meet for coffee down here at 6:30

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tomorrow morning. I need to track down a couple things that might help Alexa.” Martine got up to go. “See you tomorrow.”

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Chapter 69

Back at work in the Capitol city of Colorado made famous both for its sweeping mountain landscapes that created stunning backdrops provided by the Rocky Mountains, and its rough and tumble rowdy past, Martine found herself at a disadvantage in helping further with Stewart Kincaid's investigation. Still on his retainer, she struggled with what to do next while information was in limbo—along with her dreams.

Accustomed to putting out so many fires in one day that she wished it would rain, made this waiting period unbearable. Even her dreams, which were messages from heaven that guided her through complex and disturbing mazes of injustice, had abandoned her for a couple nights.

With a colorful receding horizon behind her, Martine worked alone in her Denver office wrapping up the events of a long day when Alexa forwarded an e-mail with the comprehensive CAST Report attached. Reading through the findings and summary, she sent a thank you reply and dialed John Mahoney immediately.

"Mahoney," Martine spirited with bated breath when he answered his phone, "Alexa has found some very conclusive results—I really think we have something. So far the CAST Report shows Phil's phone was definitely near or at Charmaine's at the supposed time of death. It also shows Phil's phone tracked inside or near the stolen car's GPS route, and his phone tracks at or near the time of Rena's accidental hit and run."

"It can't get much better than that," he agreed.

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“Yes it can,” she factualized another related detail, “his phone was in contact with a phone in Texas, before, during and after, these events.”

“Did the phone belong to Chaz?”

“Can’t say for sure, it was a burner,” she admitted sadly, “but Phil’s phone does tract near or at the location where Chaz is employed at.”

“Martine,” Mahoney projected hastily, “I think you do have something here. Is there anything else we can get from this report?”

“Not at this point, it could still be anyone who owns that phone, and whoever it is they haven’t called Phil’s phone since he passed. If we could locate the burner phone, we could put it all together. Phil either wasn’t smart enough to type and text or he knew the communications could be retrieved. Either way, I still believe someone hired him and they concealed their identities with a burner phone and short conversations—no voicemails either.”

“Oh, ‘kay,” Mahoney said slowly, “you think they might have been that sophisticated, right?”

“Let me put it into context for you, yes, it’s extra hard to solve a crime when the perps are smarter than the cops—you know that. That much cover-up indicates that at least someone was that sophisticated.”

“So that number hasn’t called Phil’s phone since he died, huh,” Mahoney ponder aloud.

“Right, guess they know he’s dead, huh,” Martine returned.

“Yes, they do. That’s why the phones are temporarily a dead end, so I’m bringing Chaz in for a chat,” he concluded, springing the news on her for the first time. “Do you want to be there for that—I mean Texas, because that’s

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where he's at?" Mahoney enticed her further, "He's most likely the guy you've been looking for."

"Yes, I do," her voice lifted without any hesitation, "but, let me talk to him one more time before you do something formal and on the record."

Mahoney paused a moment, "Sure, that'll work. When can you get here?"

Martine was already pulling up flight information from Denver to Texas. "Tomorrow," she replied, searching for the right flight. "I have court in the morning and can take a flight out of here at about 1PM and get there at 5PM."

"That'll have to work, can't argue with the court system."

Martine laughed, "No one can—we just argue with each other."

"I'll leave tonight and get with the Texas boys so we are ready. I'm going to arrange surveillance just to make sure he stays in town."

"The non-intimidating kind please," she requested, "I want to talk to him when he has no idea he's a suspect."

"Got it," he said. "Text over your flight information and I'll pick you up."

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Chapter 70

Transitioning from the air to the ground, Martine felt and heard the powerful aircraft thrusters reverse—forcing rapid deceleration prior to the thud of a clean touchdown. As the automatic braking engaged, the large flying vessel rolled along till it came to a complete stop near its gate. Having landed a few minutes early she sat back and contemplated the private information she would be using while in Texas. After securing the laptop computer that carried the treasured communications she recently came in possession of safely in her bag, she texted Mahoney updating him that she was departing the plane momentarily.

As promised, John Mahoney was parked outside waiting in a restricted area—but not in a regulation rental car. Today he was proudly standing beside an official police squad car.

“Nice wheels,” she commented, looking over the intimidating vehicle. “I’ve never Ubered in one of these,” she kidded as he opened the passenger door for her. Still dressed in the business attire she wore in court, Martine slid gracefully into the front seat.

After Mahoney got in on the driver’s side, he explained his reasoning, “I told them it was official business.”

“Really,” she replied, “and someone believed you?”

“No,” he admitted, “traffic is so bad right now we can make better time if we speed—that they believed.”

“Ah, I do, too.”

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Pulling out into the sea of cars flowing from the busy airport, he began filling her in, "Looks like he's been at work all day."

"So, you do have eyes on him already?"

"Oh, yeah," he said with confidence, glancing at the time, "and he should be heading home soon."

"Great, I wouldn't want to talk to him at work and risk being thrown out."

"Exactly, that's why they'll let us know when he's home," Mahoney added.

"Perfect," she concurred.

"So, do you have a plan?" he questioned.

"Sometimes," she remarked, sounding vague, "but not this time. I'm going to know what needs to be said when I get his reaction after he sees me for the second time."

"So you're shooting from the hip, huh?"

"Yep, just like a cowboy—we are in Texas aren't we? But, seriously, no shooting—just fact finding before you bring him in for a formal interview and he lawyers-up," she reminded him what was at stake.

"Ah, that way you can be his lawyer when he needs one."

"That was not my plan, and you know I can't, but if he believes I can help him like an advocate, I still might get that one thing we need."

"What's that, a confession?"

Studying the very complicated and official looking police car gadgets decked-out across the dashboard, she disagreed, "No, the phone."

"Right, we really do want the phone."

"That's why," Martine corroborated with him, "you're going to call this number when I'm in the house for a while." Sending him the phone number she had stored in

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her contacts, she explained, “He won’t think I have anything to do with it ringing if I’m with him and my phone is in my pocket. Don’t call right away in case he doesn’t let me stay.”

“This could work. If the phone rings in his home, that will let us get the search warrant. Don’t do anything to get the phone,” he cautioned her.

“Wouldn’t think of it” she assured him, “but if anything goes wrong, I’m going to push your contact number, and you better get in there, because with these impressive wheels, you could come and take him to the car for questioning, and I can still try and find the phone’s location—if it’s not on him.”

“I actually think we have a plan,” Mahoney commended her, “and I like it,” he was saying when his cell phone rang. Seeing who the caller was, he took the disruption immediately, “What do you have for me today, Sean?” Listening briefly, he concluded the call, “Thanks, good work.” Disconnecting, he looked at Martine and grinned. “Looks like they got a match on the pregnancy stick to Chaz Walsh’s DNA.”

“Ah, the gift that keeps on giving,” she remarked.

“DNA is a wonderful thing,” he chuckled. “Well now we have a better plan. I think this proves he’s the guy. Do you want to still go through with this? I don’t think we care if he lawyers up at this point. We can prove he was the father and had a motive—let’s just bring him in.”

Pointing at his holstered side-arm weapon, Martine devised her own plan, “You have your bullets,” she said, pointing to his gun, “and I have my silver bullet,” she added, patting a silver colored laptop stored in her satchel. “Let’s try mine first before yours. You can take him in anytime at this point, but we only have one chance to try and make him with the phone. That won’t happen if he gets rid of it. I’m

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not going to need the DNA information, either. You can use that as a reason to bring him in for questioning.”

“Are you sure?”

“I think I might have his kryptonite. We both came a long way and need to get somewhere with this kid tonight. Just keep the car running.”

Having reached their destination, he dropped her off on the side street so the police car would not be visible. “Good luck, I’ll be right here,” he guaranteed as she got out of the squad car.

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Chapter 71

Walking up to Chaz's door for the second time, she rang the bell—standing tall and poised in front of the peephole. Like the last time, the foyer light eventually came on and Chaz opened the door, giving her a look reserved for unwanted solicitors.

"Hello, Chaz," she greeted cordially, "remember me?"

"Thought you lived in Denver," he addressed her like a pestering nuisance, "what are you doing back here at my place?"

"Personal delivery," she returned, tapping her finger on her leather case. "I asked myself if I should share something with you that I recovered from Rena's apartment belongings—I decided I should *only*," she accentuated the word 'only,' "share this with you."

"Share what," he said rudely, "I've never been to her apartment."

Martine remained friendly and collected, "I didn't say you had."

Sounding suspicious and guarded, Chaz shook his head, "Then what are you talking about?"

"Let me show you," she offered, as she let herself in and headed for the living room. Opening her bag, she pulled out Rena's laptop and turned it on. "I want your opinion, because I'm not sure you want anyone else to see this," she implied mysteriously.

Apprehensive, Chaz reacted, "What's this about?"

Logging on with the new protected password Alexa created after gaining access to its secured contents, she

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knowingly glanced at Chaz while the computer's musical tones sounded out, booting-up the device. "You really do need to see this," she encouraged him, "because it's very moving."

"I suppose you want to log onto my internet," he surmised arrogantly. "I'm not sharing it with you until you explain what this is all about. If you're here to extort money from me or my family, you came to the wrong place, lady."

"It's Martine, please." Keeping him in suspense and curious, she quickly reassured him, "I don't want your money, and I don't need your internet."

Chaz appeared impatient as the computer completed loading its programs and files. "There's nothing on her computer that you haven't already accused me of," he told his intruder.

"You mean paternity?" Martine asked nonchalantly.

"Yeah, and you can't prove that anyway," he stated with unwavering coolness. "That Birth Certificate was not proof of anything except a girl had a fixation on me and forged some fake document. Anyone can Photoshop something like that."

"Why would anyone do that, Chaz? But, you're right, it's not proof." Opening up a secured file, Martine hit the 'Return' key, set the computer down on the coffee table, and spun it around to face him.

While Chaz looked into the computer screen it came alive with Rena's sad and concerned expression graced by her long thick auburn hair. Silenced by the image of both their faces and the realization that a private conversation between them had been recorded without his knowledge, brought him to his knees where he stared at the scene with a slack jaw of awe.

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Martine sat by him observing and listening to an intimate Skyped conversation the two of them engaged in not very long ago.

Appearing shy and timid, Rena started first, “Hi, Chaz, how’s it going?”

“It’s good,” sounding curt, he barely looked at her.

Forcing a smile she kept the awkward exchange civil, “Good, good . . . I’m glad for you.”

Chaz’s edginess came through loud and clear, “What do you want?”

Nervously blinking, she began making small talk, “I’m going to see my friend Charmaine in Oklahoma.”

“Sounds fine. Why do I need to know?”

“I want to provide a memorial service for our child,” she gulped. “It’s really important we do it because of how she died.”

Alarmed, Chaz blared, “You told someone and you want to have a service?” Angered, his cheeks flushed slightly.

“Yes, I do,” she stated.

“That’s just gross,” he snapped back. “Why did you tell her—no one is supposed to know—no one,” he reiterated. “Did you at least tell her it was a miscarriage?”

“No,” she clarified, “I’m going to tell my friend everything when I see her,” she said with a deep breath.

“Why would you do that?”

“Why? You know why. I see you, Chaz. Do you see me? I’m absolutely miserable. I’m going to visit her. I need a friend to talk to.”

“I don’t see what your friend can do for you,” he barked insensitively.

“We just talk and she helps—that’s how it works with people who care about each other—you should try it.”

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"Talking has never helped me," he flashed in frustration.

"Chaz, I see you better than my own reflection in the mirror, we both need help right now. She'd want to help both of us. Come with me. We should reconnect and do right by our child. It's the right thing to do," she pleaded. "This child has a soul and needs to be recognized. I've learned from Charmaine how this decision we made can affect us for the rest of our lives if we do nothing. It already has affected the soul we terminated."

"Like how?" he demanded in aggravation.

"Amends," she said succinctly. "If we acknowledge our love and regret, we help heal this soul for a better chance at everlasting life and existence."

"Do you think this is my fault, because it's not?"

"Stop, stop, stop this right now," Rena begged, "let's just fix what we did, and make it right."

His words harsh, snapped like a taut binder that releases all its energy at once, "We are finished. I'm not getting back with you, Rena, you have crossed the line."

Rena appeared perplexed, "Do you think Charmaine or I want anything to do with changing your mind about me so we would get back together?" she questioned in surprise. "I can assure you that is not what this is about."

Chaz arrogantly sassed back, "Sure, just like when you got yourself pregnant and you thought I would be okay with that."

"That's not what this is about. It's not about you, Chaz. I wouldn't ever want to do this, especially with you if there wasn't a bigger reason. We can do the right thing for this child without getting back together."

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“Just because you let your friend know what happened, don’t think I’m going to change my mind, feel guilty, or let anyone else know?”

Rena shook her head in disbelief. “You’re just not getting it.”

Sounding cold and heartless, Chaz rebuked her again, “If I wanted you in my life you would be, Rena.”

“What is wrong with you, Chaz?” Tears began welling up.

Rolling his eyes in exasperation, he made his intentions clear, “Nothing if I’m free of you. Why is this so hard for you to understand? Birth control is your responsibility and you did what you had to do for both our sakes, just like everyone else does eventually.”

Rena flicked her head in amazement. “What I did wasn’t birth control. It’s our child that we killed. It shouldn’t be so easy for you to have wanted this done so badly, unless something is wrong with you. I did this for you, not me. We’re not done with this by a long shot,” she pledged.

“Yes, we are, Rena,” he affirmed.

“Chaz, Chaz, don’t hang up,” her voice sobbed as his image abruptly left the screen.

By the time the communication ended, Chaz was choking on his tears, “What have I done?”

Martine closed the device and approached the boy, putting her arm around his shoulders. “Chaz, I think we know it’s your child now.”

“Yeah, sure, what does it matter now? Did you come here to gloat and make me feel like a big heel?”

“Only you can make yourself feel like that,” she replied as she fetched something inside her purse. Taking a small thumb drive out of it, she handed it to Chaz. “Here, I

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saved it for you. There's another one you should watch on here as well."

Taking it from Martine, he grumbled, "Why are you here?"

Martine studied the boy whose head was in his hands, hiding from the gloom he was forced to face like a man. "I'm here because we believe Rena and her friend Charmaine both died by the same person's hand. This kinda implies you might have a motive. Do you?"

Shocked without delay, he looked up and shouted, "No."

Martine rephrased her question, "Do you know someone with a motive?"

"Absolutely not," he exclaimed.

"Do you have an alibi?"

Suddenly, worry spread on his face, "Are you saying I'm a suspect?"

Shrugging her shoulders, Martine answered, "You could be."

Anguished, Chaz rebelled at the accusation, "Seriously, what's my motive? She clearly got the abortion?"

Nodding in agreement, Martine confirmed his reasoning, "Clearly she did."

"That's right she did."

Martine kept pressing, "Maybe you know something about that and you could help me locate the facility she used."

"No . . .," he objected more thoughtfully, "I don't know anything about that."

"Huh, that seems odd. Most dads know those types of details. Yah know," Martine paused, "I'm going to let you watch the other communication you had with Rena. If

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something comes to mind that could help us, I want you to give me a call.” Reaching in her purse for a business card, she handed it to him and diffused the confrontation, “Here, in case you can’t find the one I gave you last time.”

“Sure,” he uttered in dismay, taking the card from her.

“I’ll let myself out,” Martine announced as she packed up her items and headed for the foyer. “Please call me, Chaz.”

When safely situated in the squad car with Mahoney, he immediately asked, “Did the phone ring? I called twenty times.”

“I would’ve heard it if it was there—no phone that I heard,” Martine squelched his hopes.

“Damn, dead end again,” he muttered.

“Not at all,” Martine returned.

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Chapter 72

After Chaz's infuriating guest departed, he had an overwhelming wave of reality sweep through his body. Unable to accept or process the permanent loss of Rena in his life, or the finality, made him question the choices he had made and how everything ultimately may have had an alternate outcome if he had chosen differently.

Seemingly successful in every part of his life except for love, Chaz embraced the night he spent with a girl that met his parameters. Electrifying people aren't always what they seem to be, sometimes they are even better until something unexpected changes everything.

Contemplating his actions and recollections from the pivotal time Rena had Skyped her communications with him brought him into a deep contemplation—leading him to bravely watching the other conversation left in his possession on a flash drive.

Overwhelmed and confused he eventually decided to watch the recording for the purpose of closure and finality—the same reasons he always used to move on and never look back. For the sake of pursuing a lucrative career and impressing his domineering father, Chaz had built an impenetrable wall around his heart letting nothing in that could cause any pain or rejection.

Connecting the external drive to his laptop, he watched as the two files loaded. While he labeled and saved the files by date, he began to recall the day she reached out to him and he gave her five minutes of his time.

Opening up the file, he strained to see the images of both her and him displayed during the conversation.

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Clicking play, he saw himself smile as he accepted the call from a girl he only meant to have a fling with.

Portraying a professionally reserved business man, he faked a smile and asked her, “How are you doing?”

“How do you think?” Young and naturally beautiful with flowing auburn hair and a flawless complexion, her eyes showed pain and hopelessness. Life and great looks had been good to the popular girl that had always displayed perfect decorum and discipline. She was the perfect package and an ideal loyal partner for a future super couple.

“I’m sorry you’re upset,” he offered.

Rena’s sun-kissed cheeks accented her cherry lip gloss. “I wish we could rewrite our past. First we loved passionately, then we were separated by degrees of states—me in Texas, you at Berkeley. Then we were brought together when—you know.”

Chaz sat back in his office chair. “Let’s not talk about this now, we’ve both moved on.”

“What I’m trying to tell you is we loved each other and then left each other, but we need to rewrite the past.”

“How are we going to do that? I don’t want to be with you.” Impatient, he looked at his watch like it had a timer.

Sighing, she spoke-up louder, “Okay, so maybe I will. If I’m the only one that can change it, I will, but it might change everything.”

Angered at a threat, Chaz raised his voice, “Change what? We fought and made-up a couple times, but we weren’t meant to be together. You can’t fix what doesn’t exist.”

Straightening her back, she struggled to express her perceptions, “Throughout our highs and lows the one thing that bound us got broke. I let it, because I cared too much about you. That was a mistake.”

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Irritated with innuendos, Chaz huffed, "What are you getting at?"

"We have important things to discuss."

"Like what?"

She shook her head in dismay. "I need answers."

"Uh," he expelled, "what answers do you need? I'm busy and spread way too thin. I don't have time for this or a girlfriend that just wants to talk."

Her eyes, never bluer, looked straight at him. "You barely acknowledge that I exist. You never gave me any reason to think differently." Fighting the tears forming in both eyes, she wiped the corners with a knuckle.

"May I say something?" Pausing briefly for a response, he continued, "The truth is I have a job that is demanding and consumes all my time."

"Are you disappointed in me?" she butted in.

"No I'm disappointed in us. We aren't ready for anything you've dreamed up in your head. I don't have time for you or anyone else right now. I'm sorry, but that's just what's going on. I can't change my situation to benefit you."

"Just your father," she injected, "right?"

"It's a big job and I got it."

"Why don't you let people see you the way I do. What's changed?"

Indignant, Chaz returned a mean tone, "Everything, and nothing you'd understand."

"When you came to me last time we weren't holding back, why now?"

"You weren't holding back, and that's not on me," Chaz chided her, "but I was."

"Why can't you make space for something new in your life?" Rena asked. "Listen to me. I don't want to be alone, why would you?"

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“You are alone when you’re with me. I can’t talk about that now.”

Rena started sobbing, choking on her words, “Chaz, don’t say that.”

“Rena,” he said bluntly, “I don’t love you. You need to accept that.”

Unable to stay composed, Rena cried-out, “I’m pregnant.”

Chaz didn’t hesitate, “Get rid of it.”

“It’s not just you I love, please don’t make me do that, I’ve waited too long and no one will help me now,” she pleaded.

“You can do it. Girls figure it out all the time,” he said, “just take care of it.”

Checking the time again, he said his goodbye, “I’ve got to go. I’m already late. Take care of the problem and we’ll talk then.” Clicking his computer, he cut off the transmission.

After he viewed the communication he and Rena had, he finally had to reflect on what part he played in her short life. Angry and embarrassed by his callous behavior toward this girl, he pulled the flash drive out of his computer and hurled it across the room. Guilt ridden and vulnerable, Chaz paced his living room experiencing genuine despair and the bottomless pain it brings.

Confused and tormented, he picked up Martine’s business card and his phone. Slowly punching her number into his cell, he paused momentarily in contemplation before hitting ‘Send.’

“Hello?” Martine answered.

“It’s Chaz,” he said slowly.

“Chaz,” she replied. “How are you?”

“I’m not sure. I think we need to talk.”

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Taking down the address to her hotel, he said, “I’m on my way.”

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Chapter 73

Descending down in the elevator to the hotel lobby, Martine filled Mahoney in, "He called me. He wants to talk."

Dressed in his jeans, button-down blue shirt, sports jacket and his black cowboy hat, Mahoney was dressed more like a Texas Ranger than the director of Arizona's FBI. "I want to be there. You don't know what he's gonna say or do."

"I doubt if he's going to do anything in a public place like this hotel. I'm very interested in what he has to say though."

"That's why I'm going with you," Mahoney insisted.

"He thinks I'm just a lawyer, you're not. You'll scare him off before he says hello," she argued.

"I can be a lawyer, too."

"Fine, then act like a concerned lawyer so I can get him comfortable enough to talk to me."

"What do you think he wants to talk to you about?"

"I have no idea, maybe an admission of some guilt, or something in his tangled love life that caused this. He must have thought of something that he wants to share. Some answers you look for . . . some just show up."

"You're not convinced he's the guy, are you?"

Martine owned up, "Not so sure, Chaz has 'tells' that give him away."

"Seriously," Mahoney sounded shocked

Martine was also dressed casually in her jeans, t-shirt, and a waist-high leather jacket. "Absolutely," she assured him.

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“Is that why you have wanted to meet him twice alone? You were sizing him up?” he unveiled.

Martine deflected his certainty, “More or less I guess. It helps when there’s no other way to figure out his involvement.”

“What ‘tells’ are you looking for?”

“Body language, eye contact, voice levels, and pauses to simple questions.”

“Give me an example.”

“If I asked you if you murdered my husband, what would you say?”

“No,” he snapped emphatically.

“If I asked you what you did for Valentine’s Day, what would you tell me?”

Mahoney pondered his memories, ultimately guessing, “I probably was home watching TV or talking on the phone.”

“Chaz is very adamant when I ask frank questions that he knows the answer to. There is no hindrance in his response. When he lies or is uncomfortable, he denies, slows his speech, loses eye contact, drops his voice and rubs his hair back from the sides. If he doesn’t know an answer, he delays momentarily like you did. Then he answers. If I catch him in a serious lie, he’ll have to take time to think how to answer it, repeat what I asked him, and that hasn’t happened yet. His ‘tells’ are visible, but not obvious.”

“Okay, you do seem to have a plan or method. I won’t interfere.”

Jabbing him in the shoulder, Martine coached her new associate, “Let me talk to him alone and see what he wants. If I can invite you in, you are a defense attorney that may be able to give advice if we need it. Can you do that?”

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“Yes,” he complied tipping his hat out of courtesy, taking a seat at a nearby table.

“Chaz,” Martine hailed, when she noticed him walk into the hotel bar.

There was nothing common looking about the tall handsome boy dressed in perfect fitting jeans and a jewel-toned paisley men’s dress shirt. Seeing her sitting at a table in the corner, he strode over to her, stopping to look around. “Thanks for meeting me,” he obliged.

“I’m glad to, especially after giving you a copy of the sensitive communications you and Rena shared,” Martine acknowledged her role and responsibility. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Releasing a weak chuckle, Chaz made an awkward attempt to speak, “We . . . we really weren’t right for each other. That’s what happened.”

“Why do you say that?” Martine probed.

“My job came first and she didn’t like that. She didn’t understand how important it was to me.”

“Tell me about your job.”

“It’s the biggest opportunity I could’ve imagined. We are taking a new company public at any moment and it will be huge.”

“You’re in securities and finance, right?”

“Yes, and the commitments are extremely demanding of my time and attention.” Chaz justified a career being eclipsed by an unwanted pregnancy, “It was a really bad time to have a child, or be in a relationship like that, it simply wasn’t for me.”

“Why,” she questioned, “people do it all the time and don’t take the life of a baby because of a great opportunity. Do you really believe something is more valuable than creating life?”

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“I guess I did.”

“How about now,” she asked.

“I don’t know now. There was a lot of pressure on me to not get involved with anything or anybody when I took the position.”

“Who pressured you,” Martine questioned.

Chaz smirked with a twitch, “My father.”

“Oh, your own father knew about Rena and the child?”

“No.”

“What would he have said if you did tell him?”

“He’d say it wasn’t the right time and it could cost me everything if she sued me for child support.”

Expressing bewilderment she asked, “Why would he say that?”

His words chilled, “He detested my mother.”

“Why,” Martine blurted immediately.

“When my mother divorced my father she sued him for \$20,000 a month for my child support and her alimony, so my father sued her for custody, won, and raised me himself. According to my father, if I am successful and the only heir to his fortune, the courts will award the mother whatever I can afford. He told me to stop all pregnancies unless I marry a girl and get a prenuptial with custodial arrangements and child support payments agreed to, otherwise I would be written out of his will.”

“Wow, your father must be worth a lot of money. How did he do it?”

“He’s a one-of-a-kind enterprise.”

“I suppose he is,” Martine mumbled.

“All I did was tell her to get an abortion, or we were never gonna be more than a quick affair.”

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“Chaz, I think she really cared about you. Didn’t you see that?”

“No, I didn’t. I thought she was manipulating me and I didn’t like that,” he revealed with honesty, “but I didn’t have anything to do with her death.”

“Someone did. Is that why you wanted to see me?”

“You don’t know that she was deliberately hit,” he amended her previous allegations, “I just found out she was in a hit and run. Anyone could be responsible for that if it was an accident.”

“That is the current status of the incident, but it is still under investigation,” Martine clarified.

“Either way, it couldn’t have been me,” Chaz proposed, “I was at *Heads or Tails Pet Hospital* with my neighbor after his dog got hit on the road.” Expanding on his alibi, Chaz slid a card over to her, “Here’s his card, call him. I had to drive him there because he was upset and holding his dog.”

“Thanks,” she said, tucking the card in her purse. “This is great information and easily checked out, but it still doesn’t exonerate you from involvement if someone was hired to do it,” she ventured. “You understand that don’t you?”

“No, I don’t. I didn’t have anything to do with it.”

Martine added urgency, “There is a suspect, and he’s a hired gun connected to all three murders. Chaz if you had any involvement, we should discuss it before he turns state’s evidence on you,” she embellished the facts, “or on someone you know.”

Plagued by angst and paranoia, his panicked eyes showed all his emotions of fear. “I wouldn’t know how to find a hired gun, and I didn’t need to kill anyone.”

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“Then why were you hiding the pregnancy and abortion?”

Suddenly, Chaz declared a moment of embarrassment and accountability, “Because she waited too long and it wasn’t done legally, and that could have caused everyone a big nightmare.”

Sensing the evolution of a real motive, Martine recognized a strange shift in his behavior, that prompted a huge realization, “So how old was the baby? Was it more than twelve weeks?”

“Much older,” he said with humiliation.

“Like old enough to survive outside the womb?”

Secrets slowly began to bubble to the surface. “I don’t know, it was like twenty-two weeks,” he guessed.

“That’s very old for an abortion,” Martine alleged.

“Yeah, so I hear. But what choice did I have? She never really proved it was actually my child. She was pregnant, but it might not have been mine. We weren’t like steady boyfriend-girlfriend.”

Ignoring his denial, she pressed forward, “How’d ya do it?” Knowing what she did about the current status of abortion laws in Texas, she added, “I don’t think you could have done it in this state.”

“First of all, I didn’t do it. Someone I knew was able to arrange it with her at a highly specialized facility we were going to be working with.”

Confused, Martine clarified what she knew, “What kinda work do you do? I thought you were in securities and finance—am I wrong?”

“I am, but the product we’re bringing to market has been developed and tested by us and now it’s ready for distribution, followed by a lucrative public offering. We’re almost ready to launch the product on the stock exchange

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and we need to before another copycat comes along and steals our intellectual property.”

Congealing the concepts of Chaz having the connections to abort a twenty-two week old baby, combined with bringing a viable product to market world-wide, in conjunction with all the profound etheric dreams involving the demise of unborn and newborn babies was taking Martine in a direction she could never have dreamt-up on her own. “What kinda product are you developing?” she sounded repulsed.

“I can’t disclose that to you. We haven’t concluded obtaining the pending patent, and FDA approval. Till that is finalized I’m sworn to secrecy for the protection of our products integrity and success in the marketplace.”

“Well your DNA isn’t a secret,” Mahoney injected, moving over from the table he had been eavesdropping from. “Son, we have every reason to believe you knew that was your child, and may be involved in some very desperate and illegal actions.”

“Well that’s just not true,” Chaz eked in shock, “and I’m not going to say another word.”

Mahoney intimidated the boy further, “Don’t worry—your DNA will speak for you.”

“Who are you?” Chaz demanded, starting to get up.

“Someone who can help if you’re innocent of three homicides,” Mahoney replied, tipping his hat. “Help us understand what may have happened to Rena and Charmaine because we can prove from Rena’s pregnancy stick that the child was yours—that is if you really doubted it. Just sit back down and think about this a minute,” he directed forcefully.

Martine added, “If you can tell us how Rena aborted the baby it will help defend you against any wrong doing, Chaz.”

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“How’d you get my DNA,” he asked in bewilderment.

Martine gave him the proverbial look of knowing, making him think for himself. “Really, you need to ask?”

“You took something from my house, didn’t you?”

“I might have,” she confessed.

Chaz sat back down, looked away, and rubbed his hair back, conflicted and uncertain of what to say next, “I’m gonna have to call my dad,” he decided.

“Chaz, you already know what he’s going to tell you,” Mahoney advised. “Call him after. We know you didn’t abort the baby, we just need to know who did and how?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t even there with her. I just arranged it.”

“How did you get it arranged?” Mahoney asked.

“Chaz,” Martine cut-in, “help us get closure for your child. You realize now that it was your child, and it was old enough for Rena to want a memorial service. You also know the child was named Jade. You’ve already let them both down once. Don’t you have a duty to your child and the mother . . .,” Martine tried shaming him into cooperating, “to do the right thing now?”

Downcast, he avoided eye contact. “It’s too late for that. They’re both gone,” Chaz’s black mood rejected the bleak notion.

“Well, do you believe in God?”

“Of course,” he said immediately, looking back at her.

Unwilling to back off, Martine persisted, “If you can’t impress anyone down here on earth, how will you impress anyone in heaven.”

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"I can't involve anyone else in this. It was just an abortion, not murder."

"We realize it was an abortion, but who arranged it with her? Someone had to set it up for you, Chaz, who was it?"

He walked back her accusation, "I told you it wasn't me."

Martine knew she couldn't identify the source of her insights into the devastating effects of aborting millions of babies a year, but she had to keep pulling the thread until it finally unraveled. "Because the same person most likely murdered Charmaine and Rena, we need to rule you and anyone else connected to you out."

"There's no one connected to me that would do this."

"How about your father," Martine asked.

"No, he never met these two girls. He just told me to never get a girl pregnant or I was disowned, that's what all father's say—right?"

"Not usually," shaking her head, Martine disagreed. "I know you work for him, and he supported an abortion, or a prenuptial, but that sounds really cold and callous."

"Well, it's his way or the highway, and he told me to take care of my problems if I made them." Chaz defended the only parent he knew, "He made it clear he didn't want me to do anything messy that could affect him. He's a powerful man that can sell water to a drowning man, so I believed him."

Not easily swayed, Martine considered these new inclinations about his father. "You're sure your father wouldn't have a reason to cover something up?"

Chaz gave a thoughtful stare before muttering, "He wouldn't do something like that to protect me and his mighty companies. He didn't even know it happened."

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Hearing a very real validation that something of great value might be a stake, Martine challenged Chaz, "Did it ever occur to you that if your father couldn't have you and his company, he may not choose anything other than his company?" Pausing for his reaction, Martine quoted famous author and poet, Wendell Berry, "When we no longer know what to do, we have come to our real work, and when we no longer know which way to go, we have begun our real journey." Reaching for his arm like a mother would to a son, she asked, "Chaz, are you afraid of your father? Do you love him out of fear?"

Mahoney having heard everything, excused himself, "I'll be right back. I have a call to return."

Chaz just nodded at him and answered Martine, "I don't know. Most people are very intimidated by him."

"How about you?" she asked delicately.

Chaz didn't hesitate, "I don't know."

Pulling back her hand, she pivoted her attention to a bigger question, "Is he ruthless enough to kill for his company?"

"No, we're close to launching a new venture. There's no reason for him to be involved in any of this."

"And how much value does he place on its success?"

Chaz shook his head in denial, "A lot, but he would never do anything illegal like you're suggesting."

"But what if he has, Chaz," Martine pushed, "the point is if he knew about your situation, he wouldn't approve."

"All I can say is he didn't know and he didn't have anything to do with murdering people he didn't know," Chaz fought for his father's integrity.

Terminated

Martine continued recruiting his cooperation, "Someone did, and if wasn't you or your father, help us find out who."

"How am I supposed to do that?" Chaz revolted, "I'm not a detective."

Desperate to keep Chaz a few moments longer, she changed the subject, "Do you remember your mother?"

"No, of course not," he replied, "why?"

"I was wondering if you knew anything about her, do you?"

"No, and I never thought about it."

Martine was working up the urge to yawn and needed to delay his departure a little longer. "I could find out for you if you wanted."

"No thank you. I'm sure my dad would have you disbarred if you did."

Finally, Martine yawned wide, "How about you, would you have me disbarred?"

Chaz seemed to think about his answer while Martine fixated on his reaction, "I probably wouldn't report you, but I have no reason to know anything about her."

Still watching him closely, Martine let out a second contagious yawn, "I'm sorry," she offered, "it's been a long day and there's a time change I haven't factored in." Still seeing no unusual behaviors, she tried once more to sway Chaz, "You have my number if you ever want to talk again. Remember, bullies prevail until they're stopped. Maybe your mom wasn't the horrible person in your life you've been led to believe. I could help you find out."

"I think we're done here, and I hope you're wrong about everything," Chaz extinguished the conversation. "Don't bother me anymore," his voice firm with resolve as he stood and left.

Kathi Bjorkman

Third Eye Witness-

Terminated

Terminated

Chapter 74

Unbeknownst to Chaz, Mahoney slipped into a vacant corner in the hotel lobby to contact Martine's daughter Alexa. Tapping his foot he waited impatiently for her to take the call, "Alexa, its Mahoney."

"Hey, boss," she greeted her former director at the FBI.

"I wish I was," he teased one of his favorite agents that relocated from Arizona to Colorado only months ago, "when can you transfer back to Arizona?"

Alexa provided an excellent come-back, "When my mother and sister do."

"That's a good answer." Mahoney glanced around the lobby to make sure no one was in earshot. "I think we might have a new lead."

"Really?" she exclaimed.

"Yeah, can you fast track DNA from a crime scene down here and run it against the DNA on Chaz Walsh?"

"Sure. Tomorrow, right? They're not available in the evenings."

"Of course," Mahoney acknowledged.

"Why have me do it?" she asked.

"I don't know that it will match Chaz, but you might be able to have that place you're using determine if it has a relationship to Chaz, specifically his father. Check that guy out for me, too."

"Are you talking about the familial DNA connection service I'm using to find a relationship to that Philip Goodman?"

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"I certainly am. I just need to go get the crime scene items in question that had foreign male DNA forwarded to you. Nothing comes up in CODIS for anything they found here, but there was some evidence we should look at."

"Okay, I think I know what you're looking for, but let me make sure," Alexa recapped his request, "you want me to see if there is a close match to Chaz Walsh—even if it isn't his DNA."

"Exactly, I never did have to explain anything twice to you," impressed, he flattered her with the glowing accolade.

"I should get some information on Philip Goodman's DNA profile any minute now, too. I know you found him deceased, but I kept the search for his DNA going. It may help if they find a family match that you can follow-up on."

"I forgot about that," he remarked thoughtfully, "it could help answer some of our questions, I suppose."

"DNA seems to answer questions we haven't already asked a lot of these criminals," Alexa stated enthusiastically. "We're getting more hits up here every day that's solving cold cases."

Concealing his doubts about utilizing a genealogy site to conduct a broader, more subjective search with the crime scene DNA they had mustered up, Mahoney changed the topic—confiding in her, "Lies and deceit are piling up, but I don't think we're dealing with the usual type of suspect. We do need a big boost right now."

"Certainly," Alexa returned, "but don't forget that no matter how hopeless the clues and evidence seem, my mother will still have an opinion. Don't give up on that if the DNA fails to produce any meaningful results."

"Yes, you both have been very effective. Oh, great work on the CAST report. Too bad we were just a little too

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late getting there.” Mahoney’s eyes narrowed in suspicion as he watched Chaz rush through the lobby and out the hotel’s doors. “One of our prime suspects has left the building—I’ll have to go, Alexa.”

“I’ll be in touch soon,” she replied, ending the call.

Slightly frazzled, Martine appeared in the lobby as Mahoney headed in her direction. “What happened?” he asked.

“He’s done talking,” she sighed.

“Well?” he quizzed.

Discouraged, she shook her head. “I’m not sure he actually has all the answers, which probably means, he didn’t do it.”

Mahoney faked a grin, commenting, “Those are becoming my sentiments, too. Do you think he might know the truth?”

“I think he’s so blind to the truth he couldn’t see it through a window or under a microscope. But, he is the common denominator,” sharing her premise, she gave him a knowing look. “I just didn’t find him lying about anything he said. I think we’re lucky we got him to say anything at all.”

“I agree. Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” he prompted her.

“That we need to know a lot more about his daddy,” Martine guessed.

“Yes,” he said surprising her, “I wouldn’t mind scoping him out.” Mahoney viewed Chaz ducking into his fancy sports car.

Martine affirmed their suspicions as they both watched Chaz speed off, “Let’s do it, because this has never been a little problem, and it’s never been a bigger one than now.”

Terminated

“What just happened?” Mahoney was still eyeing Chaz’s car as it bolted out into the heavy traffic.

“Oh, that, I’m pretty sure he has sociopathic tendencies, which means he could’ve been born that way, or someone made him that way.”

“How do you know that now?” Mahoney smirked.

“I gave him the yawn test and . . .,” Martine was saying when Mahoney started chuckling before breaking up her response.

“What is that?”

“I yawned a couple times, and he didn’t. Sociopaths won’t yawn like everyone else does when you yawn. It actually helps explain what I’ve observed, yet I think he’s gravely misaligned due to unnatural parenting.”

“So now you think he’s the guy?”

“No, I think his father was more motivated and had the resources to be behind this, which also fits into what he made his boy into. So let’s get on with his father.”

“Already started, ma’am,” he declared confidently.

Smiling at the tall man with a Texas-sized cowboy hat on, she remarked, “You do have a John Wayne complex, don’t you?”

“Why yes I do, ma’am,” he replied politely, tipping his hat slightly.

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Chapter 75

Like the expansive billowing white clouds in the Colorado Rockies can occasionally hide the monster sized mountains, Martine was discovering a dark massive cover-up hiding the truth behind a defective belief affecting humanity's destiny that was architected by misguided and short-sighted people. As the smoke began to clear in Martine's mind, her convictions regarding the ill-effects of abortion had never been made more pronounced.

When false doctrines dissolved without reservation and monumental misaligned beliefs were exposed, she knew for certain that a new perception regarding the sanctity of human life would ultimately be required in order to ever complete a desired connection with our Creator.

Innovative scenery projected through the guise of 'free choice' was the illusion that hid the dark underbelly of enemies that resent and discount us as God's children, God's creation. Completing the birthing process is what makes us possible in His plan for us to be with Him. Having gone behind the curtain, she now understood how negative forces had successfully operated and satisfied their unquenchable thirst for the human races blood and demise.

At the moment of sleep, Martine felt her body come alive in a strange land at dusks' light—the moments before a complete sunset. Darkened forms around her resembled tall walled buildings in the heart of a metropolitan area. Though dimly lit, the normal activities of a busy metropolis were not apparent, neither were the noises or lights.

Dressed in the odd, close fitting, black futuristic, clothing of a warrior with tall boots that covered her knees

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baffled her further. Her stealth looking garment sported a leather strap around both her hip and thigh—each holstering strange weapons of protection. Only the curves of her body and long blonde hair revealed she was a female armed for battle.

Realizing she was in a trashy dead-end alleyway, she jogged towards the entrance where she took in the visible signs of a sprawling war torn mega city. Standing on the edge of a dingy city street with stalled and ruined vehicles of transportation stranded everywhere, presented the scene of a post apocalyptic event that ravaged an entire municipality or world. Twisted poles of metal that once stood tall, lighting sidewalks and streets were toppled over onto piles of rubble that had blown off of buildings obstructing normal passage everywhere.

Just when she was ready to venture into the decrepit carnage that seemed abandoned long ago she heard barking dogs, drawing her attention to the people running towards her from one of the demolished buildings.

“Run faster,” someone yelled as they approached Martine’s location.

As the group came into view, Martine saw, women, children and men, diverge in her direction with a huge monstrous adversary converging on them like a robotic stomping beast. Rigid in metal armor with red glowing eyes and oversized weapons in each hand, the brute like creature crashed through obstructions to track down what resembled holocaust survivors.

Glancing back down the barren alley she had come from, she saw an open door at the end. Frightened like them, she yelled “Over here.” Waving the group into the alley before the intimidating monster could catch up to them, she directed the first person to the door, “Get in there.” As he

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whisked by with two Siberian husky dogs on his heels, she noticed how the wolf-like dogs deliberately made eye contact with her using their bright blue eyes.

As each desperate individual passed by her, she noticed how vulnerable and unprotected they all were with their ragged clothing, bundles of belongings, and children in tow. Before the menace pursuing them got to the alley, Martine turned to run behind the people who had begun funneling through the door to safety.

“How did you find us,” a young pregnant girl struggling with a toddler in her arms asked Martine as she hobbled near her.

“I think you found me,” Martine answered as she turned to follow behind the last person. With her back to the marauding intruder, she was next in line to cross through the doors threshold when she suddenly felt the blast of a powerful assault weapon that dropped her to the ground like a causality of war. Instantly, she saw the bright red image of ‘Level 1 Breached TERMINATED’ flash in her mind before she lost consciousness.

A moment later she was standing in the exact same dusk lit alley wearing the same clothes with odd armaments strapped to her that resembled ray guns from a Sci-Fi movie. Proceeding down the alley as before, her curiosity noticed a couple of items she had overlooked last time. Next to a trash can filled with rain water were a can of gas and a box of matches. Making no sense of the items, she continued to the street where the exact same order of events began again, including the dogs and young mother that both seemed to acknowledge her presence more than the others.

Repeating everything the same in an effort to save the people fleeing for their lives, Martine ushered them to the door of safety, but stopped at the trash can and grabbed

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the gas and matches. This time, she poured the gas out on the ground behind her while the innocent pedestrians hurried through the door to safety. When the giant mechanical monster came down the alley and aimed his guns at her, Martine struck a match and lit up a fiery barricade that stopped the confused combatant long enough for her to escape through the door.

Inside the security of what once was a bank building, the young pregnant woman with a small child in her arms, addressed Martine again, "You saved us, but where will we go? It'll break this door down."

"We keep moving," Martine advised. Striking one of the wooden matches, she ordered the worried group, "Look for a lower level." Following behind them as they shuffled forward in the dark, she randomly lit a match in hopes of discovering where they were and where they were going. In front of her was the same pregnant mother who suddenly lost her balance and stumbled from the weight of carrying her child and a bag of their belongings. "I've got you," Martine let out, as she caught the woman's shoulders and steadied her. "Let me help you," she offered, taking the heavy bag off her shoulder.

"Thank you," the exasperated girl exclaimed.

Martine asked her, "What happened here? Why is that thing chasing you?"

"We don't know. They've been destroying everything to capture the children." Panicked in the light of the glowing matchstick, the women sobbed, "It'll kill me just to get the baby inside me."

"Don't worry, I'll protect you," Martine said, reaching for her weapon.

"You can't. Nothing can stop it. Our weapons do nothing to it."

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Bewildered, Martine gasped, “Why?”

“We don’t know, but bullets bounce off of them.”

Sooner than anticipated, Martine heard the door being hit hard from the outside as she gazed in dreaded fear at the little mother that endured so much. When the young mother started to speak, she shushed her, “Quiet, keep moving.”

Unexpectedly, she jerked when a loud explosion blew open the metal door of security. “Run,” Martine ordered as she turned to face the super powered nemesis that hunted them like wild game. Before she could react and draw her weapon out, the hunter blasted her in the chest, dropping her to her knees. Her mind flashed in bright red, ‘Level 2 Breached TERMINATED,’ before blacking out.

Plunged back into the same exact location where some type of epic event had distorted reality, Martine determined she was stuck in a loop that had to be forged all the way through like a multi-level PlayStation type game with a possessed action figure stalking victims and destroying them with superior strength and weaponry. Rethinking her possibilities, she thought through all the likely clues and miniscule forms of protection that would be available to her immediately.

Calculating her options based on the inventory of resources within her means to utilize, Martine began formulating a way to expeditiously alter the predetermined outcome that was doomed to repeat, eliminating her every time. Resolving to out-manuever the iron predators course of action, she ignored the odds in this virtual interactive sport of survival she had been a participant in twice, and focused her mind on how to use the primitive method of defense she had used and the ones she wore. Drawing from what she now realized was the wolf animal energy spirit that had showed

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itself twice to her through the Siberian husky dogs, she shifted into combat mode.

Knowing her past efforts had been futile and only prolonged the breach of their security and her ultimate demise, she strategized an offense that would save them all.

Before advancing forward and engaging in the same scenario that had been repeatedly playing out, she took out her hip holstered weapon and checked its capabilities by firing it into a truck stranded outside the alley. Acting like a ray gun that could blast things with super strength derived from some high-powered light source, she blew the vehicle into pieces. Holstering it, she tested the small weapon that had been strapped to her thigh. Resembling a handgun with a red laser sighting beam used for precise accuracy, its unusual chamber shot something like she'd seen shot out of a Taser gun. Finding its use and function more challenging, Martine walked up to the harmless water-filled trash can and shot another round into it. This time the weapon caused the metal trash can full of water to immediately crackle, pop, and fizzle, like an electrical storm hitting water.

Engaging the animal horse spirit within her that never gives up on faith and overcomes obstacles in the face of adversity, she began hatching her own plan. Drawing on the quick and intelligent instincts of the fearless wolf couple, she holstered her mystery weapon with a nod of satisfaction.

As steamy condensation simmered from the large container of smoldering water, Martine hastened up to it—grabbing the gas can and matches before heading down the alley for round three.

By the time Martine heard the cue, “Run faster,” she was ready and waiting for the group to enter the alley and begin the revised sequence of events she had arranged, providing them all more time. When the lagging pregnant

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girl with a child and belongings was safely past her, she dispersed the gas across the width of the narrow passageway's entrance, and lit it with her match creating a longer lasting barricade.

Sprinting up to the frightened mother, she grabbed the heavy bag she toted and remembered to ask, "What do they do with the children?"

Panting from exertion, the girl huffed, "We don't know, but we think they're terminated."

"Why do you think that?" Martine said with alarm.

"What could they want them for, especially since they go for the youngest ones first?"

Martine asked, "How young?"

"Like the one inside me."

Inhaling the blackness of the moment, Martine gasped, "They want your unborn children?"

"Yes," the girl said hysterically, "so why do you think they do it?"

"Probably because they can control and capture you more easily when you're not risking your lives to protect them," Martine guessed. Glancing back, she saw the gas was burning to a lesser degree.

"Really?" the mother spouted, "that doesn't make sense."

"It is our Achilles heel," she reminded the distraught mom.

Bewildered by Martine's assertion, the frantic girl asked, "How is that possible?"

"They observed your dedication to protect your children, and that comes from the power of love—they must think the loss of love makes you powerless. Remember, they would have more power over all of you if the desire and instinct to defend your loved ones were removed." Hearing

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the monstrous invader advancing towards them again, Martine rushed the woman through the door and handed her back the bundle of supplies. Shutting the heavy door, she ran up to the trash can and toppled it over—spilling gallons of water into the pathway of the rampaging beast.

Racing back to a spot midway between the door and the mechanical fiend, she faced it like a ninja warrior—readying herself for battle. Positioning her legs like a shooter, she took out her smaller gun and took aim, steadying her shot until both a red concentric circle from her laser showed on the invading interloper's eye and its feet touched the water she had just released into its path.

Targeting its weakness, her first shot stunned and paralyzed the giant killer with an electric current that sent a shock wave through its metal armor of defense taking out its force field of protection. Her second shot was aimed into the body of water pooled around it creating a lethal weapon that generated enough voltage to electrify the circuits throughout its entire system, instantly immobilizing it. Martine now became the saboteur, drawing her larger weapon and blasting the powerless assassin to smithereens.

Prevailing in the standoff, Martine yelled, "Yes." Before being able to turn and join-up with the ones she had saved, bright green letters flashed in her mind, "HIGH SCORE CHAMPION Game Over." Instantaneously, a remarkable display of celebratory confetti in the shape of jigsaw puzzle pieces rained down around her, demonstrating they were all present and she just needed to put them together.

Jolted awake by the climax of the unusual dream experience resembling a science fiction fantasy adventure of survival, was a welcome relief when she realized she was in

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the comforting surroundings of an upscale hotel room and not fleeing with others about to be executed.

At the moment of waking up, relevant information needed to be recalled in her conscious reality before it faded from her mind. Relating it to her current circumstances in Texas didn't seem to fit. Martine and her daughter weren't gamers and had never owned a PlayStation, though she experienced what seemed to replicate games of survival and competition under catastrophic conditions that were frequently advertised on TV.

One thing she could gleam from her interactive experience was that every item and contact she could utilize was relevant and made it possible for her to succeed—no matter how worthless or insignificant it appeared. “Is this the message I get from this,” she asked herself. Gingerly maneuvering herself out of bed made her painfully aware her legs, arms, and body were achy as if she had been running and working out all night. It was eerily reminiscent of a strenuous marathon requiring all her physical strength.

Presuming she was still in the fight to solve Charmaine's murder and the temporary reprieve was over, Martine quickened her pace to get ready.

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Chapter 76

Alexa laid eyes on her somewhat older comrade Wayne and headed straight for him before starting work at her own station. “Wayne, gotta thank you for helping me with that CAST report, it was effectual—until the target we identified was eliminated.”

Devastated by the news, Wayne swiveled his chair around to face her. “You’re kidding.”

“Sadly, I’m not.”

Shrugging his shoulders, he questioned, “What can you do next?”

“Back to DNA,” she said wispily.

“Sure, if you got it, use it.”

“Yep, just wanted you to know how much the report helped.”

“Yeah, glad to utilize it and test its effectiveness in the field.”

“It truly was a great tool. Gotta get to work, talk to you latter,” she added as she turned to leave.

“Let me know if I can help again,” his voice faded off as Alexa walked away—waving a goodbye over her shoulder.

Once logged into her computer system, Alexa scanned through her income, wavng e-mails for any communications on DNA results that would come from Mahoney or Texas. “Ah, she sounded, “There you are already.” Logging onto the GEDmatch genealogy website, she named her two DNA files Don and John before uploading them to the site. Putting on her headset she dialed GEDmatch.

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“GEDmatch,” the customer service representative answered.

“Hello, I just uploaded two DNA data files and was wondering how long it will take to see if they’re related since you don’t need to run the DNA?”

“Let me check for you, can you hold a moment?”

“Before you do that, can you also check on my husband’s DNA genealogy that we sent several days ago? The name is Justin Case.”

“Sure, let me check on both of those.”

“Great,” Alexa returned, “I’ll hold then.”

“Give me a moment or two.”

Resuming her normal job requirements that were not considered time sensitive, but were equally important kept Alexa occupied while she waited for the representative to return.

“Alexa, I actually have some information,” the woman informed her when she returned to the phone, “seems that Justin Case has a brother our system located. His name is Tanner Goodman. I’ll send you everything we found—hope it helps.”

“I’m sure it will. This is very good news, I can’t thank you enough,” Alexa pretended to be thrilled. “They were separated through the foster care system. This will make him very happy,” she fibbed.

“I also did view your e-mail and files,” she began, “I’ll see what I can do and get back to you, maybe even today. Since we don’t have to run the DNA ourselves I’ll see if we can squeeze this in right away.”

“You have my contact information, don’t you?” Alexa verified.

“I do.”

“What was your name, please?”

Terminated

“Doreen.”

“You’ve been very helpful, Doreen. I look forward to hearing back from you.” Alexa pushed her chair away from her desk and spun it in a circle. “Yes,” she squealed, “gotcha Mr. Goodman.”

Beginning a search on Tanner Goodman’s background and whereabouts, she quickly learned he was an educated family man that appeared to have no criminal blemishes. His younger brother, Philip Goodman, did not have the same stable attributes. Alexa compiled a detailed biography, similar to Wikipedia since there were no legal or criminal findings to report on him. Having been authorized some leeway to assist Director Mahoney, she hastened to complete the task and forward him the information, until she remembered that she was also asked to check out Chaz Walsh’s father.

Starting a fresh search on Chaz, she found his father’s basic information. Digging deeper into Eric Walsh she found the usual biographical information, but no criminal or legal complications that would reveal more personal and financial dealings that expose failures or successes. Again she began creating a Wikipedia type biography to report her findings. Not too far into her investigation on Eric Walsh, her cell phone rang indicating a call from GEDmatch. “Hello,” she answered.

“Alexa, its Doreen,” the caller identified herself.

Elated, Alexa replied, “Hi, that was quick.”

“Yes, we are that,” she exchanged proudly. “I think it’s good news if you’re looking for a familial connection.”

“I am.”

“Could be father/son,” Doreen relayed. “Is that what you were hoping for,” she asked.

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"I believe it is," Alexa spoke slowly, "who would have thought," she muttered.

"We hear that a lot," Doreen commented. "I'll send you our analysis right away. Is there anything else?"

"No, not right now, but thank you for expediting this. Alexa expressed her appreciation, "Excellent service, please pass that on."

"I will," Doreen acknowledged brightly.

"Goodbye," Alexa hastened when she noticed something she hadn't anticipated when accumulating data on Eric Walsh and Tanner Goodman. Setting her cell down slowly in thought, she clicked open the file she had created on Tanner Goodman and scrutinized it more carefully.

"How ya doing," Wayne interrupted her train of thought, startling her.

"Wayne," she said in surprise, "you should wear a bell."

"Thanks," he replied, "you think that would be okay here?"

"No, but you've gotta look at this." Highlighting key dates, places, and associations, she hit 'print' on her keyboard.

"What do I gotta look at? Wanna grab a fresh cup of coffee? It's on me. The guys loved my update on your CAST report, but they would like a more thorough briefing on the case and how the report impacted it."

"Sure, sure, when we wrap the case up," she replied hurriedly. "Come on, you gotta see this."

Terminated

Chapter 77

Consumed with anxieties brought on by insinuations made by Martine, Chaz decided it was time to confront his father. Unable to locate him in the building, he grabbed his keys and headed out of his office to track him down at his favorite club.

Chaz raced away from the office complex, calling his father in a panic. Hearing his dad finally answer, he yelled, "Did you have anything to do with Rena's accident?"

Caught off guard, Eric denied the accusation, "Of course not. I don't even know what you're talking about."

Revved up like his car, Chaz demanded, "Where are you?"

"None of your business, son," he snapped.

"We need to talk," Chaz bantered back.

"Well, that is not gonna happen right now. I'm with someone," Eric said coldly.

"Get rid of them," Chaz ordered.

"What do we need to talk about?"

"People think I had something to do with Rena's accident."

"What people?" Eric said in surprise.

"I guess they're lawyers."

"Lawyers for whom," Eric asked angrily.

"I think it's about Rena and her friend Charmaine."

"I hope you're not talking to them, because if they want you to point a finger at someone, it means you have a gun."

"Almost hysterical, Chaz threatened his father, "If you had anything to do with this I'm not taking the fall."

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“Damn it, Chaz,” Eric swore, “why would you say that?”

“Because you play to win. Maybe you thought one of my girlfriends was in the way. Was she?”

“No,” he said flatly.

Chaz pressed harder, “Then why do they think I’m involved?”

Agitated, Eric barked back, “Who thinks you’re involved?”

“A man and woman,” shouted Chaz, “that know she had an abortion.”

Eric sighed heavily, “Is that all? There’s nothing wrong about that. An abortion didn’t kill her.”

“No, but something else did,” he snapped at his father.

Tempering his son’s angst, Eric minimized the situation, “Just because someone found out she had an abortion that they didn’t know about doesn’t mean her accident had anything to do with it. That car accident was merely an unfortunate coincidence.”

“I don’t know. They seem to know a lot about her, more than I did.”

Continuing to diffuse the situation, Eric pacified his boy, “Don’t worry so much about that. You and I had nothing to do with it. I warned you that when we get close to launching our sensational breakthrough, espionage was inevitable. Tell me you did not reveal anything about our product.”

Chaz simmered down, “I didn’t tell anyone anything.”

“Good boy,” his father reassured him. “That’s all this is about. You’re worrying for nothing.”

Terminated

Somewhat satisfied, Chaz took a deep breath, “You’re telling me the truth, right?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Eric convinced his son further, “This happens all the time in the world of big money. Don’t be fooled by schemes like this. I’m not. That’s probably why they went after you. Don’t ever talk to them again. I mean it.”

“I won’t,” his voice broke, “sorry, dad.”

“Go home and get some rest, I need you teed up for the initial private offering that’s about to happen,” his father instructed. “Tomorrows a big day, you can tell me about these people when I see you at work. I need you at the top of your game right now. You can’t win if you don’t play.”

“Wait, how did you know she had an abortion?” Chaz asked suddenly.

“Because you said they were asking you about her abortion. Now stop worrying about this.”

“Easier said than done,” Chaz said. “Wait, how did you know it was a car . . .,” he was saying when he heard his dad’s phone hang up.

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Chapter 78

From the outside looking in, Eric Walsh's prestigious office building with a blue reflective-glass exterior surface exuded wealth and exquisite taste. Standing at a moderate height among taller skyscrapers indicated he had procured very valuable real estate in order to position himself in this type of commercial neighborhood. Dressed in their business attire, which included a black Stetson hat for Mahoney, the two of them ventured in unannounced.

Armed with a plethora of personal information, DNA results, a logistical CAST report, and a heap of questions, Martine and Mahoney wasted no time tracking down Eric Walsh's office location. Following another gentleman headed for the same offices at which they knew they'd find Eric, paved the way through the security system that required a company ID pass card.

Waiting in line behind the man, Martine half-listened, as he announced his name, "I'm Aiden here to see Mr. Walsh." Disheveled and hurried like he came from the stock yards, compared to the impeccable assortment of men and women that utilized the floors in the high rise office suites, he impatiently drummed his fingers on her counter.

Reviewing the calendar of events she must be privy too, the receptionist gracefully looked up, saying, "It doesn't look like he's expecting you. What is this regarding?"

"I'm here to pick up, and deliver," he replied with satisfaction, patting the manila envelope tucked under his arm.

"Excuse me," she returned.

"Just tell him the terminator is here."

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Suddenly perked up, Martine strained to hear the young woman ask Aiden, “Anything to go with that?”

“That should be more than enough,” he projected confidently.

Perfectly poised, as expected, the meticulous receptionist to high-level executives offered him a beverage and ushered him to the private conference room nearby. When she returned, she inquired, “How can I help you?”

Alerted by the unusual inference ‘terminator’ caused Martine’s eyes to widen—staying on Aiden’s location when she stepped up to the receptionist with Mahoney. Triggered by the memorable dream she had just had where she was hunted and terminated herself, it dawned on her how each impression on a treacherous venture can ultimately present a new path to follow.

Flashing his ‘get-in-now’ FBI credentials, Mahoney asked politely, “Can I speak with Mr. Walsh immediately? It’s about his personal safety, miss.”

Caught-off-guard, she nodded, leading him and Martine to his private office. “Sir, this man is with the FBI and seems to have urgent business with you,” she announced stiffly. “Will you need anything else?”

“No, I don’t need anything,” Eric replied, remaining composed. “Come in,” he said to Mahoney and Martine, “what can I do for you?”

“We have reason to believe your safety has been compromised. We’d like to talk to you about that in case we need to take further action,” he fabricated.

“Of course, you can tell me about that, I assure you I have no idea what you’re talking about though,” Eric sounded cool and indifferent.

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“You’re an interesting man, Mr. Walsh,” Mahoney started, “seems like you’ve been very successful most of your business life.”

“Yes, I have,” he sported solidly.

Studying the business card she snatched off his desk, Martine commented on her observation, “Your tagline says, ‘We’re in to Win,’ I bet your investors love that.”

“Absolutely, we pride ourselves in excelling in truly high return investments. Our intentions are to never disappoint.”

Raising her eyebrows in doubt, she gave him a hard stare as the muscles in her stomach tensed, bearing-down on what she was sensing around her. “The road to hell is often paved with true intentions. What makes yours honorable and profitable?” Waiting for him to formulate his response, she fired another question, “Have you ever done anything grievous in order to protect an investment, or make it more profitable?”

Startled by the insinuation, he reacted in dignified, stark, disbelief, “Of course not, that would never be necessary.”

Conserving oxygen, Martine silenced herself when Mahoney gave her a mild look of disapproval. Passing the time for him to finish his line of questioning, she glanced around Eric’s office for any other interesting items that could reveal what business he had currently gotten himself and his son into. After Mahoney finally asked him if he knew a man named Philip Goodman, she listened intently as Eric spoke at length.

“I know a lot of people, but that name does not sound familiar. Possibly he has worked here, or tried to be an investor. He could be the janitor and I wouldn’t know. I can’t say the name means anything to me at this time. I’m sorry I

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can't help you with that. Why is he important?" he rambled on, "We're always looking for high-profile individuals that want to financially contribute to our portfolio and receive returns beyond their expectations. Some rich and famous people have even retired on their earnings. No one should pass-up a sure thing like we represent. And they don't."

Primed for trouble, Martine broke-in, "This guy we're talking about isn't famous, he's infamous. He likes to go by the name Dr. Phil Good."

"Well, that sounds curious," Eric commented.

"Doesn't it," Martine antagonized him further, "and do you know what's worse than missing out on a great opportunity where I can financially contribute to a successful and prosperous organization, contributing to the wrong one."

Mahoney stepped in again, "You see, Mr. Walsh, we have complied enough facts to connect you and your son with this individual."

"Really," Eric sounded sharply, "why would you do that?"

"Because there is also evidence that he has engaged in some illegal activities with which you and your son seem to have a personal relationship. We thought you could help explain some recent deaths that appear to coincidentally relate to your son and his girlfriend."

"What girlfriend, he has many," Eric ducked the question.

"Right," Mahoney acknowledged, "she's the young woman named Rena that he got pregnant."

Artfully dodging any involvement, Eric laughed, "I don't recall my son having a girlfriend named Rena, or getting her pregnant."

"Mr. Walsh, your son Chaz hasn't denied it, why would you?"

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“I guess I didn’t know the girl.”

“I suppose that’s possible, if you never met her,” Mahoney conceded. “Maybe you made her acquaintance, did you?”

Remaining tight-lipped, Eric replied. “No, I can’t say that I have.”

“Here’s the problem, your son did have a girlfriend of sorts named Rena. She was pregnant with his child, and that has been established through communications and DNA. We also have received enough information to verify the child was aborted at about twenty-two weeks, probably illegally.”

Eric didn’t miss a confrontational opportunity, “Are you investigating an illegal abortion, or a man named Philip Goodman, Mr. Mahoney?”

Martine injected herself in the interview, “Both, because they appear related and criminal.”

Eric squashed her accusation, “I think we all know abortion isn’t illegal.”

Martine argued back, “That depends on where it was done. Here in Texas it would’ve been illegal.”

“I don’t know anything about when or where she got her abortion, so I don’t see how any of this is related at all.”

Mahoney jumped-in, “Yeah, that’s where it gets a little complicated. We’re confident Phil Goodman was responsible for the murders of Charmaine and Levi Norton in Oklahoma and the homicide of Rena here in Texas. What doesn’t make sense is I don’t think your son knew this man and doesn’t appear to have a reason to eliminate these people. We were hoping you could shed some light on how these folks all ended up dead by the same killer.”

Eric chuckled at the lame inference, “How would I know if you don’t. I already told you I don’t know this man,

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and apparently my son doesn't either. Possibly you need to find a hopped-up lover that didn't get the girl he wanted. You should be questioning this Philip guy."

Mahoney faked a grin, saying, "Right, right . . . we tried that, but when we found him he was dead."

Eric looked shocked and amazed, laughing, "So you think I can help solve your crimes? I'm good, but not that good."

"No, not exactly, because we actually found DNA related to you in Philip Goodman's room, a room he only had for one night. Thought you could explain how DNA like that got in there, and then we might know where to look next. You could be a witness to who murdered this man," he fudged, "putting you and your son in danger."

"I see, you believe my help is needed to locate some murderer that has already killed . . ., let's see—four people?"

"Yes," Mahoney said, "as you can imagine we're concerned that more will perish if we don't stop this now."

"I'm sorry, but I can't help you. Where did you say you found him?"

"I didn't," Mahoney admitted, "he was in the local motel not far from here."

"Ah, well, I can assure you I've never been to a motel here or anywhere."

"The DNA was there," Mahoney stated, "but could've come into Philip Goodman's possession somewhere else."

"Well, I wouldn't worry about the DNA being mine, because nobody has my DNA."

"You're right, it's a close match to your son's. Do you have another male heir that it could belong to?"

Eric avoided the implication, "I think we're done here."

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Mahoney didn't stop, "You can imagine how serious that is if you don't know this man, or how he got in contact with your DNA."

"Yes, I can see how serious that might be if it was possible, but we can take care of ourselves. I'll tell my son about your concerns so that we both take the necessary precautions, though I can't imagine why we would be in any danger."

"Sir," the receptionist interrupted the conversation with a soft knock on his door, "I just want to remind you that Aiden has been waiting in the conference room. He says you have something for him, and he has important information you've been waiting for. What should I tell him?"

"Tell him I'll be right there," Eric directed.

Martine stood first to acknowledge her departure, "I can see you're very busy and we've taken up too much of your time today."

Slowly rising from his seat, Mahoney glanced sharply at Martine as he got to his feet. "I guess we'll be leaving. I'll keep you posted on our progress."

"Absolutely, if you make any headway on this mysterious case, you sure can give me a call." Handing Mahoney his card, he added, "Please call me and not my son, this would cause him unnecessary worry."

Hurrying Mahoney out of the office, Martine obliged Eric Walsh, "We will certainly keep you in the loop. Thank you for speaking with us."

Once they were both inside the elevator alone, Mahoney grabbed Martine by the shoulders and looked hard at her out of frustration. "What just happened? I wasn't done and neither were you."

"That was just a riff-off in there, we weren't getting anywhere with him," she argued back.

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“You don’t know that because I wasn’t done.”

Martine held steadfast, looking right back at him, “I didn’t thing we were gonna get anymore out of him today than we did. We already know he’s involved and has lied his way through that mild interrogation. We need more, and I have an idea. Come on,” she said, exiting the elevator.

Terminated

Chapter 79

Once inside their vehicle, Mahoney began, "Where to then?"

"Nowhere," Martine answered immediately.

"What are you talking about? You said you had an idea."

"I do," she said. "Can you watch for that guy that had an appointment with Mr. Walsh? His name was Aiden."

Mahoney speculated with uncertainty, "Are we going to talk to him?"

"Yes, we are, but first we're going to follow him and see where he goes. What we're looking for isn't in there."

"Why him," Mahoney asked.

Rummaging through her satchel for documents she recently acquired, she shared her observation, "No way does a man that looks that odd and messy get privileged access to the executive suites we were just in unless he's doing something other than investing. He's like a skunk at a garden party."

Mahoney laughed, "You could've let me finish my line of questioning. I didn't even get to the good part where Eric does have a connection with Philip's brother Tanner Goodman, my God they went to Harvard together."

"I know," she conceded.

"Don't forget, the coroner hasn't even ruled Philip Goodman's death a homicide. He's saying the probable cause of death was natural causes brought on by heart failure. Eric was looking like our best lead so far."

Angered, Martine debated the findings, "Probable cause is ambiguous and means nothing more than a likely

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guess. He can do better, and we need that now. Probable cause is great for warrants, but not the coroner. As far as Eric,” Martine stopped midsentence, digging through her files as she finished her thought, “legally speaking, Phil and Tanners connection to Walsh doesn’t prove anything that will help incriminate him—at all. We need more and bringing that up now would’ve got us kicked out and shutdown. I had to hold back, too, I wanted to blame him for five murders, not just four.”

“Five?” he questioned.

“Don’t ever forget Jade. If five murders are related, someone has a blueprint for murder and a motive for it. After locating the coroner’s findings that she was fuming over, she asked a favor in an overly sweet controlled tone, “While we’re waiting for this guy can you get the coroner on the phone? I need to talk to him about Goodman.”

Scrolling through his phone for the contact number, he shook his head in amazement and dialed I, letting it ring until he heard, “Dr. Nielson speaking.”

“Doctor, its John Mahoney with the FBI. I have an associate with me that has some questions on the Philip Goodman findings. Do you have a minute to speak with her?”

“Certainly, my patients can wait,” he chuckled dryly.

Handing her his phone, he let Martine take over, “Hello, Doctor, this is Martine. I’m working on this case and noticed you determined Philip Goodman died from a heart attack. My question had to do with what you determined caused a heart attack in an almost middle-aged man like that?”

“Well, he must have led a hard life. His organs indicated he wasn’t a stranger to drugs and alcohol.”

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Martine dove deeper, “So what triggered it. The drug and alcohol levels are high, but not extraordinarily.”

Accepting her observation, Doctor Nielson admitted, “It’s possible the drugs and alcohol in his system aggravated his heart enough for it to stop, though they weren’t necessarily extreme.”

“Did you test for any other unusual medications or toxins that could have accounted for his demise?”

“Just the usual ones, we don’t normally test for anything exotic. Did you have something in mind?”

“I’ve examined everything I could, and didn’t really notice he was in distress like most people are when having a heart attack.”

“Well, plenty of individuals die in their sleep like that.”

Martine bantered back, “I haven’t come across it too much when I’m working a case and he’s the suspect.”

“I’ll admit his death is somewhat troubling and sudden, but there’s nothing to show there was foul play involved.”

“Were any other medical records available on him that would indicate he had any heart or health issues?”

“We did look for that, naturally, but there were no records found. Most people never disagree with my findings, are you?”

Martine contradicted him strategically, “I do think you’re findings are correct, just not complete. I think something could have slowed his blood pressure down enough while he was on drugs and alcohol to put him to sleep indefinitely.”

“Well, if you want this to be a murder, that’s a stretch. Maybe you’re just a little paranoid because I didn’t identify any signs of wrongdoing.”

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Miffed, Martine continued, "It's only paranoia if I'm worrying for no reason."

"Give me a reason," Nielsen challenged her.

"Give me an idea of what someone could take to tank their blood pressure. Because when the blood pressure is too low the heart becomes oxygen deprived causing a heart attack."

"Basically, you're describing acute Adrenal failure."

"Yes," Martine agreed eagerly, "what medication would never be considered or looked at that could cause complete Adrenal failure?"

"I suppose Cushing's syndrome patients would be treated with a medication like that." Thinking out loud, Dr. Nielson went on, "In severe cases where the patient produces too much cortisol, causing high blood sugar levels, they treat it with a synthetic progesterone blocker which is used to lower blood sugar and blood pressure."

"Exactly what I'm thinking," Martine blurted excitedly.

Dr. Nielsen hesitated, "Um . . . I'm not sure what you're getting at."

"Wait," she reacted anxiously, "doesn't the abortion pill RU-486 contain an ingredient just like that?"

"Yes," he replied guardedly.

"So a man pumping a progesterone blocker in like it was a steroid could make his heart stop," she imagined out loud.

"Mifepristone," Nielsen repeated with a questioning inflection. "It's possible, if he had any in his possession. But he didn't. Who would give a man Mifepristone if they weren't being treated for Cushing's syndrome? You can't get high on it."

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Noticing the man named Aiden exit the elite corporate office building with a smile and bounce in his step, Martine buckled up as Mahoney began pursuing the man's vehicle. "Someone in the abortion business I suspect, and he wouldn't necessarily take it willingly. Can you check for that in the deceased's body?"

"Let me try. This is urgent I suspect."

"It is."

"I'll see what I can do and get back to you."

"Much appreciated," she said, ending the call and handing the phone back to Mahoney.

Calling into the bureau, he rattled off Aiden's license plate identification that he wanted run, adding, "Get me everything you can on this guy—don't stop looking till you know where he's sleeping tonight."

Cruising a safe distance behind the man who was oblivious to the tail on him, Mahoney figured out what Martine was up to, "I can tell you're onto some theory that is ping-pong around in your pretty little head—care to let me in? I feel like we're shadow-boxing and I could use a bit more to go on here. I'm not doubting you," he clarified, "I just want in."

"Right, I wish I knew exactly what we needed, and where to get it, but all I can do is try and follow the clues."

"Are these clues hiding in your head?" he teased with a friendly smirk.

"Not all of them," she chuckled half-heartedly.

"Let's talk about the ones that are," Mahoney's tone became clear and serious as he turned the car off the road, following Aiden into a drive-thru banking lane.

Guarded, Martine deflected the idea she was hiding anything from him, "I've always shared everything with you. This is the first time we've worked this close together on a

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case and you know everything I know. Are you accusing me of keeping information from you?" She watched Aiden make a bank deposit from his car. "Wonder how much that was for," she said with suspicion in her tone.

"I don't know, but we will within hours." Revealing his deepest wish, he took a deep breath, "I've been hoping you'd trust me enough by now to tell me what you won't tell anyone else." Staying on Aiden's tail he followed behind him when he exited the teller lane and got back on the main road. "I wanted to prove to you I'm the safest person in your life you can be around. If we mutually respect each other why can't we be truthful to each other as well?"

Caught off guard, she shunned the notion, "Ah, I don't know what you mean."

"I mean your intuitions. That's what your daughter and your sister call them."

Somewhat relieved, Martine turned the tables, "I do have strong intuitions, don't you?"

Nodding in silence, he followed Aiden's car into a parking lot and parked nearby it. "Now what?" he asked Martine.

"Let's check him out." Exiting the car as fast as she could to escape the personal and intimate exchange that had been avoided for years, she summoned Mahoney, "Are you coming?"

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Chapter 80

Entering behind Aiden, Martine and Mahoney looked around the sparse reception area that consisted of low-end furniture and a small desk with one phone and a dinner bell that needed to be dinged for deliveries and occasional guests. Clearly the operations for this business took place in the back where they saw Aiden disappear behind a locked door.

Exchanging confused expressions, Mahoney suggested, "This is the front of an office warehouse space, let's drive around to the back." Heading out the door to their car, they both got in before he decided what to say next, "I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable, can we at least finish our conversation before you leave for Colorado?"

Biting her bottom lip, she complied, "Yes, another time and another place would be better."

Satisfied, he sped the car to the back of the building and swung up to the loading dock associated with Aiden's location in the building. As Mahoney put the car in park his phone rang. Signaling to Martine he needed to take the call he tried to stop her from getting out.

Pulling away from him she slid out of her seat and honed in on two young men standing and smoking outside the docking area. "Hey, boys," she hollered as she walked up to them, "I'm looking for Aiden, do you know where he is?"

"Who's Aiden?" the taller boy smarted back with a goofy giggle.

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Within close proximity of the two, Martine took in the harsh aroma of marijuana and winged-it, "He works here, do you two?"

"Yeah, we do today," the same boy replied with a shake of his head.

"What does that mean," Martine asked.

Dressed in worn jeans and ugly t-shirts, the shorter of the two snickered, "That means who knows. Today we're taking out the same shit we put in a week ago."

"What is it you do?" Martine asked.

"Whatever they tell us to do, lady." Martine glanced to her side when Mahoney came up to her. "We're gonna have to go in and find him," she schemed, "they don't even know who he is."

"What do they know?" Mahoney asked.

Watching them snuff out their joints for later use and board the shipping van for transport, she shook her head in disbelief. "Nothing, if they were any dumber we'd have to water them once a week."

"Let's go in then," Mahoney said with a chuckle.

"Yep," she agreed, "let's find him now because they're packing out of here."

Inside the long narrow inconspicuous warehouse facility they passed through stacks of sealed and unsealed boxes before coming upon a plastic tented-in area reminiscent of a quarantined medical space. Pushing aside a draped doorway, Mahoney let Martine in first. Within the compartment that resembled an urgent care unit, several beds with medical monitoring devices were at each make-shift hospital bed bay.

"What is this," Mahoney uttered in dismay.

"Shhh," Martine whispered, putting her finger to her mouth, "we need to find this guy before he disappears."

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Suddenly Aiden entered the triage type tent, startling each of them. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

Mahoney took out his badge, "FBI, who are you?"

Aiden quickly turned to bolt, but Mahoney, taller in stature, more masculine and trained with quick reflexes snatched the back of his shirt, pulling him towards them. Clumsily, Aiden stumbled backward from the restraint of his clothing till he was forced to face Mahoney. Fidgeting like a kitten on catnip, his eyes darted back and forth at the two strangers that surprised him. "What is the FBI doing here?" he asked in a panicked state. "What do you want? I have my rights?"

"Let's talk about that," Mahoney took the lead. "Hopefully, I won't have to read you those rights," he intimidated. "Let's all have a seat."

Martine wheeled three medical stools into one of the bays, directing their person of interest as to what to do, "Aiden, have a seat, please."

"How do you know my name?"

Mahoney grinned wide, "Aiden, we know where you bank, what you drive, and where you live. Why don't you tell us what you're doing here?"

Remaining evasive, he replied, "Medical drug research, that's all."

"I see," Martine said calmly, "do we need to get a warrant that includes a cavity search, or do you want to explain more?"

Directing his attention to her, Aiden sounded, "It's not that kinda drug research."

Martine looked around, saying, "Do you mean medical secrets then? Like the Terminator?"

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“Proprietary information is meant to be secret,” Aiden answered defensively. “If you’re looking for drugs or something, there are none here.”

Mahoney asked, “Where are you packing up to go?”

“We’re done, so we’re returning the equipment. Don’t worry it’s leased and not stolen. No laws have been broken, so what do you want and why are you here?”

“We’re investigating some serious crimes that may be linked back to you. We can clear your name, if our information is incorrect.”

Alarmed, Aiden stuttered, “What . . . what crimes?”

“They’re all murders,” Mahoney relayed matter-of-factly.

“Murders,” Aiden exclaimed, “well that clears me because I’ve never murdered anyone.”

“Have you ever administered the drug Mifepristone?”

Caught off guard, Aiden paused, “What?”

“Mifepristone,” Mahoney repeated.

“Is that what this is all about?” Aiden asked in astonishment. “This was a trial for a new drug, but we didn’t kill anyone, I assure you. We just cleared phase three of the FDA staged trials.”

Mental recollections of her dramatic dream experiences rewound in Martine’s mind instantly causing the realization that something more sinister was going on here than the murder of Phil Goodman with a drug called Mifepristone. Orchestrating a more advanced and resourceful way to abort babies that went against all her beliefs and the eternal laws in heaven that were being violated made her spring up from her stool. “This is a trial for another abortion method, isn’t it?” she blared.

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Aiden looked more confused. “Yes, I thought you knew that.”

“Explain the method,” she demanded.

“It’s just a better more efficient way to conduct at-home abortions.”

“That’s what the abortion pill does already,” she refuted.

“Yeah, up to nine weeks, but not later,” Aiden replied. “This works up to twenty-two and twenty-three weeks.”

“Why?” Martine pushed.

“Because most girls decide when it’s too late,” he started explaining, “they can’t afford the expensive procedures, embarrassment, and the laws that will inevitably restrict a woman’s rights from state to state and country to country.”

Stunned, Martine suddenly realized he was the one that might have helped with Rena’s abortion. “So, you know a girl named Rena, don’t you?”

“Is she the one that told you about us? Because she had to sign a release for our privacy since this was an ongoing secure and regulated trial study. Oh, by the way, I know she wasn’t harmed, so what murder, her fetus?” he sounded upset.

“Sadly, she was murdered,” Martine held.

“Oh my God,” he expelled in astonishment, “I didn’t have anything to do with that.”

Mahoney pressured him, “Can you prove that?”

Flabbergasted, Aiden spilled his guts, “She wasn’t part of the study, but I was required to arrange the abortion. The doctor that was going to oversee the human trials performed the abortion. That’s all I know.”

Terminated

Mahoney weighed-in, “Who required you to arrange it?”

Aiden pursed his lips tight, fighting the urge to squeal, “Chaz Walsh, he said he was doing a friend a big favor.”

“Aiden,” Martine began softly, “it sounds like you actually might have met her. When was that?”

Hanging his head in shame, he admitted, “I had to drive her home, she didn’t have anyone to help her, but that’s all I did.”

Martine fired-back, “What about family, friends, or the father of the child?”

“Nope, she didn’t want anyone to know.”

Perplexed, Martine got up and paced behind him, unable to figure out why Rena had to be eliminated. “I’m starting to believe you, Aiden, but not if you leave one single thing out when I ask the next questions.”

Gulping hard, Aiden nodded. “I would never have harmed her, I promise.”

Martine proceeded, “Did she use the new drug?”

“I believe so. She would’ve had to take it before the procedure.”

Next she asked, “Did she receive the child’s remains?”

“No,” he answered without pause.

“We think she got them, are you lying?”

“I’m not lying. He sedated her. She couldn’t have asked for them.”

“Let’s stop cutting corners,” Martine said sharply, “Did she get the remains?”

Aiden just looked at her for a moment before confessing, “I heard she came back and made a big scene until they agreed to cremate the remains for her. They

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wouldn't let her see or have what was left after the abortion. Nobody should ever see that."

"Yet they will with this new abortion method, right? They'll all see the destruction that caused the death of their little babies. How can that be a good thing?"

Aiden shrugged his shoulders, "Billions of dollars I guess."

Martine kept going, "How much was that check you deposited today?"

"What?" he exclaimed in surprise. "You followed me?"

"Yeah, how much," she commanded again.

"\$500,000 dollars," he answered.

Wasting no time, Mahoney scooted right up to Aiden, alerting him of the urgency, "I'm going to have to take you in," he started before he was distracted by an incoming text message on his phone, "huh . . .," he uttered, reading the message, "for your own protection it seems. You know too much and if you want that \$500,000 dollar check to clear you don't want to be found right now."

"What!" Aiden ignited loudly.

"You're not the one in trouble unless you've lied to us," Mahoney warned, "you're the witness and not safe at the moment." Receiving another text message that he read while Aiden wiped his brow in nervousness, he updated the withering man, "We're up to five murders now, buddy."

Handing his phone to Martine, she read the message from the coroner, "Adrenal failure due to high levels of Mifepristone—cause of death, suspicious homicide."

"I haven't murdered anyone," Aiden declared hysterically.

"Then you could be next," Mahoney simplified the solution, "and that's why you need protection."

Terminated

“Sure, sure,” Aiden conceded.

Knowing they were on the right track for the first time, Mahoney asked his final question, “Did Chaz or Eric Walsh have access to Mifepristone and Phenobarbital?”

“Of course, they’re ingredients in our abortion pill cocktail.”

Mahoney remained calm and collected. “We’re gonna need your phone and computer to verify your innocence and gain access to all your communication records. You’ll get it all back tomorrow,” he reassured.

“Why? I haven’t done anything illegal,” Aiden fretted.

“We’re just gonna verify some numbers aren’t on your call registry. We’ll also be able to verify your whereabouts the last couple weeks. Mahoney tried to bolster Aiden, “Your records should clear you.”

“Sure, sure, I promise I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Lock this place up and let’s go,” Mahoney ordered as they all exited the tent.

Terminated

Chapter 81

By the time Mahoney met with the DA and arranged for Aiden's accommodations and security the sun was inching into the western horizon. While headed back to their hotel, Mahoney finally complained about something, "I'm famished. I swear I always lose weight when I'm around you. Let's grab dinner together before I call Stewart, I promised him I would before tomorrow. I just wish I knew what to tell him about Charmaine and Levi," he lamented. "How do I explain they got killed by the same guy that killed her friend?"

"Yeah, my blood sugar levels are tanked, too," she replied.

"You know this mission we've been on wasn't as harrowing as some of our adventures together, but it was equally complicated and impossible to solve without you," he commented.

"Stewart," Martine sighed, "what do we tell Stewart? I don't know if it's solved if we don't understand why Charmaine was murdered the way she was. What *are* you going to tell him?"

"I'm going to tell him we'll have to get it out of the Walsh's when they're arrested tomorrow," Mahoney explained while he parked the car.

Reaching down for her satchel and purse, Martine stopped abruptly, looking up in amazement. "Wait, I think I understand what happened." Pulling her laptop out of her bag, she fired it up while Mahoney sat back and watched her.

"What do you know that I don't know?" he asked her.

Terminated

Scrolling through saved files, she landed on an exchange between Rena and Charmaine that Alexa helped recover. “It didn’t seem important at the time, based on what we already knew, but now it does.” Clicking on her play command brought up the images of the two girls Skyping. Fast forwarding through Charmaine laughing and chatting away, she stopped when Rena started talking. “Listen to this,” Martine instructed.

“I do wanna tell you about him,” Rena blurted.

Charmaine got serious, “Okay, I’m listening.”

“He’s a charmer, oh boy,” Rena said, shaking her head. “Of course, I know now it wasn’t just for me.”

“Another girl,” Charmaine guessed in disgust.

“Possibly, but I’m talking about his job for sure.”

“His job,” Charmaine repeated.

“I get close to him and I . . . I don’t know, everything else just seems to fade away. I wanted to believe everything he said. I wanted to believe everything would work out. At first he was so dashing, attentive and interesting. It was a while later when I realized all that attention I was getting was like some sorta a drug.”

“Did he drug you?” Charmaine pitched.

“No, no, not like that—he didn’t do drugs,” Rena stated emphatically. “He said his dad would disown him if he ever did get on them. I said he was *like* some kinda drug, the kind I couldn’t get enough of.”

“Oh, honey,” Charmaine let out sympathetically, “I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, I eventually realized it wasn’t healthy, but I couldn’t resist it and that gave him more power over me. I’m ashamed of how weak and tolerant I was.”

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“You don’t have to be ashamed. You’re not responsible for how he took advantage of you,” Charmaine tried to sooth her fragile friend.

“That’s exactly what he did. It was those tiny things, those tiny, tiny, things of which he took advantage.” Rena hung her head slightly. “When the fog finally lifted, it was too late.”

Charmaine gasped, “Too late for what?”

“The worst thing imaginable, you would think so, too.”

“What thing,” Charmaine annunciated the word ‘thing.’

Rena’s guarded emotions erupted, “This is the kinda thing that happens to someone else. I don’t want to complain and feel sorry for myself over something like this—because why anybody?”

“Who is he? Do I know him,” Charmaine grilled.

“No, you don’t know him and its over—even after I did what he wanted. I’m not sure it’s even about him now.”

Charmaine begged her friend, “What happened, tell me?”

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” Rena stated, “It’s over and I’m not coming to see you right now, maybe another time.”

Martine shut her laptop lid, turning to face him. “So, we’ve tied the murders together, but why Levi and Charmaine? I thought we’d know why from Phil, but that is not gonna happen.”

“No, its not,” Mahoney agreed.

Martine went on, “I believe Rena had planned to see Charmaine, but cancelled her plans at the last minute without anyone else knowing. So, then I thought she decided to get the abortion and save her relationship with Chaz, who

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figured she was going to go there to tell her friend everything. Maybe he tattled to his dad.”

“That fits, and makes them both culpable,” Mahoney reasoned.

“Not necessarily,” she deliberated, “I really don’t think Chaz was in the know about the murder plan. “When I put the communications in a specific sequence, I believe the story goes down a very personal and private road that kept everyone in the dark, including the ones that knew something.”

“What do you mean?”

Pulling her thickening file of records, contacts, and communications out of her briefcase, she continued, “I don’t think Chaz told his father,” Martine proposed. “He would be too humiliated to confide in his dad.” Finding Rena’s phone records that were highlighted in coded colors, she pointed to a specified number that stood out in red. “Where’s his card,” she mumbled anxiously. “Look,” she said, pointing to Eric Walsh’s business card when she finally found it, “his direct line called Rena.”

“What?” Mahoney bellowed.

Cross-referencing dates she had scribbled down in the folder, she rationalized the events as she saw them now. “Rena called the Walsh office number, and Eric called her back, not Chaz.”

Mahoney rejected the notion, “Why would Eric call her?”

“She called him after she finally told Chaz she was pregnant and he told her she had to abort the baby,” Martine ventured. “Rena called Eric to get his support and it backfired. They spoke twenty-two minutes.”

“That’s a stretch, why would she call his father?” Mahoney asked again.

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“She didn’t call for investment advice. She was emotional, distraught, in love and conflicted. She didn’t want to give Chaz or the baby up. It was a desperate act where sacred secrets were revealed.”

“But why Charmaine, then,” Mahoney reverted back to the reason they were involved.

“I assume Rena told Eric similar things she said to Chaz and got similar advice—abort the baby,” Martine stressed. “That led her to telling him she was going to see her friend,” she solidified. “Because Rena procrastinated and vacillated, Eric probably felt she was a huge risk factor at this point and couldn’t be trusted to do what he and his son wanted.”

“Chaz obviously arranged the abortion,” Mahoney injected, “probably without his father’s consent to use company resources, which means Eric didn’t know the abortion happened and ordered the hit to take place when she would be in Oklahoma when she would be far away from his son in Texas.”

“I agree,” she complied.

Mahoney shook his head in disbelief, “I still don’t understand why he would keep that from his father?”

“You met him—because of shame,” she determined. “So he took a page out of his father’s playbook and arranged the abortion with Aiden, who was basically blackmailed to do it.”

“But, Charmaine,” he persisted in disgust.

“Yeah, that’s a tough one. I really think Rena implied that Charmaine knew about the baby, but I can’t find anything that shows they ever discussed a baby or an abortion at all between them. I don’t think Charmaine knew and this Skype proves it. She was a victim of circumstance and secrets.”

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Mahoney looped-in, “That’s why when Phil got there to eliminate Rena he killed Levi first thinking Rena and Charmaine would be coming in the house soon—just the way you thought it went down.”

“When Charmaine came in from the garden without Rena, he either mistook her for Rena and killed her, or killed her because he had orders to kill them both—but missed the most important one he was paid to eliminate. That garden was behind the big utility building and couldn’t be seen from the home.”

“Phil doesn’t appear to be the sharpest tool in the shed, who knows what he was thinking.”

“Yep,” she concurred as she put her laptop away, “he managed to kill two people he didn’t need to kill and still didn’t get the job done that he was paid to do. Based on the timeline that seems to be coming together, that infant could’ve been twenty-three weeks. Ya know what? Sadly, Eric ordered the hit before the last minute abortion finally happened, because I don’t think he trusted his boy to get the job done, and his boy couldn’t tell his father what he got himself into.”

Opening their doors and exiting the vehicle, Mahoney questioned part of her scenario, “Why did Eric really have to eliminate Rena in the first place?”

Martine joined him at the front of the car, conceptualizing the mind of a warped man, “He really didn’t trust another woman to control his son or him—and end up in their lives forever.”

“So, Eric didn’t know about the illegal abortion,” he gathered.

“Not then,” Martine replied, “but he may know today after what we put Chaz through yesterday. That is, if Chaz comes clean with his father and tells him how he crossed the

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line and used Aiden for the illegal procedure that could've had terrific ramifications if it was revealed later."

Mahoney nodded decisively, "So, you don't think either of them knew what the other had done."

Dramatically closing up her file, she gave her big reveal, "Personally, I don't."

Mahoney stayed thoughtful, "These normally unapparent connections we've uncovered do possibly prove this and why senseless murders happened that seemed unrelated."

"I also suspect Chaz may be oblivious to what ultimately transpired due to his reckless choices," Martine added. "I think he'll be wrecked when he finds out."

"How will we clear Chaz of the murders, it still doesn't look very good for him."

"Legally speaking, Aiden and the doctor will confirm Chaz's involvement in the illegal abortion, and Eric's lack of involvement. If that transpires, that leaves Eric on the hook for the murders because Chaz had no motive or knowledge. I think your answer to that comes when you talk to the doctor."

"I'll make sure we talk to the doctor before we bring Eric and Chaz in for their statements," Mahoney formulated, "and you're probably correct, Charmaine would've definitely got involved with her friend's personal affairs if she had known and it doesn't look like she did."

"Oh, yeah, knowing what I do about Charmaine, a broken heart deserves to be heard, not silenced. I'm talking about Rena and Jade."

"They're gonna be heard," he proclaimed as they walked to the hotel.

"This case wasn't too physically tough like the other ones we've worked together. Since I know this is mostly

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over for you, was it as traumatic and harrowing as the other cases we've done in the past?"

"Maybe it wasn't for you, but it was horribly terrifying for me."

"Does that mean I can know everything you went through?"

"It's a lot, John," she said using his first name as he had always preferred.

"I want you to know I will respect your privacy and guard it like my own."

"I have a condition," she bargained, looking straight ahead.

"Just one?" he smiled.

"Yep," she declared without elaborating.

"What is it?"

"That Eric Walsh will be prosecuted and his product, I use the term loosely, never sees the light of day or dark of night."

"No problem," he assured her.

Martine had a thought, "It would be a marvelous trade if you took the death penalty off the table and arranged life in prison in exchange for that patented drug to be transferred to the Pro-Choice Organization I met with here. I know Joy would make sure it was shelved for good."

"I promise I'll try," Mahoney returned, moving closer to her. "There's not a chance in hell Eric Walsh would've been identified without you, or that he will not be prosecuted."

Martine grinned wide hearing his words, "Nobody has a chance in hell."

"Touché," he laughed. This time his arm reached around the small of her back as he guided her into the hotel lobby.

Kathi Bjorkman

Third Eye Witness-

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The End